

AGAIN AND AGAIN



a novel

JONATHAN EVISON

Author of SMALL WORLD

ALSO BY JONATHAN EVISON

All About Lulu

West of Here

The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving

This Is Your Life, Harriet Chance!

Lawn Boy

Legends of the North Cascades

Small World

AGAIN
and
AGAIN

A NOVEL.

Jonathan Evison



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Acknowledgments

About the Author

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For my beloved kids:

Owen and Emma and Lulu;

may they lead many happy lives

I

The Most Beautiful of All Possible Worlds

Don't tell me life is short. With the benefit of my considerable experience, or should I say in spite of it, I'm still willing to buy that life is beautiful if you dress it up right, that people are basically good, or that love can save you. I still want to believe. Tell me that life is meaningful, and you've got my ear. Tell me that life is a journey, and I'll nod in agreement. But try convincing me that said journey is short, and you've lost me; that's one cliché I can't abide. If you think life is short, just wait. One of these days it might not end for you; it'll just keep going and going and you'll see that life is not a breathless sprint to the grave, gone in a heartbeat, but an odyssey that stretches on and on into eternity. Once it starts, it never ends, not even if you want it to. I should know.

I have gone by other names: Euric, Pietro, Kiri, Amura, York, and Whiskers. Currently I answer to the name of Eugene, though the attendants here at Desert Greens call me Mr. Miles. In August, I turn 106 years old. Wow, you'll say, what a full life! Impressive! What's your secret? But the fact is, I'm ready to die. There is nothing holding me here. I only hope that I am not born again, for I don't think I could endure another loveless existence.

As far as I know, I first came to live on the Iberian Peninsula in the town of Seville, or Ishbilyah as it was then known, during the golden age of Abd al-Rahman III in al-Andalus. If you've read your history, you probably know something about Spain under the Moors: how it was a global seat of wisdom, a paradise for scholars and poets and artists, philosophers, historians, and musicians, how Arabic was the language of science—mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. You've likely heard about the wondrous architecture of the mosques with their flowing arabesques and honeycombed vaults, their domed tops echoing the

hypnotic suras of the Quran. You've probably heard about the great walled alcazabas, and the splendor of the riads and gardens. That is where the story of Euric and Gaya begins.

Of all my lives, this has been the longest, at turns the most rewarding and the most fruitless, the most satisfying and the most trying, and, accounting for the enduring awareness and attendant weight of all my previous follies and failures, the most exhausting. So don't tell me life is short.

But I digress.

Now I live here at Desert Greens, an eldercare facility in Lucerne Valley. I've been here for twelve years. It's a nice enough place, I suppose, though there exist no actual "greens" on the premises, unless you count the blighted buffalo grass on the west end of the facility. There are a few picnic tables—four, to be exact—out there amidst the thirsty palms, which, depending on the direction you choose to face, confer views of the Ord, Granite, or San Bernardino Mountains, the craggy Ords and Granites brown most of the year. It's a stark landscape, yes, but a beautiful one; timeless, like me.

I still get around well enough. I can go to the bathroom on my own, or walk down the corridor to the common area, or the cafeteria, or the aforementioned "greens," where a more sociable soul than myself might find a game of dominoes, or even chess, if he were so inclined. Were it my wish to learn to paint landscapes, or achieve computer competency, I could do that, too, here at Desert Greens. But I don't.

Though there is no denying a slight antiseptic air here at the Greens, don't imagine it as a hospital or an institution exactly. I have my own quarters, albeit small, populated with my own things, though if eleven centuries have taught me anything it's how to travel light. Thus, I possess comparatively little next to most of the tenants: two shelves' worth of cherished books, from Virgil to Proust to O'Connor, and of course my dear Oscar; a few dozen history texts, ranging from the Greeks to the Romans to the Moors to the Americans; and an old Gideons Bible swiped decades before from the Oviatt Hotel in downtown Los Angeles (not by any means to be confused with the lavish Oviatt Building on Olive Street), along with a dozen jigsaw puzzles at any given time and a shoebox half-full of

keepsakes, including my tags and medals from the war, a typed letter from one of my high school history students twenty years after I taught her, and the bone-handled jackknife my war buddy Johnny Brooks gave me. Then there's my paperweight on the dresser, a walnut-sized spherical rock I found along the Oregon coast on my honeymoon with Gladys. Oh, what a beautiful wedding it was! Oh, what a lovely time we had in Cannon Beach!

Evenly spaced atop the dresser I keep three framed photographs of my beloved Gladys (or Gaya, if you will), gone these eight years. Still not a day goes by that I do not gaze at these photographs and think of her. In the first picture, a black and white portrait, Gladys is but a young woman of nineteen or twenty, many years before I'd found my way back to her. She looks at once delicate and formidable with her dark, intelligent eyes and her generous lips. She's not smiling in the photo; rather her face is at rest for the occasion, her hands folded neatly in her lap.

In the second photograph, Gladys is in the prime of her life, 1948, flanked by her two girls, Donna and Nancy, six and eight years old respectively, the three of them clad in bathing suits and floppy sun hats, waving at the camera from Pismo Beach or some other California seaside retreat. I didn't know Gladys then, either. Our fateful reunion was still twenty years in the future. Had I known it was coming, I might have done more with my life. If you look close enough at the photo, you'll see that Gladys is still wearing the wedding ring from her first husband, Richard, who lost his life at Guadalcanal years before the photo was taken.

The final photograph depicts Gladys and me in midlife. It would have been the late-1970s, not long after we bought the house in Hesperia. There's nothing particularly memorable about this instant frozen in perpetuity, no special occasion or importance attached to it. The photo was snapped by a busboy upon my request. Gladys and I are sitting at a table at King George's Smorgasbord, wineglasses half-full, our dinner plates clean, both of us smiling, although Gladys cannot disguise a bit of a deer-in-the-headlights look, as though she wasn't expecting the photograph. God, we were happy; for the whole of our thirty-five years together it seemed we were happy every step of the way; through every peak and valley our love abided surely and steadily. And why not? Our reunion was,

after all, eleven hundred years in coming. And never once did we take it for granted.

But again, I digress.

The attendants here at Desert Greens are invariably cheerful, though most of them speak to me with that cloying condescension of the sort one might employ with a toddler or a puppy. I play along with them to some degree, though despite my vintage I am still “quite sharp,” an observation staff members share with me weekly. They are all very professional, which is to say attentive, even-tempered, if not consistently measured in their distance. While the others are fastidiously unyielding in their professionalism, which is fine by me, the one called Marguerite has been known to harmlessly flirt with me on occasion, a kindness I oblige as if it flatters me, though in truth nothing could arouse my ardor at this point, not with Gladys dead and gone. Aside from Marguerite’s occasional playful antics, the rest of the staff here at Desert Greens maintain a polite deference and patient disposition that never quite achieves warmth.

When Gladys died, there was nothing left for me to lose. Had I believed for one minute that it would’ve relieved my suffering, I would have taken my own life without question. But I knew that any such merciful conclusion was beyond my reach. Chances were, I would only be reborn one step further removed from Gladys, one more lifetime distant from Gaya.

After the memorial service, my slide into decrepitude was sudden and sweeping. It seemed I aged twenty years in a matter of weeks. The dishes piled up. The phone went unanswered. I stopped eating beyond the bare minimum, stopped bathing, and I hardly got out of bed. The mail piled up and the bills went unpaid. Neighbors’ casseroles were left untouched, until they eventually stopped coming around. Gladys’s daughters dropped by on occasion, invariably attempting to roust me out of my isolation for a meal in town or a walk in the park, but even Donna and Nancy gave up eventually. I was unreachable. A normal person would have given up the will to live and followed Gladys to her grave, but I was a preternaturally hearty physical specimen for any age, and besides, I knew that such a notion was futile. I’d been lucky enough to find my true love twice, but surely lightning would not strike thrice.

And so, I languished, holed up in my house, resigned to my isolation. To be honest, it was only the grubby state of the house, and the constant upkeep required to render it barely habitable, that finally drove me to Desert Greens.

While it is true that in my tenure here at Desert Greens I have been far from a gadabout, and for the most part a certifiable recluse, I am not unacquainted with my fellow denizens. Namely, there is Irma McCleary across the hall, who smells of wilting gardenias and the inside of pill bottles. I would put Irma's years somewhere between eighty-five and ninety, although decorum necessitates that I never solicit a woman's age. An interesting fact about Irma: Her hair is quite literally blue, and I don't mean grayish blue, rather somewhere between baby blue and cornflower blue. Only recently did I discover that this fact is not owing to some unfortunate mishap involving off-brand hair dye, or an unforeseen chemical reaction, but instead to personal preference. As it turns out, Irma willfully cultivates her azure hair for reasons I'm not given to understand. Unerring in her politeness, though she's been calling me Benson for nearly a decade now, Irma is quick with a compliment, as recently as last week commending my choice of moccasin-style slippers.

Two doors down from me resides Herman Billet. Herman is an unnaturally lean, bullet-headed old buzzard who is about as hale and hearty as a paper bag full of cobwebs. The next stiff breeze could be the end of Herman. While Herman might appear to be even more decrepit than yours truly, I have it on good authority that the man has not yet lived to see his ninetieth birthday. Mr. Billet is just a babe still, though you wouldn't know it to see him wandering the hallways, stooped and listless, Danish crumbs ringing his slackened jaw. My exchanges with Herman have been limited mostly to assisting him in locating the commissary or helping him find his way back to his quarters from said commissary. More than once he has mistaken me for his son, and once for a former business partner, a certain Phil Jacoby, who, I've come to learn, died an untimely death some forty-odd years ago.

In the next corridor over resides Bud Brewster, he of the ceaseless fly-fishing adventures and intolerant politics, who calls himself a patriot and claims to have fought in the 478th Infantry Division, though no such outfit

ever existed. Despite my own service, I have no interest in exposing Bud Brewster as a fraud, and even less interest in talking to him.

Across the hall from Bud Brewster resides Iris Pearlman, a charming if not overly talkative woman, who has cultivated an unimaginably large family and likes nothing more than to inform people on the particulars of their existence. To wit, there is daughter Judith in Fort Worth, a retired school administrator. Judith's husband, Mac, a retired oil executive, converted to Judaism thirty-seven years ago. Great-grandson Levi was just accepted at Brown University. His mother, Barbara, a former Ms. Schenectady, is over the moon about this acceptance. Then there's Iris's son, Adam, a playwright allegedly of some renown, and his wife, Natalie, and their three sons and two daughters: Todd, Mira, David, Hannah, and Caleb, in descending order. We are only grazing the surface here, but I'm sure you get the idea. In the sum of my exchanges with Iris, which total four, I have contributed all of twelve words.

But at least Iris Pearlman is not nosy like Mrs. Messinger, who sees fit to entrust me with any and every shred of gossip she can amass, a litany of dubious particulars comprising sexual innuendo, marital complications, deaths, near deaths, projected deaths, alleged UTIs, and colorectal surgeries. As an intensely personal sort, I could never abide gossip. I find Mrs. Messinger to be, in a word, odious, and to be avoided even more emphatically than Mrs. Pearlman, who means no harm.

There are dozens of others here at Desert Greens, too many to catalog, thus I'll spare you a further inventory. Apologies if these assessments of my peers seem unkind. I harbor for these venerable souls no grudge whatsoever. Like me, many of my elderly neighbors live in relative isolation, receiving infrequent visitors. Their lives have become very small. I feel for them, I do. But not even one of them carries a light in their eyes that suggests they have ever lived before and remember it. Some of them can hardly remember their own names. I want to pity them. But the truth is I envy them, because most of them will probably win the death lottery. A few more years of habitually eating their big meal early in the day, collecting newspaper clippings for the sons and daughters who never call on them, and watching the five o'clock news, and the six o'clock news, and the seven o'clock news. Most of them will likely enjoy the

opportunity to call it quits, while it seems that I am destined to go on living again and again.

I've not received a visitor in eight years. Such is my desire for isolation at this point that I have zero interest in talking to anyone beyond my perfunctory exchanges with the staff. Instead, I keep to myself, confounding my meaningless but endlessly stubborn life force. I soothe my restlessness with jigsaw puzzles depicting cats sprawled on bookshelves, lighted cityscapes, national parks, famous book covers, and locales familiar to me, most of them five to fifteen hundred pieces. It's not that I take any joy in jigsaw puzzles beyond the small satisfaction attending their completion, it is simply that they keep me occupied and focused, anchored to the one existence I hope to be my last.

Understand, I am not depressed, merely resigned to my isolation because it takes the least amount of effort. All my life I've tried to connect, and most of my life I've failed. My lone aspiration now is to ride this life out, and it seems that the less connecting I do, the less I reach out to the world, the less I'm inviting future probabilities.

Noncompliance

Just as I avoided contact at Desert Greens, so I avoided movement, reasoning similarly that the less mobility I employed, the less I would be forced to engage the world. Thus, I marked the bulk of my days at my desk puzzling, and my afternoons and evenings in bed reading. I was doing just that one evening when I pretended not to notice the young housekeeper who trundled his cart of cleaning supplies into my quarters and set directly to work putting my room in order. With his back facing me, I watched him tend to his charge, wiping down flat surfaces and straightening what little clutter there was as he moved along the back wall. It was clear that he was a conscientious enough worker, methodical and thorough in his tasks. But I'd be lying if I said that his presence in my room didn't feel like an unwelcome infringement on my solitude.

"Good evening," he said, turning to face me, rag dangling in hand.

I kept my face buried in my book, offering no rejoinder. But it was an omission, alas, that failed to dissuade the young man.

"I'm the new guy," he said. "Angel."

"Mm," I said, eyes still glued to the page, where I proceeded to read the same sentence for a third time.

Angel shrugged off my aloofness and resumed his cleaning.

I snuck another furtive glance from behind my book at Angel as he busied himself wiping down the TV remote, which he then replaced atop my bedside table. He was a young Chicano, maybe twenty-two or twenty-three, short of stature and stocky of build. He wore his hair cropped and neat on top, and shaved to a stubble on the sides. I believe the style is referred to as a *fade* in the modern parlance. Though he attempted to hide his tattooed arms, the stylized numerals 1 and 3 occasionally peeking out from beneath his left sleeve, there was no disguising the lion's head below his left ear, already beginning to fade slightly. He boasted a ring-studded

septum that, coupled with his compact frame, lent him a distinctly bullish aspect.

“So, what’re you reading, there?”

I deemed this query unworthy of reply.

Undaunted, Angel leaned in to get a closer look at my book.

“*Twilight of the Gods*,” he read aloud. “*War in the Western Pacific*. So, a history buff?”

“Mmph,” I said.

“Not much for conversation, huh?” he said.

Bristling, I lowered my book long enough to break my silence.

“As a matter of fact, no, I’m not an avid conversationalist, thank you. So, if you wouldn’t mind . . . ?”

Young Angel took my impudence in stride.

“Ah, okay, I see how it is, my friend,” he said casually. “My bad.”

I felt my cheeks begin to flush.

“Thank you,” I mumbled.

“No problem, man,” he said.

I couldn’t ignore a little pang of guilt at my impoliteness as Angel concluded his work silently. I almost apologized. But I didn’t want to encourage him, for it was evident he was the garrulous sort.

Though my quarters remained in a state of perfect order, Angel returned the next day with his rolling supply closet. This time he found me at my puzzling table, where I’d nearly completed my latest 750-piece undertaking, the ancient Roman aqueduct of Segovia, Spain, bathed in footlights set against the night sky.

“I’m back,” he said. “Got any messes for me?”

“No,” I said. “You can move on to the next room.”

“Nah, homie, that’s not the way it works. I got a schedule. Every room, every day.”

“Overkill, if you ask me,” I said.

“Yeah, I don’t make the rules, unfortunately.”

He’d stationed himself right over my shoulder, practically touching me. To my chagrin, he reached out and snatched a puzzle piece off the tabletop.

“This goes up here,” he said, placing it amidst the night sky.

I was furious at this trespass. He'd overstepped a boundary. He had no business touching my personal things or insinuating himself upon my activities.

My ire at this trespass was not lost on him.

"Oh, sorry, dog," he said.

He promptly removed the piece and dropped it back amongst the scrum, mixing them all up as though it would make everything right again. It was too much to take.

"Don't do that!" I said.

"I was just trying to—"

"Get your hands off!" I said.

The young man was clearly shaken by my outburst. He stepped back sheepishly, looking genuinely contrite as the color drained from his face.

"I'm sorry, dog. I didn't realize it was so important that—"

"And stop calling me that, for heaven's sake. I'm not a dog. I don't even like dogs. I'm a cat person."

For once, he was at a loss for words. I'd let all the air right out of him, and now he was left looking somewhat bewildered as he stared at his shoe tops. I knew his shame and embarrassment well, I had lived it countless times, yet still I could not bring myself to extend an olive branch. And so, for the second consecutive day, Angel concluded his work in silence.

By the time he vacated my quarters, I felt terrible. Certainly, he'd done nothing to deserve my wrath. He was obviously a nice kid. God knows, his job couldn't pay much. His familiarity had only been an attempt at friendliness, and I had rebuked it savagely. What was wrong with me? Who was I to admonish friendly advances? I spent a good hour flagellating myself for my cruelty. When had I become such a bitter old man?

So, on the third day, I resolved to be civil.

"I apologize for my rudeness," I said. "It seems I've become one of those cantankerous old men who shakes his fists and tells kids to get off his lawn."

Angel seemed genuinely relieved by this bit of diplomacy, and a smile spread across his face.

"Nah, homie," he said, waving it off. "I get it. I mean, who the heck am I, right? I'm just some cleaner who comes into your personal space and

starts invading your privacy. You did the whole puzzle yourself; I understand.”

“It’s not like that,” I said. “I’m just out of practice with people.”

“Don’t get out much, huh?”

“Hardly at all,” I said. “Anyway, I’m sorry. I can’t imagine what you must think of me.”

“I don’t even know you, dog.”

This time, I let the dog reference pass.

“Well, I suppose you’ve heard all about me?” I said.

“A little,” he said.

“Surely they told you that I’m a deluded old man who thinks he’s a thousand years old.”

“Nah, man. They just said you have a vivid imagination.”

“It’s not true, what they say,” I said.

“Whatever, I’m not here to judge you,” he said. “I’m just here to empty your wastebasket.”

“Don’t listen to Wayne, or you’ll get the wrong idea about me.”

“I make up my own mind about people, so you don’t have to worry about that, boss.”

“I’m Eugene, by the way,” I said.

“Good to meet you, Geno.”

Again, I let the pet name pass without comment.

“So, what’s it like being so old?” he said.

Many have tried and failed to open me up in recent years, to disarm or erode the formidable defenses I’ve erected to keep people on the outside. But nothing about Angel’s straightforward manner aroused my suspicion.

“Well, imagine being young,” I said. “Except you’re tired all the time, and you’re no longer ambitious, and nothing tastes as good as it used to, and you have to go to the bathroom all the time.”

The truth is, physically I’m healthy as an ox. While the ruinous effects of time have taken their toll on my once semi-good looks (I now resemble an elderly chimp with radiation poisoning), my blood work is clean, my ticker is steady, my prostate normal, and my plumbing serviceable.

“You’re funny, I like your style,” said Angel. “With some of these people around here I feel like I’m talking to a lampshade. It’s depressing.

But you, you're sharp, Geno."

"That's what they tell me."

The fact is, if I'm being honest, despite my avowed preference for solitude, I was desperate for connection. And there was something naturally disarming about Angel; maybe it was his easy smile. These are the only explanations I can think of as to why I let the young man waltz right through my fortifications and achieve something akin to familiarity so quickly.

.....

The next time I saw Angel, however, he was not the same cheerful presence. There was a distinct air of listlessness about him as he tended to his charge. I allowed him this consolation until a genuine curiosity got the best of me.

"What's got you?" I said.

"I had a fight with my old lady."

"It happens," I said.

"You been in love, right, Geno? Man, you must have been. You're like a hundred years old."

"Hundred and five."

"You had a wife, right? That's her?" he said, indicating the photos on the dresser.

"Yes," I said.

"She looks different in this one," he said of the most recent photo.

"Just older," I said.

"And those are your kids?"

"Those were Gladys's girls, Donna and Nancy, from before I knew her. When she was married to her first husband, Richard."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed in the war—at Guadalcanal."

"So, you never had your own kids?"

"No."

"You regret it?"

"Sometimes."

"Mm," he said.