

THE  
ALCOHOLIC'S  
DAUGHTER



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David Sherman



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Michael Mirolla, general editor  
Isabelle Schumacher, editor  
David Moratto, interior and cover design  
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*I had a thought for no one's but your ears:  
That you were beautiful, and that I strove  
To love you in the old high way of love;  
That it had all seemed happy, and yet we'd grown  
As weary-hearted as that hollow moon.*

—W.B. Yeats, "Adam's Curse"

She asked him to write her a love song with the word “darling” in it.

“No one has ever called me darling,” she said. So he did. He called it *Forever*.

*If there's forever, I'll find you without fail*

And they would not fail. After so many trials and so many errors — serial monogamists, serial screw-ups, they were the real deal. So much to talk about, so many people in common. It was the love of a lifetime, they told each other, curled in bed, waltzing around the kitchen to music only they heard, driving down the highway to wherever. They were forever.



**H**e increasingly found himself spending the hours before dawn on the shitty green sofa he had bought at one of those insidious box stores off the 40. It was cheap and not particularly comfortable, but it did the job. The cats would often be on each arm. His laptop would often be on his lap. A glass of scotch would often be on the floor within easy reach. Annie didn't like coffee tables. He would work in the dark, silent house, revelling in the peace, broken occasionally by the sirens running down Papineau St. or the late-night clubbers drifting from the bars on Mount Royal to their cars parked in front of his door, their voices giddy with booze, music and the anticipation of sex.

When he became too tired to bang away at whatever he was working on or research for something Annie was doing, he would put the Mac away and pick up the scotch and remember. The scotch was a recent friend. It woke him, it fortified him, it made him smile.

Evan had not always found solace in the wee hours, in the solitude, in the absence of stress that floated through the living room in the middle of the night like a cool breeze. Now he was only too happy to embrace it when he awoke at three or four a.m. He had given up on tossing and turning in the hunt for sleep when the gargoyles attacked. He had

exchanged that for putting on a robe and ceremoniously slipping downstairs. It was his time. His only time. His thoughts were his. His life was his. The house was his. For at least those few hours, the vessel that contained this great love, their shelter from the storm, was his domain.

But, he smiled, it wasn't their shelter at all. It was their storm. Or perhaps the leaky vessel from which they navigated the ferocious squalls, intensity accelerating. No doubt about climate change under this roof. It's all about the house, asshole! Here's to.

She got him. Her tight condensed body, good hips, tiny breasts, short legs — he sent her an e-mail later with the salutation, My Dear Truncated Turnip — electric mind, crackling and sparking. Yeah, there was an occasional short circuit, smoke and burnt wires, but her killer smile, dimpled highlights, green eyes, man, they lit up a room.

Yes, Annie looked good for 50. She spent a lot of time on a clunker of a bike she pedalled everywhere with a burdened, swaying motion he would recognize two blocks away, her legs pumping like pistons. And she jogged with a seniors group almost every morning. On the run at 6:30, so she could get to her computer by 8:30. Yeah, she had a lot of energy that woman. Her small body was in shape.

Evan taught screenwriting once a week in the weathered meeting room of a faded downtown library, a dusty anachronism with a card catalogue and librarians just this side of senile. He liked to teach and he liked the library.

Workshops are an intimate endeavour, eight or 10 adults around a table and Evan had learned early on how to work the room. Most people liked nothing better than to talk about themselves and Evan exploited that to break the ice, get to know them, get to know what in their life could be mined for story material.



“My name is Evan and I’ve been doing this for a few years,” he would say, “and so far I have succeeded in killing no one. Workshops, however unfortunate it might be, are about work. And since you’re all grownups and there are no credits or degrees involved, the amount of work you do is entirely up to you. I will not be sending notes home to your parents or partners.”

He always said his lines with a straight face, see who was with him, who was receptive to his charms, who smiled, laughed, or gave him the long, cold stare. He discovered he liked having an audience to play to, he fed off their smiles, their laughter, their questions.

Heterosexual men would be the hardest sell. They trusted the least and needed to impress the most. Evan had to prove he had a bigger dick, measured in screen credits, sense of humour, knowledge and proving himself non-threatening to their egos.

“What do they want, what do they fear, who do they sleep with?” he said. “My mantra for characters. That’s where the stakes are and your characters’ sex lives or lack of, is indicative of who they are. Put it on the wall in front of your eyes. Carl, tell us about your story.”

Carl had wedged himself into a tight T-shirt, maybe two sizes too small. He was short, a wispy goatee hung from his chin, pointing to his impressive pecs and arms. Probably a gym rat.

“I work in a garage,” he said, “you know, changing tires and working their diagnostic computers, aligning wheels. Cars are all computers, now. But I thought it would be a cool story, this gay guy working in this macho grease pit, everyone talking about horsepower and CCs and this one guy,

just likes cars and deals with all these swearing, smoking homophobes, staying in the closet, pretending, talking like the rest. You know, every time a woman comes in, 'like to see what's under her hood' or 'Wonder what she does zero to 60 in,' and this guy just likes cars but has to pretend he's het. I don't know. I thought it would be kind of interesting, the contrast of who he is and who he pretends to be."

"That's fascinating," Evan said. "Do you have the story?"

"Not yet, I thought I could work on it here in workshop," Carl said.

"Find the arc, find his journey, where's he going," Evan said. "And why he's afraid to come out. Bring us into the garage. Use the jargon, use the sounds, bring the audience into this noisy, greasy, all-male world. Show us the reality of a place we think we know. And don't run from the politics. Who's the boss? What's the pay like, working hours. Everyone can relate to working for the boss. Don't be afraid of that. What you take for granted the rest of us don't know so use it. It's a great idea."

You had to win them over, almost one by one, encourage them, point out they were all different, jack up their confidence. And self deprecation was a great tool. This time he aimed the tired line straight at Annie, sitting in the middle across the table, smiling, entranced, even eager.

"William Goldman, one of Hollywood's most successful screenwriters, wrote a book called *Nobody Knows Anything*, meaning exactly that. I can't teach you what's good and what's bad, I can't teach you how to write, I can only discuss with you the basics of three-act storytelling going back to Aristotle and the foundations of Greek tragedy. I might make suggestions as to how a character might need more

definition, how a story might need a clearer arc, but I warn you, pay as little attention to me as possible.”

That was usually enough to bring most people inside. And on this particular fall evening, it was enough to hit a home run with Annie. There was an older, heavy woman, Helenie, walked with a cane, scribbled compulsively in a notebook, remnants of Greece in her accent, who laughed and she and Annie exchanged glances. Evan knew it was going to be a good group. They would come along for the ride.

Give workshops to adults, leavened with a touch of charm, a little humour, and usually one woman a semester will make her feelings known. An e-mail, a smile, too much attention. Evan imagined to them he was a writer. If they had a window into his bank balance they would see he enjoyed a little disposable income, enough to pay for habits good and bad. A plane ticket to a beach now and then, moderate indulgences like Cantonese lobster in Chinatown and a new lease on a Mazda every four years. But they knew only he had written films and plays, had hair and no belly to speak of. And he made them laugh and, occasionally, think. They didn't see the man with the aching back who often wondered if he was teaching 'cause he wasn't doing. Or maybe he needed an audience and any kind would do. The class clown several decades down the road.

When times had been good with Danielle, their domesticity a sea of relative tranquillity, a few laughs and lots of tumultuous sex, he would mention her to the groups early and often. “I saw this with my girlfriend” or “My girlfriend writes and we were discussing” ... No misunderstandings, though if he was clarifying his lack of availability to them or him was a question he never asked himself. But when

Annie walked into the room, his domestic congress slipped his mind.

Annie watched his every gesture, listened to every word, eyes ablaze. And almost as soon as she walked into the room that first night, he was smitten. Maybe it was the flirtatious air about her. Or maybe it was time for a change. Home life kept drifting from fractious to psychotic.

Last couple of years, Evan had often found himself naked on crisp cold sheets of hotel rooms with participants in the workshop, a habit he came to love but a habit he had grown to enjoy. They were all grownups and there was no degree at the end of this predicated on their availability. And he never made the first move. The couplings in the overlit rooms on stiff linen came guilt free. He wondered about that. Sometimes.

"It's all about compartmentalizing," Roberta had said, her head and mane of blond curls draped across his belly in a room at the downtown Delta. They had gone from the workshop to the bar to the elevator. "Danielle is in one place and we're in another. I kind of like where we are right now."

"It's about living," Evan said, still breathing hard, stroking her hair. "About living as much as you can in the little time the big guy hands you. What you and I have has nothing to do with Danielle." To prove the point she moved her head down his belly and there was nothing more to say.

Evan smiled at the intrusion of the memory as he watched Annie. She liked the students, was open to their opinions, engaged in the discussions, loved to critique their work.

"It's great that this man collects hunting knives and seems obsessed with his collection, a good visual element, but I have no clue as to why he suddenly would stab his

neighbour,” she told Brian, a 40-something journalist who worked the trade mags. He was riveted to her every word. *So am I*, Evan thought.

“If he’s homicidal, we should have some inkling of it, some foreshadowing, I think; otherwise, I don’t believe it.” Then she flashed Evan a shy smile. He reciprocated.

“Yeah, Brian, Annie’s probably right,” Evan said. “Maybe give us a taste of his predilection for evisceration, and we’d find it more credible. Good film writing is about making the incredible credible.”

But he wasn’t looking at Brian, he was still looking at Annie who was looking right back.

So he played to her, waltzing in front of them, imitating a beautiful scene from *The Human Stain*, Gary Sinise and Anthony Hopkins dancing on the porch under incandescent light at night in the dead of winter.

“Movement,” he said. “It’s motion pictures. Give your scenes motion. Don’t worry about long shot, medium shot, close-up; let the director worry about that. Your job is to give him something to work with.”

He was waltzing around the table, his arms around thin air, his eyes on Annie, wondering if he was making a fool of himself but she was smiling. She was impressed. And that had become his job this workshop. Impress Annie.

He had taken to the workshops not as a way to make a buck. He had enough money, at least these last few years, a novel experience, stoked by non-stop work. But he liked the teaching — it made him think. He liked meeting new people, he liked the stage it offered, and, of course, the potential of sexual conquest. Though as one young woman had told him as they came down the elevator of his favoured Downtown

Delta late one night, his legs a little shaky, his dick sore: "I was really proud I was able to seduce you."

It hadn't taken much effort. She was gorgeous. Turned out to be seriously bipolar, mad as a fucking hatter, but then that was part of the charm, wasn't it? Normal was a bore. Who needs sane when you can crawl between the legs of crazy and wonder what surprises awaited you?

Was there anything more fascinating than a beautiful woman, her shining eyes millimetres from his, their hips locked, he bestowed with the wondrous honour of pleasing her?

A guy he had worked with once compared him to a dog chasing a car: "You run after it but once you catch it you don't know what to do with it." But those days were gone. He knew exactly what to do with it and had no compunctions about doing it.

**T**he adrenaline always kicked in about 10 minutes before 10 — showtime. The little bar would be full, the tables covered in beer bottles, the room swallowed by cigarette smoke as thick as fog. It was all part of the charm, waiting for the band to climb onto the little stage. The anticipation was almost as intense as watching a new lover undress for the first time but the Mickey Roberts Blues Band, unlike some women, never disappointed. Fiery guitars and big thumping bass lines and the syncopated drums would take him places, get him moving, give him goose pimples. What had it been, three, four decades since the first time he took a seat in the back of the 12 Steps Bar & Grill and discovered their brand of blues? It was raw but tasty and addictive and transformative. Man, he came in there any night they were playing, usually four nights a week, three weeks in a row, several times a year, and nothing else mattered. Not what was happening at the paper, not the shallow balance of his bank account, not whatever drama was playing out with a lover. Here with these four or five guys, he would lose himself. Every woman he met, it was their initiation.

“There’s this band playing tonight, Mickey Roberts, you know ‘em? I thought we could grab some dinner and catch a set or two.”

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Sherman has worked as a newspaper and magazine journalist and editor, CBC radio producer, playwright, filmmaker, screenwriter, singer/songwriter and now novelist. He abandoned the newspaper business when layoffs and budget cuts decimated the industry and concentrated on writing for the theatre and writing and performing as a folksinger. His latest play, *Lost and Found*, produced by Infinitheatre and written with his partner Nancy Lee, is a musical, inspired in part, by *The Alcoholic's Daughter*. They wrote the songs and story and performed the play in Montreal, B.C. and the Laurentiens. Sherman is also a gym rat and was an avid squash player and cyclist before the body said enough and the medicine chest overflowed. He is now working on another novel in between walking in the woods with his Chocolate Lab named Jesse and swimming in the lake behind his house, a century-old former fishing lodge, where he occasionally obsesses over dinner parties.