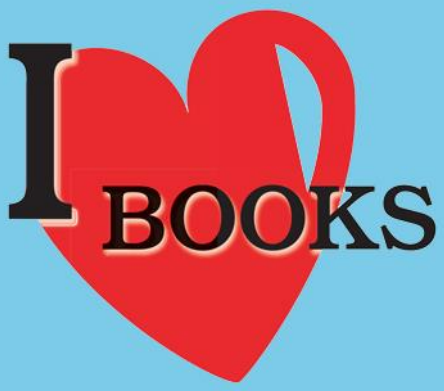


Lovereading4kids.co.uk is a book website created for parents and children to make choosing books easy and fun

Opening extract from

The Ethan I Was Before

Written by

Ali Standish

Published by

Orchard Books an imprint of Hachette Children's Group

All Text is Copyright © of the Author and/or Illustrator

Please print off and read at your leisure.



ORCHARD BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2017 by The Watts Publishing Group

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Text copyright © Alice Standish, 2017

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

All rights reserved.
No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of the publisher, nor be otherwise circulated in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 40834 292 3

Typeset in Perpetua by Avon DataSet Ltd, Bidford-on-Avon, Warwickshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

The paper and board used in this book are made from wood from responsible sources.



Orchard Books
An imprint of Hachette Children's Group
Part of The Watts Publishing Group Limited
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

An Hachette UK Company
www.hachette.co.uk

www.hachettechildrens.co.uk



Prologue



Kacey's window has been dark for fifty-nine days.

It's been dark for so long that someone else might easily forget she ever even lived there. Or that she ever existed at all.

I haven't forgotten.

Tonight, like all the other nights, I wait until everyone is asleep. Then I tiptoe downstairs, slip into my coat, and creep out the front door. I climb on to the roof of Mum's Subaru and sit there, staring.

I have stared at Kacey's window for so many nights that I no longer see the four black panes held together by the skeleton of the frame.

All I see is a dark hollow where there used to be light.

But tonight, when I step out on to the porch,

something is different.

Tonight, there is a car in Kacey's driveway.

Kacey's window has been dark for fifty-nine days.

But now a light flashes on, and a yellow glow seeps into the night.

I pull my breath in so fast that the frigid air burns the back of my throat.

I hold it there.

Before I can stop myself, my feet slam against the pavement, and I'm running across the street and into the Reids' yard. My gloveless fingers fumble on the ground until I find a suitably large pebble. I position myself underneath Kacey's window and swing the stone up into the air, hitting the top left pane.

For a second, nothing happens.

Then a shadow slides up the wall, and a face appears in the window.

I feel Kacey's name rise up from the place where it stays, deep in my chest.

But then I get a better look at the face above, and her name lodges in my throat.

The drawn complexion and mussed hair belong to Mrs Reid, Kacey's mother.

I duck down into the shadow of the Reids' hedge, next to their front stoop, hoping that she didn't have

time to spot me. I crouch with my face resting against the scratching branches until I feel sure she isn't looking any more.

My eyes flicker to the stoop, where a crisp, white square of paper rests against the bricks.

Before I have time to think about it, I snatch the letter up.

Then I sprint back to my own driveway and drop on to the porch stairs. I look at what's in my hands.

Not a letter. A bill.

I glance at the return address. I know what the words mean, but they don't make any sense.

The earth begins to seesaw.

Stupid, stupid, stupid. Throwing rocks at her window like I expected her to be up there. But of course she isn't.

I know where she is now.

I'm still trying to catch my breath from my dash across the Reids' yard. But I am suddenly filled with the urge to run until I am sure I will never see this place or that window ever again. Like swimming so far out to sea you know you won't have the energy to make it back to shore.

Once my feet start moving, I can't seem to make them stop.

I have to get to Kacey.

What I Know about Myself

1. My name is Ethan Truitt.
2. I am twelve years and four months old.
3. I have been in the car for fifteen hours, four minutes, and thirty-two seconds.
4. Which is probably why my left butt cheek has gone numb.
5. My older brother Roddie, who is snoring next to me, hates me.
6. Sometimes I hate me too. Because I know I am responsible for everything that happened in Boston.
7. That's why the Ethan I was before is gone.



Palm Knot



According to the city limits sign we see when we drive into town, Palm Knot, Georgia, is the 'Hidden Jewel of the So th'. Mum says that it *used* to be the 'Hidden Jewel of the South' before the wind and ocean air swept away the paint from the *u*.

When I think of jewels (not often), I think of bright, sharp, polished things. But driving through Palm Knot, everything I see is kind of drooping and faded and flat. More like an ocean pebble that's been washed smooth over a lot of years.

As we turn on to Main Street, my butt cheek starts to cramp up again.

I've been leaning against the car door for the past few hours, trying to keep as much distance as I can

between me and Roddie.

But now I shift my weight and accidentally bump my knee into his.

The rattle of his breath suddenly stops; his eyes flash open and he jerks his leg away from mine as if he's afraid I might be carrying some highly contagious disease. He looks at me in disgust. He doesn't say anything, but I can read the words flashing through his eyes. *Watch it, freak.*

I don't flinch. I'm used to this now. Roddie hasn't spoken to me since the day I tried to run away. For the third time.

That first night, when I found the bill that Mrs Reid must have dropped on her way into the house, I only made it to South Station before a police officer stopped me. Apparently, a twelve-year-old hanging around the bus station alone in the middle of the night is suspicious.

But the second time I ran, I was smarter about it. I looked up the bus times in advance, I made it to the station for a mid-afternoon bus, and I got on behind a middle-aged woman who could have been mistaken for my mother. And it worked.

That time, I almost got to Kacey.

Almost.

That's why I knew I had to try one more time. I waited for my chance, for the first opportunity when

Mum and Dad would leave me home with just Roddie. And then I ran again.

I only got halfway down the block before someone jerked my shoulder back, making me trip over my own feet and fall to the pavement.

Roddie was right about everything he said that day. I know that now.

But I don't have to tell him that.

'You boys awake back there?' Mum calls from the front seat.

Roddie grunts and pulls his Boston College hat down lower over his eyes.

'Doing OK, Ethan?'

Mum has started saying my name the way she placed the teetering stacks of her best china into boxes back in Boston. Carefully. Slowly. Like she's afraid of breaking something fragile and precious.

I nod.

'We're almost home,' she says.

Roddie glares out the window. 'This place isn't home. It's a dump.'

He has a point. The porches of the houses all sag like giant hammocks. Trees grow crooked and claw-like out of the sandy soil. The narrow roads are rough and lumpy, and even the ocean water looks clouded and grey, like

the bay is filled with lead.

'Your grandpa Ike needs us here, Roddie,' Mum says, turning around to face us. 'We need you to stay positive, please. This is a fresh start for all of us.'

Roddie's eyes narrow into little pools of ice, and he aims a kick at the console between the two front seats. 'Stop lying! We don't even know Grandpa Ike. He's your own father and you barely even *talk* about him.'

'Roddie!' Dad barks. 'Don't start again. That's enough. Just – enough. It's been a long drive.'

But Roddie's right about this too.

Mum and Dad announced we were moving here the day after my third attempt at running away. They said we all needed a change of scenery. I guess it shouldn't have come as such a surprise. This is the only place they *could* move us to get me away from Boston, since Grandpa Scott lives just a few streets down from our old house and it's not like Mum and Dad could afford to just buy a new place somewhere.

They've been telling anyone who will listen that we're moving to Palm Knot so we can 'help' Grandpa Ike, who's 'getting up there in years'. I pretend to believe them, but I know they're lying.

We didn't move so we could help Grandpa Ike.

We moved because of what I did to Kacey.



Grandpa Ike



Five minutes later, Dad swerves on to a gravel road, and we pass a few houses in varied states of dilapidation before pulling up in front of a boxy, wood-sided house at the end of the street. It's not the most run-down place on the street, but it's not the nicest one, either. There's a rusty truck parked out front, and the garden beds are overflowing with brown tufts of withering weeds.

Mum gasps and covers her mouth with her palm. 'Look at the place,' she says. 'He's let it go to ruin.'

'Then it's a good thing we came!' Dad says, forcing cheer into his voice. 'Everybody out.'

I unhook my seat belt and thrust the door open, desperate to stretch my muscles and feel fresh air.

But as soon as I'm out of the car, the humidity wraps

around me like a wet fleece blanket, so thick I can barely breathe. An insect drone swells up from the gnarled wall of marsh trees that surrounds us.

Mum stands in the gloomy shade of the house, squinting up at it and shaking her head. Maybe it's just the effect of the shadows, but her eyes look grey and stormy.

I hear a croaking noise and look toward the wooden porch to see a door open and the silhouette of a man emerging. Grandpa Ike. He doesn't come down to greet us. He just stands there, hands in his pockets, staring.

'Hello, Ike,' Mum says. She greets him with all the enthusiasm of someone who's just opened their door to find a greasy salesman waiting on the stoop.

Grandpa Ike says nothing.

'Great,' Roddie mutters. 'So he's a lurker.'

Mum hisses something back at him.

Dad watches closely as Roddie and I each grab two suitcases from the trunk. Mum and Dad have been careful to keep an eye out whenever Roddie and I are together, ever since they found us in the street that day, Roddie pinning me against a parked car while blood dripped on to the pavement from my scraped knees.

Reluctantly, I shuffle up to the porch, where most of the white paint has chipped away to reveal the bare

skin of the wood. Then I'm standing face-to-face with Grandpa Ike.

He's tall – over six feet – and solid, like someone built him from a stack of bricks. His eyes and beard are the same silvery-grey colour, and he has a smear of mustard in the corner of his mouth.

''Lo, Ethan,' he says. He looks me straight in the eye for a few seconds before lifting a duffel bag easily from my shoulder and leading me inside. 'Your room's upstairs.'



Grandpa Ike's house is very different from our house back in Boston.

For one thing, it's old.

Our house in Boston was old too, but it didn't seem like it. It had clean showerheads that sprayed hot water, and shiny marble counters and digital appliances in the kitchen.

It only takes me a couple of hours to figure out that Grandpa Ike's house – I mean *my* house – has none of those things. The shower spurts out lukewarm water, the kitchen counters are stained green and brown, and every few minutes the fridge makes a noise like someone

with a cold clearing their throat. *Huu-hukk! Huu-hukk!*

There are also boxes everywhere, stacked behind the washing machine, wilting on the back porch, peeking out from under the beds. Most of the garage is taken up by an ancient hunk of metal on wheels that Grandpa Ike calls the Fixer-Upper.

After we unpack the car, Mum bakes a frozen pizza and hands out slices on paper plates. Grandpa Ike says he's already eaten but sits in near silence at the table with us, looking on while we wolf down our dinner.

I'm glad that he doesn't seem interested in telling me how much I've grown or forcing me to answer questions about my best subject or my favourite sports.

'Can I be excused?' I ask after ten long minutes.

'Did you eat enough?'

'I had two pieces, Mum.'

'OK, well, let me come with you and make up your bed.'

'I can handle it.' I throw my plate in the trash can and retreat upstairs before she can object.



My new room is actually OK. It's a lot bigger than the old one, and it even has a window seat, where I sit

for a long time, staring. The window looks out on a marsh, where moonlight shimmers on the black water winding through the reeds, giving it shiny scales.

I'm just about to go to bed when I hear a rapping at the door.

'Come in.'

Grandpa Ike swings the door open and stands in the hall. 'Settling in OK?'

'Sure, I guess,' I say, standing awkwardly by my bed.

'Well, all right, then.' Grandpa Ike nods and squints around the bare room. 'Planning to decorate?'

'Not really.'

'What's the point, eh?' he replies. 'You've got all the necessities.' His eyes fall on the chest of drawers stuffed into the corner of my room. I follow his gaze and notice that a photograph has been placed on it.

Grandpa Ike clears his throat. 'Well, good night. I'm next door if you need me.'

Roddie's room is on one side of mine, so Grandpa Ike's must be on the other. Behind the door that's been kept shut since we got here.

'Good night,' I say, relieved that there is not going to be a pep talk, no I'm-always-here-if-you-need-anything speech that all adults feel required to give me these days.

Suddenly, I hear a scratching sound coming from the ceiling.

Grandpa Ike shrugs.

'Only mice,' he says. 'Nothing to worry about. Unless it's squirrels. Then you've got a big problem. Anyway, sleep well.'

Just then, Roddie's speakers thrum to life, the bass of his music vibrating against our shared wall.

Grandpa Ike looks at me, one eyebrow raised. 'Or not.'

I decide I am going to like Grandpa Ike.



Main Street



On my first morning in Palm Knot, Dad shakes me awake at eight o'clock. I squint when I open my eyes, because the sun is blazing through my window. I hear a loud humming, which I think is in my head for a minute before I realise it's just the buzz of insects down in the marsh.

'Time to get up,' Dad says. 'Mum made breakfast, and then we're off to the hardware store.'

'Why do I have to go?' I groan.

'Because I need your help,' Dad says.

Another lie.

As if going on a quest to the hardware store will somehow make me feel any better.

But I get up and get dressed because it takes less effort

than fighting with him. Mum ends up coming too, so she can make sure Dad and I get 'the heavy-duty cleaning stuff' and 'the humane kind of mouse traps'.

Grandpa Ike's truck is already gone from the driveway by the time we leave.

As we twist back up the gravel road, Mum points to each house and tells us who lives there. My new neighbours are:

1. The Bondurants, who are now actually just the Bondurant. Mr Bondurant lives alone in a rusty trailer next to the house he used to live in with Mrs Bondurant, who Mum says left him for his own brother.
2. The Millsaps, whose house is painted purple and green. They have two little kids and keep goats and chickens in their backyard. This morning, Mrs Millsap brought Mum canned peach preserves and a basket of fresh tomatoes from her garden.
3. The Preyers, who I haven't seen yet because they go to Cape Cod from April to September.
4. An old rotted house – the biggest of any on the road – that used to belong to a family called the Blackwoods but is now empty. Unless there are ghosts who live there, which seems likely.



Palm Knot isn't the kind of town tourists flock to for vacation. It would be more accurate to call it a pit stop than a town, a strip of shops and a stretch of cracked highway built into the crook of the bay. 'The old Texaco station halfway between Savannah and Jacksonville,' Mum says as we cross over the inlet bridge. 'That's what tourists call Palm Knot.'

The bay sprawls out to our right. Almost all of the buildings are clustered on the other side of the road. 'It's on the left, Dave!' says Mum, pointing to the first brick building we pass, with a sign in front that reads *Mack's Hardware Store*.

But Dad has already driven past it, and we have to turn around in the parking lot of the Pink Palm Motel.

On the far side of the motel, there's a restaurant called the Beachy Keen Fish House. Nearer to us, next to the parking lot, is a bean-shaped pool. Even though it's only the beginning of April – when the kids in Boston are just hanging up their snow coats for spring – steam rises off the turquoise water. The pool is already crowded with kids who all seem to know each other, judging by how they splash and roughhouse together.

I like swimming, and diving especially. But this

pool is nothing like the one Kacey and I used to go to in Boston, the only one nearby that still had a high dive board.

'Mr Ernie always lets the local kids swim, since he never has any paying guests anyway,' Mum says, following my gaze. 'I used to play there all the time. Do you want me to take you later?'

I think of the press of alien faces that would greet me if I showed up at the pool. The eager crush of questions about where I'm from and what Boston is like and when I'm starting school.

I watch as the kids line up on one side of the pool for a race.

It looks like fun.

'No,' I say.



Flowers line the outside of Mack's Hardware Store, and wind chimes hang above the door, clanging against each other in the breeze. Two identical tabby cats lie side by side on the welcome mat so anyone who wants to come into the store has to clamber over them.

I follow Mum and Dad inside and trail behind them, stopping every once in a while so they can debate

the pros and cons of organic glass cleaner and what the probability is that Grandpa Ike has a working lawn mower.

The air in the shop hangs heavy and moist, and everything smells like earth. Like we're standing in a giant coffin. My stomach begins to churn, and I suddenly feel a choking that makes me want to claw at my throat.

'Mum? Can I wait outside?'

Mum fumbles with the screwdriver in her hands, and it clatters to the ground. She casts a bleak look in Dad's direction as she bends to pick it up. 'I don't know, Ethan,' she says. 'I don't think it's a good idea for you to—'

'I'll stay right outside,' I say. 'I want to, um, pet the cats.'

OK. So sometimes I lie too.

'Maybe your dad should come—'

'I'll stay where you can see me through the windows. Promise.'

'Where I can see you,' she echoes, looking flustered as she reaches into the basket and pulls out the wood polish Dad put in, scanning the shelves for a different kind. 'We won't be long.'

As I make a break for the exit, a dreadlocked woman behind the shop counter, who is fanning herself with a

square of sandpaper, points to a colourful jar in front of her. 'Taffy?' she asks.

I shake my head and yank the door open, hurdle over the cats, and heave myself out into the seething heat, where I inhale deep gulps of salty air. It's hotter out here than it was in the store, but at least a breeze rakes in from the ocean.

I pull my sweatshirt up over my head and knuckle it into a ball. No one told me it would be so much hotter here.

I look over my shoulder, on a hunch, and see Mum staring at me through the window. She waves at me before ducking behind a display of toilet cleaning supplies.

I guess even here, a place with no buses and no trains – no way for me to get to Kacey – they're afraid I'll try to run again.

I sit down on the edge of the hot kerb and stare across the road at the murky bay, which as far as I can tell has no official name. The no-name bay has no beach, either, just waves lapping against a ridge of rocks that separates the ocean from Main Street. A few boats bob on the lazy ocean swells.

Maybe they think I'll steal one of those and try to sail back up the coast.

And maybe the Ethan I was before that day Roddie tackled me on to the pavement would have.

But *I* won't.

My gaze wanders to the Sand Pit, the only building on the other side of the street. I know it's a grocery store, since Mum pointed it out on the way into town. But there are also hopeful advertisements in the windows for snorkel sets and shark-tooth necklaces, and blow-up pool toys line the sidewalk outside. A woman comes out and holds the door open for two little kids. A boy and a girl, both licking ice-cream cones.

Suddenly the girl trips on a crack in the sidewalk, and her cone goes flying. The boy is quick to help, lifting her up and offering her his cone to stop her tears. She wipes her eyes and beams at him.

Hurt boomerangs unexpectedly through me, and I look away.

I'm not lying when I say Mum and Dad don't have to worry about me trying to run again.

Back in Boston, I ran because I wanted to find Kacey.

If I could find her, then I could make everything OK again.

But I know now that I can't.

Because where Kacey has gone, I'll never be able to find her.