

Anna—

There's a kind of jacked-up happiness that comes when you know your life is almost over, when the decision to end it becomes solid. It might be adrenaline. It might be relief. And if I had always felt like this, I might have climbed mountains or raced marathons. Now it's just enough to see this through.

I should have left you alone that first night at the bar. If I had, you wouldn't be reading this letter at all. You'd be walking your dog or watching TV with your boyfriend. You didn't deserve to be dragged into my shit, and you definitely don't deserve the pain I'm about to cause. This is not your fault. For two years you have been my only reason for living. I wish I could give you forever.

You are strong and brave, and someday you'll be okay. You'll fall in love, and I hate him already for being a better man. Someday you will be happy again.

I love you, Anna. I'm sorry.

—Ben



## *ten months and six days (1)*

I walk out of my life on Thanksgiving Day.

Last-minute shoppers are clearing shelves of stuffing mix and pumpkin pie filling as I heap my cart with everything I might need. (Dry beans. Canned vegetables. Rice.) I move through the grocery store like a prepper running late for doomsday. (Boxed milk. Limes. Spare flashlight.) I am quick so I won't lose my nerve. (Apples. Toilet paper. Red wine.) I try not to think beyond leaving. (Cabbage. Playing cards. Bottled water.) Or about what I might be leaving behind.

My mother calls as I'm wrangling the grocery bags into the back seat of my overstuffed Subaru. I haven't told her that I won't be there for Thanksgiving dinner, and she's not ready to hear that I'm skipping town. Not when I've barely left the house for the better part of a year. She'll have questions and I don't have answers, so I let the call go to voicemail.

When I reach the dock, the Alberg is right where it should

be, the shiny hull painted navy blue and the transom empty, still waiting for a name. For a moment I expect Ben's head to pop up from the companionway. I wait to see his little fuck-me grin, and to hear the excitement in his voice when he tells me today is the day. But the hatch is padlocked, and the deck is covered in bird shit—another part of my life I've let fall into neglect.

Ten months and six days ago, Ben swallowed a bottle of prescription Paxil and chased it with the cheap tequila that lived under the sink, and I don't know why. He was already gone when I came home from work and found him on the kitchen floor. In his suicide note, he told me I was his reason for living. Why was I not enough?

I breathe in deep, to the bottom of my lungs. Let it out slowly. Step onto the boat and unlock the hatch.

The air is stale and hot, smelling of wood wax, new canvas, and a hint of diesel. I haven't been aboard since before Ben died. Spiders have spun their homes in the corners of the cabin and a layer of dust has settled on every surface, but the changes leave me breathless. The interior brightwork is varnished and glossy. The ugly original brown-plaid cushion covers have been replaced with red canvas and Peruvian stripes. And a framed graphic hangs on the forward bulkhead that reads I & LOVE & YOU.

"Why do all this work for a trip you'll never take?" I say out loud, but it's another question without an answer. I wipe my eyes on the sleeve of my T-shirt. One of the things I've learned is that suicide doesn't break a person's heart just once.

It takes me the rest of the morning to clean the boat, unload the contents of my car, and stow everything away. Traces of Ben are everywhere: a saucepan at the bottom of the hanging locker,

an expired six-pack of Heineken in the cockpit lazarette, a moldy orange life jacket stuffed in the refrigerator. I throw these things in the trash, but even with my spider plant hanging from an overhead handrail and my books lining the shelf, the boat belongs to Ben. He chose it. He did the renovations. He charted the course. He set the departure date. My presence feels like a layer as temporary as dust.

The last thing in my trunk is a shoebox filled with photos taken using Ben's old Polaroid, a dried hibiscus flower from our first date, a handful of dirty-sexy love letters, and a suicide note. I take out a single photo—Ben and me at the Hillsboro Inlet Lighthouse about a week before he died—and stash the box in the bottom drawer of the navigation station. I tape the photo to the wall in the V-berth, right above my pillow.

And it's time to go.

My only plan was to spend today in bed—my only plan since Ben's death—but I was startled out of sleep by an alarm. The notification on my phone said: TODAY IS THE DAY, ANNA! WE'RE GOING SAILING! Ben had programmed the event into my calendar almost three years ago—on the day he showed me his sailboat and asked me to sail the world with him—and I had forgotten. I cried until my eyelashes hurt, because there is no longer a *we* and I've forgotten how to be *me* without Ben. Then I got out of bed and started packing.

I've never been sailing without Ben. I don't always get the terminology correct—it's a *line*, *Anna*, not a *rope*—and I'll be lucky if I make it to the end of the river. But I am less afraid of what might become of me while sailing alone in the Caribbean than of what might become of me if I stay.