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A Thousand Pardons

Written by Jonathan Dee

Published by Corsair

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A Thousand Pardons

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Constable & Robinson Ltd
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the United States by Random House,
an imprint of The Random House Publishing Group,
a division of Random House, Inc, New York, 2013

First published in the UK by Corsair,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson, 2013

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The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance
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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in
Publication data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-84901-737-4 (hardback)
ISBN 978-1-47210-852-4 (trade paperback)
ISBN 978-1-47210-738-1 (ebook)

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in the UK

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HELEN TRIED NOT to look at her watch, because looking at your watch never changed anything, but it was already a quarter to seven and her husband's headlights had yet to appear at the top of the hill. Evening had darkened to the point where she had to press her forehead to the kitchen window and frame her eyes with her hands just to see outside. Meadow Close was a dead end street, and so even if she couldn't make out the car itself, the moment she saw headlights of any kind cresting the hill there was a one in six chance they were Ben's. More like one in three, actually, because by turning her face a bit in the bowl of her hands she could see the Hugheses' car parked in their driveway, and the Griffins', and that obscene yellow Hummer that belonged to Dr. Parnell—

“Mom!” Sara yelled from the living room. “Can I have some more seltzer?”

Twelve was old enough to get your own fanny out of the chair and pour your own third glass of seltzer. But it was Tuesday, and on Tuesday evening guilt always ruled, which was why Sara was eating dinner in front of the TV in the first place, and so Helen said only, pointedly, “Please?”

“Please,” Sara answered.

She couldn’t help stealing a look at the kitchen clock as she closed the refrigerator door. Six-fifty. Mr. Passive Aggressive strikes again, she thought. She wasn’t always confident she understood that expression correctly—passive aggressive—but she referred to it instinctively whenever Ben failed to do something he had promised her he would do. Sara was sitting on the couch with her plate on her lap and her feet on the coffee table, watching some horrific show about rich girls; she still wore her shin guards but at least she’d remembered to take her cleats off. Helen placed the seltzer bottle on the table at a safe distance from her daughter’s right foot.

“Thank you?” she said.

“Thank you,” Sara repeated.

Then they both turned to watch a beam of light finish raking the kitchen, and a few seconds later Helen heard the lazy thump of a car door. Instead of relaxing, she grew more agitated. She hated to be late for things, and he knew that about her, or should have. Ben walked through the front door, wearing his slate-gray suit with an open collar and no tie. When he was preoccupied, which was his word for depressed, he had a habit of pulling off his tie in the car and then forgetting it there; last Sunday Helen, passing his Audi in the garage, had glanced through the window and seen three or four neckties slithering around on the passenger seat. It had sent a little shudder through

her, though she didn't know why. His eyes moved indifferently from Sara to her dinner plate to the TV as he trudged past them toward the hallway, but his expression didn't change; he was sunk too deep in whatever he was sunk in even to make the effort to convey his disapproval. Helen followed him into their bedroom. He finished emptying his pockets onto the dresser and then turned toward her without a trace of engagement, as if she were trying to talk to a photo of him.

"We're late," she said.

He shrugged, but did not so much as consult the watch right there on his wrist. "So let's go," he said.

"You're not going to change?"

"What for?"

She rolled her eyes. "It's Date Night?" she said.

He scowled and started taking off his pants. Really, it was like having two adolescents in the house sometimes. So that he wouldn't lose focus—he was perfectly capable, these days, of sitting on the bed in his shorts with his lips moving silently for half an hour or more—she stood there and watched him pull on a clean sweater and a pair of pressed jeans. His hair still looked like he'd been driving with the top down, but whatever. That kind of detail Sara was very unlikely to notice. When he was done they marched back out through the living room and Helen grabbed her bag and kissed Sara on the top of her head.

"You can call either cell," she said. "We'll be back by eight thirty. You know the drill."

On the television a girl and her father appeared to be auditioning a group of male strippers. "Happy Date Night," Sara said in a deep voice meant to sound hickish or retarded, and with one finger she mimed inducing herself to vomit.

They took Ben's car because it was still in the driveway. Helen tossed his necktie onto the back seat. He drove too fast, but only because he always drove too fast, and they were ten minutes late for Dr. Becket. Not that Becket seemed to care. Why would she? She got paid for the hour either way. So if she doesn't mind, Helen thought as they took their seats at the threadbare arms of the couch, and Ben doesn't mind, then why am I the only one who minds? What is the matter with me?

"So how was your week?" Becket said. She wore her hair in a tight gray braid whose teardrop-shaped bottom was nearly white. The office was in the rear section of an old carriage house that had long ago been converted for commercial use by a real estate broker, who operated out of the half of the house that faced the road and rented out the back. Fourteen years ago, when they were trying to make themselves look stabler and more prosperous for the insanely superficial Chinese adoption agencies, Helen and Ben had bought the Meadow Close house from that very broker. Now it was night and the only light on in the house was Dr. Becket's. Where was her husband? What did her kids do when she worked nights? Helen didn't always feel that certain about her, but unless you wanted to drive all the way to White Plains and back, Dr. Becket was the only game in town.

"Maybe a little better," Helen answered, when it became apparent Ben wasn't going to say anything. It was a lie, but in the atmosphere of this sorry room the truth was generally something you had to work up to. "We tried some of the things you suggested last time. We tried to at least sit down for meals together, even though that's difficult with Ben working past seven most nights."

“I know a number of couples,” Becket said, “find that it works well to set aside one night a week for spending that kind of time together, make it part of the schedule rather than subject to the schedule, if you see what I mean. Like a Date Night.” They both snorted, and it gave Helen a little nostalgic pang, honestly, just for the two of them to laugh at the same thing, at the same time. Becket raised her eyebrows, with her typical maddening dispassion.

“We can’t really use that one,” Helen explained. “We’ve been telling Sara that we’re on Date Night every week when we come here.”

“Maybe we can tell her that Thursday is our night to date other people,” Ben said.

“That’s not really that funny,” Helen said, but it was too late, Becket was leaning forward, sinking her teeth into it like she did into any stupid, spontaneous thing either of them might ever blurt out. “I’m curious why you say that, Ben,” she purred. “Is that something you’d like to do? See other people?”

Helen closed her eyes. Dr. Becket was just confirming every stereotype Ben held of her, every complaint he went through on the drive home every week about how she was a huckster, a charlatan, who didn’t do anything except repeat whatever you said to her and then ask you what it meant. Why are we even doing this? he would ask. What is the point? Because you had to do something: she had no better answer than that, which was why she usually delivered it silently. You had to try something, even something as wasteful and frustrating and demeaning as this weekly hour in the back of the carriage house, because to do nothing was to find it acceptable that you were in a marriage where you hardly spoke to or touched each other, where your

husband was so depressed he was like the walking dead and yet the solipsism of his depression only made you feel cheated and angry, and your daughter was old enough now that none of this was lost on her whether she knew it yet or not.

But now thirty seconds had gone by and Helen hadn't heard him say anything or even make some kind of immature, derisive sighing sound, as he usually did; and when she opened her eyes again and looked at him, what she saw, to her astonishment, was her husband wiping his eyes with the back of his hand like a child.

"Yes," he said. "Yes. I mean Jesus. I would love to see other people."

Which could only be followed by a momentous silence; but since silence was anathema to Dr. Becket, on the grounds that silence might belong to anyone but vapid professional jargon was something that could bear her own distinctive stamp, she said to him, "Stay with that."

"Not anybody in particular," he went on. "In fact, a stranger would be best. I would like to wake up tomorrow next to someone who has no idea who I am. I would like to look out the window and not recognize anything. I would like to look in the fucking *mirror*," he said with a truly inappropriate laugh, "and see other people. I mean, I cannot be the only person who feels that way. Are you seriously telling me that you don't feel that way too?"

It wasn't clear which of them he was speaking to; he was staring at the carpet, tears hanging from his nose, and stressing certain words with a kind of karate-chop motion of his hands.

"Helen, what are you feeling right now?" Dr. Becket said.

Ben was right, she thought; it was all an act, the gray-haired

old fake maintained an air of smug control even though she had no better idea what the hell was happening in front of her than either of her patients did. “A lot of things,” Helen said, trying to laugh. “I guess mostly that that is the longest I have heard him talk at one stretch in like a month.”

“Because it’s all so *unsurprising*,” Ben said, very much as if he hadn’t heard anyone else’s voice. “I’m scared of it. I’m scared of every single element of my day. Every meal I eat, every client I see, every time I get into or out of the car. It all frightens the shit out of me. Have you ever been so bored by yourself that you are literally terrified? That is what it’s like for me every day. That is what it’s like for me sitting here, right now, right this second. It’s like a fucking death sentence, coming back to that house every night. I mean, no offense.”

“No *offense*?” Helen said.

“It’s not that Helen herself is especially boring, I don’t mean that, or that some other woman might be more or less boring. It’s the situation. It’s the setup. It’s not you per se.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Helen said, her heart pounding.

“Every day is a day wasted, and you know you only get so many of them and no more, and if anybody uses the phrase ‘midlife crisis’ right now I swear to God I am coming back here with a gun and shooting this place up like Columbine. It is an existential crisis. Every day is unique and zero-sum and when it is over you will never get it back, and in spite of that, *in spite of that*, when every day begins I know for a fact that I have lived it before, I have lived the day to come already. And yet I’m scared of dying. What kind of fucking sense does that make? I don’t think I am too good for it all, by the way. In fact I am probably not good enough for it, if you want to think of it like

that. I am bored to near panic by my home and my work and my wife and my daughter. Think that makes me feel superior? But once you see how rote and lifeless it all is, you can't just unsee it, that's the thing. I even got Parnell across the street to write me a prescription for Lexapro, did you know that?" He finally looked up at Helen, whose hand was over her mouth, as if miming for him what she wanted him to do, to stop talking, to turn back. "Of course you didn't know that, how would you know that. Anyway, I took it for two months, and you know what? It didn't make the slightest fucking difference in how I feel about anything. And I'm glad."

Helen stole a glance at Becket, who was sitting forward with her fingers steeped under her weak chin. She could not have looked more pleased with herself.

"Something's got to give," Ben said. He sounded tired all of a sudden, as if the act of denouncing his wife and child and the whole life they had led together had taken a lot out of him. Poor baby, Helen thought hatefully. "Something's got to *happen*. It is hard to get outside yourself. It's hard to get outside the boundaries of who you are. Why is that so hard? But the pressure just builds up until there's some kind of combustion, I guess, and if it doesn't kill you then maybe it throws you clear of everything, of who you are. Well, either way. I suppose that's how it works."

He sat back into the couch, the same couch where his wife sat, and within half a minute he had disappeared again, his face had resolved into the same zombie cast Helen had been looking at for a year now, two years maybe, without ever really guessing what was going on behind it.

"I know it may seem painful," Becket said, "but I think we

have really, really given ourselves something to build on here tonight.”

He drove them back home, because it was his car, even though she was newly afraid he would just run them into a tree or a lamppost if he saw the opportunity. In fact, she kind of wondered why he didn’t. When they reached the top of the hill and came in view of their house, where every light was burning, he broke the silence by saying gently, “Can we at least agree that we are never going back to that heinous cunt’s little office again?”

“Absolutely,” Helen said. The end of Date Night.

The darkness made the thin ranks of trees at the end of their property line—this early in the spring, you could still see right through them to the back of the water treatment plant—look deep as a forest. He walked ahead of her through the vestibule and turned left into the kitchen to pull the cork out of the bourbon. Sara was in her room with the door closed; her light was still on and the tapping of her keyboard faintly audible, which meant either that she was doing homework or that she was not. Helen wanted to go in but knew she probably couldn’t look into her daughter’s face just then without crying; so she stood there in the hallway, her shoulder against the wall beside the door, and listened to the inscrutable tap of the keys. Back in the living room, she heard the television click on.

She knew what the right thing to do was. Dismantle it together: help him find a new place, work out the money, sign whatever needed to be signed, put on a united front for poor Sara, who’d already had two parents abandon her, after all. But for once in her life Helen didn’t want to do it. Why should she make even this easy for him? She’d made everything easy for

him for eighteen years, and he repaid her by making an explosive, weepy public display of his horror at the very sight of her. Screw the right thing. If he hated her so much, if life with her was such a death sentence, then let's see him be a man about it, for once, and devise his own escape.

SHE DIDN'T HAVE to wait long. Every June, a new crop of summer associates arrived at Ben's law firm in the city for their strange audition. They were given a modicum of real work, though everyone knew and even joked about the fact that this was an extended bait and switch and that if they were lucky enough to be hired full-time they would then be worked as remorselessly as rented mules. It was really an audition for the lifestyle, for their receptivity to perks. They came from Harvard and Michigan and Stanford; they were young and obedient and performed simple tasks in a sportsmanlike way and were then sent out into the night with free passes and the account number of a car service and a sense of coming into their inheritance as dauphins of privilege.

They were at the very bloom of everything for which they felt destined and everything that others would begrudge them, at the very instant of life that a certain type of old hedonist would look back on and wish could have been arrested forever, and one of them, a short, blond, gregarious, almost comically well-built second-year from Duke named Cornelia Hewitt, attracted Ben's attention. He asked to have her assigned to a simple probate case he was working on—it was customary for junior partners to request summer associates based on nothing more than could be gleaned about them from seeing them walk

past one's open office door—and by the Fourth of July he had lost his composure to the point where one or two of his fellow partners took him aside, not in any official capacity of course, and advised him to cool it. He could not have cared less; or, to the extent that he did care about potential risk to himself or to the firm, such concerns were powerless against what was driving him. He took Cornelia out to lunch almost every day; he even called her in to work on weekends, which was unprecedented, but in order to be near her there was nothing at Ben's disposal he was unwilling to use. He had a photocopy of her personnel file hidden under the driver's seat of his car.

Cornelia was uncertain how to play it. There had to be an advantage in exciting this kind of intense personal interest from a partner, even if she wasn't sure what sort of advantage; the specifics were hazy, but there was something elemental about it that seemed as though it should be quite clear. She was smart enough to know that the woman tended to get blamed in the end, in these types of situations, if things went too far. She was always searching for a line in her dealings with him, a line where propriety met savvy, both when others were in the room and when they weren't. For Ben's part, watching her struggle to find that line, to figure out in this new adult context what consequences of her own allure she was or wasn't in control of—struggle with womanhood, in a way—was intoxicating. He began texting her, and calling her on her cell if she didn't respond to the texts, and when the summer was half over, when he began to sense that this whole infatuation was like his life in miniature in that the opportunity to act transcendently was now drifting away from him, he told her that he had fallen in love with her.

Actually, what he told her was that if he didn't have sex

with her very soon he was going to die. The rest was implicit. Once he declared himself, once he had renounced for good any claim to ambiguity, legal or otherwise, Cornelia felt the power in the relationship, which up to that point had seemed fluid, shift decisively onto her side, and that was when she really grew interested—if not in taking things to any sort of next level with this old married man, then at least in the potential of his agonizing status quo. By now most of her fellow associates had stopped speaking to her. She grew curious about the limits of what she, in her apparent irresistibility, could get this man—forty-five, previously dignified, successful in precisely the way she planned to be, an emotional slave to his lust for her—to do, and in what that might let slip about her future in her chosen field.

She stopped evading his casual touches, stopped hanging up on him when his descriptions of specific longings went past the point of self-restraint. She was not sure whether his complete loss of decorum meant that she would be hired by the firm for sure or that there was no chance in hell they would let her back in the building once her summer contract expired; but by now it had all become an experiment for its own sake, a sustaining of certain emotional inequities in the pursuit of knowledge about the way the world worked and where the best available seat in it might be. A woman of her gifts, she reassured herself, would get hired somewhere. Oddly, Ben realized at a certain point, without the realization slowing him down at all, that while he was irredeemably in love with her, he didn't really like her all that much. But he seemed to have decided that the only way to go out was to go out as a fool, an antagonist, exciting the crowd's derision, because having your cock in the mouth of a

gorgeous young girl was the only tolerable state of being he could imagine anymore, and was worth anything the cowardly circle of his peers could throw at him.

Helen had no inkling of any of it, but it would be unjust to conclude that she was stupid or oblivious or in some sort of denial. She didn't miss the signs, because from her perspective—seeing her husband only in the half hour before he slipped out the door in the morning, or in the hour between his arrival at home at night and his climbing into bed after three bourbons and turning out the light—there were no signs to miss. All was as it had been for some time. If he seemed a little more euphoric in the mornings, in a little more of a hurry to drink his coffee and knot his tie and get into the car and drive away from there, she read that only as a reflection of his feelings toward her: he was driving away from something, that is, not toward something else. Conversely, the long drive home up the Saw Mill at night seemed to drain all the dark exuberance right out of him, and when he came through the door there was nothing about his blank face and flat voice that was in any way unfamiliar. What weighed on her most was how poor a father Ben had become. The crazy bored rictus of a smile he wore whenever Sara talked to him was something Sara herself must surely have noticed, or felt. This made Helen sadder than anything else. She couldn't really remember anymore, except in a sort of evidentiary sense, a time when things had been better between herself and her husband, but she remembered piercingly how good they used to be between father and child.

For five days running, in August, Ben rented a room at the Hudson Hotel in the hopes that he could talk Cornelia into going there with him. He had not seen it. All week, each time

they were alone, he would remind her that the room waited there, empty and expensive, just for them, and would continue to wait there until she said yes to him.

On Friday, in a sort of invocation of Zeno's paradox, she concluded that she could say yes to him without breaking, either explicitly or in her heart, her vow not to let him have sex with her. At four o'clock he called the car service and the two of them rode in air-conditioned silence up to West Fifty-eighth Street. Ben was shivering. The people who flowed around the windows at every red light passed by as silently and impotently as ghosts; though in another way, Ben thought, he himself was the ghost, for they searched malevolently for him from their side of the smoked glass but still could not see his face. In the elevator at the Hudson he stood gallantly behind her and silently checked out the smooth skin rounding her shoulders, the patch of neck beneath her upswept hair, the incomparable, exaggerated heart of her ass, the legs in high heels that still brought her head up only to the level of his chin. The room was not the nicest in the hotel; it had, in full accord with his imaginings, a vast bed in it, and a shuttered window, and very little else. He sat in its one chair and stared at Cornelia as she stood in the narrow space between the foot of the bed and her own reflection in the dark screen of the television.

"We are not going to have sex, Ben," she said.

"All right," Ben said. He continued to stare, not in an effort to demean or unsettle her but almost as if he believed she did not even know he was there. After half a minute, the impatience of youth got the best of her, as he had guessed it would.

"Well then why did we come here?" she said. "What did you imagine would happen? Did you get what you wanted?"

“Take off your clothes,” he said.

“What?”

“Take off all of your clothes, and just stand there and let me look at you. That will be enough.” Who knows, he thought, maybe it will be enough. Probably not, though.

“Like hell,” Cornelia said. “You’ll jump me.”

“I promise you I will not.”

“I may be small but I can defend myself.”

“It’s the furthest thing from my mind.”

“You’d just sit there in that chair and not get up?”

“I will. You there, me here.”

“For how long?”

He considered it. “I don’t know,” he said. “Until whatever happens next happens, I guess.”

She tried to think of it from every angle. If she couldn’t come up with some good reason not to take him at his word, she was in danger of becoming a little aroused by the idea. Just the sight of her. Just the sight of her would be enough for him. No harm, no foul. She had always enjoyed the sensation of being admired, and though opportunities to let men admire her had never been in short supply, something about the sight of Ben, sitting patiently in the stiff-backed hotel chair in his tan summer suit, impressed on her that it would not be this way forever.

“You’re not going to pull your dick out and start masturbating?” she said.

“Please,” he said. “Who do you think I am?”

She stepped out of her heels, and when she straightened up again she was three inches closer to the floor. She had a boyfriend, a large, servile, sullen former lacrosse captain whom

she'd dated since college, when she was a sophomore and he was a senior. Over the past two years they had seen little of each other, mostly on weekends when one or the other of them could afford to travel, because she'd been in Durham; but when she came for her summer in New York, where he was already living while working as a junior analyst at Bank of America, it seemed only logical, not to mention kindly optimistic, for the two of them to share his apartment in Fort Greene. It had not gone all that well, in her mind at least, but that didn't mean she was going to cheat on him. He knew all, or most, about the texts and the cellphone calls from her boss. It would matter to Cornelia that standing frankly in the nude in a hotel room for ten minutes or half an hour, while one of the junior partners looked at her with actual tears running down his face, emphatically did not fall into the category of having sex with, or even being touched by, another man. She unzipped her dress, not slowly or provocatively, and when it fell to the floor she picked it up and laid it carefully along the foot of the bed, smoothing it with her hands. Her bra left red lines under her breasts and along the smooth skin below her arms; Ben stared at those lines as they faded away to nothing and felt as if he had triumphed over time. The bounty of her seemed endless. She took off her simple panties, and he saw that she had shaved her pubic hair, not completely but down to a small strip, as they all seemed to do these days, because it was beautiful that way. What a wonderful world, he thought, where women will do something so difficult and intimate and utterly pointless just for the sake of beauty. What a blessing to be a man in it.

"Okay?" Cornelia said finally, resisting the urge to fold her arms over her breasts.

He tried to speak but could not, so instead he nodded and smiled. It was a sad folly, he knew, to assume that even this feeling, the most powerful he could remember, wouldn't weaken in time just like every other feeling; but for the moment he was so suffused with gratitude for living that he could not imagine ever feeling any other way.

When she was dressed again he stood and opened the door for her, and there on the threshold—in no way out of breath, but rather as if he had been standing there for quite some time—was Cornelia's boyfriend. Ben heard Cornelia gasp before he actually saw the boy (he was looking at her ass again, and thinking about the difference between imagining what it looked like unclothed and remembering it) and he lifted his head just in time to receive the first blow right on the mouth. It was like being kicked by a horse. He couldn't believe how much force was behind it. He intuited what was happening, mostly from the quality of Cornelia's screams—she was trying to control the young man rather than plead with him—even though he'd had no idea there was any sort of boyfriend in the picture at all. He didn't appear in Cornelia's personnel file. His name, evidently, was Andy. Ben dropped to his knees and then felt a kind of splintering in the area of his nose before everything went white. The blows were all just one blow for a while, and then they had stopped. "No police," he mumbled in a voice that didn't sound like his own voice at all, and he opened one eye and saw that there was no one there to hear him anyway; the corridor he viewed sideways from his prone position on the carpeted floor was empty, and both Cornelia and his young assailant were gone.