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How To Be Lost

Amanda Eyre Ward

About the Book

‘[*How to Be Lost*] invites comparison to *The Lovely Bones*’ *People Magazine*

‘I read Amanda Eyre Ward’s lovely *How To Be Lost* after a warm recommendation from a friend … it has that lovely tone that only American women writers seem to be able to achieve: melancholic, wry, apparently (but only apparently) artless, perched on the balls of its feet and ready to jump either towards humour or heartbreak, with no run-up and no effort. *How To Be Lost* has a great setup, too’ **Nick Hornby**

‘The narrative is so engrossing, so propelling, you’re surprised to come upon the last page … a damn good story’ *Time Out New York*

‘A walloping knockout of a finisher that would seem like a cheap trick if it weren’t so thrilling. The author plays a smooth game, not showing her hand until the absolute right time’ *Kirkus*

‘This is one of those sink-your-teeth-into-it novels that reminds you why you loved to read in the first place’ *The Charlotte Observer*

To their neighbours in suburban Holt, New York, the Winters family has it all: a grand home, a trio of radiant daughters and a sense of security in their affluent corner of

America. But when five-year-old Ellie disappears, the fault lines within the Winters family are exposed.

Fifteen years later, Caroline, now a New Orleans cocktail waitress, sees a photograph of a woman in *People Magazine*. Convinced that it is Ellie all grown up, Caroline embarks on a search for her missing sister. As she travels through the New Mexico desert, the mountains of Colorado, and the smoky underworld of Montana, she devotes herself to salvaging her broken family.

How To Be Lost is a spellbinding novel about sisters, family secrets – and love.

HOW TO BE LOST

a novel by

Amanda Eyre Ward

Hutchinson
London

Contents

Version 1.0

Epub ISBN 9781446441039

www.randomhouse.co.uk

Published by Hutchinson in 2005

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in the United States by MacAdam/Cage Publishing in 2004

Hutchinson
The Random House Group Limited
20 Vauxhall Bridge Road, London SW1V 2SA

Random House Australia (Pty) Limited
20 Alfred Street, Milsons Point, Sydney
New South Wales 2061, Australia

Random House New Zealand Limited
18 Poland Road, Glenfield
Auckland 10, New Zealand

Random House (Pty) Limited
Endulini, 5a Jubilee Road
Parktown 2193, South Africa

The Random House Group Limited Reg. No. 954009

www.randomhouse.co.uk

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

ISBN 0 09 179979 1

For Mary-Anne Westley,
my mother and guiding star

PART ONE

ONE

THE AFTERNOON BEFORE, I planned how I would tell her. I would begin with my age and maturity, allude to a new lover, and finish with a bouquet of promises: grandchildren, handwritten letters, boxes from Tiffany sent in time to beat the rush. I sat in my apartment drinking Scotch and planning the words. “Mom,” I said to Georgette, the cat. “Mom, I have something important to discuss.”

Georgette stretched lazily on the balcony. Below, an ambulance wailed. A man with a shopping cart stood underneath my apartment building, eating chicken wings and whistling. The heat had dimmed, but the smell of New Orleans seemed to grow stronger: old meat, sweat, and beer.

“Mom,” I told the cat, “please listen to what I am telling you.” Although Georgette continued to ignore me, the man with the shopping cart looked up, and I took this as a good sign.

I had to work that night, so after the Scotch and a small nap, I stood in front of the mirror and put on mascara. I was going for sultry European, so I took my hair in my fingers and twisted it, securing the roll with bobby pins. Was this a chignon? How did one pronounce *chignon*? In any case, my hair was out of my face, and this would please the health department. I washed my hands with the rose-scented soap my sister had sent me, and slipped my feet

into heels. As a final gesture, I drew a mole next to the left corner of my mouth.

We had been told, at The Highball, to “glamorize our images.” This is a direct quote. Jimbo, the club’s elderly owner, had begun soliciting buyers for his “little piece of New Orleans history.” The Highball was the cocktail lounge at the top of the World Trade Center in New Orleans. It revolved. If you sat drinking expensive themed cocktails for a full hour, you would see the whole city, from the lazy Mississippi River to the dilapidated downtown, to the French Quarter, and back again to the mighty Miss, Old Man River.

Jimbo had implored us, in his memo, to glamorize. I believe he thought that despite the old plush décor, despite our advancing ages (I was thirty-two, in a town where many cocktail waitresses were underage runaways) and annoyed demeanors, if we tarted up, he could convince some Yankee that The Highball was an exclusive club, and not a tourist trap that revolved. So, why not? My old look (irritable and overtired) hadn’t gotten me many dates. Along with Winnie, I went to Payless Shoes and bought a few pairs of high heels. We bought fishnet stockings and perfume. And then we went to Bobby’s Bar and drank beer from giant cans until we ran out of quarters for the jukebox.

I drove slowly to The Highball. With my car windows closed and my air-conditioning on, the night was lovely. People sat on their front steps drinking from paper bags and watching kids play soccer. I was one of the few white people in my neighborhood, and one of the many heavy drinkers. I waved to Lady B, my landlord, who was sitting on her porch swing and braiding her daughter Lela’s hair. Lady B winked in response.

Although I didn’t have to, I drove up Canal Street, past Harrah’s. Three frat boys, their necks strung with beads,

sat on the sidewalk outside the casino. Their eyes were glazed, and they were not drinking from their giant daiquiris. They were simply staring at the street, defeated. These were the sorts of people who eventually roused themselves to ride the elevator to The Highball. More than one of my customers had fallen asleep in their velvet chair.

Things were slow up at The H-ball. Winnie was leaning on the bar, her tight dress leaving no inch to the imagination. Behind the bar, Peggy the yoga queen mixed a martini like Tom Cruise, shaking her hips this way and that. A few customers gazed out the window. One couple was making out madly. The good thing about a revolving bar is that odious customers are soon out of sight.

“Look at you!” said Winnie, pointing red fingernails and laughing throatily.

“What?” I said. “It’s a chignon.”

Winnie and Peggy looked at each other. Sometimes, I surprised them.

It was a long night, and everybody wanted bourbon. When my shift was over, even I wanted bourbon, instead of my usual Scotch. Peggy poured me a stiff one. “I am dreading tomorrow,” I told her.

“Why?”

“I have to tell my mother I’m not coming home for Christmas. She’s going to flip.”

Peggy sat down on her stool. She had removed every bit of her eyebrows, and drawn thin lines. “Why not?” she said.

“What?”

“Why aren’t you going home?” said Peggy. She poured herself a glass of bourbon.

“Oh, it’s a long story,” I said. “For one thing, I’m an adult, you know? I can’t go flying home to New York for every holiday like I’m in college or something.”

“I never went to college,” Peggy said, dreamily.

“And my family … well, it’s a bit fucked up, is the thing,” I said.

“I wonder,” said Peggy.

“What?”

Peggy sipped her drink, and looked through the enormous windows at the sparkling city below. “I wonder who I would be,” she said, “if I had gone to college.”

“I went to college,” I said, “and I’m still here.”

Peggy nodded. “But you’re you,” she said.

On the drive home, I fantasized about my Christmas alone. I would buy a little tree for my apartment and decorate it with lights. I could spend the day at the movies, or at the Napoleon House, eating a muffaleta sandwich and then slowly drinking my way through a bottle of house red. Winnie had already invited me over for turkey, and I could watch all the kids at her house open presents. Or I could work on Christmas, and make a bundle. Jimbo paid double on holidays.

I wouldn’t have to hear it from my sister Madeline and her investment banker husband, Ron. And the Christmas party. My mother insisted on keeping up the Christmas party tradition, making us don taffeta dresses, hiring the bartender from the Liquor Barn. She made the same meatballs, a little too sweet, and the cheese ball. The cheese ball! There must have been a time when an enormous mass of orange and pink cheese covered with nuts and parsley was fashionable, and my mother has not moved past that time. My mother, who was a model in the sixties, who loved fondue, who made cheese balls and laughed so brightly it made me want to cry.

Last year, I wore the costume and deflected questions about my career. (“Just tell them you’re still playing,” my

mother had said, “I beg of you.”) I drank too much wine, listened to my brother-in-law’s investment advice, and did not argue with Madeline.

I went to sleep before making a scene, but in the middle of the night, I woke up. The guests were gone, and the condo was silent. Next to me, my sister breathed slowly. Strands of hair clung to her flushed cheeks, and she smelled of face cream. I looked at her, the curve of her nose, her thin lips. Her eyelashes, clean of mascara, were pale, and her skin was lightly freckled. In many ways, she was a stranger to me now: an Upper East Side wife, nervous and easily wounded. And yet, in the glow of the streetlamp outside the bedroom, she was the same girl who had once told me *You and me are our family*, her eyes searching mine for a promise. I touched her cheek with my fingers, and she stirred, furrowed her brow, but did not wake.

Our room was on the third floor of my mother’s condo, and I went downstairs, past my mother’s bedroom and the den, where Ron slept on the pullout couch. (For the first year of their marriage, Madeline had slept with him on the uncomfortable couch at Christmastime, but now she came upstairs to sleep next to me.) I had hoped to find some leftover meatballs, or to make a ham sandwich with the Harrington’s maple ham and the little slices of rye bread. I made my way to the kitchen, but as I stepped carefully to avoid waking Ron, I heard something.

I turned toward the sound, and closed my eyes. It was muffled, a sort of breathing. For a moment, I felt a wave of fear, thinking it was a prowler, a robber, murderer, or rapist, but then I remembered I was in suburban New York, and not New Orleans, and my mother’s condo complex had a guardhouse. I was wearing wool socks and my Christmas nightgown.

My eyes adjusted to the light. In the kitchen, by the sliding glass door that led to the third-story deck, I saw a figure: my mother. “Mom?” I said.

She looked up, and I could see she was crying. “Mom? What is it?”

“Nothing,” she said. She blinked quickly and ran the sleeve of her bathrobe across her eyes. By the time I reached her—a few seconds—she was composed. “I was just thinking about Christmas,” she said, a false edge of cheer lining her voice. She clutched the picture in her hands. The blurry one, taken on a fall morning a lifetime ago when we had covered Ellie in leaves.

“Oh, Mom,” I said.

“No,” she said.

“I won’t….”

“Caroline,” said my mother, her voice grave, “we are talking about Christmas, and only Christmas.”

“Mom, it’s OK to miss her.”

“I hope I get a cashmere sweater,” said my mother.

“Mom, we have to talk about this,” I said. “She’s gone. It’s not your fault.”

“And maybe some of those cute fur mittens.”

From my mother’s lap, where she remained trapped in a black-and-white picture, my lost sister looked out at us, laughing.

TWO

THE NEXT MORNING was dull and muggy. December in New Orleans: the thick haze of summer finally dissipated. Georgette rolled over when I sat up in bed. She looked at me steadily. My head felt scraped out and hollow, and it hurt to open my eyes. I lay back down underneath my sheet—it was flowered, a blue print—and wished I had a man to press my skin against. In my apartment, there was only a shadow of the night's coolness. The heat was pushing its way through the windows even before the sun had risen.

I had to call my mother about Christmas, and then I had to glamorize again and serve overpriced drinks to members of the Association of American Lung Surgeons. Every week, a new batch of conference-goers flooded my city and headed, inevitably, to The Highball. As the years went by, we were able to plan ahead: the Amway week was slow, Electrolux salespeople went for champagne. The amazing thing about the Lung people is that they smoked as much as everyone else.

Rubbing my eyes, I promised myself that I would stop drinking alone at night. Outside, there was a crash of metal. I lived at a corner that averaged an accident a month. Whether it was the drinking habits of my neighbors or badly marked streets, it was just depressing.

In the kitchen, I made coffee, spooning the last of the bag into a filter. The kitchen was in the back of the apartment, so I did not have to listen to the aftermath of

the collision. The clock on top of the refrigerator read 6:34. My mother would be awake soon, making Toaster-Kakes and covering them with butter. She mixed milk and sugar into her coffee. I drank mine black, in a blue mug that said "#1 Boss," though I'd never been the boss of anyone.

I was thirty-two, and hadn't had a date in a year. Recently, I had begun to think about being on my own forever. As for kids, I was ill equipped. I was impatient, hard-drinking. I spent days in bed with trashy novels, climbing out and pulling on sweats only long enough to grab a bag of Taco Bell (I loved chalupas). What kind of a mother would I be? I worked nights, fantasized about strange men. I ate hot dogs by choice. From the gas station on the corner. Three for a dollar—I ate all three. I was supposed to have become a famous pianist, but was a cocktail waitress instead.

My mother lived in Holt, New York, the town where I grew up. It's a small town, twenty minutes from New York City, on Long Island Sound. If you stood just right, her condo had a view of the water.

While the coffee was brewing (and I did love that sound, as it dripped into the pot), I went to get the paper from my front steps. The *Times-Picayune*, a travesty of a paper, so filled with bad news that it was thrilling to read. The obituaries, especially, interested me. New Orleans had an inordinate amount of death. There were young heroin addicts, middle-aged gunfight victims, elderly ladies who smoked Pall Malls until their dying day.

And there were the Society pages: newly minted queens of Mardi Gras Krewes, debs of the season, benefit galas. Most mornings I read the paper on the balcony, the sun warming my hair. But this morning, I read in the kitchen. I did not want to see the accident. I saw rescue workers with the Jaws of Life prying open a car once, and once was enough.

My coffee was strong and hot. I turned on the ceiling fan, fed Georgette, and settled down to read. The sound of an ambulance became loud and then stopped. On the front page was another damn story about the Saints and their demands for a new stadium. “Absurd,” I said to Georgette. The obituaries were at the back of the paper. I finished one cup of coffee and poured another. I looked over a photo spread of some new debutantes frolicking at a pool party, each carrying a towel with her monogram embroidered on it.

The phone rang, and I answered it. “Honey? Caroline?” It was my mother, up early.

“Hi, Mom,” I said.

“Oh, Caroline!” My mother sounded close to tears, which was unusual in the morning. Generally, she only grew teary in the evenings, after too many wine spritzers. When my father died of cirrhosis, she cut back on her own drinking, but she still got tipsy most nights.

“What is it?” I said.

“It’s your sister. It’s Madeline….”

“What?”

“It’s that lawyer, the Simpsons’ lawyer. They want—” Her voice broke.

“Mom?”

“Oh, Caroline,” said my mother. “That horrible man’s trial is in January. The one who….”

“Killed Helen Simpson.”

“Yes. And they … they think … they think he….” Her voice dropped to a whisper. “Killed Ellie.”

“Mom, I know. But what does this have to do with Madeline?”

“She wants closure.”

I rubbed my eyes. “You’re losing me.”

“It’s … oh, Caroline!”

“Mom, please. Please calm down. I can’t help you if you don’t….”

“They want me to say she’s dead!”

“They want you to say that Ellie’s dead?”

“Y-e-e-sss,” said my mother, a strangled assent. I heard her blow her nose.

“Mom, have you been drinking?”

There was silence. “A small Bloody Mary,” she admitted.

I sighed. “Can you try to calm down and explain what’s going on?”

“Don’t yell at me,” she sobbed, and then she blew her nose again. “Anyway,” said my mother, “we’ll discuss it all next week at Christmas.”

“Right, ah, Mom, I need to talk to you about that.” There was no sound on the New York end of the line. “Mom?”

“Yes?” Her voice was tight.

“The thing is, well….” Visions flashed in my mind: a quiet stroll through the French Quarter, my personal Christmas tree. Georgette stopped licking her paw and looked at me. “I can’t make it home this year,” I said. I sipped my coffee. “Mom?” I said finally.

Nothing.

“Mom,” I said, “I hear you breathing.”

“You’re coming home for Christmas.”

“Well, I have to work, see, and the plane tickets … I mean, we’re inside of the fourteen-day advance here. You know, I really think that there comes, um, a time….”

“Do you have a boyfriend?” said my mother, hope like a butterfly in her voice.

“Well, the thing is, Jimbo pays double on….”

“Is there a man in your life?”

“Mom, the thing is….”

“A woman? I’d understand, you know, Caroline.”

“Mom! No, there’s nobody. It’s more that….”

“Oh,” said my mother flatly. “Well then, I’ll see you on Wednesday.”

“Mom, I don’t think you’re listening.”

“The Christmas party is Thursday, and I have the most beautiful red dress for you. And the Royans’ son is still single!” She seemed to have regained her usual manic cheer. I didn’t have the heart to tell her the Royans’ son was gay.

“But Mom, I can’t….” She waited me out. “I can’t afford a ticket,” I said, finally.

“Caroline,” said my mother, “you know I’m paying. And I need you.” She sniffled a bit, and I rolled my eyes.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, but I could already feel my resolve wavering. “Oh fuck,” I said.

“I’ll make the cheese ball!” shrieked my mother.

THREE

THE CHRISTMAS PARTY was coming to an end, though *Elvis' Christmas Classics* was still blaring. The bartender from the Liquor Barn was packing up the unopened bottles, someone had stolen the mistletoe, and only a few of the guests were left. Mom, in red-and-black striped pants, held a meatball on a toothpick and nodded seriously, listening to a man in a bow tie describe his boat restoration project. Madeline was putting Saran Wrap around everything that wasn't tied down, pushing the plastic against bowls and platters with concentration. Ron seemed amused by a tall woman's tale of woe at the poodle groomer. "I said one red bow," she exclaimed, "and they made little Keenie's ears into pigtails! Now that is tacky."

Agreeable Ron. He smiled sympathetically.

I had finally extricated myself from a lengthy lecture. Dr. Randall, who had been our pediatrician, was discussing with himself whether Princeton had changed since the day they let ladies in the door. I had no opinion, I said a few dozen times, having never been to Princeton, but Dr. Randall seemed to have enough opinions of his own to keep the conversation going for some time. In conclusion, Dr. Randall finally said, the whole university had gone down the drain—no offense there, Caroline—since females had started meddling.

The bartender saved me. He walked right up, interrupted Dr. Randall's discussion of ladies' lacrosse, and

said, “Excuse me, but could you sign the bill?” He was handsome in a swarthy way: black hair, deep blue eyes. His nose was large. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said, not looking the least bit sorry.

“Sure. No problem.” I smoothed the fabric of my red taffeta dress and rubbed my lips together. Unfortunately, they felt dry, as if all the Juniper Berry Max Factor Lip Stay I had applied had worn off on my wine glass. I followed the bartender back to his makeshift bar, a foldout table my mother had covered with a linen tablecloth. He pulled a clipboard out of a carton and flipped a page. “I’m Caroline, by the way.”

“Oh,” he said, looking up. Good heavens his eyelashes were long. “I’m Anthony,” he said. “I’ve been working at your mom’s Christmas parties for years.”

“Really?”

“Really,” said Anthony. He held the clipboard toward me. “You can sign here.”

“I never realized,” I said, “that it was you.”

“People don’t.”

“Oh,” I said.

Anthony looked impatient. He poked the clipboard in my direction. “I have a question for you,” I said.

“Do you?” said Anthony. “What’s that?”

“How do you know how much to bring?”

“How much liquor?”

“Yeah, and wine.”

He smiled. “My dad’s been doing the same parties for a long time,” he said. “You know who’s going to be where.” He nodded to the man in the bow tie. “He’s going to drink vodka, and his wife used to like her gin. So you’d figure a half bottle for her. The Watsons, they drink wine. Mr. Kenton, Scotch. Mrs. Kenton, G&T’s. You get the picture.”