



EXCERPT FROM YOUNG WIDOWER: A MEMOIR

By John W. Evans

*John W. Evans was just 29 years old when his wife Katie was mauled and killed by a predatory bear in the Carpathian Mountains, leaving him guilt-stricken and bewildered by the sudden loss. He explores that grief in his haunting new memoir, *Young Widower*, published by the University of Nebraska Press in 2014. In this excerpt, Evans describes their meeting and work as Peace Corps Volunteers in Bangladesh in 2000. — editor*

Before Katie's death, I saw our beginning clearly. I told the story about dancing at a party in Dhaka, both of us a little drunk and each of us saying something clever. I described the bus ride that next month and my taking the empty seat next to hers; how Katie pulled my arm over her and leaned into me so matter-of-factly that when my arm fell asleep I did not move it, not even as I lost feeling into the shoulder, so that we might keep talking about the families, hometowns, and friends back home we would most likely never meet, imagining ourselves and our lives in enough detail that we seemed to know each other instantly. Dinner the next night in Dhaka. The park where we finally noticed the security guard watching us. The morning a mutual friend looked at Katie's neck and said, Man, this hangover sucks harder than Big John.

I tell myself now that I will not reanimate a ghost; that if the fact of Katie's death ends our life together, then I can make no sequence of events that does not also initiate tragedy. Why begin with optimism a story that must dissemble reluctance and violence?

There is a competing claim to this logic, a way of making the past that seeks emphasis and invention, rather than sequence. Say it is the difference between closing down every possibility into some broad lie, on the one hand, and finding instead the feeling, however disjointed, that makes the senseless and violent end of a life something more deeply felt than the trivial anecdote of its sensational facts. Before Katie's death, I would not think to make a distinction between how our life began and how the feeling of the marriage was invented and sustained. I didn't have to make the distinction. The fact of our marriage, not Katie's death, was the decisive moment of our life together.

It feels good to tell an exceptional story about us, one that makes certain virtues essential—selflessness, service, privation—in unlikely places no one we knew had visited or was likely to visit. Katie and I were Peace Corps volunteers who fell in love in Bangladesh, made a life in Chicago and Miami, and then went abroad one last time

to Romania, where we lived for the last year of her life. In such a story, we arrive, always, to another place. We are young, idealistic, selfless, hard-working. We are an idea of ourselves, fixed in that time, which is now lost forever.

What were we doing in the middle of Bangladesh? We were dating. We were serving our country and changing lives. Bangladesh isn't real; we said this to each other constantly. We lived in sparse, cement-walled rooms rented from our schools. We took buses, rickshaws, and two-cycle motor taxis to leave them. Smog made our phlegm black. Red circles marked wells drilled into arsenic. We tested our water and carried it in ten-gallon plastic barrels from the well to the front gate of our schools, where we taught hygiene classes and met with local politicians, who drew phonetic squares and drilled the z and j sounds.

Zack drives John to the zoo in his Jeep.

Joe jokes that Zahir zings the xylophone.

My students said I looked and sounded like President Clinton: tall, young, and Midwestern, with blond hair and thick-rimmed glasses. To them all Americans looked the same. When President Clinton visited that spring on his last world tour in office, the entire Peace Corps contingent stood in a cluster opposite the runway, watching Air Force One and waiting to greet him. We shook the hands of senators and aides as his procession arrived to the airport. President Clinton wore a new suit that afternoon, blue with a gold tie, tailored by a local Bangladeshi. He was leonine, wary. He looked each of us in the eye, and somehow he knew to stop and ask the volunteer from Arkansas where she had gone to high school. We smiled and cheered. Then, he was gone, up the stairwell, which rolled into a larger cargo plane further down the runway. Plane after plane disappeared into the night sky. Wouldn't we leave Bangladesh so gracefully?

In the beginning, when I hadn't seen Katie for a few weeks, her face seemed sharper than it did the last time, her eyes a different blue. There was nuance in her voice, her laugh round and smooth in a way than I didn't quite remember. Had her front teeth always had that gap? Was that scar over her left or right eye? Always, one of us had gained or lost weight. Katie wore raw silk and a hand-sewn cotton shalwar in public, covering her face, making her body shapeless. Sometimes I heard her voice before I saw her mouth. I thought of it as running the dub on a video: trying to synch words with lips. The effect lasted only a few minutes, but I remember thinking it was strange, that I could imagine someone so vividly in her absence that she might seem to become someone else.

The Peace Corps was a finishing school, a nondenominational cult, a secular house of worship. We spoke in acronyms—rpcv, pst, ist, pcmo, apcd—that meant we lived on the other side of the world, where the water was not clean, the roads were not paved, and the people were impressed by our relative size. All of this distinction required a separate and secret code of efficient communication. Americans were tall and well fed. We nourished babies that thrived. On the walls of our rooms were photographs of handsome, wealthy people: family members, in fact, who lived in our family homes.

When the Peace Corps conducted official business, its representatives arrived in enormous sport-utility vehicles, with tinted windows and chrome grills across the headlights. Officers and staff members in crisp shirts and bland ties wore expensive watches and, always, sunglasses. They broke into sweats immediately, because their cars in the monsoon heat had been cooled for hours to arctic temperatures. But they spoke the language. They drank whatever was offered them. In this way the Peace Corps was an ideal, an argument, a mobile promised land working a methodical, slow

reveal. We volunteers were its prophets, the elect ambassadors who made our country beautiful by example. We carried backpacks and wore sandals, but everyone seemed to understand that if we were threatened, a battalion of marines would arrive instantly and extract us into the sky.

Katie applied to the Peace Corps, she said, because she hated hearing John Lennon and Yoko Ono's "Happy Christmas! (War Is Over)" in shopping malls, at holiday parties, and especially late at night, by request, when she delivered pizzas in the Twin Cities. Why was the song following her, and what did it want from her? She didn't know. She was not doing enough to help the world, she believed, because if she was doing enough, then John Lennon and Yoko Ono would not hound her to do more.

I applied to the Peace Corps, I told her, because everyone I admired at my university was applying to the Peace Corps. It was a process to begin that took more than a year to complete, becoming more elaborate and specific with each successive interview, medical exam, and clearance, until the selected were understood to be, in every way, exceptional. I loved the sense of momentum and possibility. The experience and destination would change me, I agreed. I could think of it only in the abstract, how my time in the Peace Corps might make me vital and return me home transformed.

It did not matter which region of the world I helped or whether I could locate it on a map. The country to which I was originally assigned, Mongolia, could very well have been the same country where I ultimately served, Bangladesh. I did not know the difference among Central Asia, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. In my naïve mind it was one giant amorphous movie set: rice paddy, monsoon, distant Himalaya. I believed that I would arrive anywhere on the globe and immediately solve problems. I was a young American

abroad, the Peace Corps told me, it was likely I would not only help people but also love doing so.

In the weeks after Katie's death, I felt that same uncertain inclination to optimism about a person I might one day become. I had plenty of opportunities to practice being that person, in public and private gatherings that honored Katie. In Bucharest Katie's coworkers laid fresh flowers at her desk. A colleague spoke about Katie's sacrifice to save lives the night she died and how her doing so followed the life of service she led in Romania and America. An icon of the Virgin Mary was presented by an Orthodox priest. I was given cake and wine to bring home to Katie's family. When it was my turn to speak, I tried to say something about how our last day on that hike together had been ideal; how Katie loved to hike, and to be outdoors with friends, and she had spent a full day doing both; that I had loved doing those things with Katie and also seeing her so happy. I wanted to thank her colleagues for remembering her so well, and I also wanted to make their memory of us certain. How could we ever forget Katie's spirit, I said, her generosity, smile, and laughter? How would we live after her? **WV**

John W. Evans (Bangladesh 1999-2001) was born in Kansas and grew up in New York and Chicago. His memoir, *Young Widower* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014), won the 2013 River Teeth Book Prize. His poetry collection, *The Consolations* (Trio House Press, 2014), won the 2013 Trio Award. His poems and essays appear in *Slate*, *The Missouri Review*, *Boston Review*, *ZYZZYVA*, *The Rumpus*, and *Poetry Daily*, as well as the chapbooks, *No Season* (FWQ, 2011) and *Zugzwang* (RockSaw, 2009). After completing a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in poetry, John was a Jones Lecturer at Stanford University, where he continues to teach creative writing today. He lives in Northern California with his wife and two young sons.