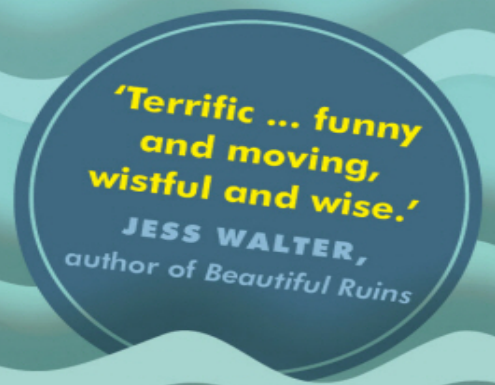


THIS
IS YOUR
LIFE,
HARRIET
CHANCE!
JONATHAN EVISON



'Generous and wise ... Deeply felt and deeply comforting.'

PATRICK DEWITT, author of *The Sisters Brothers*

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Acknowledgments

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About the Book

With Bernard, her husband of fifty-five years now in the grave, seventy-eight-year-old Harriet Chance impulsively sets sail on an ill-conceived Alaskan cruise that her late husband had planned. But what she hoped would be a voyage leading to a new lease of life becomes a surprising and revelatory journey into Harriet's past.

There, amid the buffets and lounge singers, between the imagined appearances of her late husband and the very real arrival of her estranged daughter mid-way through the cruise, Harriet is forced to take a long look back, confronting the truth about pivotal events that changed the course of her life. And in the process she discovers that she's been living the better part of that life under entirely false assumptions.

Part-dysfunctional love story, part exploration of the relationship between mothers and daughters, nothing is what it seems in this charming tale of what it truly means to begin again.

About the Author

Jonathan Evison is the author of four novels including the *New York Times* bestseller, *West of Here*. A film adaptation of his third novel, *The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving*, is in production starring Paul Rudd and Selena Gomez. He lives on an island in Western Washington.

ALSO BY JONATHAN EVISON

All About Lulu

West of Here

The Revised Fundamentals of Caregiving

THIS IS
YOUR LIFE,
HARRIET
CHANCE!

JONATHAN EVISON



✱ WINDMILL BOOKS

FOR MOM



November 4, 1936 **(HARRIET AT ZERO)**

HERE YOU COME, Harriet Nathan, tiny face pinched, eyes squinting fiercely against the glare of surgical lamps, at a newly renovated Swedish hospital, high on Seattle's First Hill. It's an unseasonably chilly Wednesday in autumn, and the papers are calling for snow. Roosevelt by a landslide! they proclaim. Workers grumbling in Flint, Michigan! In Spain, a civil war rages.

Meanwhile, out in the corridor, your father paces the floor, shirtsleeves rolled to the elbow. Clutching an unlit Cuban cigar, he checks his wristwatch. He's got a three-o'clock downtown.

By the end of the week, Harriet, you'll leave the hospital wrapped in a goose-down swaddler knit by your ailing grandmother. Your father will miss his three-o'clock today. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. They don't call it labor for nothing. Let's not forget the grit and determination of your mother. All that panting and pushing, all that clenching and straining, eyes bulging, forehead slick with sweat. Let's take a moment to appreciate the fact that she won't begrudge you any of it, though you'll always be your father's girl.

Here you come, better late than never: a face presentation. Not the boy your father so desperately wanted, but here you come, anyway, all six pounds three ounces of you. Button nose, conical head, good color. A swirl of dark hair atop your little crown. And a healthy pair of lungs, too.

Listen to you wail, as the doctor slaps your fanny: your cries, phlegmy and protracted. Hear them? These are virtually the last sounds you will utter until well after your second birthday.

Yes, Harriet, you were an exceptionally quiet child. Too quiet.

Exhibit A: December 31, 1936. For the rest of their lives, your parents will regale you, and anyone who will listen, with a rollicking story about a certain New Year's Eve party on the north end. The story involves a bassinet into which your father, in a moment of stoned clarity and admirable foresight, fastened you by your ankles and armpits for safety, using his own necktie and a leather belt from the host's closet. The party is a triumph, as the story goes, with Bacchus leading the charge. The music is brassy, the walls are thrumming. So frenzied the celebration, in fact, that amid their merrymaking, revelers fail to notice the upended bassinet in the corner. That is, until whiz kid, Charlie Fitzsimmons, the firm's youngest partner, lipstick on his collar, ladies' underpants adorning the crown of his head, nearly trips on you on his way back from the punch bowl.

It will not be the last time Charlie Fitzsimmons takes notice of you.

"Would you look at that glass of milk?" he shouts.

For an instant, the party is struck dumb as everyone turns their attention to the corner. Look at Harriman Nathan's girl!

"She'll make a hell of a judge," observes Charlie.

And of course, hilarity ensues. The story never fails, and you're the punch line, Harriet.

There you are, for God only knows how long, upside down, your poker face turning from red to blue to purple, your little gray eyes gazing impassively at the world, as your parents ring in a prosperous 1937.

You never made a peep.

This is your life, Harriet. The beginning, anyway.

August 11, 2015
(HARRIET AT SEVENTY-EIGHT)

HARRIET FINDS FATHER Mullinix in his stuffy office behind the chapel, his reading glasses roosting halfway down the bridge of his nose, his laptop propped open in front of him.

He's on his feet before she can cross the threshold.

"Harriet, you're shivering. Sit." He lowers her into a straight-backed chair. "My goodness, you're sopping wet."

"He's here, Father," she says. "I found his slippers this morning next to mine in the breakfast nook."

Father Mullinix smiles patiently, setting his big hands on the desktop. "We've talked about this several times recently, Harriet. There's but one ghost in the Bible, and we both know who that is."

"But last week, the WD-40. And now this."

Drawing a weary breath, Father Mullinix holds it in.

"You don't understand," says Harriet. "The WD-40, that was him, telling me to quiet those hinges on the dishwasher. He hated the squeaking."

Slowly, Father Mullinix releases his breath. Clasping his hands together on the desktop, he proceeds expertly in a measured tone.

"Perhaps it is possible he's trying to speak to you through God," he concedes. "But certainly I wouldn't take the WD-40 as a sign. Perhaps you left it there on the chair, a lapse in memory. It happens to me daily. Yesterday I found these very glasses in the pantry. We're all so busy in these times, so preoccupied. And you of all people, Harriet, you are so diligent in all things, particularly for someone of your ... experience."

"But I know I didn't leave it there. And the slippers."

"Well, I'm sure there's an explanation."

"I saw him Father, I felt him. Last night, we were at the Continental Buffet. He was eating corned beef."

"Ah, I see. You've had another dream."

"I wasn't dreaming. He was an actual presence."

Father Mullinix smiles sadly, but Harriet can tell his patience is wearing thin. For months, she's been eating up his time, unloading her grief on him, bludgeoning him with the details of her dream life and, most recently, trying in vain to convince him that Bernard still lingered somehow in the earthly realm. Perhaps she was mistaken in confiding in him this time, though he'd never failed her in the past.

"Do you think I'm, oh, Father ... you don't think I'm ...?"

"I think, perhaps, you could use some rest, Harriet."

"But Father, I assure you I'm—"

"Please, let me drive you home, Harriet."

September 9, 1957 **(HARRIET AT TWENTY)**

LOOK AT YOU, Harriet, a grown woman! No longer a glass of milk but a tall drink of water. Okay, not so tall. Maybe a little on the squat side, maybe a little pudgy, to hear your mother tell it. But your hygiene is fastidious, your bouffant is formidable. And you're still quiet, which makes you popular among lawyers and men alike. But you've no time for men. You're a professional. Marriage is one negotiation that can wait. First, your own apartment. An automobile. A promotion.

The sky is the limit!

Here you are, at Fourth and Union, top floor, just three months removed from your associate's degree. And not your father's firm, either. Sure, you had a push, a few advantages in life, but you got here on your own. No, you'll never be a lawyer, but a crack legal assistant is not out of the question. You love your job. Okay, maybe *love* is a bit strong. But prepping documents, writing summaries, filing motions, all of it agrees with you. Look at you, downtown girl: chic but pragmatic. Shopping at Frederick & Nelson! Lunching at the Continental Buffet!

Let's be honest, though. Let's talk about the problem that has no name. All these months later, they're still slapping your fanny around the office. Your salary doesn't stretch that far. The work is exhausting. As both a woman and an assistant, you're expected to work harder. And for what? A string of pearls? A sleek automobile? A slap on the can from a junior partner? It will be six more years before Friedan exposes the "feminine mystique," twelve more

before Yoko Ono proclaims woman as “the nigger of the world.” But by God, Harriet Chance, you’re determined to buck your disadvantages. Okay, maybe determined is a bit strong; how about resigned to them? The least you can do is achieve independence. Tackle adulthood on your own terms. Put that associate’s degree to some purpose.

Make a name for yourself, Harriet Nathan.

The truth you’re not telling anyone, especially not your father, is that amid the administrative whirlwind of the office, the hustle and bustle of downtown, the ceaseless tedium of legal research, you yearn for something less exhausting: for stability, predictability, and yes, a Christmas hearth festooned with stockings.

You yearn, too, Harriet, for a man. C’mon, admit it.

So, what is it about this new young building superintendent that catches your attention in the hallway upon your return from lunch, as he explains to your boss, in layman’s terms even you can understand, the difference between AC and DC? Surely, it’s not his stature. He’s two inches shorter than you. And it turns out, he’s not all that young, at thirty-three. There is, however, a squareness to his shoulders, a symmetry to his face, a quiet confidence in his bearing. Not just the firm, but the whole building—all that concrete and steel, all that electricity, all that plumbing—is reliant upon his capability. You’re not alone. The whole office is impressed by his confidence, charmed by his forthrightness. Even the partners, those pompous autocrats, bulging at the waist, those experts who defer to no one, treat this man as an equal.

But here’s the thing: tending an elevator, a fan, a heating duct, in his neatly creased work trousers, penlight clutched between his teeth, as he reaches for his tool belt, exposing the gray Semper Fi tattoo on his inside wrist, he strikes you as more than their equal.

Harriet Nathan, meet Bernard Chance, your valentine for 1957.

April 6, 2015
(HARRIET AT SEVENTY-EIGHT)

A PHONE IS ringing. Slippers pad down the hallway of a large, otherwise quiet house in the flats of Carlsborg. Three bedrooms, two and one-half bathrooms, in the banana belt. With mountain views. Convenient shopping. Imagine country living in this dream home on 2.5 acres!

A spotted hand picks up the receiver and answers in a voice dry and brittle as a wheat cracker. "Hello?"

"May I please speak to Bernard Chance?"

The voice on the other end is also female, slightly stiff.

"I'm afraid he passed in November."

"I see, I'm so sorry. Is this—?"

"This is his wife, Harriet."

"Well, I guess that explains it. I'm so sorry."

"Explains what, dear? To whom am I speaking?"

"This is Janis Segress from the Ann and Virginia Nitterhouse Foundation. Mr. Chance never picked up his gift basket after our silent auction last fall—wait, let's see, 2013, so, that's two falls ago. The voucher expires at the end of August."

"Voucher?"

"The Alaskan cruise? He never mentioned it?"

"Bernard? Alaska? This is the first I've heard of it. Are you certain you have the right Bernard Chance?"

"One thirty-six Rake's Glen?"

"Yes, that's us."

"We've been trying to reach him for months at 491-2318, but that number is no longer in service."

“Oh, that was his cellular telephone, dear. He never cared much for the device. He swore it would give him a brain tumor.”

“I see.”

“Of course, he went much quicker than he might have with a brain tumor. Physically, anyway.”

“Well, that’s a blessing, I’m sure.”

“It was no blessing, dear, let me tell you.”

“Well, I’m certainly sorry to hear it. You’re welcome to—”

“Unless you consider urinating in Walmart a blessing.”

“I see, well, as I was about to s—”

“Or wandering Cline Spit in your pajamas.”

“Yes, well, I’m certainly glad we were able to track you down before the—”

“I was outmatched, dear. It’s that simple. I was an old woman myself. Who was I to think I could care for anybody under the circumstances?”

“Mm. I see. Well,” says the voice. “At any rate, our offices are located on—”

“He was still quite strong, physically, you understand. Overpowering at times. But that was only part of the problem.”

“Uh-huh, yes, I see. As I was saying, our offices are located on North Sequim Avenue at West Hendrickson—kitty-corner to Jace Real Estate.”

“It’s a cruel process, aging. Take my advice, dear, maintain your independence as long as possible.”

“I’ll be sure and do that, Mrs. Chance. Now, you’re welcome to redeem your gift anytime between ten a.m. and four p.m., Tuesday through Friday.”

“Don’t let the world push you around. Stick up for yourself, dear.”

“Yes, I’ll be sure and do that. And Mrs. Chance: congratulations!”

“Thank you, dear.”

Replacing the phone receiver, Harriet pads back down the hallway to the foyer, where Bernard's blue windbreaker droops like a windless flag off the coatrack, a book of crosswords jutting out of the side pocket. On her way past, she stoops to straighten his sneakers.

"Hmph. Alaska," she says, straightening up. "What on earth were you thinking, dear?"

She retires to the kitchen, sets the kettle to boiling, and lays out two mugs in the breakfast nook.

"Well, you can hardly expect me to go alone," she says, unsheathing a tea bag. "It's true, I could always take Mildred. Oh, but dear, do I have to go? Would you be hurt if I didn't? You know I'm not a traveler. What you were thinking? A cruise?"

Just as the kettle is about to hiss, she hoists it off the burner and proceeds filling the mugs. "Oh, fine, then. I'll ask her. Are you happy now?"

August 15, 2015
(BERNARD, DECEASED, DAY 277)

FORGETTABLE DRESS SHIRT, forgettable tie, pattern baldness: CTO Charmichael is nothing like Bernard expected. But then, none of this is what he expected.

“Mr. Chance, please sit down,” Charmichael says, without looking up from the manila folder splayed open before him.

Chief transitional officer, you’d think he’d have a bigger desk. Something in mahogany. But no, it’s institutional, bland and sturdy. A vice principal’s desk. In fact, the whole office screams high school administration—the cork bulletin board, the squat gray filing cabinets, the rotary pencil sharpener.

“I presume you know why you’re here?” he says, still not looking up from the file.

“Actually, no, sir.”

Finally, Charmichael looks up, engaging Bernard’s gray eyes meaningfully. “A little matter with some household lubricant, for starters.”

“Sir?”

“Some wandering slippers? Starting to ring a bell, Candidate Chance?”

“Ah,” says Bernard. “That.”

Charmichael furrows his brow. “Strictly forbidden, you understand. As is eating, for the record. Yes, even in dreams.”

“I thought that—”

“Any contact is forbidden, Candidate Chance. Regardless of the nature. This was all in the orientation, as well as the

manual. Hard to miss, really. Section One, as a matter of fact. Was that not perfectly clear?"

"Uh, yessir. Yessir, it was, or I thought it was. Forgive me, sir."

"Believe me, I'm trying, we all are. There's hope for you, Chance. That's why you're here. If there wasn't hope for you, you'd be ... well, somewhere else."

"But, sir, the thing is, she has no idea what's coming. The shock might be too much. I gotta get to her, I gotta explain."

"By my reckoning, Candidate Chance, you had nearly four decades to do that. Why the big hurry, now that you're deceased?"

"I don't mean just about me, sir. There's a lot more. Stuff with the kids. Especially with Caroline. With all due respect, it's liable to kill her, sir. She won't understand, she doesn't see it coming. Somebody's gotta be there for her. Otherwise, it's just ... well, it's just not—"

"Fair, Candidate Chance? There are a great many things you're not taking into consideration, here."

"But I see things I didn't see then, sir. I know things—about Harriet, about Caroline—things I had no way of knowing then."

"Had you looked a little harder, you might have at least suspected them, Candidate."

"I gotta go back."

"Out of the question."

"What if I don't comply?"

"Excuse me?"

"What will happen to me if I go down there again?"

"First, I'd say you better check your coordinates. That is, if you're heading *down* anywhere. '*Over* there' might be a little more accurate but still insufficient. '*In* there' is probably the closest."

"You know what I mean, sir. What will happen?"

"If you go rogue?"

"Yeah."

"Let's just say there are measures in place. It's not so different from your marines, Major. Think AWOL."

"But what will happen? Will it affect them?"

Charmichael redoubles his meaningful gaze. "In a word, Candidate Chance: nothing. Nothing will happen."

"I see, sir."

"To you, that is, Candidate. Nothing will happen to you. Things will still happen. Just not to you. Do we have an understanding?"

"Uh, yessir. I believe we do, sir."

"Good, then. Consider yourself warned."

"Yessir. I will."

"As you were," says Charmichael, waving him off. "And, Candidate?"

"Yessir?"

"The salute is unnecessary."

"Yessir."

April 16, 1959
(HARRIET AT TWENTY-TWO)

MRS. BERNARD CHANCE, it has a certain ring to it. Anyway, it's only a name—perhaps not the name you intended to make for yourself. But this is not your identity we're talking about, this is a logical step. A practical one. This isn't about your independence, this is about the rest of your life. This is about fulfillment. The kind of fulfillment no job can offer, at least not the jobs available to you. You knew from the start you'd never be a lawyer or a judge. You were destined for an administrative role. So, why not marriage? It turns out, your independence, like your salary, had a ceiling all along.

Besides, you're pregnant.

Oh, but don't despair, Harriet. Stolid, capable Bernard, whether he knows it or not, is willing. And he's a man who knows a thing or two about duty. About commitment and sacrifice, plumbing and electricity. And he's not a man who asks a lot of questions.

Just think, a spring wedding in Seattle, at the Rainier Club! Indoors, thank God, because yep, you guessed it, it's raining pitchforks. The parking lot is a lake. The awnings are sagging. But nothing can dampen your spirits today.

You're a gorgeous bride, Harriet—it's true, look at the pictures. In your mother's champagne-beaded dress, with the V-neck bodice, you cut an hourglass figure. You lost fifteen pounds starving yourself for this day. What's more, you're showing no outward signs of that little life taking hold inside of you, but it's there, you can feel it, the promise of fulfillment glowing in your cheeks.

Let's be honest, you're marrying down, as they say, a state of affairs that your mother will frequently remind you of in years to come. You're marrying a man who would sooner pick up a bowling ball than brandish a club or a racket. Though he had other plans for you, your father does not begrudge your decision to marry a janitor. At least he's a damn good janitor. No, your father has spared no expense on the wedding. The arrangements are elegant, perfectly tasteful. Everybody but everybody is there. People you don't know or can't place. Charlie Fitzsimmons is there. The *Times* runs a lavish paid announcement for the daughter of prominent attorney and local dignitary, Harriman Nathan.

You can already smell the shrimp puffs as the procession gathers in the wings and the organ sounds its note. You've never been surer about anything, Harriet. Not that you haven't overcome a few nagging reservations over the past year. But you've managed to paint an idyllic picture of domestic life for yourself. It all starts with a honeymoon in Niagara Falls. A tiny house of your own in Seattle's north end, paid for with your own money, just you and Bernard. And baby makes three. Just think, this very Christmas, you'll hang those stockings. But let's not get ahead of ourselves again.

Your esteemed father, eyes misting as he leads you up the aisle, voice faltering as he gives you away, whispers to you that he could not be prouder. And there, beside you at the altar, is a man who knows what he wants, a man who speaks his mind and demands his just. A man who served his country. A man who has a center, whether it's moral or habitual. A man who vows to honor and protect you, in sickness and in health. To have and hold you, to love you and cherish you, from this day forward, for better or for worse, for richer, for poorer, until death do you part.

Yes, Harriet, for the next fifty years you'll eat what Bernard eats, vote how Bernard votes, love how Bernard

loves, and ultimately learn to want out of life what Bernard wants out of life. Together you will see sickness and health. At times he will honor you. Occasionally, he will cherish you. Always he will protect you. But again, we get ahead of ourselves.

Right now, Harriet Nathan, that is, Harriet Chance, you are a beautiful bride.