

ELIZABETH REEDER

Elizabeth Reeder is originally from Chicago and lives in Scotland. Her stories and experimental essays are widely published and broadcast. Her first novel, *Ramsbuckle*, was shortlisted for a number of awards including a Saltire Literary Award. She's a MacDowell Fellow and a senior lecturer in Creative Writing at University of Glasgow.

ALSO BY ELIZABETH REEDER

FICTION

Fremont (Kohl Publishing, 2012)

Ramshackle (Freight Books, 2012)

*An Archive of
Happiness*

ELIZABETH REEDER

Penned in the Margins
LONDON

PUBLISHED BY PENNED IN THE MARGINS
Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB
www.pennedinthemargins.co.uk

All rights reserved
© Elizabeth Reeder 2020

The right of Elizabeth Reeder to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with Section 77 of the Copyright, Designs and Patent Act 1988.

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Penned in the Margins.

First published in 2020

Printed in the United Kingdom by TJ International

ISBN
978-1-908058-77-5

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out, or otherwise circulated without the publisher's prior consent in any form of binding or cover other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

*This book is dedicated to ARTT who has
my heart, every minute, day, year, decade.*

*Every archive reveals the questions held by
the archivist as they gather and sort knowledge.
This means the archivist exists as a fugitive element
within the archive.*

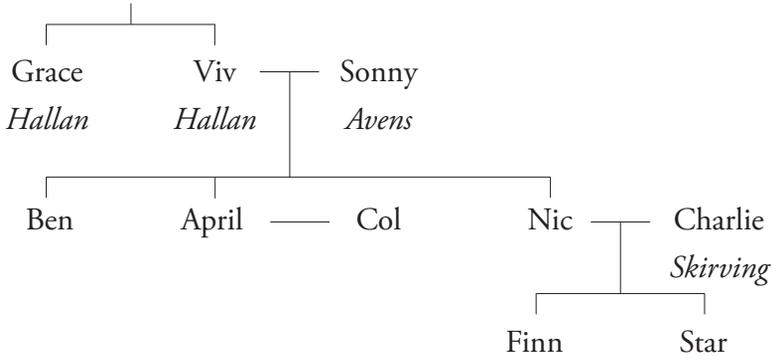
F. SKIRVING

*But she did look back, and I love her for that,
because it was so human.*

K. VONNEGUT

An
Archive of
Happiness

THE AVENS FAMILY TREE



CHAPTER I

The Avens Family

It was mid-afternoon on a Thursday, the summer solstice, and the branch of the granny pine at the edge of Grace's garden had been precarious for months and creaked a bit in the increasing wind. Beneath the tree, April and her dad, Sonny, were slapping the yearly coat of paint onto the fence. It wasn't going well. The paint was old and lumpy despite Sonny's attempted vigorous stirring.

He swore under his breath, cursing his sister-in-law. 'Buying a new tin of paint wouldn't have killed her.'

April noted his frustration when something wasn't done as he'd do it, which would be just as half-arsed, but in a different way: he'd have bought new paint but he'd have forgotten to clean the brushes before putting them away the year before. Little flares of dread at the coming days rose in her. Nothing specific but something; just tiny accumulated disagreements and resentments they'd all have to navigate. 'The paint is perfectly fine. Put more of your back into it and the lumps will go.'

'You spent too long living with her.'

April had lived with her Aunt Grace for a number of years when she'd dropped out of university, and she didn't know where she'd be if she hadn't. Since March she'd been living in a cottage that sat on the southeast side of the same hill as Grace's house, which was to the northeast. Her dad, newly arrived this spring, got the cool, stable light of the north. Her twin sister, Nic, lived two hours away on the northwest coast and her brother, Ben, would be out to sea anywhere his work took him. Their mother was a broken satellite circling and they never knew when she might plummet unannounced back to Earth.

April thought of the individuals in her family as they moved through the world, each in their own place but connected in time, and sometimes when tempers or resentments or impatience flared she imagined them all meeting at the stone ruins of the abandoned crofts that sat on the top of the hill she, Grace and her dad shared. All six adults arriving, backs to each other like in a Western and someone would say, *Ready. Aim. Fire.* When she imagined this, she knew the guns held blanks or paint balls or those wee darts with cushioned tips. Although, as their history showed, they were not adverse to using their fists, they weren't the kind of family to fire real guns at each other; not really, not even in this escapist flight of fancy—though sometimes, wouldn't it be easier if. April turned back to the paint and her dad. 'I stirred it

last year and it was easy.’

He handed her the tin with a genuine humph. She half-heartedly ran the stick through the paint a few times in a figure of eight motion and it all came together. Sonny pretended he hadn’t been watching ready to make a jibe if she failed, but instead picked up the brushes and handed one to her. The paint sat between them as they dipped their brushes in turn and applied a thin protective coat to the fence.

April sang under her breath. Sonny watched the weather come in.

‘My mum used to creosote not only our fence, but the whole house.’

He’d grown up on the Black Isle, thirty miles or so away. His parents were both immigrants who met here—him from Egypt, her from Spain—and they’d disapproved of his marriage, of her mum. He never talked about his parents and since he’d brought them up, April said nothing to draw attention to that fact. ‘Did she like getting high on the fumes?’ She fake-staggered to make her point.

He considered this. ‘She applied it every few years, like clockwork, letting no one else help her.’ He paused. ‘Yes. Yes, I think she did.’ He laughed and April imagined his mum leaning in closer to the freshly sealed surface, giggling. Happy. Taking it

where she could get it.

A gust shoved her dad's arm away from the fence and his trousers were slashed with white. The tree groaned but held firm and a shadow fell over the yard as the sun abandoned them.

They barely had time to gather everything together as a mid-afternoon summer storm rushed in with lightning and a few sure gusts: the usual when heat builds and needs to be dispersed. It signalled the start of the Avens family reunion.

The family didn't do other holidays but tried to get together every summer for at least a few days because that's what families are supposed to do at least once a year. There were good memories of late-night loch swimming, exuberant games of blackjack, as well as the dramatic consequences of this many people attempting to share a small space: the swing incident, the award-winning breakup of Grace and Annie, hundreds of micro-aggressions and tensions, the bull in the yard and the red-rag April held up to it. And then there was the incident with the axe.

They were angry and funny and exposed and there was a mother-sized absence in the middle of their family and if they poked it, it growled. This was how they were and with this many Avenses together almost anything could happen. Add in another moody element, Mother Nature, and this was what you got: a wind so strong it could knock you off your feet. Daughter and

father made their way to the house. April opened the door and Grace lifted her head. Both women smiled.

‘A sailor I know says there’s always weather on the solstices and the equinox. They allow space for it, and don’t make any big travel plans.’ Grace looked at the rapidly darkening sky.

‘A sailor you know,’ April said as she held the door open with her hip to let her dad through and made the outline of womanly curves with her hands. The temperature dropped and the colour of the day became a sort of otherworldly greyish purple and the rain pelted down. ‘And plus, what does “there’s always weather” mean? Of course there’s always weather.’

‘Bad weather, Patience.’ Grace’s nickname for her niece who had so little and yet tried her aunt’s so much. ‘Don’t give me your attitude.’ Grace certainly didn’t miss April’s moodiness around the place. But then she watched her with her dark hair and how she’d settled into her body in recent months, and she realised she did, she missed her cheek.

‘After every storm, there’s an uplight,’ April said, perhaps quoting a ballad or tune learned from the band she’d been playing with, occasionally, the Scots newer to her tongue, but suiting her.

‘Sometimes quicker than others.’ They all looked north where, past the broody clouds, a patch of blue could be seen.

Sonny stepped past Grace who was in the kitchen, in her

element, cooking the day's feast, and crossed the room heading for the shower room in the corner. Ben, Sonny's eldest, now thirty-one, with his black eye and recently freed-up schedule (i.e. he'd been fired that morning), was in the shower as the storm hit.

Sonny knocked on the door. 'Ben.'

'Aye, Dad. I hear you.' His shout was an acknowledgement and held only a faint tinge of resentment.

And then a flash, boom and shudder. A branch of the gnarly pine slammed down onto Grace's fence, giving itself a lick of fresh paint along its bark. As it landed it gouged out a bit of her garden and tickled the decking that edged the back of the house. They looked towards the burst of movement and noise and noted the new space in the canopy opened towards the sky, with luckily no damage done to the house. The fallen branch was the size of a small tree and yet not even a needle had touched the house proper. A coven of three granny pines watched over Grace's house and so this branch could be considered a gift (and locally sourced firewood), but now the fence needed mending so the crofter's cows could be kept out of the garden.

The abstract threat of lightning was one thing, that very real crash quite another, and that was it for Ben's shower. It'd been cool and long enough to get the brackish loch water out of his hair and from behind his ears, although he did stay in a minute longer

to let his heart calm, just a bit, for his worry about the coming days and weeks outweighed his anticipation of the evening or any sense he might be needed to help clean up a mess.

Off went the water. He only had to survive until Nic arrived and distracted them all from themselves. Nic lived eighty miles away, as the crow flies, and would be driving down with her husband and their three-month-old baby, Star—such a brilliant name—in the backseat. They'd pick up Finn from nursery and would then be heading down here. Ben was looking forward not only to a deflection from the colourful array of bruises his face displayed, but also to Nic's way—an art—of putting the family at ease. Her kids would help too, the inquisitive toddling boy and the excitable newborn who would need to be held. Her husband Charlie was good for a laugh or for some clumsy action that would break through any Avens-created atmosphere. Nic's company was always an invitation to stay a bit longer and be yourself. Ben glanced at his watch: ninety minutes, he guessed; she'd arrive and the whole world, the world of the Avens family, would become better.

He heard his aunt say, 'Tomorrow Victor the bull will be in the field,' as she started to assign tasks that would require tools.

When exiting Grace's shower, you had to have all your bits covered, and Ben made a fully clothed entrance into the

living room, having gone in prepared with boxers, jeans and a T-shirt. By the time he emerged, his dad was standing there with goggles and gloves and the promise of the chainsaw waiting for him outside once the storm passed through. Ben shook his head.

‘Have April do it. She’s the man you’re looking for to do that butch stuff.’

‘Don’t talk about your sister like that.’

‘I don’t mind,’ said April, already eyeing the branch in a mercenary way.

‘She doesn’t mind.’ Ben grinned at her and raised a hand in greeting. ‘Hey bro!’

She bent her arm at the elbow and exposed her biceps, which were, honestly, only average on a body that did nothing to flaunt or hide its basic femininity. Her muscles were unimpressive but her will was mammoth and that got her through. Ben was well toned and proficient enough with a chainsaw but with April around, why bother? He was functioning on very little sleep where as she, who was also functioning on little sleep, was actually bright-eyed and energetic, full of the flush of new love. He remembered when Nic had just met Charlie, she’d been exactly the same—full of the heat of it, the possibility. Ben had known that feeling when he met Sonia, but it hadn’t lasted. Sonia had been vocal about how he was making mistakes, pretending to be a type of man he

wasn't, and that he could change that. She'd said she liked this other Ben better. Ben shook off the frustration and sadness that memories of Sonia caused in him. He had hopes for April and Col.

When Ben said April could do it, Sonny looked at his son with disappointment, perhaps, for the briefest second, like he could resist what his family had become. It passed, defeated, dramatic, like the lightning burst, and he smiled and turned. 'April, I have the perfect job for you.'

As he turned, for a minute, both father and son were aligned, squared shoulders, dark wet hair (one from the shower, one from swimming and the storm), a beautiful soft sort of sorrow and joy in their demeanour, as if they were the space between an inhale and an exhale. Sonny took one and then another step forward, his arms outstretched with an offering towards his daughter.

Ben looked to Grace who approached him, having missed his arrival, and she gently touched his face and the plaster on his brow before pulling him into an embrace, and he let her.

'When will your fighting be over?' She whispered. Both of them were thinking about the punch-up between his mum and him, all those years ago, which hadn't been his first fight, but the one with the greatest consequences, and the one he couldn't shake

himself free from.

His body didn't feel peace or resolution but he let himself be held. This was a home of sorts, Ben knew. Grace's hug bound him here, grounded him just as everything had started to flutter, as if she knew he was planning either an escape or an ambush, thinking those his only two choices, given everything.

Outside in the garden, April and Sonny were heading towards the fallen branch at this, the start of the Avens family reunion.



About a mile away, heading for Grace's house, was Col, whom April had invited and told to arrive anytime. Col drove carefully through the squall, thinking that the water table could use the rain, and aware of a clutch of flowers on the passenger seat, two bottles of fizz (the real stuff), a few steaks for a grill (a guess at the set-up for the celebration), and such a pounding of the heart it was an effort to keep a relaxed grip on the steering wheel. April Avens. Now there was a woman you could settle down with.



Earlier, Nic had tried to snatch a power nap while Charlie packed everything into the car. She knew she should be sleeping because she was bone-tired and could feel a headache coming on, but instead she was listening to him singing to the baby.

April and Ben had been spending more time with the kids this spring and had started to mimic Charlie. Singing out of tune they'd say: 'This is your papa.' Singing in tune they say: 'This is not your papa.'

The off-key rendition was an ugly sort of beautiful and it's what put the kids to sleep. If that wasn't an argument for nurture, Nic wasn't sure what was.

Once she heard Charlie say after singing *really* out of tune: 'This is your mama'. Singing slightly more in tune: 'This is not your mama'.

And so she was kept humble. His singing grew quieter and she knew that Star had fallen asleep and so too did Nic, briefly, thickly.

Charlie had been up most of the night with Star, hadn't slept or napped, and so when they were finally ready it was quarter past four and Nic slid behind the wheel. It was her favourite drive,

down along these quiet roads, the torque pressing on one side and then another as she took the curves.

All day on the summer solstice there's a sense of darkness being banished. Of the world being outlined with light, even if faint in the early hours. In other years there had been fog so thick she couldn't see the end of the car when driving. A real pea-souper. And then it felt like winter and all possibility of forty-eight hours of sunlit clarity gone. This year though, packing up the car, the bright blue sky promised a midnight swim. Star's first. Finn might paddle and Charlie might have to take him back to Grace's, or maybe April or Ben or Grace would do it. And they'd float there. Dad would join them, yes, and April would carry Finn to her own cottage later. She'd promised Finn that he could sleep within the trees. She'd promised a fire too and roasted marshmallows, but if he was tired that could wait until tomorrow. And plus, in this heat. The field trip to the Summer Isles was going well and they'd pick Finn up on their way down. Finn's teacher had texted all the parents to say it'd been a good day and that they'd be back at the harbour by 4:40. *Try to be sharpish*, she said. *They're wired and tired and looking forward to seeing all of you.*

Just off the collection of potholes they called their croft road and onto the main road the view out to the sea loch opened up and the water reflected the deep curved blue of the sky. Nic

started to know it now, what the feeling was, that had been approaching all day. Anticipation in her chest, behind her eyes. April's exuberance, the brilliance of Ben's coaxed smile, Grace's food and drink, offered so freely. Her dad's awkward belligerence about rules and roles and yet, in his flawed way, she knew he loved them all.

Her whole family would be at Grace's. Ben had texted her this morning that he'd been fired—unceremoniously put on the first helicopter off the rig—and so would be there too. Ben's difficulties were clearly coming to a head with this morning's punch-up. She was looking forward to seeing him, to helping him stay off the rigs, to start to talk about the things he held hostage in that tight chest of his. She thought about her mother briefly, trouble-maker and problematic absence, and a familiar worry agitated a tender, fluttering spot on her jaw.

The road unwound before them and the rest of the world flickered at the edges of her sight. The blue of the air expanded and swooped around her and her hands turned bright like they were suns; her heart and belly too. A light powered through her, had been building all day and was, for that instant, only pleasure.

Well, maybe. As the blue scooped her up and gravity pulled her down, she knew its edge had shimmering questions.



At Grace's, Sonny was in the garden again, and Grace painted the fence April and Col had mended, in a fashion that was quick but good enough for now. The rest could wait until tomorrow or the day after. A solid breeze kept the midges close to the ground and only Sonny got bitten because he was on his knees deadheading flowers in the still spot by the house Grace had assigned him. She was too much of a sweet meal for them, apparently.

Ben was cleaning the grill for the steaks that would be slapped onto it later. He remembered the last time his mum had been with them here, sixteen years ago, and how they'd avoided each other, but she still gave him instructions on how to do almost everything. The love, the anger, the impatience. They weren't talking because he'd been kicked out of another school, and she'd had to be that sort of mother, again. They'd not been getting on but he found, deep down, especially when he noticed her red eyes and the balled tissue in her hand, that he felt for her too, but this sympathy somehow only gave breath to his resentment. Today, watching his dad and Grace work, he touched the butterfly bandage on his brow and felt the light pain radiating out from his fingertip, and he wondered what his mum might be doing now.

April and Col had disappeared off for a walk in the woods. 'We'll not see them again,' Sonny said.

But Grace wasn't so sure. 'Sometimes a quickie is enough, a sort of tantalising snack.'

'Stop it,' Ben said. 'Both of you. I don't want to think about April shagging. Or you either, Grace.'

'Okay.' She capitulated although she'd gotten them all thinking about young love and snatched intimacies. 'I do think they'll be back. Col seemed curious about us. Like someone who is entertained by family dynamics. He might even be looking for a family.'

'This family?' Ben asked.

'Why not? We're as good as any.'

Ben and Sonny laughed at her joke.

'Well, better than some, anyway.'

Pointing to some rocky soil that was overgrown with chickweed, Sonny said, 'Didn't you used to have something here? Little purple flowers.'

Grace stood up and glanced to Ben, hoping Sonny would take the hint and stop this line of questioning.

'Yes, Suzie had wild thyme planted there.' The house had been Suzie's before it had been Grace's.

'Ah, I remember now. Viv used to love wild thyme,' Sonny

said. Ben stiffened and so did Grace, who shot Sonny a hard look but he was oblivious, which is how he'd survived in this family. The sound of metal on metal as Ben cleaned the grill increased and finally got through Sonny's thick skull. He turned to Grace grappling to change the subject. 'What happened to *your* thyme?'

She nodded. 'I had some work done to a patch of damp at that wall and it killed it. A shame, really.' She did wish that she'd done more to protect it too. The scraping eased and Ben was listening. 'Especially now that it's overrun with weeds. Although,' she drew out a bit of a smile in her voice, 'did you know you can eat chickweed? Full of good stuff, supposedly.'

'If you feed us that, none of us will ever come back,' Ben said, looking up and smiling.

'Got it. I'll just sneak courgette or beetroot into the chocolate cake like I did when you kids were little.'

'You did what?' Ben laughed, thinking of all the delicious things he'd eaten that Grace made. None of them had felt like one of his five-a-day.

'Ach, we adults need to amuse ourselves in small ways when it comes to kids.' And they all went back to their small tasks, re-balanced.

A little while later, Grace noticed two roe deer edge the woods, their heads low in the long June grass. A tortoiseshell

butterfly landed on a sea pink beside her, its wings wide open, and it put her in mind of the small metal music box she'd come across the other day at the back of the old dresser in the living room, which she hadn't wound yet but, if memory served, it had been recorded on a day like today but when the kids were young; a keen worm aerated the soil and Sonny moved his shovel so to avoid it and heard the two-part call of a redstart and was thinking about re-planting the thyme on the sly; Ben found that, for no reason at all, he could not catch his breath.



The car smoothed around the curve. The young couple from the croft heading out to Achiltibuie. Nic drove. Her hair, which Helen had always thought of as black, looked auburn in today's bright sun. She slowed a little in front of the house, waved and shouted, 'Hi Helen!' as she flew past. Music blasted from the car and her husband waved and then turned to his wife, singing too. Helen saw the infant car seat on the seat behind her, and a baby, born a few months ago. A girl named Star. She didn't know about these parents and these names. Finn, whom she looked after occasionally, must be at nursery. The summer afternoon was

beautiful, and later she'd garden, keep herself moving or she'd stiffen up. Just beyond her house the road took a sharpish curve and the car raced towards it. Nic was a local and knew these roads so well, but a ripple of concern moved from Helen's belly to her ears and instead of turning towards the house she paused and listened.