

By Heart

**These
Songs**

I Know

a novel

Erin Brubacher



These Songs I Know By Heart

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SAMPLE

CAMPING WITH ALICE
The Present Perfect

THIS YEAR, WE FOLLOW THE RIVER. THERE'S BEEN SO much rain, we think we might get through. From where we are, the next lake seems close, but I stand up in the boat and see the maze of waterways we'll have to navigate before we're clear. I stand up in the boat because I consider myself invincible in all things I mastered as an adolescent: standing in canoes, improvisational cooking, platonic love, making the best of a bad situation. We follow the current. Alice wants to smoke another cigarette. I should just let her do it: burn through her whole lone pack before we even get there. But I pretend I have some authority and tell her she can't until we clear the reeds. She pretends I have some authority and leaves the cigarette hanging in her mouth, unlit.

Alice and I have been making this trip together since we met, one hot summer a decade ago. This tenth paddle is our anniversary party; it is the quietest party Alice has ever attended. Water lilies and wind. Not that we are silent. The trip is a stream of stories. It is also a sort of personal history lesson. We try to remember each of our birthdays, every piece of work we've ever been paid for, every piece of work we were never paid for, every person we've ever loved, every stranger we've spent more than an hour with, every person we've had sex with, every person we've hurt, every moment we've felt pure joy. We debate the definitions of sex, love, and work. Joy and hurt we agree on.

These lists are interrupted with more and less related revelations:

Alice knows nothing about her grandmother.

I have never read *The Bell Jar*.

Alice knows she could have been a professional swimmer.

I have complicated feelings about Shakespeare.

This last reflection prompts me to tell Alice how, at Shakespeare in the Park—just as Viola was revealing to Orsino and Olivia and everyone that she was a woman—I had somehow managed to go undetected, inserting a tampon while sitting in the third row of the audience. It was either that or bleed all over those Canadian Stage High Park cushions. Alice asserts that if I can imperceptibly insert a tampon—while wearing a tight pair of jeans—in the middle of a seated crowd, I can probably do anything.

We stop to acknowledge how lucky we are that it hasn't really rained today. And how lucky we are to be together. We weave through the reeds to the mouth of the river and are on a vast lake, the shape of which seems not to resemble the waterproof map. Alice lights her cigarette and I paddle. She is getting nervous that we won't find a campsite before sunset. I try to distract her with some idle conversation about the watercolours she'll paint tomorrow, or orgasms (generally), or anything I can think of. That reminds her that she forgot to list one of the people she's slept with. He was a meteorologist and his dick was fascinating but too big to work with, so she'd just stare at it and paint it in watercolours. She was in a penis-painting trance for a full week and only got out of bed to change the water. She wants to know if that counts as sex. I've distracted her all right.

We round the point and are quiet for a time as we search the perimeter of the lake. After a while, Alice begins pointing

out mushrooms, asking me if she should paint or photograph them tomorrow.

ALICE: I should take a foraging class so we can eat some. But do you think it would be all men in the mushroom-hunting club? Who cares?! What do I care if it's only men in the mushroom club!

I am only half listening, because I'm looking down the water and it has suddenly occurred to me that every man I have ever loved has been afraid of swimming. I bring my keel in and out of the water.

We are having trouble accurately assessing the shape of the lake. I think we are at one point on the map, and Alice is certain we are at another. I reach across our gear and hand her the map. She looks at me.

ALICE: I don't care where we are; we're setting up at that site, right there.

She knows I'll be inclined to paddle around each bend of the lake before making a choice.

ME: Fine.

I steer the boat into the shallow, narrow space between rocks at the nearest site. Alice carefully gets out.



Alice is a dynamo. She'll be in her prime at eighty. But watching her steady herself, getting out of the boat, I know

we're both older than we were that summer we met at the backyard party.

In a sense, we were brought together by The Libertine. I had recently moved back to Toronto, and left The Ex-Husband after ten years of shared life. I still loved him, but I thought I might also love The Libertine. Remembering that sensation makes me question if I had any idea what love was at all. I was at the party because I had been invited, and because it was good for me to get out and socialize with new people now that I had completely altered my future. But really I was at the party so I could fraternize with The Libertine. Someone took a photo of me and Alice and The Libertine sitting on a backyard bench, sweat dripping off the three of us in the heat, and he is looking at me and I am pretending not to look back. Alice is entertaining herself as she is capable of doing when she makes up her mind to have a party. In the photo, she is probably thinking about sneaking a cigarette, and delighting herself with this thought. If I saw the image now, I would comment that the vintage tea towel, casually draped around The Libertine's neck, was a clear indicator of empty gestures, but at the time I thought it was impossible to be so attracted to someone with so little character, so I treated him like a blank piece of paper and wrote my hopes on him. But at the backyard party, these hopes were distracted by the energy of Alice. Somehow, Alice and I were alone together in the Dundas West alley adjacent to the backyard, inventing secrets. We found pleasure in the most mundane confessions and dropped our voices whenever the gate opened. The thrill of making a new friend: one entry on the list we compiled called *Pure Joy*.

Alice and I had seen each other around before—we were mutual acquaintances of The Libertine and others—but that day in the alley we knew we had something. She eclipsed the heat, The Libertine, and my uncertainty. She made me feel strong and okay and ready to take better care of myself. I had been having sex off and on with The Libertine for several months, and while it wasn't particularly fulfilling in the moment, and even though I felt consistently terrible afterwards, I was constantly thinking about when and how we would do it again. Someone who has been inside you should never conclude a text with “cheers.” Still, I kept sleeping with him. Maybe it was for the usual reasons of loneliness, or perhaps because I was curious about having physical intimacy with somebody so different from The Ex-Husband, who had always been so thoughtful and gentle. Sex with The Libertine was compellingly of the body but also essentially empty, everyone in it for themselves. He seemed hard to quit because I kept seeing him everywhere: buying groceries in Kensington Market, walking through Trinity Bellwoods Park, biking on College Street, on the way to midday meetings across the city, or evening drinks in neighbourhoods I thought were safe. But by the end of the backyard party, I was feeling decisive. I would invite Alice, whom I barely knew, to go on a canoe trip, and I would delete The Libertine's phone number. Miraculously, from that moment on, I never saw The Libertine again and, more miraculously, Alice agreed to go camping.



I am starting the fire while Alice lays out the tent and unwinds the tarp rope. Everything is a little damp and it's going to be difficult. Alice feeds my ego by telling the

story of how I once kept the fire going through three full days of cold rain. I hunch over, fanning the flames in the kindling with a metal plate. Alice sticks her head out from our precariously erected tent.

ALICE: Nice work! The only problem is you're wearing too many clothes and I can't get a good enough view of that great ass!—Careful of your back, mate! Bend your knees!

She asks me how we're going to maintain and improve our bodies, purely for the purpose of ease on the trip as we age. We want to be old ladies starting the fire and setting up the tent. We don't want to miss a year of this.



Alice owns a stationery shop in Toronto called I Really Need You. The main attraction is her watercolour cards. The most popular one is an ice cream cone with two scoops on it, that looks like testicles when turned upside-down. The second most popular is her Wonderland mushrooms thank-you card series. While I join Alice in the two-person parts of the tent set-up, we talk about a new card collection she is developing on thoughtfulness. She says the most thoughtful thing she can think of is the simple act of bringing a friend flowers for no reason. The first thoughtful thing that comes to my mind is Q-tips.

After four years apart, I spent one week with The Ex-Husband, in a friend's vacant house, in a small French village. I was between homes and took up a self-made residency there, where it wasn't so far for him to visit me. I picked flowers and put them in water. I filled a bowl with

fruit. We compared souvenirs. The first morning, I asked him if he had any Q-tips. He didn't. Near the end of the week, he washed and hung our clothes the way he used to, and we sat in the kitchen, pouring afternoon glasses while they dried. He took our clothes off the line and folded them, as we had folded time. It was an overdue goodbye we hadn't been ready for sooner. On the last morning, we walked to the general store to get him some food for his journey home. I waited outside. We went back to the house to collect his bags and make our final farewells. I walked him to the bus stop, and when I returned, there were Q-tips in the bathroom. The gesture was so perfectly him.

I wonder if he wouldn't want me sharing these stories. He might find this whole thing self-indulgent. But if you are reading this now, it means he said I should go ahead and write what I like. Or he asked me to alter things, and I already have.



The larger branches have caught flame and Alice has the tent under control.

ALICE: What do you think of orchids?

ME: Orchids are beautiful. But I don't really care for them. They're too perfect and fragile. I prefer wildflowers.

ALICE: Oh yeah. Wildflowers are the go, mate.

I add a log to the fire and watch it burn.

ME: Hey—what’s an appropriate thank-you card to send to your ex-mother-in-law for no particular reason?

The Ex-Husband’s mother still writes me once a year, at Christmas or New Year’s. She doesn’t say much, her sentiments usually expressed through an e-card with exploding fireworks or a series of emoticons she learned how to use at the public library. It is very kind.

ALICE: I’ll paint you a lily pad right now. Before the light goes!

Alice takes out her watercolours and I take out my pocket knife, a gift from The Turtle, to open the vac pack of sausages before laying them on the grill. I slice a bulb of fennel in half and arrange the pieces between the sausages. Alice paints till dark. She carefully hangs her lily-pad paintings from the tent fly rope with clothes pegs, then joins me on the log bench. I tend the fire and lay the loaded grill on top of it. We place our ready plates on a tree-trunk table, no doubt fashioned by a group of industrious men confusing nature for a project, and watch the fat drip out of the casing. We pass a flask of whisky back and forth, listening to the circle of trees around us sway, from time to time.

There are no people around to worry about. The water is calm as the wind comes and goes. The moon is massive.

My dad says he always likes to get my emails. Even if they just say:

*Hi dad,
I’m looking at the moon.*

xo