



The A to Z of You and Me

By James Hannah

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All our choices have consequences. But what happens after?

A Target Book Club Pick!

"Compassionate."-*The Independent*

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Editorial Review

Review

"Spare, poignant, and with a quirky charm all of its own, it reminds us how kind people can be." - *Rachel Joyce, New York Times bestselling author of The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry and The Love Song of Miss Queenie Hennessy*

"Hannah's debut is a humor-filled tear-at-the-heartstrings story... the urge to hug and simultaneously shake Ivo for the poor decisions he makes, and for the way he learns, loves, and forgives make this expertly crafted story a winner." - *Publishers Weekly*

"An affecting debut... Hannah proves himself a worthy inheritor of the lip-trembling English tradition... Hannah's debut is an excellent example of that genre of sophisticated and sentimental fiction in which the terrible perplexities of life are teased into pleasing fictional shape" - *Guardian*

"Beautifully constructed and hugely moving. Deserves to be a smash hit!" - *Lissa Evans, author of Crooked Heart*

"Ivo's tale may resonate with readers of Rachel Joyce's *The Unlikely Pilgrimage of Harold Fry* and Gabrielle Zevin's *The Storied Life of A.J. Fikry*... this debut novel rings with an unsparing clarity and ultimate honesty." - *Library Journal*

About the Author

James Hannah has a Master's degree from the Beckett International Foundation at Reading University. *The A to Z of You and Me* is his first novel.

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A

Adam's Apple

Adam's apple means the Reverend Cecil Alexander.

Adam's apple means me coming out of church, down the stone steps trailing in the wake of my mum. We leave the chapel every Sunday and take our turn in line to bid thankses and good-byes and see-you-next-Sundays to the Reverend Alexander. I'm a kid. Short trousers, short legs. I'm actually scared by his enormous Adam's apple. It's the biggest I've ever seen. It leaps and bounces around, like an angular elbow fighting to free itself from his throat. It makes me feel sick even looking at it. I just think, how doesn't the man choke? What if he got punched right in it?

I know it might not be the right thing to do, to point it out. But you know me.

"What's that in your throat?"

The kind of questions a minister must have to deal with on the hoof.

If there's a God, why must he allow the suffering of children?

Got your shirt on back-to-front then, eh?

So, what about the dinosaurs, then, mate? Explain that. See, you can't, can you?

Frank says you said he could do the flowers next week, but you told me last week I could do them. Did you say that to Frank?

"What's that in your throat?"

He must have been asked this question a lot. Despite the embarrassed gasp and laughter of my mum, and a censorious hand swashed about my face, he is quick with his answer.

"Oh, that's a piece of apple." I frown at it very hard.

"Why don't you swallow it?"

He's a great one for thinking on his feet. Part of the job description.

"I can't. Do you remember the story of the Garden of Eden? Well, it's put there as a reminder of the moment that Adam was discovered eating the apple that Eve had given him. It stuck in his throat, see?"

"My dad's got one of them."

"Well, yes, of course. All men have them."

"I haven't."

"Ah, no. No, no. Not yet."

He smiles as he says this, with the air of a chess player good-naturedly checkmating an opponent.

I'm very fond of Adam's apples for that reason. I was totally satisfied with it as an explanation. And it didn't put me off apples. But it was years before I understood all the repercussions that were echoing around his head as he said those words.

"Ah, no. No, no. Not yet."

You'll fall, he was saying.

You'll fall.

• • •

"Morning, Ivo!"

It's Jef. Jef the chef.

"Any ideas what you fancy for breakfast this morning?"

Jefrey with a single f. Since school he must have had one career in mind. Except in the end they called him a catering manager.

"Can I get you some eggs? Scrambled eggs? A bit of toast?"

They make him wear the black-and-white-checked trousers and everything. Is that health and safety? In case his trousers fall in the soup, so he can ladle them out more easily?

"You didn't have any of your porridge yesterday, so I'm guessing you don't want porridge today?"

He's hiding behind his clipboard a little bit, lingering respectfully in my doorway. Half in, half out. He should have a black leather notepad, like a proper waiter.

I have never been less hungry. Not full, just not-

"Hallo, Jef." It's Sheila.

"All right, Sheila, you still here?"

"Yeah, I've got another hour and a half yet. You just got in?"

"I've been in about twenty minutes. I thought I'd get these breakfasts sorted before the electricians arrive. Do you know what they're doing?"

"It's nothing major, is it?"

"I don't know."

"I thought it was only going to be looking at the security lights outside. They can only get to them from the inside or something. Are they still on?"

Jef ducks to look out of the window.

"No," he says, "they've gone off."

"God, isn't that always the way, that it fixes itself before the electricians arrive?"

"Murphy's law."

Sheila looks down at me. "How are you supposed to sleep with a big security light on the whole time?"

I shrug inside, but I don't know if it reaches my limbs.

"I reckon it's the hedgehogs on the lawn," says Jef. "These sensors are really oversensitive."

"Safety from attack by hedgehog. That's worth three thousand pounds of anyone's money, isn't it?"

"Three grand, eh?" Jef tuts and raps his clipboard with his pen.

"Well, I suppose you'd better get a move on anyway, hadn't you?"

"That's what I'm trying to do here, but we can't make our mind up." He turns to me. "Scrambled eggs? Toast? I'll do you some porridge, if you want it. Whatever you want. Try me."

I don't want anything. I shake my head.

"No?"

"I tell you what," says Sheila to me, "how about if we get you something simple, and you can see how you feel when it gets here? I'd like you to eat something this morning, even if it's only a couple of bites. How about something soft and easy, like scrambled eggs?"

I can't answer. I don't want anything.

"Yeah? Scrambled eggs?" Jef is looking at me brightly.

"How about that?" says Sheila. "Or poached? Or fried?"

"I don't do fried," says Jef.

"Oh no, course! Well, scrambled then? Or poached?"

I can't answer this.

"I'd like you to have something. It'll get your strength up, and maybe everything won't look so gloomy, will it?"

So.

They're waiting.

"Poached."

"Poached?"

I nod.

"Right you are, poached." Jef notes it down. He stabs an overzealous period onto his clipboard and sighs. "You have to choose the one that's hardest to get right, don't you?" Not without humor. He disappears through my doorway, and his footsteps drop down the corridor, cut off by the suck of the big double doors.

He could so easily have said, "That wasn't hard, was it?" That would have made me angry.

Sheila stays behind, gazing thoughtfully at the space in the doorway Jef has just vacated. She half blinks as she comes to, straightens the bedsheets, looking at me and squeezing out an eye smile as she does so.

I like Sheila. Everyone does. She's got that way about her-bright and sparky. But I like her hardness. She's a bit brusque, not fluffy. Mischievous, I'd say, when she wants to be. And it's as if she's got twenty-six hours in the day. Always unhurried in her conversations with me or Jef or Jackie the relief nurse. And I've seen it: people light up when they see her.

She checks my drinking water's fresh, making contact with everything, fully and firmly-one palm now flat against the reeded side of the water jug, the other patting the white plastic lid, her chunky gold rings rapping out her reassurance that it's secure.

There's something more deliberate about her as she carries out her ritual hardware-bothering this morning. I can sense it. She seems to want to stick around. Is she sizing me up? She thinks there's something the matter.

I'm having none of it. I fix my eyes on the wall opposite. I could look out of the window. I could look at the magnolia tree; the robin has returned. But I'll look at the wall. The wall that has seen it all. I'm staring it out.

It's staring me back.

It's winning.

It pretty much always wins.

Sheila's moved on to the towels, using the entire front of her body to assist in the folding of a new clean one, stroking it liberally with her hands, before dropping it in half and bringing it around into a quarter. She gives it a final stroke and pat for good measure as she slips it neatly into the space beneath my bedside cabinet.

I wonder when this hospice was opened. It looks like the 1990s, going by the precision brickwork with forty-five-degree corners, bricks looking less like stone, more like solidified porridge, every course the exact same color, laid as if by a computer, not a bricklayer. And green plasticky-looking metal girders with friendly curves.

So that's a quarter of a century this wall has watched people on their deathbeds. A quarter of a century of hysteria and tears and pain and misery.

I shouldn't be here.

I don't want to be here.

I've been here almost a week and-nothing. No better, no worse. Are they disappointed or something? Such an effort to get here in the first place.

What was it-Dr. Sood said they'd sort out my symptoms, and then maybe they'd let me go home for a bit if things got better. But he could say that whenever, couldn't he? Even if I found myself confined up and rolling along the conveyor belt to the furnace, old Dr. Sood could say, "We'll let you out if you start to show signs of improvement."

I'm not ill enough for this. I don't feel like I should be waited on by these people, using up their time when they should be tending to properly dying patients. Mopping up all these charity donations by the old biddies and the shattered and bereaved.

"Are you comfortable there?" asks Sheila, finally bringing her fussing to a conclusion. I nod automatically. "Well, you let me know if there's anything you need, OK? Or let Jackie know when she comes in."

"Mmm."

"You all right?"

"Mmm."

She weighs me up with a look, her jet-black eyes just as intent and penetrating as my mum's used to be, but with many more smile lines sunnying them up at the edges. "Don't you want the TV on?"

"No. Thanks."

"You sure? You won't get bored?"

I do a smile. "I'll look at the wall."

"Oh yeah? Look you in the eye, does it?"

I nod. "It's seen a lot of us."

"Oh, I daresay it'd have a tale or two to tell."

"Mmm."

"But there's a lot of wrong things people would presume about these walls. They've seen a lot of love and pleasure, you know." She gives me a gentle smile. "How are you doing upstairs?" She taps her temple.

"Staying sane? I'm still a bit worried about you, you know. I don't want you going bananas on me, all right?"

"I'm not going bananas."

"How's your game going?"

"What game?"

Of course I know what game she means. I just want to pretend I don't know what she's talking about. "You remember I told you about that game the other day? The A to Z? Keep the old brain cells ticking over a bit. So what you could do is try to think of a part of your body, all right? A part of your body for each letter of the alphabet-

I nod-yes, yes-I want her to know I remember now.

"-and what you do-

Yes, yes.

"-is tell a little story about each part."

"I've done one. I started doing it, actually. Today."

"Oh yeah? See, well, that's trying, isn't it? How far have you gotten?"

"A."

She laughs. "Well, it's good to take your time over it."

"Adam's apple."

"Oh, great. I've had a few people say Adam's apple when I get them to have a go at this."

"Do women have Adam's apples?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I think so."

"I thought they didn't."

"It's the larynx, isn't it? They don't have the sticking-out bit so much, because they're smaller than men's. It's why they have the high voices."

"Is it?"

"Yeah." She lifts her chin thoughtfully and circles her forefinger on her throat. "Larynx. Anyway, you're not a woman, are you, so don't be so picky."

"The vicar when I was little said it was the apple sticking in Adam's throat. Adam out of Adam and Eve."

"D'you know, I've never once thought of it like that, but it makes sense, doesn't it? How funny. Well, that means you've already got a story then, haven't you? Sometimes I think we should collect everyone's little stories about their Adam's apples. We could put them up on the wall in the day room."

"What do you do when you get to X? Or Q?"

"Well, that's where you've got to get your thinking cap on, isn't it? You've got to be a bit creative."

What would I do for Q?

Oh, there it is. It's my sister Laura, isn't it, mocking me, just to look good in front of her new best friend Becca.

Doesn't he know what a quim is? Aw, bless-

Becca's tongue pushing between her pristine white teeth, hissing with laughter, leaning in to Laura and bonding against me.

We aren't born with all the information we're supposed to magically know.

Becca's hissing laugh echoes down the years.

I'm Queen Quim!

Nope. Enough. Snuff it out.

I look up at Sheila.

"You could end up with an alphabet of all the rude bits," I say.

"Well, you have to have rules. You've got to use the right name for a body part, or near enough, like. No slang. No rude words."

"Yes, but 'larynx' never would have turned up the story about 'Adam's apple,' would it?"

"No, true," she says thoughtfully. "But rules are there to be bent, aren't they? It's only a game."

Anus

Anus, I write.

I straighten the photocopied handout on the school desk in front of me and adjust my grip on my fountain pen. A potent blob of black ink spreads across my knuckle, working into the tiny lines and creases of my skin and cuticle. I wipe it on my trousers.

Black trousers, black ink, no worries.

There are two outlines of human bodies on the class handout, with straight lines pointing to various parts.

"And I'll stop you after ten minutes," says Mr. Miller, perching his wiry frame on the stool at the front of the lab, making the crotch of his musty trousers wrinkle up in a cat's whisker shape. "And use the proper names, please."

I draw my own connecting line from the word anus to the relevant area of the male silhouette. I don't know what's made me do it. There's no undoing it. It's in pen. But a real, slightly frightening sense of freedom is swelling in my belly. Maybe now is the time to say it: Mr. Miller, you, me, and biology, we were never meant to be. Let's call it quits, eh?

Kelvin and the new kid look at what I've written, and Kelvin laughs a silent and heartening laugh. The new kid doesn't laugh. His face smiles without his mouth smiling-maybe it's in the brow-and he watches on with a cool detachment.

Balls (hairy), I add, and then underline the A and B, before quickly coming up with C, D, and E, all from the same source. Cock, dong, erection. We both tense up with silent laughter.

Fanny, counters Kelvin, arcing a line out to the female. Gonads.

Horn.

Incest.

I frown at him. "Incest isn't a part of the body," I mutter.

"No, but when it happens, it makes a dysfunctional human. It's genetic." He connects it to a line to the male's midriff, and then the female's for good measure. "They're brother and sister."

I look at the new kid, and the new kid arches an eyebrow at me. We're not convinced. Still: Jugs.

Knob.

"Doesn't that begin with n?"

"Mine doesn't."

Lips.

Mammaries, nipples.

Orifice.

We're silent-laughing in that way that makes me kind of queasy. The mash-it-all-up childishness you can only get in a hot afternoon of triple science.

Prick.

Queer. A connecting line to the wrist.

Rim.

Slit.

Tit.

Urethra.

Vadge, wang.

Kelvin chews his pen while he mulls over the crowded diagram for what to put for X.

In the meantime I add yum-yums, Zeppelins, and draw lines to the boobs with a grand flourish.

Suddenly and with detached confidence, the new kid picks up his own pen, plucks off the lid, and writes X chromosome. He draws a line to the midriff. I look up at him, and he looks at me, and I don't get it. But he smiles, and I smile back, and I look at Kelvin. Kelvin doesn't get it either.

"I'll take that, thank you." The paper is whipped from beneath my pen, and Mr. Miller leans on the new kid's desk. "Malachy, I see it was a mistake to put you with these two. I'll see all three of you afterward."

• • •

"I still don't know how Jef poaches those eggs so well," says Sheila. "I try to do them at home, and they go all mangled."

"Mangled eggs," I say with a weak smile. I don't mean it as a joke. Just reporting what my brain is feeding back to me. But it's quite funny, I suppose.

"Ha! Mangled eggs. That could be my signature dish, couldn't it?"

Ah, I don't know, I can't eat. I'm made of stone inside. Honestly, I don't want to be difficult.

Sheila perches on the edge of the visitors' chair and slots her hands between her knees.

"I think it would be a good idea if you could manage just a little bit of it. You don't want to make yourself feel worse by not eating. I know the last thing you want to do is eat, I really do. But believe you me, I've walked up and down this corridor for eight years, and I tell you, it always helps. It always helps when you eat it. Sets you right for the day."

I should. I know I should.

"Do you want me to get him to make you some fried eggs? Honestly, it'll be no bother. And if he says no, I'll do them myself."

Bless her, she does try to make me laugh.

What passes for a laugh these days. Wheeze and cough.

"Or I could come over there and do choo-choo trains with you, if you'd rather try that," she says, unclasping her hands and absently checking the positioning of the little upside-down watch clipped to her breast.

I can feel myself being persuaded along, like a boat at rising tide, my hull lifting with the wash, scraping along the wet sand and stopping, scraping along and stopping.

It's you I need now.

If I imagine it right, I can...I can sense you, enthusiastic you, telling me, Yeah, you can do it.

I can do it.

Of course you can.

Of course I can. If I just...if I just remember you right...I can sense your face...the way it used to move when you'd decided on something.

This is going to happen.

Here it is. I love it. I love this blueprint of you, here in me.

This is going to happen.

It feels to me like you're here. I can hear the comforting tones of your voice. I can actually hear the sounds. Or the memory of the sounds. They remain in my brain. I can be persuaded.

What is that, when you can hear someone's voice without really hearing it through your ears? I'm not hearing you, but I'm hereing you. I'm H-E-R-E-ing you. You ignite my gray brain. Light me up. Spark me into being.

If you eat now, you'll thank yourself later.

I lift my heavy hand and reach out for the fork.

I know, I know. I need to try to eat.

Chew chew. Chew chew and think of you.

Ankle

Does it count in the A to Z game if it's someone else's ankle and not mine?

I can't beat the best ankle story of all time, which absolutely belongs to Laura. She went down in the history of our family with her ankle. I cannot believe how perfect the whole thing was, and I cannot believe how out of order I was.

What would I have been, about twelve? So she'd have been seventeen. I think I said to her-did I?-yes, I told her that her boyfriend at the time-what was his name?-I told her her boyfriend at the time had told me that he thought she had a fat arse.

He never did. He never said anything like it. Why did I ever even think to say something so cruel? I didn't feel the cruelty at the time. It was only a joke.

Her boyfriend must have delivered a persuasive explanation of not knowing anything about it, because she came storming back to me later in the day, absolutely spitting venom, and calling me a little shit.

Mum took my side, again. She told Laura I would never do something like that on purpose, and that it must have been some sort of misunderstanding. And she said-poor Laura-Mum said, "I wouldn't be surprised if anyone did say you had a fat backside, the kind of skimpy shorts you waltz around in."

Of course Laura rushed upstairs in floods of tears. And the irony, the beautiful irony of it was that Laura must have dumped herself down on her bed with such a leaden sulk that she fractured her ankle between the bed frame and her arse.

There's not a year goes by that I don't think what utter humiliation she must have felt, shuffling on her backside down the narrow staircase to tell us, wailing, that she needed to go to the ER.

It's no wonder she ended up going the way she did.

• • •

"Let me get that." Sheila lifts my abandoned plate away. I've managed a few bites. "All right, you've done well there, haven't you? How are you doing now? Have you been able to lie back at all?"

I shake my head.

"Starts you coughing, does it? Did you sit up all night too?"

Minimal nod.

Shaking your head means no. Nodding it means yes. Why would that be? I'll save that for H in my A to Z.

"It's a problem, that, isn't it? You try to get a moment's respite because you're cold, and then your lungs start filling up because you're lying down. It hardly seems fair, does it?"

She stands with her weight on one hip, as if she's never encountered anyone with such a problem before.

"I'm all right," I say.

Sheila rearranges the knife and fork less precariously on the plate and considers me for a while. "Give me a shout, anyway, if you want any blankets or anything. Or a nice cup of something warm. Although we've run out of mugs again." She lowers her voice. "I don't know why people can't read the sign and bring their mugs back to the coffee machine. It says it right there. It's not too much to ask, is it?"

She takes the plate away and puts it on a cart in the corridor.

"I mean, I don't mind washing all the dregs out if they just leave the mugs there, but I haven't got time to go around doing a collection every twenty minutes. Have you filled in your lunch card yet?"

"No. Will he make me some chicken soup? My mum always used to make me chicken soup when I was sick."

She smiles. It's a sweet smile.

She understands and leaves to make inquiries.

Stay lifted. Self-sufficient. I can do this thing.

What thing?

Look out of the window. Look at the wall. Look at the bedsheets. Look at my arms.

God, look at them against the bedsheets. Like great big useless horses' forelegs. What are they? A connecting piece between chest and hand. Between neck and hand. Between heart and hand. Well, what? They're arms, aren't they?

Look at them. The superhighway of the body. They're history. A hopeless historical map, plotting clots and

craters of short-lived attempts to spark me into being. They have evolved into someone else's arms. An old man's arms, not the arms of a forty-year-old. Purple and yellow, brown and bruised. Every vein is collapsed. Every entry point blocked off. Lumped-up fistula scars now useless, no way in anymore. My insides are sealed off from the outside forever.

They're numb cold, my arms. Cold arms are the price to pay. I can't keep them under the covers. They feel like they're dead already.

Arms

I flick the syringe lightly with shaking fingertips, and the bubble unsticks itself from the plunger and creeps sullenly through the liquid toward the needle.

"Come on, man, the little ones don't matter."

"That's not a little bubble, though, is it?"

It settles up around by the needle, and I flick again. Flick harder.

"Careful, man. You're losing the liquid out the top."

"I'm not injecting bubbles."

"It's only a little one."

"Listen, man-fuck off. It's up to me, yeah?"

Mal sits back, surprised. I never talk to him like this.

I don't like this.

Feels wrong. This is not me.

All I can think of is you. What if this goes wrong? What if...what if it changes me forever? What if you find out? I'll lose you.

No, no. All this is bullshit. This is exactly like I was before I took my first trip. I was scared there would be no way back. But there is a way back. And anyway, this is the first and last time.

Try anything once. Once only.

•••

Sheila's head eclipses the television screen a moment as she walks past. She's doing her Closing Ceremony.

"I'm just on my way, Ivo," she says. "Got to go home and see what that useless lump of a husband's been up to overnight."

"You should...you should get him in here. Ask him to come here."

"What? Come in here and I can look after everyone at the same time? That's not a bad idea, that. Save me coming and going every day, wouldn't it? Now, how are you doing? You're looking perkier than when I came in earlier. I want to see more of the same later, please. Do you need anything sorting out before I head

off?"

I don't want her to go. Don't go, Sheila.

"No."

"You're comfortable, are you?"

I nod.

"How are your arms and shoulders?" She rests her olive-skinned hand on my arm, uninvited. I don't mind. Everything everyone does to me now is uninvited, and it's rarely so tender. "Are they a bit cold? Do you want me to get a blanket?"

I nod. "They are cold. They ache."

"It's always a problem," she says, opening the bedside cabinet and beginning to rummage. "Because with most people it's all these drips and taps and pipes, they have to keep their arms exposed for them. It's always the same. Where are these spare blankets? Honestly, people must just come in and-" She stands up and looks about.

I know what's coming.

"Oh, here," she says, reaching down into my bag. She's got the crochet blanket.

No, no. Don't ask.

"Put this around your shoulders. That'll keep you nice and warm, won't it?"

No, don't.

She casts the blanket about my shoulders, and your scent wafts up, perfectly preserved, and floods my senses.

I don't want her to see, I don't want her to see, but she's looking up at my face, and she can see now there's something wrong. My throat's so tight. Hot, tight, tight, dry. That's normally what passes for crying with me. It's a dry throat. It's not being able to breathe.

But this time, for once, gratifying tears begin to prickle.

"Oh, lovey..." she says, quietly.

She doesn't make a fuss. She must be used to unexplained fluids leaking from patients.

How weird, tears. I trickle water for you.

Sheila sits on the side of the bed, takes up my hand, and strokes the back of it.

"Is there anything I can do, lovey?" she says in the softest, gentlest voice.

My throat aches, hot. "Sorry, sorry. Stupid."

"Not at all."

"This blanket," I say. "Lot of memories."

"Really?"

"My girlfriend made it for me."

"Oh. I wasn't sure if you had a girlfriend or anything."

"Ex."

"Oh, I see."

She doesn't see, of course.

"Mmm." I sniff. "She crocheted it specially for me."

"No-she did all this? It's lovely."

"I've been thinking about her a lot lately. Been talking to her. In my mind."

"Special one, was she? It's a shame, isn't it? Sometimes."

"Anyway, you'd better go," I say.

"No, no. There's no hurry."

"No, I'm fine. And husbands don't just look after themselves, do they?"

"No, you're right there. Well, if you're sure you're OK? I'm happy to stay."

"No, no. Thanks."

She rises from her perch on the side of the bed and places my hand down on the sheets.

"I'll be back tonight, all right? Press the button if you want Jackie. Don't be shy, now."

She gives me a regretful little smile and leaves me. I'm wrapped up to my neck in crochet, up to my neck in you.

I would give everything I have ever had and everything I will ever have just to put my arms around you, have you put your arms around me.

Our bodies simply fit, yours and mine.

That's what I'm going to think of now. That will see me off to sleep. Those arms of yours, wrapped tight, tight around me.

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