

# Standard Deviation: A novel

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An uproarious novel ("Both heart-piercing and, crucially, very funny." -Louise Erdrich, The New York Times) from the celebrated author of *Single*, *Carefree*, *Mellow* about the challenges of a good marriage, the delight and heartache of raising children, and the irresistible temptation to wonder about the path not taken.

When Graham Cavanaugh divorced his first wife it was to marry his girlfriend, Audra, a woman as irrepressible as she is spontaneous and fun. But, Graham learns, life with Audra can also be exhausting, constantly interrupted by chatty phone calls, picky-eater houseguests, and invitations to weddings of people he's never met. Audra firmly believes that through the sheer force of her personality she can overcome the most socially challenging interactions, shepherding her son through awkward playdates and origami club, and even deciding to establish a friendship with Graham's first wife, Elspeth. Graham isn't sure he understands why Audra longs to be friends with the woman he divorced. After all, former spouses are hard to categorize—are they enemies, old flames, or just people you know really, really well? And as Graham and Audra share dinners, holidays, and late glasses of wine with his first wife he starts to wonder: How can anyone love two such different women? Did I make the right choice? Is there a right choice? A hilarious and rueful debut novel of love, marriage, infidelity, and origami, *Standard Deviation* never deviates from the superb.

KATHERINE HEINY is the author of *Single*, *Carefree*, *Mellow*, a collection of short stories. Her fiction has been published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *Ploughshares*, *Glimmer Train*, and many other places. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and children. Chapter | One

It had begun to seem to Graham, in this, the twelfth year of his second marriage, that he and his wife lived in parallel universes. And worse, it seemed his universe was lonely and arid, and hers was densely populated with armies of friends and acquaintances and other people he did not know.

Here they were grocery shopping in Fairway on a Saturday morning, a normal married thing to do together— although, Graham could not help noticing, they were not doing it together. His wife, Audra, spent almost the whole time talking to people she knew— it was like accompanying a visiting dignity of some sort, or maybe a presidential hopeful— while he did the normal shopping.

First, in the produce section, they saw some woman with a baby in a stroller and Audra said, "Oh, hi! How are you? Are you going to that thing on Tuesday?" and the woman said, "I don't know, because there's that other meeting," and Audra said, "I thought that got canceled," and the woman said, "No, it's still on," and Audra said, "I wish they wouldn't double— book this stuff," and the woman said, "I know," and Audra said, "Well, if we don't go, will everyone say bad things about us?" and the woman said, "Probably," and it wasn't that

Graham wasn't paying attention, it wasn't that he missed the specifics—it was that there were no specifics, that was the way they actually talked.

He took his time thumping melons and picking over grapefruit and was actually rewarded for being forced to linger by remembering to buy green grapes, which weren't on the list.

"Who was that?" he asked when Audra rejoined him.

"Who?" Audra said. She was peering into the shopping cart.

"That woman you just said hello to."

"Oh, she has a girl in Matthew's class," Audra said, selecting an apple. "And a five-year-old and a toddler and that baby, if you can believe it. But no more, because when the baby was only a week old, she had her husband get a vasectomy. Just made the arrangements and woke him that morning and said, 'Guess what? You've got a doctor's appointment.' And he went!"

She took a bite of the apple. Audra was forty-one—a slender woman with a not-quite-perfectly oval face. In fact, Graham sometimes thought, all of Audra was not-quite. Her eyes were not quite brown but had stalled at hazel, her lips were not quite full enough to be lush, her eyebrows were not quite high enough to be called arched, her chin-length hair was not quite auburn, and its messy waves were not quite ringlets. She'd worn her hair this length for as long as Graham had known her. Apparently, if she cut it shorter, it curled up around her face and made her head look overly round, and if she grew it longer, the ends got too heavy and she had to have lots of layers put in. (This was marriage: you started out thinking you'd married the most interesting person in all the world and twelve years later, your head was full of useless hair facts. Of course, there was other stuff in there—some milestones, having a baby, buying a house—but that was basically the essence of it.) Audra was not quite beautiful but her liveliness kept her far away from plain.

One aisle over, in the breakfast cereals department, Audra suddenly stopped the cart. A young man behind them glared but Audra paid no attention.

"Oh! Hey!" Audra said. "Look! Hello! Hi! Whoa! How are you?" You would have thought she was greeting a whole soccer team instead of one lady in a T-shirt and jeans with her hair pulled back into a bun.

"Hello, Audra," the lady said.

"So sorry I missed yoga this morning, Beverly!" Audra said. She cleared her throat. "Or, um, I mean, Maninder Prem. Sorry, again. I forgot that you go by your spiritual name now, right? Even in the supermarket?"

"You can call me Beverly," the lady said neutrally. "But please remember that I have a no-refund policy for late cancellations and no-shows."

"Of course," Audra said. "It's just that this morning we had a slight- well, I don't know if you would call it a family emergency, more of a family situation- regarding my mother- in- law and an ancient jar of capers in her fridge and a trip to the hospital- "

Audra's tendency to lie could still shock Graham. His mother lived in Ohio, and as far as he knew, she was perfectly healthy, although she did have a habit of leaving things in the refrigerator for a terrifyingly long time.

"I'm sorry to hear that- " Beverly said. There seemed to be more to say but she wasn't saying it.

"Yes- " Audra said. There seemed to be more for her to say, too, but she wasn't saying it, either. Finally, she made a fluttery little gesture and said, "Beverly, this is my husband, Graham. Graham, this is my yoga teacher, Beverly."

Graham smiled politely and shook hands with Beverly, who looked him up and down, her eyelids flickering. He was fifteen years older than Audra and he could tell that Beverly was thinking, Oh, it's one of those marriages. Graham wanted to tell her that it wasn't one of those marriages, that his relationship with Audra was so special and unique even he didn't know what it was, but he'd given up on trying to communicate that long ago. He was tall and in good shape, with the hair at his temples just starting to go gray, but he suddenly felt tempted to stand up straighter. (Was it just Graham or was Beverly awfully judgmental, especially for a yoga teacher?)

"So anyway," Audra said, "see you next week, Beverly."

They moved on, and as soon as they went around the corner and out of sight, Audra said, "I completely forgot about yoga this morning!" as though that hadn't been as obvious as a bumper sticker.

"I think Beverly could tell that," Graham said.

Audra sighed. "Maybe so. I don't know why I ever thought yoga class early on a Saturday morning was such a good idea. I guess I must have been feeling particularly empowered when I signed up."

They saw their appliance repairman, Brady Shannon, in the ice cream aisle, and Graham knew that Audra would have an extralong talk with Brady because she believed that if you were very, very nice to repairmen, they responded very, very quickly the next time you needed something repaired. The fact that this theory had proved very, very untrue had not shaken her belief in the practice.

"Brady Shannon!" Audra exclaimed.

"Well, hello, Ms. Daltry, Mr. Cavanaugh," Brady said. He was a slight, balding man wearing a

gray sweat suit and those black padded kneepads that skateboarders wear. Every time Graham had seen him, Brady was wearing those kneepads, presumably because he was always having to get down and crawl around people's refrigerators and washing machines.

"I was thinking of you just this morning," Audra said. "In fact, I think of you every morning when I get in the shower!" Brady had recently fixed their shower head. "I think, This feels heavenly and I owe it all to Brady Shannon!"

Brady smirked at Audra and rocked a little on the balls of his feet.

Not for the first time, Graham wondered if there was some sort of processing unit- some sort of filter- missing from Audra's brain. She said things like this all the time without realizing how they sounded, and now here was poor Brady Shannon, getting turned on in Frozen Foods.

"Anyway," Audra said, oblivious, "how have you been?"

"Oh." Brady sounded disappointed. He probably hoped that Audra would go on describing what she did in the shower. "I'm all right."

Audra touched Brady's arm. "And please tell me how dear Ellen is."

Okay, now first of all, Graham happened to know that Audra didn't say things like "dear Ellen." Except that she just did. Second, Graham would have bet that Brady didn't like it when people said things like "dear Ellen." But he had just liked it when Audra said it. Third, Ellen was a cat.

"She's coming along, I guess."

"Bladder infections can be very serious," Audra said.

"Don't I know it," Brady said, shaking his head and tsking.

Audra and Brady talked some more about dear Ellen's urinary tract, and health problems among the elderly cat population in general, and the astronomical cost of veterinary care, and Brady's aunt Linda, who had had a bad run of UTIs herself recently, and the time Audra drank cranberry juice nonstop for a week and turned out not to have a UTI at all and-

Finally, finally, they got to the checkout lines.

Audra said, "Now, let me see if Jordan's working. Oh, yes, he is! Let's get in his line. Come this way."

"Who's Jordan?" Graham asked, maneuvering their cart with some difficulty.

"The checkout guy."

"Well, yes, but why do we need to be in his line?"

"Just a minute," Audra said. "Here." She pulled the front of the cart to a checkout line near the door. The customer in front of them was just putting the last of her groceries on the conveyor belt.

"Audra," Graham said again. "Why-?"

Audra squeezed around the front of their grocery cart so that she was standing right next to Graham and spoke in a low voice. "I thought I told you this but maybe not." Her breath on his face was as warm and soft as clover. "I was here a couple of weeks ago and Jordan was ringing up this man's produce and the man had bought some pears but Jordan accidentally hit the wrong button and rang them up as these superexpensive Asian pears and the man got very huffy- he really was the most awful man, Graham, very coarse and uncaring- and told Jordan to take the Asian pears off his order and Jordan tried but he'd never done it before and the cash register froze and they had to call the supervisor and the man hollered at Jordan and stormed off without even buying his groceries! I thought Jordan was going to cry. I honestly did. He can't be more than twenty, and he's so sweet and defenseless- looking. So, anyway, now I always make sure to go through his checkout line and tell him what a good job he's doing."

Perhaps this was the fundamental difference between them. Audra was worried about Jordan's self- esteem and Graham was wondering if Fairway still had the special Asian pears. If so, should he go get some so they could have Korean short ribs with pear marinade for dinner?

Audra edged back to the front of the cart and began unloading their groceries onto the conveyor. Graham peered around her to look at Jordan. He was a tall skinny African- American guy with neatly cornrowed hair and the large scared eyes of a deer. He was painstakingly checking out the purchases of the customer in front of them.

When they got up to the cash register, Audra said, "Good morning, Jordan!" so suddenly that Jordan fumbled the can of peas he was holding and had to lean down behind the counter to pick it up off the floor.

He looked at Audra cautiously. "Good morning." He began scanning items.

"How are you, Jordan?"

Jordan paused, a bottle of ketchup in his hand. "Pretty good." He scanned the ketchup and reached for a box of cereal.

"I was hoping you'd be working today," Audra said. "You always do such a good job."

### Other Books

The Rise and Fall of the Victorian Three-Volume Novel. Utilizing recent developments in book history and digital humanities, this book offers a cultural, economic, and literary history of the Victorian three-volume novel, the prestige format for the British novel during much of the nineteenth century. With the publication of Walter Scott's popular novels in the 1820s, the three-volume novel became the standard format for new fiction aimed at middle-class audiences through the support of circulating libraries. Following a quantitative analysis examining who wrote and published these novels, the book investigates the success of publisher Richard Bentley in producing three-volume novels, the experiences of the W. H. Smith circulating library in distributing them, the difficulties of authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson and George Moore in writing them, and the resistance of new publishers such as Arrowsmith and Unwin to publishing them. Rather than faltering, the three-volume novel stubbornly endured until its abandonment in the 1890s.

For 500-copy editions (the largest group), the cost for paper averaged £31.18.4 per title (with a standard deviation of about £2), ranging from £28 to £36 per title. There was little variation in this cost due to the uniform size of the ..."