

AN AB DISCOVERY BOOK

*Always
&
and
Already*

FOR EVERYONE WHO HAS
ALWAYS KNOWN

ANDREW STEPHENS

Always and Already

Always And Already

*For everyone who has always
known*

Andrew Stephens

First Published 2026

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Title: Always and Already

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Publisher: AB Discovery

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www.abdiscovery.com.au

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Chapter One: The Knowing

The earliest memory Robin Ashworth had of understanding himself was not in words. It was in a feeling, specific and bodily and entirely without shame, that arrived one morning in the autumn of his third year and never left.

He had woken in a wet bed — as he always did, as he had done every morning of his life thus far and he had lain still in the warmth of it, looking up at the ceiling of his small bedroom with its curtains printed with trains, and something had settled in him like a stone finding the bottom of still water. A quiet, complete knowing. Not a thought he could have spoken aloud. Just the knowledge, available to him in the way that the warmth of the bed was available, in the way that his own breathing was available: simply and without argument.

I am a baby.

Not, I feel like a baby. Not, I wish I were still a baby. Simply: I *am* one. This is what I am. The wet bed was not evidence of failure, nor evidence of anything going wrong. It was the morning's first confirmation of the truest fact about himself. The sheets were warm and damp. His pyjama bottoms were wet through. The mattress beneath him was safe, protected by plastic from what the night had made, and he was at the centre of it, small and completely himself, and everything was correct.

He was three years old. He had no framework for what he knew. He had only the knowing.



The Ashworth family occupied a four-bedroom detached house on Mercer Avenue in the kind of suburb that had been built in the early nineteen-eighties with the confident assumption that families would fill it: broad-windowed, double-garaged, the front gardens well-kept and slightly competitive. Robin was the second of four children. His sister Joanna was two years older. His brothers Daniel and Callum came after, separated by a gap of three years apiece.

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His parents, Margaret and Geoffrey, were the kind of people the suburb had been designed for. Geoffrey was a solicitor with a practice in the town centre, precise and unhurried, a man who ironed his shirts the night before and always knew where his car keys were. Margaret taught primary school three days a week and ran the household with a cheerful competence that made everything look easy. They were not unaffectionate parents. They were simply busy ones, and the busyness had its own warmth.

The bedwetting was, in the Ashworth household, not a crisis. This was partly temperament and partly history. Margaret's younger brother, Robin's Uncle Paul, had wet the bed until he was seventeen, and Margaret had grown up with the matter-of-fact domestic management of a bedwetter: the waterproof sheet, the extra laundry, the brisk morning changing of the bed without drama. When Robin showed no signs of nighttime dryness at two, or three, or four, she registered it with the practical part of her mind and managed it accordingly.

"He'll dry up when he's ready," she told Geoffrey, who had never thought much about it either way. "Paul was the same. Some people just take longer."

It did not occur to either of them that Robin was not taking longer. That Robin was not, in any part of himself that mattered, moving in the direction of dryness at all.



Joanna achieved nighttime dryness at three and a half with barely any fuss. Robin noticed this with a distant interest, the way you notice the weather in a country you are not visiting. She was dry. He was not. These were simply facts about two different people.

What was more interesting, as the years passed, was watching his brothers. Daniel was slow, as Robin had been — still in a nappy at night at four, still wetting at five and six, still requiring the waterproof sheet at seven. Robin watched his brother's progress with the focused attention of someone watching a horse race in

which they have no horse entered. Would Daniel stop? When? What would that look like?

Daniel stopped at seven and a half. One morning, he came down to breakfast and announced, with the gravity of a small person delivering important news, that he hadn't wet last night. Or the night before. His mother made the appropriate fuss. His father said well done, old man, in the way Geoffrey said most things: with warmth carefully measured so as not to overflow.

Robin was ten. He sat across the breakfast table from his brother and felt, as precisely as he had ever felt anything, the absence of any desire for what Daniel had achieved. He was still wet every morning. He had no intention of being anything else.

Callum, the youngest, was the family's surprise: dry at night almost from the time he was out of daytime nappies, as though dryness were simply his natural state, as though the body had decided early and emphatically. He was five when Robin was twelve, and Robin watched his little brother's uncomplicated dryness with something that might, from the outside, have looked like envy and was, from the inside, simply curiosity. What was it like to not know what he knew? What was it like to be dry in the morning and to find that entirely normal?

He could not imagine it. He did not particularly want to.



The sheets were changed twice a week, on Tuesdays and Saturdays. Robin's bedroom had a waterproof mattress protector that his mother had put on without comment when he was four and which had been there ever since, part of the room's furniture like the wardrobe or the desk. He was expected to put his wet pyjamas in the laundry basket and to pull back his duvet in the morning to let things air. He did both these things as automatically as he cleaned his teeth. They were simply part of how mornings worked.

At school, bedwetting was in the general category of things that could make a boy's life difficult if it became known. Robin had understood this early and had arranged his social life accordingly. He

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did not go on sleepovers. He gave plausible-sounding excuses, so consistent and so varied that no single excuse was ever repeated, and nobody pushed. He was, in most other ways, entirely ordinary: competent at schoolwork, decent at cricket, possessed of a small and stable group of friends with whom he played video games and argued about football and did the ordinary things that boys in their early teens did in the suburb in the mid-nineteen-nineties.

The bedwetting was private. It was his.



He was thirteen when he first told another person.

The other person was a boy named Kieran Doyle, who sat next to Robin in maths and had a quality of stillness about him that Robin had always found restful. Kieran was not one of Robin's immediate friends but was in the adjacent circle: someone you could sit with comfortably at lunch if the usual table was full, someone whose company was easy without being particularly close.

It had come out, as these things sometimes do, sideways. They had been discussing a camping trip that the school was running, and Kieran had said, with the careful casualness of someone testing the water, that he wasn't sure he was going to go.

"How come?" Robin had asked.

A pause. Kieran looking at his maths textbook rather than at Robin. "Just. You know. Sharing tents and stuff."

Robin had understood immediately. The specific, careful vagueness of it. The not-quite-saying.

"I'm not going either," he said. "For the same reason."

Kieran had looked up then. Looked at Robin with an expression that Robin recognised from the inside: the expression of someone who has just heard, for the first time, that they are not the only one.

"Yeah?" Kieran said.

"Yeah."

They had not discussed it further. Not that day, and not for several weeks. But something had shifted between them, quiet and

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permanent: the specific warmth of a shared secret that does not need to be spoken to be present. They both knew. They both knew that the other knew. And that knowing, unremarked and unelaborated, was its own form of companionship.

A month later, walking home from school on a grey November afternoon, Kieran had said, still looking at the pavement: "Does it bother you?"

Robin had thought about it honestly. "No," he said. "Not really. Does it bother you?"

Another pause. "It's supposed to," Kieran said. "Isn't it?"

"I think so," Robin agreed. "It doesn't, though."

Kieran had nodded slowly. "No," he said. "Me neither."

They had parted at the end of Kieran's road, and Robin had walked the remaining ten minutes home in the November grey, feeling something he did not yet have a name for. A warmth, specific and uncomplicated, that had nothing to do with attraction and everything to do with recognition. Someone else who didn't mind. Someone else for whom the wet bed was simply a fact of mornings, neither terrible nor wonderful, simply there.

It was the closest Robin had come, until that point in his life, to being known.