DOLLY ALDERTON



GOOD MATERIAL



EVERY RELATIONSHIP HAS ONE BEGINNING.
THIS ONE HAS TWO ENDINGS.

'THIS IS THE GREATEST. YOU'LL CRY AND LAUGH'
CLAUDIA WINKLEMAN

'A BOOK TO BE DEVOURED, ADORED, UNDERLINED AND PASSED ON . . . IF ONLY MORE BOOKS WERE AS FUNNY AS THIS'
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'Like Nora Ephron, with a British twist . . . Delivers the most delightful aspects of classic romantic comedy – snappy dialogue, realistic relationship dynamics, humorous meet-cutes and misunderstandings – and leaves behind the clichéd gender roles and traditional marriage plot' *The New York Times*

'Funny, sad and true; a book she has clearly poured her soul into . . . Cements her status as a fiction heavyweight' iNews

'Sharply written and acutely observed . . . A beautifully nuanced portrayal of modern love that will have you racing to the last page' *Heat*

'A relatable, laugh-out-loud story of a thirty-something failed comedian struggling with a break-up' *Sunday Times Style*

'*Good Material* combines Alderton's wit and eye for detail with a beautiful depth of emotion' *Woman & Home*

'The author of *Everything I Know About Love* nails the zeitgeist with a witty, relatable and acutely insightful page-turner about the trials and tribulations of the lovelorn' *Daily Express*

'Dolly Alderton is the Adele of writing' Esther Coren, The Spike

'Witty, warm and well observed' *Fabulous Magazine*

'A funny, tender novel about human relationships. By turns laugh-out-loud, eye-roll relatable and "stop you in your tracks" heart-wrenching. A thoroughly modern romantic masterpiece' Nina Stibbe, author of *Love, Nina*

'Alderton entertains with observational quips about thirty-something life . . . There's a Hornby-esque charm to her well-meaning characters and their relatable dramas' *Observer*

'The bestselling author brings her warmth, emotional intelligence and wry observation to bear on her second novel . . . Refreshing' *Bookseller*, Editor's Choice

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'Alderton is perceptive about how men deal (badly) with emotional pain' *The Times*

'All of Alderton's considerable gifts as a writer are on display here: her wit, her ability to capture exchanges that feel real and her skilful characterization . . . Alderton's work truly shines when she writes about friendship' *Sunday Independent*

'Alderton is excellent at fusing poignant tenderness with wry observations about modern life . . . If you're on the hunt for a readable romcom to inhale in a few sittings, this is very good material' *Stylist*

'Funny, tender and astute on heartbreak' *Mail on Sunday*

'Brilliantly observed . . . Addictive' *Daily Mail*

'Comical yet warming' *Psychologies*

'A novel as witty as it is perceptive'
Daily Express, The must-read novels of 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dolly Alderton is an award-winning author, screenwriter and journalist based in London. She is a columnist for the *Sunday Times Style* magazine and has also written for *GQ*, *Red*, *Marie Claire* and *Grazia*. She is the former co-host and co-creator of the podcast *The High Low*. Her first book, *Everything I Know About Love*, became a top-five *Sunday Times* bestseller in its first week of publication, won a National Book Award (UK) for Autobiography of the Year and was made into a BBC One TV series. *Ghosts*, her first novel, was an instant *Sunday Times* bestseller. *Dear Dolly*, a collection of her agony aunt columns from the *Sunday Times Style* magazine, was published in 2022 and was also a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

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For Lauren Bensted, queen of my heart

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I expect you've seen the footage: elephants,
finding the bones of one of their own kind
dropped by the wayside, picked clean by scavengers
and the sun, then untidily left there,
decide to do something about it.

But what, exactly? They can't, of course,
reassemble the old elephant magnificence;
they can't even make a tidier heap. But they can
hook up bones with their trunks and chuck them
this way and that way. So they do.

And their scattering has an air
of deliberate ritual, ancient and necessary.
Their great size, too, makes them the very
embodiment of grief, while the play of their trunks
lends sprezzatura.

Elephants puzzling out
the anagram of their own anatomy,
elephants at their abstracted lamentations –
may their spirit guide me as I place
my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements.

– *A Scattering*, Christopher Reid

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Summer 2019

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Reasons Why It's Good I'm Not With Jen

Can't dance. Has no rhythm at all. Used to find it adorable until I saw people laughing at her and hate to say I was embarrassed.

Once overheard her say 'Let's grab a cappuccino some time and we'll talk' to my teenage cousin who wanted advice about his university applications.

Generally has quite nineties ideas about what is glamorous, like cocktails or spending twenty pounds on a plate of tagliatelle in a 'little place'.

Refuses to get to the airport a minute earlier than ninety minutes before a flight takes off.

Don't have to persuade her to like where we live any more.

When she would go for a run in the evening she would come into the living room, stretch in front of the TV and say 'What's this?' and make me explain the programme I was watching even though she knew what it was, just to make a point that she was exercising while I was watching *Help, I'm a Hoarder!*

Talked too much and too smugly about coming from a big family, as if it was her decision to have three siblings.

Always used to boast about how she'd reject an OBE if it were offered to her because of her apparent lefty republican values

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but would never know why she'd be offered an OBE in this fantasy when I asked her.

Would definitely never reject an OBE if it were offered to her.

Would take an hour to go to bed, no matter what time she got in, because she'd do a seven-step skincare routine, browse shopping apps and listen to podcasts. And yet only left twenty minutes from her alarm going off to having to leave the flat in the morning.

Always late for me, never late for work.

Can't drive (childish).

Somehow managed to relate the plot of every film we watched back to her own life.

Her unbearable sister Miranda who carries nonsensical homemade signs at protests saying things like HISTORY IS WATCHING and who I know hates me because she always ranted about 'straight white guys' when she came round for dinner, no matter the topic. She used to say 'Sorry, Andy' but didn't by the end.

Her work friends: boring and cliquey and not fun *or* funny.

All talk about being some big adventurer but never followed through. Wanted to take a year off to travel because she never had a gap year ('next year'). Wanted to move to Paris ('not the right time'). Wanted to get an undercut ('work wouldn't like it'). Wanted to go to an outdoor sex-themed rave ('when my hay fever gets better').

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Goes to therapy every week and has done since she was twenty-nine but would never tell me what they spoke about and I've never seen that she has anything wrong with her.

Was too connected to dogs and spoke to them as if they were people.

Her rude dad.

Her weird mum.

Comes from a family who go on long circular walks and play board games.

Annoyingly loquacious and was on a debating team at her school, which meant I didn't win an argument in nearly four years even when I was right about loads of them.

Always on at me about biting my nails, picking my feet, too much hair in my nostrils and bum hole etc., despite the fact she's always fiddling with her cuticles.

Talked at the cinema.

Pretended she's unsure about wanting children because she cares about the planet, but I think she just didn't want children with me.

Would never talk seriously about having children, despite knowing how much I want to be a dad, but would sometimes say 'That's one of my baby names' to people in conversation.

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Those baby names included: Noah, Blue (?) and Zebedee.

Snob. Once said that she thought people who wear straw hats at the airport on the way to their summer holiday are 'regional'.

Lingered too long in museums at every artefact or painting and would have a go at me if I walked through the exhibition too quickly.

Once saw her nod respectfully at a TINY JADE SPOON in the British Museum.

Only saw her cry a handful of times in nearly four years together and it wasn't when we broke up.

One time was when we were watching a Joni Mitchell documentary.

Ruined my life.

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Friday 5th July 2019

There is a jumper and a shirt hanging on the washing line in my mum's garden that look like they're holding hands in the breeze. I stand at my bedroom window and watch their interplay change with the direction of the wind. I watch until exactly 7.03 p.m., when I pick up the phone to the woman I've loved for three years, ten months and twenty-nine days, who dumped me and smashed my heart like a sinewy piñata eight days and twenty-two hours ago.

We agreed I would call at seven but I wait until three minutes past to make a point that she doesn't get to call the shots any more. I scroll to her name in my phonebook: Jen (Hammersmith). We found it funny – my chosen life partner, reduced to a borough. It's not funny now it's lost all its irony. It's just a fact. I am about to call Jen (Hammersmith), a woman who I would probably never be friends with, who lives in a part of London I would never visit.

'Hello?'

'Hey,' I say, my voice breaking like a bagpipe. 'It's Andy.'

'I know.'

'Have you deleted my number already?'

'No? Why would I delete your number?'

'I don't know, just the way you picked up the phone and said "Hello?" like that, so formally, like you're answering the phone at a dental practice.'

'I didn't say "Hello?", I said "Hello!" '

'No you didn't, you said it like a question, like you were unsure of who was ringing.'

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'I knew you were ringing. We agreed on the time.'

'I just thought because I was ringing later than we planned . . .'

'We said seven,' she says brightly. 'And I know your number anyway.'

'Why?'

'Because at the beginning I used to delete your number all the time, so I ended up accidentally memorizing it.'

I think back to the conversation we had a few months into our relationship, straight after we told each other we loved each other for the first time. She admitted she used to delete my number after every time I texted, so she didn't see my name on her phone and obsess over when I was going to message again. I don't understand how this is happening. I want to go back there. How do they time-travel in the films? I'll do anything. Fall from a great height. Electrocute myself. Go into a cupboard and spin around ten times. I suppress a sob and it sounds like a hiccup.

'Oh, Andy,' she says.

'I'm fine,' I say, honking like a bagpipe again. 'How's Miranda's?'

'It's okay. The spare room is where the baby sleeps now, so I'm in the living room on a blow-up mattress, but it's all right.'

'Are you surrounded by placards that say "History is Watching"?'

'No, I'm not,' she says. One of our favourite jokes, extinguished along with our relationship. We were only allowed to make it when we were in cahoots; when we were so close that her family felt like my family, even though they drove me mad. But she'd crossed over now. I'm not her family any more, we are no longer playing for the same team. I am just a man from the Midlands who she would probably never be friends with, being rude about her sister.

'How's your mum?' she asks.

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'She's fine, she hates you, her Zumba class are plotting your death.' Another arctic pause. 'She's devastated, obviously.'

'Can I write her a letter? Then I won't contact her again, I promise. I just want to say goodbye.'

'She'd like that. She adores you.'

'I've never met a mum like your mum.'

'I adore you.' More silence. I take a cigarette out of my pocket and light it.

'Are you smoking?'

'Yeah.'

'Don't, Andy, you worked so hard to give up.'

'Don't care,' I snap, hoping I sound like a romantic outlaw. I inhale and feel the peculiar comfort of my lungs tightening.

'I've started again as well. I might have one if you're having one.' I hear her rummage around in her handbag. 'It's weird, being here. Sleeping on the floor. Smoking and drinking as much as I want. Not seeing anyone. It sort of feels like Christmas.'

'Like *Christmas*?'

'Yeah. Just, like, my world has stopped for a bit.' I stay silent. 'You know what I mean.'

'No I don't, actually. Because it feels like the opposite of Christmas to me.'

'What's the *opposite* of Christmas?'

'I don't know. Easter? The worst birthday ever? My own fucking funeral except I'm alive at it?'

'Andy – can we try to avoid the hysteria? I know this is awful for you, it's awful for me too. But people break up all the time.'

'Stop saying that! Stop referring to "people breaking up" like we're a YouGov poll or a vox pop.' My pride stops me from saying what I actually want to say, which is that 'people break up all the time' is a sentiment that only comforts the person ending the relationship. They're not in love any more and they don't want to feel guilty about it – I know because I've said it

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myself. I didn't realize what a useless statement it is to the person being dumped.

'My therapist suggested I do something this week that I found helpful, and I think you'd find it helpful too.'

'Your therapist suggested that I "write a letter to my ego", so I'm sorry if I'm not gagging to hear whatever she advised.'

'Do you want to hear it or not?'

'Go on.'

'She said that at the end of a relationship, it's useful to write a list of reasons of why it's good you're no longer together.'

'I can't write that list because I want us to be together.'

'I don't think you do.'

'I do, that's all I want.'

'Try writing this list. I think it will help you separate the fantasy of us from the reality of us, which I think you know deep down wasn't working.'

'I can't believe you're being so clinical,' I say. 'I've never heard you talk like this before.'

'I'm just trying to help us both move on.'

'Whatever. No point discussing it any further.' I can't find my footing in this conversation – I lurch from desperation to indifference. I want her to know how much I love her and I also want her to think that I don't care about our relationship any more. I don't know what the desired outcome is. I wish I hadn't had three beers. 'I don't think these phone calls are helping us,' I say.

'Neither do I.'

'Maybe we should agree to not speak for a while.'

'If that's what you want,' she says.

'It is what I want.'

'Okay,' she says, taking a deep drag of her cigarette. 'Have you told Avi yet?'

'No.'

'*Andy*.'

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'I'll tell him when I'm ready. Please. I'd like to have a tiny bit of a say in this break-up.'

'Who are you talking to?'

'You're the only person I can talk to about this stuff,' I say, revolted by the baldness of my own love. 'Please make sure Jane doesn't tell him before I do.'

'She's sworn she won't, but she can't keep it up much longer,' she says. 'He's your best friend. He can help you process this.'

'We don't work like that, Jen, but thanks.' There is a pause that I wait for her to fill. She doesn't. 'So goodbye, then, I suppose,' I say with weary cheer. 'And we'll just text if we need to talk about flat stuff or whatever.'

'Yeah, sure,' she says softly. 'Look after yourself.'

'I love you, Jen.' I can hear her considering the risks of saying this back to me, her therapist on her shoulder saying things about codependency and boundaries.

'Lots of love,' she replies.

I hang up.

Mum comes in with two mugs and I throw my cigarette out of the window.

'I thought you only smoked when you drank,' she says, placing one mug on my bedside table and sitting on the edge of the bed cradling the other.

'I've had three drinks and it's not even eight.'

'That's all right, given the circumstances.'

I sit next to her and pick up a mug that has *I Support Aston Villa and This is the Only Cup I'll Be Getting This Year!* emblazoned on its front in burgundy Courier New.

'This tea tastes of marzipan.'

'I put some Disaronno in it,' she says.

I put my arm around her and she leans into me and smells my T-shirt.

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'Do I stink of fags?'

'Yes,' she says, putting her face into my shoulder. 'God, it's good.'

'Jen wants to write you a letter. I've said she can. Hope that's okay.'

She nods. 'I love Jen.'

'More than me?'

She considers this. 'A *bit* more than you. She bought me lovely candles.'

'Fair enough.'

She gets up from the bed and walks over to the blue and silver CD player, its hardware scratched from decades of use. She picks up a case and takes the CD out.

'You can stay here for as long as you want, you know. I love having you here.'

'Thanks, Mum.' A tinkling sound and a surge of strings warm the room. 'What's this you've put on?'

'*In the Wee Small Hours*. The best break-up album of all time.' She returns to sit next to me. 'Listen to it every day until you feel better. I listened to it non-stop when your dad left.'

I imagine my mum feeling like this while I was a newborn baby, unable to make her tea or put my arm around her or play her albums. She pats me on the back and heaves herself up in that way she does since she turned sixty. I'm instantly comforted by Frank Sinatra's voice, the sound of every December. The kind of voice that lets you believe in an alternate world of luxury and elegance and romance and string orchestras.

'It feels like Christmas,' I say.

'Good!' she says cheerfully, closing the door behind her.

I walk to the window and stare out at the washing line. The sleeves take turns to reach out to each other as they dance in the

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air. Everything is a sign since she left. Everything is another clue to help me understand what's happening.

I think about our first kiss on her front doorstep.

I think about our first argument and our last argument and every argument in between.

I think about the first birthday presents we bought each other.

I think about her top lip and the mole on her side and the way her nose seems to change shape with every angle she turns it towards.

I think about the first night we spent in our flat together: lugging her across the threshold, empty rooms, Thai food, too much red wine, a drunk argument about the need for a magazine rack, a giggly fuck on the floor.

I think about the first six months we shared a bed and how she would fall asleep on my chest with my arms around her and we would wake up in exactly the same position.

I think about the shape we made in our sleep when we were comfortable. Backs to each other, bums touching.

I think about the first time I made her laugh and how that sound will always be the most satisfying noise in the world to me, even better than the laughter of an audience.

I think of the possibility that I will never hear her laugh again, never buy her a birthday present, never guess what she wants from the takeaway menu, never hear her secrets or kiss the petals of her eyelids.

I take a photo on my phone of the jumper and the shirt in case I forget what it feels like to be loved. I close the curtains and get into the bed I've been sleeping in since I was a little boy. And I cry and cry and cry and cry.

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Monday 27th July 2015

Thirty-first birthday parties were better than the thirtieths. The thirtieths had too much symbolism. Symbolism is good for a story but bad for a party. But by thirty-one, we knew where we were. One hangover a week, merino knitwear, DIY, IPA – the early thirties.

It was Jane's birthday, the girlfriend of my best friend. They'd been together for two years, she was pregnant with their first baby and I'd finally got the official promotion to birthday drinks attendee. The pub was in a Zone One no-man's-land – the result of coordinating twenty-five people's locations and travel times and babysitters' costs. You end up with a place where nobody would ever normally socialize.

'ANDY!' Avi shouted as I walked into the pub, sparsely populated with people I didn't recognize. 'BRINGER OF VIBES, HAVER OF FAGS.'

'Y'alright, mate?' I said.

'Fags! Fags! Fags!' he chanted. I took a packet of Marlboro Lights out of my jacket pocket and noticed the woman to his right, silently amused by his specifically-five-pint looseness. 'MY BROTHER!' he bellowed in my ear, holding my face and kissing my cheek. 'What did I say? You can always rely on Andy for cigs.' He grabbed the packet and pulled one out.

'Do you mind?' the woman asked, reaching for the pack.

'Go ahead,' I smiled. She wore jeans and heels and hoop earrings. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tucked behind her ears. I couldn't remember if jeans and heels and hoop earrings

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had always been my favourite combination on a woman, or whether it was only now my favourite combination because it was on her.

'Oh, sorry,' Avi said, his breath soured from beer. 'Jen, this is Andy, my best mate. Andy, this is Jen. Jen is Jane's best mate.'

'Ah, nice,' I said inconsequentially. 'How do you guys know each other?'

'We met at uni.'

'OXFORD!' Avi bellowed. 'Oxford twats!'

'I know this mood and this is a mood that peaks too early,' I said. 'You'll be in bed within an hour if you don't get a glass of water.'

Avi rolled his eyes. 'Andy's a comedian.'

Jen gave an expression of genuine interest. 'Oh reall–'

'Hey, what's even less funny than a comedian?' Avi continued.

I sighed. 'I don't know, what's less funny than a comedian?'

'A failed one!' he said, pointing at me and slapping my chest.

'Brilliant,' I deadpanned.

He walked towards the door with his cigarette and Jen got up to follow.

'Would you like a drink?' I asked her.

She looked at her nearly empty glass and hesitated. 'Er –'

'Go on,' I said.

'All right, vodka tonic, please. Thank you.'

As I was waiting for the drinks at the bar, Jane came over, arms outstretched.

'Hey, happy birthday!'

'Why can't Avi be this tall?' she said, nuzzling into my chest. 'It's so *fit*.'

'Because Avi is going to have a full head of hair forever. He can't have everything. He'd be even more annoying.'

'That's true,' she said, pulling away.

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'He seems –'

'Oh, he's steaming. He'll be in bed with a doner before eleven. I've told him I'm not taking him home. How are you?'

'I'm good,' I replied, distracted. 'Your mate Jen.'

'Have you met her?'

'Yes.'

'She's the best.'

'Is she single?'

'Always. Forever single.'

'Really?!' I said. 'That surprises me.'

'Why?'

'She just seems lovely,' I said.

'You're so old-fashioned, aren't you?' she said with a smile.

Avi appeared through the doors, Jen following behind him.

'Av,' Jane snapped. He turned to her like a well-trained terrier. 'Come with me, I wanna introduce you to someone.'

'Who? I already know every boring cunt here,' he slurred, flapping his hand around the room. She gripped his arm and yanked him away. Jen took a seat next to me at the bar.

'Thanks,' she said, picking up her drink.

'Cheers,' I said, picking up my pint glass to clink hers, immediately regretting the formality of the gesture. The silence between the clink, taking our first sip and putting our drinks back down seemed to go on uncomfortably long.

'I've never met a comedian before.'

'Some of my reviewers would say you still haven't,' I replied.

'Go on then, tell me –'

'Don't say it.'

'Say what?'

'A joke. "Tell me a joke." '

'I wasn't going to say that!'

'Oh *really*? What were you going to say?'

'Tell me how you got into comedy,' she said.

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I took in the finer details of her. Her enormous, sleepy blue eyes. A small scar in between her brows. The shades of golden blonde streaked through her hair. A nose that went from seeming small to prominent, straight to slightly curved, depending on the way in which she turned her head.

'How do you think I got into comedy?'

'Um,' she pondered, taking a sip of her drink. 'Always felt like an outsider growing up? Didn't know how to be yourself? Didn't know how to be friends with boys or make girls like you? Then one day you did a show-stealing performance in a nativity and made everyone laugh. And you thought: Yes! Aha! This is how I make people love me.'

'I really am that much of a cliché, aren't I?' I sighed. 'What do you do?'

'Guess.'

'Dancer.'

She let out a hoot of laughter. 'Pervert.'

'I know, I know, I'm sorry. Um. PR.' She shook her head. 'Publicist.' She shook it again. 'Handbag designer.'

'Jesus Christ, it's like a man from 1962 has been asked to come up with women's jobs. Catalogue model? Make-up counter girl?'

'It's because you're so –' I floundered as she raised her eyebrows at me – 'glam.'

'Fuck off.'

'Give me a clue.'

'Okay, the clue is . . .' She took a few seconds to think as she had another gulp of her drink. 'I'm overpaid.'

'Finance!'

She raised her glass with a false grin. 'Insurance.'

'Wow.'

'You don't have to say "wow",' she said.

'What do you insure?'

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'Ships.'

I nodded slowly, taking this in. 'You a maritime sort of woman, then?'

'No.'

'Grow up by the sea?'

'Ealing,' she laughed. 'My dad did it, so I guess I got the interest from him.'

'Ah,' I said. 'Wanted to impress Dad.'

'*Everybody* wants to impress their dad,' she said. 'That's the thing that motivates all our decision-making. Or at least that's what my therapist says. Your job is much more interesting, anyway!' she added with renewed crispness, possibly sensing my probing thoughts about what she talked about in therapy.

'My job isn't really my job, though. I only do stand-up sets a couple of times a week.'

'What do you do for the rest of the time?'

I took a deep breath to prolong this brief moment in which she'd heard the word 'comedian' and thought I was successful.

'Lots of different things. I host corporate events. I do roleplay training in hospitals. I dress up as Jack the Ripper and do historic walking tours. Drama workshops in schools. Sell cheese on my friend's market stall. Club it altogether and it makes a surprisingly decent living.'

She scanned my face intently, looking for sarcasm or sadness.

'I don't know anyone like you,' she said.

The evening went on like this for a few hours. We took turns to buy each other drinks, never moving to half-pints or single measures. We pulled our stools closer and closer to each other. We found reasons to touch each other – she playfully hit my arm when I goaded her, I gently touched hers when she shared something personal. She ruffled my hair when I said I worried it was thinning; she leant into me when I said I liked her perfume

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and I smelt her neck (Armani She – she'd never bothered to try anything new after getting a bottle for her sixteenth birthday). We shifted from overfamiliarity to inquisitiveness from sentence to sentence; alternating from feeling like old friends to strangers. We gave too much information about ourselves, then we pulled back. We got a kick out of the novelty of each other, heightening ourselves for the other one's enjoyment (she, the fauxhemian corporate West London girl; me, the scruffy comedian who never had enough bog roll in the flat). We made too much comedy of our differences and placed too much meaning on our similarities. It was flirting to a Premiership standard. Any time someone came over to talk, it felt like our match had been disrupted. I was desperate to return all my focus to her and I could feel she wanted to do the same to me.

Avi, predictably, was in an Uber home by half ten with a kebab. Jen and I snuck out just before last orders to go find some terrible bar on our own. Ten-pound entry fee, stamp on the hand, drinks out of white plastic glasses, fake orchids in the toilets, underage girls dancing to Ja Rule, middle-aged men watching them.

We sat in a booth, the red pleather peeling off the seats.

'WHAT'S YOUR WEEK LOOKING LIKE NEXT WEEK?' she shouted over 'Mambo No. 5'.

'I'M GOING TO EDINBURGH TOMORROW,' I bellowed back. 'I'M TAKING A SHOW UP TO THE FRINGE FESTIVAL FOR ALL OF AUGUST.'

'WHAT'S THE SHOW?'

'IT'S CALLED *NO HEAVY PETTING*. IT'S ABOUT MY EXPERIENCES OF BEING A LEISURE CENTRE LIFEGUARD.'

'DID YOU ENJOY IT?'

'NOT REALLY. I ONLY DID IT FOR A FEW

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MONTHS SO I WOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO WRITE ABOUT FOR EDINBURGH THIS YEAR.'

Her face was unable to hide its bemusement.

'HAVE YOU BEEN BEFORE?'

'EVERY SUMMER FOR TEN YEARS.'

'IS IT FUN?'

'NOT REALLY!' I shouted, sipping my vodka Coke and dancing in my seat to distract myself from my discomfort. 'I'M DOING THE FREE FRINGE THIS YEAR, WHICH MEANS THE VENUE COSTS ME NOTHING BUT IT ALSO MEANS THAT NO ONE HAS TO PAY TO WATCH ME. I HAVE TO WALK AROUND WITH A BUCKET AT THE END OF EVERY SHOW ASKING FOR DONATIONS.' She nodded, unsure of how to react. 'PRETTY EMBARRASSING FOR A MAN OF THIRTY-ONE.'

'WHY DO YOU KEEP DOING IT?'

I bopped my head from side to side, biting down on to the plastic straw as I contemplated the question.

'LOVE, I THINK,' I finally shouted, my voice breaking over the song-change to Nelly's 'Hot In Herre'. 'UNREQUITED LOVE.'

She looked at me with a soft expression that I couldn't read. Pity? Arousal? Admiration? Amusement? Disgust? All of the above?

'COME DANCE WITH ME,' she said, shuffling out of the booth.

She couldn't dance for shit and I loved it. If Jen had been a good dancer, she would have had too much on her side. Her self-possession was already enough; the bad dancing counteracted it adorably. The curves of her body and her stylish, laid-back clothes suggested she would have as much control of her limbs and hips as she did her smarts and wit, but she had absolutely no rhythm.

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The moves that should have been languid were jolty, and when she should have been keeping in time with the beat, she looked like she was wading through molasses. I relished the fact that it's much easier to put the gear stick into neutral on the dance floor as a man, so shifted from foot to foot, moved my head and my shoulders like I was working out a knot, held my drink to my chest and tried very hard not to close my eyes or give a sensuous expression that would suggest I was capable of losing myself in the music.

The *Grease* medley and flickering overhead lights signified it was the end of the evening, and I hurried Jen out of the bar before she could see the puddles of sweat that had collected on my T-shirt, most worryingly around my stomach.

'Where's home?' I asked.

'Hammersmith.'

'Hammersmith? Random.'

'"Hammersmith, random,"' she said back to me. 'Observational, your work?'

'I didn't realize people lived there. I just thought it was a motorway and a theatre.'

'A real John Betjeman, you are.'

'Give me your number,' I said. I handed her my phone and she put her number in. I saved it as 'Jen (Hammersmith)'. 'How are you getting home?'

'Bus.'

'Do you want company?'

'Where do you live?'

'Tufnell Park.'

'That's miles away from me.'

'I know. I'm not angling for an invite into your flat, I swear,' I said. 'I just want to keep talking to you. If you fancy it.'

'Okay,' she said. 'Yes, I do.'

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We sat on the top deck and spent the journey sharing stories from the places we passed. Pubs where I'd died at open mic nights, bars where she'd gone on bad dates. Every road offered another destination of a past bad date. I tried to seem unsurprised by the volume, but I was silently estimating how many dates per week this girl must have been on in the last decade. I wanted to know how and why she had been on her own for so long, but I didn't want to seem judgemental or boring. No matter how late it got or how much we drank, she stayed so certain and playful and articulate. I had to work hard to keep up and match her confidence. I cringed as I watched drunken thoughts tumble out of my mouth like Scrabble tiles and I tried to piece them together into clever observations.

We walked to her flat and stood on the steps outside. It was a grand Victorian building with bay windows and its own gate and hedge. Her flat occupied the first floor and was, she kept insisting, the smallest. We stood on her steps, speaking in hushed voices, and pretended not to be cold. After a few minutes, we fell into our first silence of the night.

'Is this the longest it's taken you to kiss a girl?' she asked.

'No, this is fast for me. I've spent years gearing up to make a move in the past.'

'Ah,' she said, nodding. 'Men never make the first move any more. What's happened to them?'

'It's not them, it's you.'

'Me?!'

'Yes, this is your fault for being so fucking hot and clever and funny – how is anyone meant to kiss you, it's like trying to kiss . . . Tom Selleck.' She raised her eyebrows. '*Young* Tom Selleck,' I corrected myself.

'Don't make me do it first.'

'I won't.'

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'I don't want to have to make the first move,' she said.

'You won't have to,' I said.

She put her hands around the back of my neck, pulled me towards her and kissed me. I felt tiny and enormous; like I was her toy and her king.

'Too late,' she said, kissing me again.

I felt the euphoric relief when you've spent hours presenting your very best anecdotes and making your best jokes, smelling your pits and checking your nose hair every time you go to the toilet, and you realize it hasn't been for nothing. I would not be the punchline to the joke, not tonight. I hadn't messed up. She fancied me too.

'I wish you could stay over,' she said.

'I can stay over.'

'No you can't,' she said.

'Why?'

'Um –' Her face crinkled while she searched for a reason.

'You've got a boyfriend,' I said. 'Some enormous . . . rower hedge-fund manager. Called Tristan. He's up there asleep.'

'No,' she said.

'What is it?'

She sighed. 'I don't like spelling it out like this, Andy, but I'm desperate to fuck you.'

'But?'

'But I'm on my period.'

'So?!' I said. 'I don't care. I fancy everything about you.'

'You fancy my period.'

'I fancy your period,' I repeated. 'Cover me in it, I don't mind.'

'You're disgusting.'

'So I'm leaving for Edinburgh in seven hours. And I've got to wait a whole month to take my dream woman for a drink?'

'Yes,' she said. 'Until then we can text. I'm a great texter.'

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'Must have a lot of time on your hands to text, keeping all those ships afloat.'

'You're a bell-end.'

'You're a *beauty*.'

'Beauty and the bell-end,' she said. 'What a fairy tale.' We kissed some more.

'*Desperate*, you said?'

'Goodnight,' she replied.

I held her head in my hands and took in her features: eyes swimming, skin reddened from too much vodka, top lip flaky and swollen from dehydration, black make-up dust collecting in the delicate lines under her eyes. Still so impossibly gorgeous at half three in the morning.

'*Tell me exactly how desperate*,' I whispered, tucking her hair tightly behind both ears. 'I think I need to hear it.'

'Goodnight,' she repeated, turning away and putting her key into the door.

I took two night buses home and got into bed at four a.m. The next day, I got the coach to Edinburgh for my month at The Fringe. The show was shit. I somehow lost money on a run that was meant to cost nothing. No one came to see it. Everyone who did see it saw right through its inauthentic and hollow premise. My comedian friends who came to see it would say 'Great, mate' as they looked into their pint glass when I saw them in the bar afterwards, and changed the subject. One of the reviews declared: 'This is the most spectacularly weak hour of comedy I have ever seen at The Fringe', which I shortened to: 'the most spectacular . . . hour of comedy I have ever seen' for the flyers.

Jen and I texted every day and spoke on the phone every night. It was the happiest August in Edinburgh I'd ever had.

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Saturday 6th July 2019

Sobbing is a sedative. I wake up after a ten-hour dreamless sleep and it takes me a few seconds less than yesterday morning to adjust to my new reality. I'm in my mum's house, it's not Christmas, Jen's broken up with me, conveniently in the exact month of the break-clause in our rental contract. Her stuff is gone and is sitting in a storage unit in London. All my possessions are alone in our flat. The extent of my self-pity means I am starting to feel sorry for my toothbrush and my record collection and my trousers. All alone in NW5, none the wiser. Not knowing what's about to hit them.

I instinctively reach for my phone underneath the pillow to check if Jen has messaged or called. She hasn't. I open Instagram and the first circle that appears on my story updates is Jen. Of course it's Jen – this phone knows me better than anyone in the world. Never has there been a worse time for all of my algorithms to understand my interior life better than I do.

I stare at the circle for a few seconds and deliberate whether to watch it, doing the mental calculations of loss of dignity vs gains of new information. In the hope that the Instagram story is a block of text on a neon gradient explaining to her 467 followers exactly why she ended our relationship, I click on it, feeling a rush of masochistic euphoria. It is instead just a photo of a park near her sister's flat posted at 6.47 a.m., a time I know to be her morning run. I watch the story four times in succession, making the most of the fact that it's eight in the morning and I've already fucked it because she knows I woke up and looked at her Instagram page so I might as well luxuriate in my

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own patheticness. I hold my finger on the screen to pause the story and bring my face up to the picture, looking for evidence. Sunshine on the path, a blue sky, a brown-green pond. What can I glean from this? What signals are here for me to read? *Why did Jen fall out of love with me?*

I head into town with a list of bits that Mum needs buying. I think she's sick of me moping around the house.

As I walk through crowds of shoppers, I sense Jen next to me and my body reacts involuntarily. Head light, heart galloping, breath short. Armani She. God damn her for choosing such a widely used perfume. Why would she do this to me? Jen, so unbelievably fussy about every other tiny aesthetic and brand detail. Jen, who wouldn't so much as buy an airport panini on a foreign holiday because everything that passed our lips had to come highly recommended from *Condé Nast Traveller*. Jen, who filled our flat with ancient rugs and sandalwood diffusers and grapefruit-flavoured gin. The one thing she chose thoughtlessly was the one thing that would follow me around forever; that reminded me of her skin and hair and clothes and bed. I turn to my left, expecting her to be there, but instead see a stranger carrying shopping bags and speaking into her phone, completely unaware of me.

The first place I find to drink is a prosecco bar in Grand Central. I'd normally opt for some underground, low-lit dive with booths and stools and an old, beardy barman with a towel over his shoulder who imparts passing wisdom, but needs must. I sit at an up-lit circular champagne bar surrounded by mother–daughter dates and female friends meeting for a browse around the shops and a glass of fizz. I am told there is no house wine, so order a bottle of the cheapest red they have and plug back into a podcast about the AI apocalypse. Any messages.

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The third I've ignored in the last ten days.

I gulp down the first glass, which tastes astringent on my empty stomach, and then halfway down my second, tastes completely delicious. It is a familiar black magic that happens in the space of one sip. And then I feel myself shifting into this other realm of being, this other state of consciousness: I feel sort of okay about me and Jen ending! The more sips I take, the calmer I feel. I relax into the facts of it easily – Jen and I didn't make it. So what! We had a pretty good run of it! I finish my third glass and pour the fourth.

'Andy?' I turn around to see Debbie, one of my mum's friends. Her hair is changed – now a deep burgundy red and styled short into hedgehog spikes. 'It is you! Oh, love. Look at you. Mum's told me everything.'

'Hey, Deb,' I say, giving her a hug. 'How are you?'

'How are YOU?' she says, gripping my arm. 'Never mind me, how are *you*?'

'I'm fine. Bit of a weird time, you know, but fine. Getting through it.'

'It's good you're drinking, I'm glad to see you drinking. When Malcolm left me I had my first drink of the day at eleven. How are you sleeping, is your sleep disrupted?'

'It's okay actually –'

'Yeah, it will be up and down,' she says. 'Now listen. If there's one thing I'd say to you, it's this: you've got to WIPE her.' She did a vigorous wiping motion with her hand, like she was miming a rag on a car window. 'WIPE. That's the only way you'll move on. Wipe her from your life, wipe her from your memories.'

We chat for a while longer, but most of it is not sinking in because I've had an idea. By the time we say goodbye I really do think of Debbie as a very close friend and promise myself that

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I'll spend more time with her one-on-one next time I come home.

Boots is flooded with strip lighting which makes my drunkness more obvious. I knock over a promotional display of fast-absorbing sun creams as I enter and, while bending over to pick them up, lose my footing and trip over a shopping basket. I head straight to the perfume section via the Meal Deal fridge and get the attention of a kindly-looking sales assistant.

'Excuse me,' I say. She turns around and smiles warmly. 'Do you have any Armani She?'

'I can check,' she replies brightly. 'Come with me.'

'Thank you –' I look at her name tag – 'Sally.'

'You're welcome. Let's have a look. Hmm.' She peers into the glass cabinet. 'Ah, yes, here we go. Armani She.' She hands over the cylindrical bottle.

'How many do you have?'

'In store?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see.' She bends down to open a drawer and counts. 'We've got four bottles here.'

'WRAP 'EM UP!' I say, slamming my hand down comically on the counter, making a noise that is louder than I had anticipated. Sally flinches in surprise.

'So you'd like them gift-wrapped?'

'No, sorry, just a bag, please.'

'Lovely,' she chirps, moving behind the counter and scanning the bottles. 'Are these presents you're buying today?'

'Yeah.'

'Lovely. Who for?'

'Girlfriend.'

'Four bottles! How generous.'

'It's the only perfume she wears.'

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