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How to Fall
in Love

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*How to Fall
in Love*



HarperCollins *Publishers*

For David,
who taught me how to fall in love

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How to Talk a Man Down

They say lightning never strikes twice. Untrue. Well, it's true that people say it; it's just untrue as a fact.

NASA-funded scientists discovered that cloud-to-ground lightning frequently strikes the ground in two or more places and that the chances of being struck are about forty-five per cent higher than what people assume. But what people mostly mean to say is that lightning never strikes the same location on more than one occasion, which is also untrue as a fact. Though the odds of being hit by lightning are one in three thousand, between 1942 and 1977 Roy Cleveland Sullivan, a Park Ranger in Virginia, was hit by lightning on seven different occasions. Roy survived all the lightning strikes, but he killed himself when he was seventy-one, shooting himself in the stomach over what was rumoured to be unrequited love. If people dispensed with the lightning metaphor and instead just said what they meant, it would be that *the same highly unlikely thing never happens to the same person twice*. Untrue. If the reasons behind Roy's death is true, heartbreak carries its own unique brand of sorrow and Roy would have known better than anyone that it was highly likely that this highly unlikely misfortune could occur again. Which brings me to the point of my story; the first of my two highly unlikely events.

It was eleven p.m. on a freezing cold December night in Dublin and I found myself somewhere I had never been before. It is not a metaphor for my psychological state, though it would be apt; what I mean is that I literally had never geographically been to the area before. An ice-cold wind blew through

the abandoned Southside housing development, causing an unearthly tune to play through broken windows and flapping scaffolding materials. There were gaping black holes where there should be windows, unfinished surfaces with menacing potholes and upturned flagstones, pipework-cluttered balconies and exit routes, wires and tubing that began randomly and ended nowhere, the place a stage set for tragedy. The sight alone, nothing to do with the minus-degree temperature, made me shudder. The estate should have been filled with sleeping families, lights out and curtains drawn; instead, the development was lifeless, evacuated by owners who had been left to live in ticking time-bombs with fire-safety concerns as long as the list of lies they were told by builders who failed to deliver on the promise of luxury living at boom-time prices.

I shouldn't have been there. I was trespassing, but that wasn't what should have concerned me; it was dangerous. To the conventional ordinary person it was unwelcoming, I should have turned around and gone back the way I came. I knew all these things and yet I ploughed on, debating with my gut. I went inside.

Forty-five minutes later I stood outside again, shivering, trembling and waiting for the gardaí as the 999 operator had instructed me to do. I saw the ambulance lights in the distance, which were quickly followed by the unmarked garda car. Out leapt Detective Maguire, unshaven, messy-haired, rugged if not haggard, whom I've since learned to be an emotionally hassled, pent-up jack-in-the-box ready to explode at any moment. Though his general appearance might have been a cool look for a member of a rock band, he was a forty-seven-year-old detective on duty, which took the stylish away from him and highlighted the seriousness of the situation I'd found myself in. After directing them to Simon's apartment, I returned outside to wait to relay my story.

I told Detective Maguire about Simon Conway, the thirty-six-year-old man I'd met inside the building who, along with fifty other families, had been evacuated from the estate for safety reasons. Simon had talked mostly about money, about the pressure of having to pay the mortgage on the apartment he wasn't allowed to live in, and the council, which had a case pending to stop paying for his replacement accommodation, and the fact that he had just lost his job. I relayed my conversation with Simon to Detective Maguire, what I'd said exactly already fuzzy, and I jumped between what I thought I'd said and what I realise I should have said.

You see, Simon Conway was holding a gun when I came across him. I think I was more surprised to see him than he was about my sudden appearance in his abandoned home. He seemed to assume I'd been sent there by the police to talk to him, and I didn't tell him that wasn't the case. I wanted him to think I'd an army of people in the next room while he held that black weapon in his hand, waving it around as he talked while I fought hard not to duck, dive and at times run from the room. While panic and fear welled inside me, I tried to coax him, soothe him into putting the gun down. We talked about his children, I did my best to show him a light in his darkness, and I managed to successfully talk Simon into putting the gun down on the kitchen counter so I could call the gardaí for help, which I did. When I hung up, something happened. My words, though innocent – and which I know now I should have left unsaid at that point – triggered something.

Simon looked at me, and I knew he wasn't seeing me. His face had changed. Alarm bells rang in my head but before I had a chance to say or do anything else, Simon picked up the gun and held it to his head. The gun went off.

How to Leave Your Husband (Without Hurting Him)

Sometimes, when you see or experience something really real, it makes you want to stop pretending. You feel like an idiot, a charlatan. It makes you want to get away from everything that is fake, whether it is innocently and harmlessly so, or something more serious; like your marriage. This happened to me.

When a person finds themselves jealous of marriages that are ending, that person must know that theirs is in trouble. That's where I had found myself for the past few months in the unusual way when you can know something but not really know it at the same time. Once it had ended I realised that I'd always known the marriage wasn't right. When I was in the midst of it, I had felt moments of happiness and a general sense of hope. And while positivity is the seed of many a great thing, wishful thinking alone does not make a good foundation for marriage. But the event, the Simon Conway *experience*, as I was calling it, helped to open my eyes. I'd witnessed one of the most real things in my life and it made me want to stop pretending, it made me want to be real and for everything in my life to be true and honest.

My sister Brenda believed my marriage break-up was due to a kind of post-traumatic stress disorder and pleaded with me to talk to someone about it. I informed her I was already talking to someone, the internal conversation had begun quite some time ago. And it had, in a way; Simon just hastened the eventual epiphany. This of course was not the response Brenda had in mind; she meant a conversation with someone professionally trained, not a drunken ramble over a bottle of wine in her kitchen at midnight, midweek.

My husband, Barry, had been understanding and supportive in my hour of need. He too believed that the sudden decision was a part of some ripple effect from the gun-blast. But when he realised – as I packed my belongings and left our home – that I was serious, he was quick to call me the most vile things. I didn't blame him, though I wasn't fat and had never been, and was intrigued to learn I was much fonder of his mother than he believed. I understood everyone's confusion and inability to believe me. It had a lot to do with how well I had hidden my unhappiness and it had everything to do with my timing.

On the night of the Simon Conway experience, after I'd realised the bloodcurdling scream had come from my own mouth, and after I'd called the police for the second time and statements had been taken for reports to be filed, after the Styrofoam cup of milky tea from the local EuroSpar, I'd driven home and done four things. First, I had a shower in an effort to cleanse myself of the scene; second, I thumbed my well-read copy of *How to Leave Your Husband (Without Hurting Him)*; third, I woke him with a coffee and slice of toast to tell him that our marriage was over; and fourth, when probed, I told him that I had witnessed a man shoot himself. In retrospect, Barry had more detailed questions about the shooting than about the end of our marriage.

His behaviour since then has surprised me, and my own astonishment equally shocked me, because I thought I was well-read on such matters. I had studied before this great big life test, I had read up on how we both would and could be feeling if I ever decided to end the marriage – just to prepare, to be aware, to figure out if it was the right decision. I've had friends whose marriages have ended, I've spent many late nights listening to both sides. Yet it never occurred to me that my husband would turn out to be the kind of man he became, that he would have a complete personality transplant, become as cold and vicious, as bitter and malicious as he has become. The apartment, which was ours, was now his; he would not let me step one foot inside it. The car which was ours was now his, he would not let me share it. And anything else that was ours, he was going to do everything in his power to keep. Even the things he didn't want. And that was a direct quote. If we'd had kids he would have kept them and never let me see them. He was specific about the coffee machine, possessive about the espresso cups, quite frantic about the toaster and had a rant about the kettle. I allowed him to flip out in the kitchen, as I did in the living room, the bedroom, and even when he followed me into