
Opening Extract from...

The Year I Met You

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The Year I Met You

HarperCollins*Publishers*

For my friend Lucy Stack.
Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over,
it became a butterfly . . .

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1

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Our greatest glory is not in never falling,
but in rising every time we fall.

Confucius

Winter

The season between autumn and spring, comprising in the Northern Hemisphere the coldest months of the year: December, January and February.

A period of inactivity or decay.

1

I was five years old when I learned that I was going to die.

It hadn't occurred to me that I would not live for ever; why would it? The topic of my death hadn't been mentioned in passing.

My knowledge of death was not tenuous; goldfish died, I'd learned that first-hand. They died if you didn't feed them, and then they also died if you fed them too much. Dogs died when they ran in front of moving cars, mice died when they were tempted by chocolate HobNobs in the mousetrap in our cloakroom under the stairs, rabbits died when they escaped their hutches and fell prey to evil foxes. Discovering their deaths was not cause for any personal alarm; even as a five-year-old I knew that these were all furry animals who did foolish things, things that I had no intention of doing.

So it was a great disturbance to learn that death would find me too.

According to my source, if I was 'lucky' my death would occur in the very same way as my grandfather's had. Old. Smelling of pipe smoke and farts, with balls of tissue stuck to the stubble over his top lip from blowing his nose. Black lines of dirt beneath the tips of his fingernails from

gardening; eyes yellowing at the corners, reminding me of the marble from my uncle's collection that my sister used to suck on and swallow, causing Dad to come running to wrap his arms around her stomach and squeeze till the marble popped back out again. Old. With brown trousers hiked up past his waist, stopping only for his flabby boob-like chest, revealing a soft paunch and balls that had been squished to one side of the seam of his trousers. Old. No, I did not want to die how my granddad had, but dying old, my source revealed, was the best-case scenario.

I learned of my impending death from my older cousin Kevin on the day of my granddad's funeral as we sat on the grass at the end of his long garden with plastic cups of red lemonade in our hands and as far away as possible from our mourning parents, who looked like dung beetles on what was the hottest day of the year. The grass was covered in dandelions and daisies and was much longer than usual, Granddad's illness having prevented him from perfecting the garden in his final weeks. I remember feeling sad for him, defensive, that of all the days to showcase his beautiful back garden to neighbours and friends, it was on a day when it wasn't the perfection he aspired to. He wouldn't have minded not being there – he didn't like to talk much – but he would have at least cared about the grand presentation, and then vanished to listen to the praise somewhere, away from everyone, maybe upstairs with the window open. He would pretend he didn't care, but he would, a contented smile on his face, to go with his grass-stained knees and black fingernails. Someone, an old lady with rosary beads tied tightly around her knuckles, said she felt his presence in the garden, but I didn't. I was sure he wasn't there. He would be so annoyed by the look of the place, he wouldn't be able to bear it.

Grandma would puncture silences with things like, 'His sunflowers are thriving, God rest his soul,' and 'He never got to see the petunias bloom.' To which my smart-arsed cousin Kevin muttered, 'Yeah, his dead body is fertiliser now.'

Everyone sniggered; everyone always laughed at what Kevin said because Kevin was cool, because Kevin was the eldest, five years older than me and at the grand old age of ten said mean and cruel things that none of the rest of us would dare say. Even if we didn't think it was funny we knew to laugh because if we didn't, he would quickly make us the object of his cruelty, which is what he did to me on that day. On that rare occasion, I didn't think it was funny that Granddad's dead body beneath the earth was helping his petunias grow, nor did I think it was cruel. I saw a kind of beauty in it. A lovely fullness and fairness to it. That is *exactly* what my granddad would have loved, now that his big thick sausage fingers could no longer contribute to the bloom in his long beautiful garden that was the centre of his universe.

It was my granddad's love of gardening that led me to be named Jasmine. It was what he had brought my mother when he had visited her in hospital on my birth: a clutch of flowers he'd plucked from the wooden frame he'd nailed together and painted red that climbed the shaded back wall, wrapped in newspaper and brown string, the ink on the half-finished *Irish Times* cryptic crossword running from the rainwater left on the stems. It wasn't the summer jasmine that we all know from expensive scented candles and fancy room vaporisers; I was a winter baby, and so winter jasmine with its small yellow star-like blooms was in abundance in his garden to help brighten up the dull grey winter. I don't think Granddad had thought about the significance of it,

and I don't know if he'd been particularly honoured by the tribute my mother made by naming me after the flower he brought. I think he felt it was an odd name for a child, a name meant only for the natural things in his garden and never for a person. With a name like Adalbert, after a saint who was a missionary in Ireland, and with a middle name Mary, he wasn't used to names that didn't come from the Bible. The previous winter, he'd brought purple heather to my mother when my winter sister was born and Heather she had become. A simple gift when my sister was born, but it makes me wonder about his intentions on my naming. When I looked into it, I discovered the winter jasmine is a direct relative of winter-flowering heather, another provider of colour to winter gardens. I don't know if it's because of him and the way he was, but I've always hoped generally that silent people hold a magic and a knowledge that less contained people lack; that their *not* saying something means that more important thoughts are going on inside their head. Perhaps their seeming simplicity belies a hidden mosaic of fanciful thoughts, among them, Granddad Adalbert wanting me to be named Jasmine.

Back in the garden, Kevin misinterpreted my lack of laughter at his death joke as disapproval and there was nothing he disliked or feared more, so he turned his wild look in my direction and said, 'You're going to die too, Jasmine.'

Sitting in a circle of six, me the youngest in the group, with my sister a few feet away twirling by herself and enjoying getting dizzy and falling down, a daisy chain wrapped around my ankle, a lump so enormous at the back of my throat I wasn't sure whether I had swallowed one of the giant bumble bees swarming around the flower buffet beside us, I tried to let the fact of my future demise

sink in. The others had been shocked that he'd said it, but instead of jumping to my defence and denying this awful premonition-like announcement, they had fixed me with sad gazes and nodded. *Yes, it's true*, they'd concurred in that one look. *You are going to die, Jasmine*.

In my long silence, Kevin elaborated for me, twisting the knife in further. I would not only die, but before that I would get a thing called a period every month for the rest of my life that would cause excruciating pain and agony. I then learned how babies were made, in quite an in-depth description that I found so vile I could barely look my parents in the eye for a week, and then to add salt to my already open wounds, I was told there was no Santa Claus.

You try to forget such things, but such things I couldn't.

Why do I bring up that episode in my life? Well, it's where *I* began. Where me, as I know me, as everybody else knows me, was formed. My life began at five years old. Knowing that I would die instilled something in me that I carry to this day: the awareness that, despite time being infinite, *my* time was limited, *my* time was running out. I realised that my hour and someone else's hour are not equal. We cannot spend it the same way, we cannot think of it in the same way. Do with yours what you may, but don't drag me into it; I have none to waste. If you want to do something, you have to do it now. If you want to say something, you have to say it now. And more importantly, you have to do it yourself. It's *your* life, you're the one who dies, you're the one who loses it. It became my practice to move, to make things happen. I worked at a rhythm that often left me so breathless I could barely catch a moment to become at one with myself. I chased myself a lot, perhaps I rarely caught up; I was fast.

I took a lot home with me from our meeting on the grass

that evening, and not just the daisies that dangled from my wrists and ankles and that were weaved into my hair as we followed the dispersing sunburnt grievers back into the house. I held a lot of fear in my heart then, but not long after that, in the only way a five-year-old could process it, the fear left me. I always thought of death as Granddad Adalbert Mary beneath the ground, still growing his garden even though he wasn't here, and I felt hope.

You reap what you sow, even in death. And so I got about sowing.

2

I was terminated from employment, *I was fired,* six weeks before Christmas – which in my opinion is a highly undignified time to let somebody go. They'd hired a woman to fire me for them, one of these outside agencies trained in letting unwanted employees go properly, to avoid a scene, a lawsuit or their own embarrassment. She'd taken me out for lunch, somewhere quiet, let me order a Caesar salad and then just had a black coffee herself, and sat there watching me practically choke on my crouton while she informed me of my new employment situation. I suppose Larry knew that I wouldn't take the news from him or anyone else, that I'd try to convince him to change his mind, that I'd slap him with a lawsuit or simply slap him. He'd tried to let me die with honour, only I didn't feel much honour when I left. Being fired is public, I would have to *tell* people. And if I didn't have to tell people it's because they already knew. I felt embarrassed. I feel embarrassed.

I began my working life as an accountant. From the ripe young age of twenty-four I worked at Trent & Bogle, a large corporation where I stayed for a year, then had a sudden shift to Start It Up, where I provided financial advice and guidance to individuals wishing to start their own businesses.

I've learned with most that there are always two stories to one event: the public story and the truth. The story I tell is that after eighteen months I left to start up my own business after becoming so inspired by those passing through my office I was overcome with the desire to turn my own ideas into a reality. The truth is that I became irritated by seeing people not doing it properly, my quest for efficiency always my driver, and so started my own business. It became so successful someone offered to buy it. So I sold it. Then I set up another business and again, I sold it. I quickly developed the next idea. The third time I didn't even have long enough to develop the idea because somebody loved the concept, or hated that it would be a strong rival to theirs, and bought it straight away. This led me to a working relationship with Larry, the most recent start-up and the only job that I have ever been fired from. The business concept was not my initial idea but Larry's, we developed the idea together, I was a co-founder and nurtured that baby like it had come from my own womb. I helped it grow. I watched it mature, develop beyond our wildest dreams, and then prepared for the moment when we would sell it. That didn't happen. I got fired.

The business was called the Idea Factory; we helped organisations with their own big ideas. We were *not* a consultancy firm. We'd either take their ideas and make them better or create our own, develop them, implement them, see them through completely. The big idea might go from being *Daily Fix*, a newspaper for a local coffee shop with local stories, a publication that would support local businesses, writers, artists; or it might be a sex shop's decision to sell ice cream – which, as my idea, was an enormous success, both personally and professionally. We didn't struggle during the recession, we soared. Because if there was one thing that companies needed in order to keep

going in the current climate, it was imagination. We sold our imagination, and I loved it.

As I analyse it now in my idle days I can see that my relationship with Larry had begun to break down some time ago. I was heading, perhaps blindly, towards the 'sell the company' route, as I had done three times already, while he was still planning on keeping it. A big problem, with hindsight. I think I pushed it too much, finding interested parties when I knew deep down that he wasn't interested, and that put him under too much pressure. He believed 'seeing it through' meant continuing to grow it, whereas I believed seeing something through meant selling it and starting again with something else. I nurtured with a view to eventually saying goodbye, he nurtured to hold on. If you see the way he is with his teenage daughter and his wife, you'd know it's his philosophy for pretty much everything. Hold on, don't let go, it's *mine*. Control must not be relinquished. Anyway.

I'm thirty-three years old and worked there for four years. I never had a sick day, a complaint, an accusation, never received a warning, never an inappropriate affair – at least none that resulted in a negative outcome for the company. I gave my job everything, notably all for my own benefit because I wanted to, but I expected the machine I was working for to give something back, to honour my honour. My previous belief that being fired wasn't personal was based on never having been fired but having had to let go others. Now I understand that it is personal, because my job was my life. Friends and colleagues have been incredibly supportive in a way, which makes me think that if I ever get cancer, I want to treat it alone without anyone knowing. They make me feel like a victim. They look at me as if I'll be the next person to hop on the plane to Australia to become the next overqualified person to work

on a watermelon farm. Barely two months have passed, and already I'm questioning my validity. I have no purpose, nothing to contribute on a day-to-day basis. I feel as though I am just taking from the world. I know that this is short-term, that I can fulfil that role again, but this is currently how I feel. Mostly, it has been almost two months and I am bored. I'm a doer and I haven't been doing much.

All of the things I dreamed of doing during my busy stressful days have been done. I completed most of them in the first month. I booked a holiday in the sun shortly before Christmas and now I am tanned and cold. I met with my friends, who are all new mothers on maternity leave and extended maternity leave and I-don't-know-if-I-ever-want-to-go-back leave, for coffee at a time of day that I have never had coffee before out in public. It felt like bunking off school for the day, it was wonderful – the first few times. Then it became not so wonderful, and I focused my attention on those serving the coffee, cleaning the tables, stocking the paninis. Workers. All working. I have bonded with all my friends' cute babies, though most of them lie on their colourful mats that squeak and rustle if you step on them by mistake, while the babies don't do anything but lift their lardy legs up, grab their toes and roll over on to their sides and struggle to get back over again. It's funny to watch the first ten times.

I have been asked to be godmother twice in seven weeks, as if that will help occupy the mind of the friend who's not busy. Both requests were thoughtful and kind, and I was touched, but if I had been working I would not have been asked because I wouldn't have visited them as much, or met their children, and everything eventually relates back to the fact that I have no work. I'm now the girl that friends call when they are at their wits' end, with their hair like an oil slick on their head, reeking of body odour and baby vomit,

when they say down the phone in a low hushed voice that gives me goosebumps that they are afraid of what they will do, so that I run to hold the baby while they have their ten-minute shower. I've learned that a ten-minute shower and the gift of going to the toilet without a ticking clock restores much more in new parents than personal hygiene.

I spontaneously call my sister, which I was never able to do before. This has confused her immensely and when I'm with her she constantly asks what time it is, as if I've upset her body clock. I Christmas-shopped with time to spare. I bought actual Christmas cards and posted them on time – all two hundred of them. I even took over my dad's shopping list. I am ultra-efficient, always have been. Of course I can be idle – I love a two-week holiday, I love to lie on the beach and do nothing – but only when I say so, on my terms, when I know I have something waiting for me afterwards. When the holiday is over, I need a goal. I need an objective. I need a challenge. I need a purpose. I need to contribute. I need to do something.

I loved my job, but to make myself feel better about not being able to work there any more, I try to focus on what I won't miss.

I worked mainly with men. Most of the men were cocks, some were amusing, a few were pleasant. I did not like to spend any hours outside of work with any of them, which might mean my next sentence doesn't make sense, but it does. Of the team of ten, I slept with three. Of the three, I regret sleeping with two; the one I don't regret sleeping with strongly regrets sleeping with me. This is unfortunate.

I will not miss people at work. People are what bother me most in life. It bothers me that so many lack common sense, that their opinions can be so biased and backward, so utterly frustrating, misguided, misinformed and dangerous

that I can't stand to listen to them. I'm not pointlessly prickly. I like non-PC jokes in controlled environments where it is appropriate and when it is obvious that the joke is at the expense of the ignorant who say such things. When a non-PC punchline is delivered by someone who genuinely believes it to be true, it is not funny, it is offensive. I don't enjoy a good debate about what's supposedly right and wrong; I would rather everyone just knew it, from the moment they're born. A heel-prick test and a jab of cop-on.

Not having my job has made me face what I dislike most about the world, and about myself. In my job I could hide, I could be distracted. Without a job, I have to face things, think about things, question things, find a way to actually deal with things that I have been avoiding for a long time. This includes the neighbourhood that I moved into four years ago and had nothing to do with until now.

It also includes what happens at night: I'm not sure whether I somehow managed to ignore it before, whether it has escalated, or whether my idleness has led to me become fascinated, almost obsessed by it. But it is ten p.m. and it is a few hours away from my nightly distraction.

It is New Year's Eve. For the first time ever, I am alone. I have chosen to do this for a few reasons: firstly, the weather is so awful I couldn't bring myself to go out in it after almost being decapitated by the door when I'd opened it to collect my Thai takeaway from the brave man who had battled the elements to deliver my food. The prawn crackers had practically dissolved and he'd spilled my dumpling sauce in the bottom of the bag, but I didn't have it in my heart to complain. His long forlorn look past my front door and into the safety and warmth of my house stopped me from mentioning the state of the delivery.

The wind outside howls with such force I wonder if it will

lift the roof off. My next-door neighbour's garden gate is banging constantly and I debate whether to go out and close it, but that would mean I'll get blown around like the wheelie bins that are battering each other in the side passage. It is the stormiest weather this country – Ireland – has seen since whenever. It's the same for the UK, and the US is being pounded too. It's minus forty in Kansas, Niagara Falls has frozen, New York has been attacked by a frigid, dense air known as a polar vortex, there are mobile homes landing on clifftops in Kerry, previously sure-footed sheep on steep cliff faces are being challenged and defeated, lying beside washed-up seals on the shoreline. There are flood warnings, residents in coastal areas have been advised to stay indoors by miserable saturated news reporters with blue lips reporting live from beside the sea. The road that takes me most places that I need to go has been flooded for two days. At a time when I've wanted, *needed* to keep busy, Mother Nature is slowing me to a standstill. I know what she's doing: she's trying to make me think, and she's winning. Hence all thoughts about myself now begin with *Perhaps* . . . because I'm having to think about myself in ways I never did before and I'm not sure if I'm right in my thinking about those things.

The bark of the dog across the road is barely audible above the wind, I think Dr Jameson has forgotten to take him in again. He's getting a bit scatty, or else he's had a falling out with the dog. I don't know its name but it's a Jack Russell. I find it running around my garden, sometimes it shits, it has on a few occasions run into my house and I've had to chase it around and deliver it back across the road to the right honourable gentleman. I call him the right honourable gentleman because he is a rather grand man in his seventies, retired GP, and for kicks and giggles was the president of every club going: chess, bridge, golf, cricket, and

now our neighbourhood management company, which handles leaf-blowing, street-lamp bulb replacement, neighbourhood watch and the like. He is always well turned out, perfectly ironed trousers and shirts with little V-neck sweaters, polished shoes and tidy hair. He talks at me as if he's directing his sentences over my head, lifted chin and head-on nostrils, like an amateur theatre actor, yet is never blatantly rude so gives me no reason to be rude back, but just distant. Distance is all I can give someone I can't truly fathom. I didn't know until one month ago that Dr Jameson even had a dog, but these days I seem to know too much about my neighbours. The more the dog barks over the wind, the more I worry if Dr Jameson has fallen over, or been blown away into somebody's back garden like the trampolines that have been garden-hopping during the storms. I heard about a little girl waking up to find a swing set and slide in her back garden; she thought Santa had come again, but it turned out it had come from five houses down the road.

I can't hear the party down the street, though I can see it. Mr and Mrs Murphy are having their usual family New Year shindig. It always begins and ends with traditional Irish songs and Mr Murphy plays the bodhrán and Mrs Murphy sings with such sadness it's as though she's sitting right in a field of dead rotten black potatoes. The rest of their guests join in as though they're all rocking from side to side on a famine ship on stormy seas to the Americas. I'm not sad that the wind is lifting their sounds away in another direction, I can however hear a party that I can't see, probably from a few streets away; a few words from those crazy enough to smoke outside are blown down my chimney, along with a distant rhythm of party music before it gets swiped away again; sounds and leaves circling in a violent frenzy on my doorstep.

I was invited to three parties, but couldn't think of anything worse than party-hopping from one to the other, finding taxis on New Year's Eve in this weather, feeling like this. Also the TV shows are supposed to be great on New Year's Eve and, for the first time ever, I want to watch them. I wrap the cashmere blanket tighter around my body, take a sip of my red wine, feeling content with my decision to be alone, thinking that anybody out there, in that, is crazy. The wind roars again and I reach for the remote control to turn the volume up, but as soon as I do, every light in my house, including the television, goes off. I'm plunged into darkness and the house alarm beeps angrily.

A quick look outside my window shows me the entire street has lost electricity too. Unlike the others, I don't bother with candles. It is further reason for me to feel my way to the stairs and climb into bed at barely ten o'clock. The irony that I am powerless is not lost on me. I watch the New Year's Eve show on my iPad until the battery dies, then I listen to my iPod, which displays a threateningly low red battery that diminishes so quickly I can barely enjoy the songs. I turn then to my laptop, and when that dies I feel like crying.

I hear a car on the road and I know it's action time.

I climb out of bed and pull open the curtains. The lights are out on the entire street, I see the flicker of candles from a few houses but mostly it is black, most of my neighbours are over seventy and are in bed. I'm confident that I can't be seen because my house, too, is black; I can stand at the window with the curtains open and freely watch the spectacle that I know is about to take place.

I look outside. And I see you.

3

I am not a stalker but you make it difficult for me not to watch you. You are a circus act all of your own and I cannot help but be your audience. We live directly across the road from one another on this suburban cul de sac in Sutton, North Dublin, which was built in the seventies and was modelled on an American suburb. We have large front gardens, no hedging or shrubs to separate the pathway from our gardens, no gates, nothing to stop a person from walking straight up to our front windows. Our front gardens are larger than our back gardens and so the entire street has taken pride in maintaining the front, each one pruned, groomed, fed and watered within an inch of its natural life. Everybody on our street, bar the occupants of your house and mine, is retired. They spend endless hours in their gardens and, because they are outside, in the front, everybody knows about who comes and goes and at what time. Not me though. Or you. We are not gardeners and we are not retired. You are probably ten years older than me but we have lowered the age of the street by thirty years. You have three children, I'm not sure what ages they are but I guess one is a teenager and the other two are under ten.

You are not a good father; I never see you with them.

You have always lived opposite me, ever since I moved in, and you have always bothered me beyond belief, but going to work every day and all that came with that for me – distraction and knowing that there are more important things in the world – took me away from caring, from complaining and marching over there and punching your lights out.

I feel now like I'm living in a goldfish bowl and all I can see and hear from every window in my home is you. You, you, you. So at two thirty in the morning, which is a rather respectable time for you to return home, I find myself, elbows on the windowsill, chin resting on my hand, awaiting your next screw-up. I know this will be a good one because it's New Year's Eve and you are Matt Marshall, DJ on Ireland's biggest radio station and, despite not wanting to, I heard your show tonight on my phone before that too died. It was as intrusive, disgusting, repulsive, unpalatable, foul, nasty and vomitous as the others have been. Your talk show *Matt Marshall's Mouthpiece* which airs from eleven p.m. to one a.m. receives the highest number of listeners of any show on Irish radio. You have been at the helm of late-night talk shows for ten years. I didn't know you lived on this street when I moved in, but when I heard your voice travel to me across the road one day, I knew instantly it was you. Everybody does when they hear you, and mostly they get excited but I was repulsed.

You are everything I do not like about people. Your views, your opinions, your discussions that do nothing to fix the problem you pretend you want to fix and instead stir up angry frenzies and mob-like behaviour. You provide a hub for hatred and racism and anger to be vented, but you present it as free speech. For those reasons I dislike you; for personal reasons, I despise you. I'll go into them later.

You have driven home, as usual, going sixty kilometres per hour down our quiet retirement-home-like street. You bought your home from an aged couple who were downsizing, I bought mine from a widow who'd died – or at least from her children, cashing in. I did well, buying when houses were at their lowest, when people were taking what they could, before anything had risen again, and I am aiming to be mortgage free, an ambition I've had since I was five, wanting everything that's mine to actually be mine and not at the mercy of others and their mistakes. Both of our homes looked like an episode of *The Good Life* and both of us had extensive work to do and had to fight with the management company who accused us of ruining the look of the place. We managed to compromise. Our houses look like *The Good Life* from the front; inside, we have extensively renovated. I, however, broke a rule with my front garden that I am still paying for. More on that later.

You drive dangerously close to your garage door as usual and you climb out of the car, leaving the keys in the ignition, the radio blaring and the engine running. I'm not sure if you have forgotten or if you are not planning on staying. The car lights are on and are the only light on the street; it adds to the drama, almost as if the spotlight is on you. Despite the wind, which has died somewhat, every word of the Guns N' Roses song is audible from the car. It's 'Paradise City'; 1988 must have been a good year for you. I was eight years old, you would have been eighteen, I bet you wore their T-shirts and had them on your school bag, I bet you engraved their names into school journals and went to The Grove and smoked and danced all night and shouted every word of their songs to the night sky. You must have felt free and happy then, because you play it a lot and always when you're driving home.

I see a light go on in Dr Jameson's bedroom; it must be a torch because it is moving around, as though the person holding it is disorientated. The dog is barking like mad now and I wonder if he'll let him in before some little girl wakes up in the morning to find Santa has left a dizzy Jack Russell in her back garden. I watch the torch moving around the rooms upstairs. Dr Jameson likes to be at the helm of things, apparently. I learned this from my next-door neighbour Mr Malone, who called to my door to let me know that the bin truck was coming and he'd noticed I'd forgotten to put out my bins. I sense Mr Malone and Dr Jameson are at loggerheads over who should be in charge of the management company. I had forgotten to put my bins out because not being at work means I often confuse my days, but him calling to my home to tell me annoyed me. Seven weeks on, it wouldn't bother me. I find it helpful. Everything neighbourly and anything helpful bothered me then. I had no community spirit. It wasn't because I turned my back on it, it was because I was too busy. I didn't know it existed and I didn't require it.

You try the handle of the front door and appear full of shock and dismay that it isn't unlocked for you or some masked gunman to freely enter your home. You ring the doorbell. It never begins politely, it is always rude, offensive. The amount of times you ring, the length of time you ring it for, like the burst of a machine gun. Your wife never answers straight away. Neither do the children; I wonder if they sleep through it now because they're so used to it, or if she's in there with them, all huddled in one room while the children sob, telling them to ignore the scary sounds at the door. Either way, nobody comes. Then you bang on the door. You like the banging, you spend most nights doing this, relieving your tension and anger. You

work your way around the entire house, knocking and banging on every window you can reach. You taunt your wife in a sing-song voice, 'I know you're in there,' as if she is pretending that she isn't. I don't think she is pretending, I think she is making it quite clear. I wonder if she is asleep or wide awake and hoping you will go away. I guess the latter.

Then you pick up your yelling. I know she hates the yelling because that above all embarrasses her, perhaps because your voice is so distinctive – though we couldn't ever think it was any other couple on the road behaving like this. I don't know why you haven't figured this out by now and just cut straight to the yelling. She remains resolute for the first time I've witnessed. You do a new thing. You go back to your car and start blowing the horn.

I see Dr Jameson's torch moving from upstairs to a downstairs room and I hope he isn't going to go outside to try to calm you down. You will no doubt do something drastic. Dr Jameson's front door opens and I hold my hands to my face, wondering if I should run out and stop him, but I don't want to get involved. I will watch and when it turns violent I will step in, though I have no idea what I will do. Dr Jameson doesn't appear. The dog comes running around the house at top speed, almost falls over himself on the flooded soggy grass in the race to get inside. The dog runs inside and the door is slammed. I laugh in surprise.

You must hear the door slam and think that it's your wife, because you stop honking the horn and Guns N' Roses is all that can be heard again. I'm thankful for that. The honking was above all the most annoying thing you've done. Almost as if she was waiting for you to calm down before letting you in, the front door opens and your wife steps out in her dressing gown, looking frantic. I see the

dark shadow of someone behind her. At first I think she has met somebody else and I seriously worry about what will happen, but then I realise it's your eldest son. He looks older, protective, the man of the house. She tells him to stay inside and he does. I am glad. You don't need to make this any worse than it already is. As soon as you see her you jump out of the car and start shouting at her for locking you out of the house. You always shout this at her. She tries to calm you as she makes her way to your still-open jeep door, then she takes the keys out, which kills the music, the engine and the lights. She shakes the keys in front of you, telling you that you have the house key on your set. She told you that. You knew that.

But I know, as does she, that your practicality belongs with your sobriety, and in its place is this desperate, wild man. You always believe that you're locked out, that you have been *deliberately* locked out. That it is you against the world, or more that it is you against the house, and that you must get inside using any means necessary.

You go quiet for a moment as you take in the keys dangling in front of your face and then you stagger as you reach for her, pull her close and smother her with hugs and kisses. I can't see your face, but I see hers. It is the picture of complication, inner silent torture. You laugh and ruffle your son's head as you pass, as if the whole thing was a joke, and I detest you even more because you can't say sorry. You never say sorry – not that I've witnessed, anyway. Just as you step into the house the electricity goes back on. You twist around and you see me, at the window, my bedroom lights on full, revealing me in all my sneaky glory.

You glare at me, then you bang the door closed, and with all that you've done tonight, you make me feel like the weird one.