

You loved your last book...but what
are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Lov**ereading** will help you find new
books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

This is Where I Leave You

Written by Jonathan Tropper

Published by Orion Books Ltd

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Lov**ereading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

this is where
i leave you

jonathan tropper



An Orion paperback

First published in Great Britain in 2010

by Orion Books

This paperback edition published in 2011

by Orion Books Ltd,

Orion House, 5 Upper St Martin's Lane,

London WC2H 9EA

An Hachette UK company

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Copyright © Jonathan Tropper 2010

The right of Jonathan Tropper to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

All the characters in this book are fictitious and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-7528-8302-1

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

The Orion Publishing Group's policy is to use papers that are natural, renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown in sustainable forests. The logging and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

Chapter 1

‘Dad’s dead,’ Wendy says offhandedly, like it’s happened before, like it happens every day. It can be grating, this act of hers, to be utterly unfazed at all times, even in the face of tragedy. ‘He died two hours ago.’

‘How’s Mom doing?’

‘She’s Mom, you know? She wanted to know how much to tip the coroner.’

I have to smile, even as I chafe, as always, at our family’s patented inability to express emotion during watershed events. There is no occasion calling for sincerity that the Foxman family won’t quickly diminish or pervert through our own genetically engineered brand of irony and evasion. We banter, quip, and insult our way through birthdays, holidays, weddings, illnesses. Now Dad is dead and Wendy is cracking wise. It serves him right, since he was something of a pioneer at the forefront of emotional repression.

'It gets better,' Wendy says.

'Better? Jesus, Wendy, do you hear yourself?'

'Okay, that came out wrong.'

'You think?'

'He asked us to sit shiva.'

'Who did?'

'Who are we talking about? Dad! Dad wanted us to sit shiva.'

'Dad's dead.'

Wendy sighs, like it's positively exhausting having to navigate the dense forest of my obtuseness. 'Yes, apparently, that's the optimal time to do it.'

'But Dad's an atheist.'

'Dad *was* an atheist.'

'You're telling me he found God before he died?'

'No, I'm telling you he's dead and you should conjugate your tenses accordingly.'

If we sound like a couple of callous assholes, it's because that's how we were raised. But in fairness, we'd been mourning for a while already, on and off since he was first diagnosed a year and a half earlier. He'd been having stomach aches, swatting away my mother's pleas that he see a doctor, choosing instead to increase the regimen of the same antacids he'd been taking for years. He popped them like Life Savers, dropping small squibs of foil wrapping wherever he went, so that the carpets glittered like wet pavement. Then his stool turned red.

'Your father's not feeling well,' my mother understated over the phone.

'My shit's bleeding,' he groused from somewhere behind her. In the fifteen years since I'd moved out of the house, Dad never came to the phone. It was always Mom,

with Dad in the background, contributing the odd comment when it suited him. That's how it was in person too. Mom always took center stage. Marrying her was like joining the chorus.

On the CAT scan, tumors bloomed like flowers against the charcoal desert of his duodenal lining. Into the lore of Dad's legendary stoicism would be added the fact that he spent a year treating metastatic stomach cancer with Tums. There were the predictable surgeries, the radiation, and then the Hail Mary rounds of chemo meant to shrink the tumors but that instead shrank him, his once broad shoulders reduced to skeletal knobs that disappeared beneath the surface of his slack skin. Then came the withering of muscle and sinew and the sad, crumbling descent into extreme pain management, culminating with him slipping into a coma, the one we knew he'd never come out of. And why should he? Why wake up to the painful, execrable mess of end-stage stomach cancer? It took four months for him to die, three more than the oncologists had predicted. 'Your dad's a fighter,' they would say when we visited, which was a crock, because he'd already been soundly beaten. If he was at all aware, he had to be pissed at how long it was taking him to do something as simple as die. Dad didn't believe in God, but he was a lifelong member of the Church of Shit or Get Off the Can.

So his actual death itself was less an event than a final sad detail.

'The funeral is tomorrow morning,' Wendy says. 'I'm flying in with the kids tonight. Barry's at a meeting in San Francisco. He'll catch the red-eye.'

Wendy's husband, Barry, is a portfolio manager for a

large hedge fund. As far as I can tell, he gets paid to fly around the world on private jets and lose golf games to other richer men who might need his fund's money. A few years ago, they transferred him to the L.A. office, which makes no sense, since he travels constantly, and Wendy would no doubt prefer to live back on the East Coast, where her cankles and post-pregnancy jiggle are less of a liability. On the other hand, she's being very well compensated for the inconvenience.

'You're bringing the kids?'

'Believe me, I'd rather not. But seven days is just too long to leave them alone with the nanny.'

The kids are Ryan and Cole, six and three, towheaded, cherub-cheeked boys who never met a room they couldn't trash in two minutes flat, and Serena, Wendy's seven-month-old baby girl.

'Seven days?'

'That's how long it takes to sit shiva.'

'We're not really going to do this, are we?'

'It was his dying wish,' Wendy says, and in that single instant I think maybe I can hear the raw grief in the back of her throat.

'Paul's going along with this?'

'Paul's the one who told me about it.'

'What did he say?'

'He said Dad wants us to sit shiva.'

Paul is my older brother by sixteen months. Mom insisted I hadn't been a mistake, that she'd fully intended to get pregnant again just seven months after giving birth to Paul. But I never really bought it, especially after my father, buzzed on peach schnapps at Friday-night dinner, had acknowledged somberly that back then they believed

you couldn't get pregnant when you were breast-feeding. As for Paul and me, we get along fine as long as we don't spend any time together.

'Has anyone spoken to Phillip?' I say.

'I've left messages at all his last known numbers. On the off chance he plays them, and he's not in jail, or stoned, or dead in a ditch, there's every reason to believe that there's a small possibility he'll show up.'

Phillip is our youngest brother, born nine years after me. It's hard to understand my parents' procreational logic. Wendy, Paul, and me, all within four years, and then Phillip, almost a decade later, slapped on like an awkward coda. He is the Paul McCartney of our family: better-looking than the rest of us, always facing a different direction in pictures, and occasionally rumored to be dead. As the baby, he was alternately coddled and ignored, which may have been a significant factor in his becoming such a terminally screwed-up adult. He is currently living in Manhattan, where you'd have to wake up pretty early in the morning to find a drug he hasn't done or a model he hasn't fucked. He will drop off the radar for months at a time and then show up unannounced at your house for dinner, where he might or might not casually mention that he's been in jail, or Tibet, or has just broken up with a quasi-famous actress. I haven't seen him in over a year.

'I hope he makes it,' I say. 'He'll be devastated if he doesn't.'

'And speaking of screwed-up little brothers, how's your own Greek tragedy coming along?'

Wendy can be funny, almost charming in her pointed tactlessness, but if there is a line between crass and cruel, she's never noticed it. Usually I can stomach her, but the

last few months have left me ragged and raw, and my defenses have been depleted.

‘I have to go now,’ I say, trying my best to sound like a guy not in the midst of an ongoing meltdown.

‘Jesus, Judd. I was just expressing concern.’

‘I’m sure you thought so.’

‘Oh, don’t get all passive-aggressive. I get enough of that from Barry.’

‘I’ll see you at the house.’

‘Fine, be that way,’ she says, disgusted. ‘Good-bye.’

I wait her out.

‘Are you still there?’ she finally says.

‘No.’ I hang up and imagine her slamming her phone down while the expletives fly in a machine-gun spray from her lips.

Wednesday

Chapter 2

I'm packing up my car for the two-hour drive to Elms brook when Jen pulls up in her marshmallow-colored SUV. She gets out quickly, before I can escape. I haven't seen her in a while, haven't returned her calls or stopped thinking about her. And here she is looking immaculate as ever in her clinging gym clothes, her hair an expensive shade of honey blond, the corners of her mouth inching up ever so slightly into the tentative smile of a little girl. I know every one of Jen's smiles, what they mean and where they lead.

The problem is that every time I see Jen, it instantly reminds me of the first time I ever saw her, riding that crappy red bike across the quad, long legs pumping, hair flying out behind her, face flushed with excitement, and that's exactly what you don't want to think about when confronted with your soon-to-be ex-wife. Ex-wife in waiting. Ex-wife elect. The self-help books and websites

haven't come up with a proper title for spouses living in the purgatory that exists before the courts have officially ratified your personal tragedy. As usual, seeing Jen, I am instantly chagrined, not because she's obviously found out that I'm living in a crappy rented basement, but because ever since I moved out, seeing her makes me feel like I've been caught in a private, embarrassing moment – watching porn with my hand in my pants, singing along to Air Supply while picking my nose at a red light.

'Hey,' she says.

I toss my suitcase into the trunk. 'Hey.'

We were married for nine years. Now we say 'Hey' and avert our eyes.

'I've been leaving you messages.'

'I've been busy.'

'I'm sure.' Her ironic inflection fills me with the familiar impulse to simultaneously kiss her deeply and strangle her until she turns blue. Neither is an option at this juncture, so I have to content myself with slamming the trunk harder than necessary.

'We need to talk, Judd.'

'Now's not a good time.'

She beats me to the driver's-side door and leans against it, flashing me her most accomplished smile, the one I always told her made me fall in love with her all over again. But she's miscalculated, because now all it does is remind me of everything I've lost. 'There's no reason this can't be amicable,' she says.

'You're fucking my boss. That's a pretty solid reason.'

She closes her eyes, summoning up the massive reserves of patience required to deal with me. I used to kiss those eyelids as we drifted off to sleep, feel the rough flutter of

her lashes like butterfly wings between my lips, her light breath tickling my chin and neck. 'You're right,' she says, trying to look like someone trying not to look bored. 'I am a flawed person. I was unhappy and I did something inexcusable. But as much as you might hate me for ruining your life, playing the victim isn't really working out for you.'

'Hey, I'm doing fine.'

'Yeah. You're doing great.'

Jen looks pointedly at the crappy house in which I now live below street level. It looks like a house drawn by a child: a triangle perched on a square, with sloppily staggered lines for bricks, a lone casement window, and a front door. It's flanked by houses of equal decrepitude on either side, nothing at all like the small, handsome colonial we bought with my life's savings and where Jen still lives rent-free, sleeping with another man in the bed that used to be mine.

My landlords are the Lees, an inscrutable, middle-aged Chinese couple who live in a state of perpetual silence. I have never heard them speak. He performs acupuncture in the living room; she sweeps the sidewalk thrice daily with a handmade straw broom that looks like a theater prop. I wake up and fall asleep to the whisper of her frantic bristles on the pavement. Beyond that, they don't seem to exist, and I often wonder why they bothered immigrating. Surely there were plenty of pinched nerves and dust in China.

'You didn't show up to the mediator,' Jen says.

'I don't like him. He's not impartial.'

'Of course he's impartial.'

'He's partial to your breasts.'

'Oh, for God's sake, that's just ridiculous.'

'Yes, well, there's no accounting for taste.'

And so on. I could report the rest of the conversation, but it's just more of the same, two people whose love became toxic, lobbing regret grenades at each other.

'I can't talk to you when you're like this,' she finally says, stepping away from the car, winded.

'I'm always like this. This is how I am.'

My father is dead! I want to shout at her. But I won't because she'll cry, and if she does, I probably will, and then she'll have found a way in, and I will not let her pierce my walls in a Trojan horse of sympathy. I'm going home to bury my father and face my family, and she should be there with me, but she's not mine anymore. You get married to have an ally against your family, and now I'm heading into the trenches alone.

Jen shakes her head sadly and I can see her lower lip trembling, the tear that's starting to form in the corner of her eye. I can't touch her, kiss her, love her, or even, as it turns out, have a conversation that doesn't degenerate into angry recriminations in the first three minutes. But I can still make her sad, and for now, I'll have to be satisfied with that. And it would be easier, so much easier, if she didn't insist on being so goddamned beautiful, so gym-toned and honey-haired and wide-eyed and vulnerable. Because even now, even after all that she's done to me, there's still something in her eyes that makes me want to shelter her at any cost, even though I know it's really me who needs the protection. It would be so much easier if she wasn't Jen. But she is, and where there was once the purest kind of love, there is now a snake pit of fury and resentment and a new dark and twisted love that hurts more than all the rest of it put together.

'Judd.'

'I have to go,' I say, opening my car door.

'I'm pregnant.'

I've never been shot, but this is probably what it feels like, that split second of nothingness right before the pain catches up to the bullet. She was pregnant once before. She cried and kissed me and we danced like idiots in the bathroom. But our baby died before it could be born, strangled by the umbilical cord three weeks before Jen's due date.

'Congratulations. I'm sure Wade will be a wonderful father.'

'I know this is hard for you. I just thought you should hear it from me.'

'And now I have.'

I climb into the car. She steps in front of it, so I can't pull out.

'Say something. Please.'

'Okay. Fuck you, Jen. Fuck you very much. I hope Wade's kid has better luck in there than mine did. Can I go now?'

'Judd,' she says, her voice low and unsteady. 'You can't really hate me that much, can you?'

I look directly at her with all the sincerity I can muster. 'Yes. I can.'

And maybe it's the complicated grief over my father that has finally begun plucking at my nerves, or maybe it's simply the way Jen draws back as if slapped, but either way, the intense hurt that flashes behind the wide pools of her eyes for that one unguarded instant is almost enough to make me love her again.