
Opening Extract from...

How to be a Husband

Written by Tim Dowling

Published by Fourth Estate

HOW TO BE A HUSBAND

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FOURTH ESTATE • *London*

Fourth Estate
An imprint of HarperCollins*Publishers*
77–85 Fulham Palace Road,
Hammersmith, London W6 8JB

www.4thestate.co.uk

First published in Great Britain by Fourth Estate in 2014

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Seven of the Forty Precepts of Gross Marital Happiness made
their first appearance, in slightly different form, in an article in
Guardian Weekend magazine from February 2013

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

ISBN 978-0-00-752766-3

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

To Sophie; who else?

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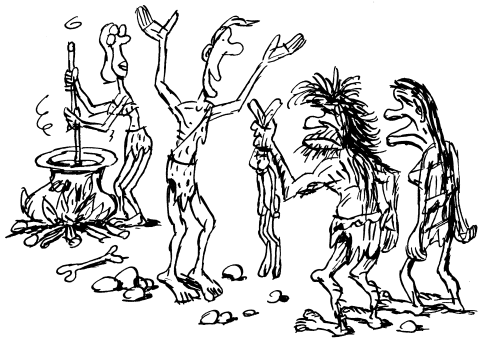

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2007 I was asked out of the blue to take over the page at the front of the *Guardian Weekend* magazine. I say out of the blue, but I'll admit it was a possibility I'd considered long before the invitation was extended. I therefore received the news with my usual mixture of gratitude and impatience – shocked, thrilled, immensely flattered, and not before time. There was no question of turning down the offer; just tremendous apprehension at the idea of accepting. If I'd thought about wanting it a lot over the years, I hadn't really given much thought to doing it. What would my weekly column be about?

'I don't want you to feel you have to write about your own life,' read the only email I received from the Editor on the subject. Perhaps, I thought, she doesn't want me to feel constrained by a particular format, or maybe she was wary because the only time I'd ever stood in for my predecessor, Jon Ronson, I'd written about an ordinary domestic event, and the magazine subsequently printed a letter that said, 'May I suggest that the mystery smell

in Tim Dowling's house is coming from his own backside as he emanates his natural air of smugness and pomposity?' Whatever the reason, I felt I had my instructions: write about anything you like, except yourself.

The Editor promptly took maternity leave, and I heard nothing more. The only additional information I received was a date for the first column, in mid-September. As the deadline approached I panicked, and wrote a piece about the dog and the cat following me around the house all day, precisely the sort of thing I'd been warned against. As I hit send I pictured myself having to defend it ('It's true! They do follow me!') at a hastily convened crisis meeting.

Nothing was said, and the column appeared as written. I wondered if the ban on domestic subjects had even been passed on. I decided it didn't matter, because now I had a full week to get my shit together.

The next column was a tightly wrought spoof apology taking in some recent scandals dogging the BBC, which had the twin advantages of being extremely topical and almost exactly the right length. Two weeks later, however, I suffered another failure of imagination, and at the last minute I wrote about my wife's amusingly callous reaction when I got knocked off my bike by a taxi. I wondered if it was possible to get sacked less than a month in.

Already I was beginning to feel the pressure of a weekly column; on the following deadline day I found myself in South America on another assignment, jet-lagged and bereft of inspiration. After a lot of

handwringing and hair-pulling, I concocted a parody of those book group discussion questions you find at the back of paperback novels, based entirely on the only reading material I had with me.

A week later, in response to a report suggesting that Neanderthals may have possessed the power of speech, I cobbled together a hilarious dialogue between a Neanderthal couple who were expecting the *Homo sapiens* next door for supper. With more time I might have come up with a better ending, but as I read it over I felt I was finally starting to find my feet.

The panic returned soon enough. The upcoming Christmas deadlines required several columns to be done in advance. Over the next few weeks I wrote almost exclusively about domestic crises – arguments in front of the telly, arguments about the children, the window cleaner, even about the column itself. I filed each one with a sense of failure and a silent promise to myself that I would adhere more closely to the original brief the following week. When I finally managed to write something with a less personal, more sophisticated conceit, I received an email from the Editor, the first real feedback I'd had in months. It said, 'What happened to the funny wife?'

And that is how I came to be splashing my marriage all over the papers. I never really had time to sit down and consider the ethical implications, if any. I know other people see writing about one's family as a pursuit full of interesting moral pitfalls, but I lacked the luxury of that perspective. In fact a full six months elapsed before I actually realized what it was I trying to

achieve with my new column: I was trying to make my wife laugh.

She is almost the only person who reads what I write in front of me, and I have come to think of her as the planet's main arbiter of what is and isn't funny. Even as I was struggling to produce less personal, more abstract columns, I was noticing that she wasn't laughing at them. She read the Neanderthal one in complete silence in bed one Saturday morning, and then sighed and said, 'I miss Jon Ronson.'

But she was reliably amused by any column in which she featured, often laughing out loud while reading back her own words.

'I'm funny,' she would say, cackling. 'You just write it down.'

It is, of course, a delicate balancing act, requiring tact, sound judgement and a good deal of empathy, which is why I have on several occasions got it badly wrong.

'I don't like when it says, "My wife" in the headline,' said my wife one Saturday in early 2008. She had never before objected to me referring to her only as 'my wife' – appreciating, I think, the half-hearted stab at preserving her anonymity – but spelled out in big letters the term suddenly looked dismissive and belittling, especially in a headline like the one she was reading: 'I don't like it when my wife hires people and then leaves their stewardship to me.' It was an understandable objection, one that required a tactful, carefully worded response.

'I don't do the headline,' I said. 'They do the headline.'

Some months later she told me I couldn't write about our eldest son referring to her as a 'self-esteem roller', but it didn't feel like a gem I could relinquish easily. I wrote about it anyway, including her objection in the piece, and decided to treat her stony silence as tacit approval.

Six months after that my wife exclaimed, apropos of nothing, that she would divorce me if I ever wrote that I found her watching *Dog Borstal*. It seemed like a bluff worth calling.

One rainy day during our summer holiday in Cornwall, she looked up from the newspaper at me with very angry eyes.

'You've gone too far,' she said. I looked back blankly – by the time the paper comes out, I don't always remember what I've written.

'What are you talking about?' I said.

'You compared me to the Canoe Wife!' she shouted. Then I remembered: we'd been bickering while watching something on the news about the Canoe Man – who had disappeared after rowing off in what was, I believe, technically a kayak – and his wife, who conspired with him to fake his death so they could start a new life in Panama.

'I think you're misreading it,' I said. When I looked at it again later I could see where I might have inadvertently drawn some parallels between my wife and the Canoe Wife, but I still thought her interpretation required a pretty ungenerous assessment of my intent.

She spent the rest of the afternoon ringing people who she knew would agree that I had gone too far.

Under the circumstances I did the only thing I could think of: I wrote about that, too.

More than a year went by before it happened again: this time my wife was furious – properly furious – because I had written something she didn't like, in a column in which she barely appeared. Her explanation didn't make much sense to me (I won't risk attempting to reiterate it), but there was no mistaking her anger.

I realized that it didn't matter that I didn't get it; that her reaction was reason enough to stop doing the column if she wanted me too – she didn't even have to give me a week's notice. I briefly thought about offering to quit, until I weighed up the chances that she might, in her current mood, take me up on it.

There were a couple of obvious solutions to the problem. I could have steered clear of writing about my marriage, although my wife insisted she was not uncomfortable with the column itself – she just got occasionally pissed off with an infelicitous phrase she thought might get her into trouble at work, although this only happened once, and neither of us saw it coming that time.

I could, I suppose, show her the column beforehand to give her a chance to voice specific objections, but I don't like her seeing it ahead of time, because then she might not laugh the next Saturday. It's meant to be a surprise.

To be honest, I wish I'd upset my wife with a callously worded phrase as few times in real life as I have done in my column. I do lots of stupid and unkind things in the course of my marriage, but with the column I get a

whole week to figure out where I went wrong and, in effect, apologize.

An obligation to write about one's marriage carries the risk that one might be reduced to creating conflict simply in order to fulfil a weekly word count. The truth is, I've never had to. People may find this hard to believe, just as I find it difficult to imagine a marriage so well conducted that it lacks the disquiet required to sustain a weekly column. To be honest, I'm not sure I'd want to be part of a marriage like that, anyway. Chances are the couple in question wouldn't be that into it either.

Twenty years ago my wife and I embarked on a project so foolhardy, the prospect of it seemed to us both so weary, stale and flat that even thinking about it made us shudder. Neither of us actually proposed to the other, because neither of us could possibly make a case for the idea. We simply agreed – we'll get married – with the resigned determination of two people plotting to bury a body in the woods. Except that if you did agree to bury a body in the woods, you probably wouldn't ring your parents straight away to tell them the news.

Two decades on we are still together, still married and still, well, if I hesitate to say 'happy', it's only because it's one of those absolute terms, like 'nit-free', that life has taught me to deploy with caution. It feels inherently risky to express contentment: I know that twenty years of marriage doesn't necessarily guarantee you ten more.

I can only really speak for myself, and while I would concede that I am, on balance, content, there also isn't a day that goes by without me stopping to think: what the

hell happened to you? Not, you know, in a bad way. But I'm still surprised, every day.

This is not really a self-help manual. If you come across anything that resembles advice in it, I would caution against following it too strictly, although I'm aware that is, in itself, advice. The kind of people who read self-help books are not, I'm guessing, looking to be more like me.

This is simply the story of how I ended up here, and along with it an examination of what it means to be a husband in the twenty-first century, and what is and isn't required to hold that office these days. I can't pretend to offer much in the way of solid advice on how to be a man. Just as my sons think admonitions such as 'Don't panic!' sound a bit rich coming from me, so would any tips I could possibly give them about attaining manhood. I tried to become a man, but in the end I just got older.

But 'Husband' – it's one of the main things on my CV, right below 'BA, English' and just above 'Once got into a shark cage for money'. 'Husband' is the thing I do that makes everything else I do seem like a hobby.

Although I wear the distinction with pride, I'm aware that the title 'husband' is not one that affords much respect these days. It was always a bit of an odd word. Of Old Norse derivation, 'husband' basically means 'master of a household', a sense that still lingers in the word husbandry, referring to the stewardship of land and/or animals, and doesn't apply to me at all.

No other European language uses a word like 'husband' to mean 'husband'. In Sweden they say 'man';

in Denmark, 'mand'. The French use the much more egalitarian 'mari', which just means 'married male', although it's easy to confuse with the girl's name Marie, and also the French word for mayor's office. As a consequence I often mistake the most basic French pleasantries for admissions of intrigue.

'Husband', on the other hand, sounds like an arcane office long shorn of its trappings, and is therefore faintly comical. It's like calling someone for whom you have no respect 'chief'. So while I feel able to use the word 'wife' with a mixture of pride and delight ('Hey look! Here comes my wife!'), my wife only ever uses the phrase 'Have you met my husband?' as a punch line, generally when she overhears people discussing the perils of self-googling.

But, I hear you ask, are you a good husband? Ultimately that is for my wife alone to judge, but I think I know what she would say: no. Still, I can't help feeling there's a longer answer, a more considered, qualified way of saying no. If nothing else, I can look back and point out the detours round some of the pitfalls I was fortunate enough to overstep, and relate a few cautionary tales about the ones I fell headlong into.

When the well-off and the well-known retrace their path to success for the benefit of people seeking to follow their lead, the accounts tend to be coloured by 'survivorship bias' – they simply don't reckon with the examples of thousands of other people who followed a similar route and ended up nowhere. In hindsight success can look like a repeatable formula comprised of hard work and a series of canny decisions. No

entrepreneur ever wrote a memoir that said, 'Then I did something terribly risky and not all that clever, but once again fortune chose to reward my stupidity.'

I don't have the luxury of revealing the secret of my success, even in hindsight. I didn't get where I am today – husband, father, gainfully employed person – by executing a deliberate strategy. I got where I am today by accident. One cold winter's evening twenty-four years ago, my life jumped its tracks without warning. As far as I'm concerned, all I did was hang on.

My successful marriage is built of mistakes. It may be founded on love, trust and a shared sense of purpose, but it runs on a steady diet of cowardice, impatience, ill-advised remarks and low cunning. But also: apologies, belated expressions of gratitude and frequent appeals for calm. Every day is a lesson in what I'm doing wrong. Looking back over the course of twenty years it's obvious the only really smart thing I did was choose the right person in the first place, and I'm not certain I did that on purpose.

And even if I did choose wisely, I also had to be chosen. How often does that happen? This is what I'm saying: luck, pure and simple.

1. THE BEGINNING

It is a few days after Christmas, 1989. I am living in New York, working in a dead-end job. It's worse than that; I'm employed by the production department of a failing magazine. I probably won't even have my dead-end job for much longer.

I've just taken the train in from my parents' house in Connecticut. It's cold, and the city has an air of spent goodwill: there are already Christmas trees lying on the pavement. I drop by the apartment of some friends, two girls who share a grand duplex in the West Village. I know they have people visiting, English people. But when I get there my friend Pat – who is himself English but lives in New York – answers the door. He gives me to understand that the two roommates are in the basement having a protracted disagreement. They argue a lot, those two, and have a tendency towards high drama.

I first see the English girl as she comes up from downstairs, where she has been attempting, in vain, to broker some sort of truce and salvage the evening. Her

short hair, charged with static, is riding up on itself at the back. She walks into the room, pauses to light a cigarette, and then looks at me and Pat.

'It's like a fucking Sartre play down there,' she says.

We all go out to a bar. The English girl has a bright red coat and swears a lot. Her voice is husky, lower than mine. She is at once afraid of everything – she thinks she's going to be murdered on the streets of Greenwich Village – and nothing. She is funny and charming, but also peremptory and unpredictable, with shiny little raisin eyes.

'So,' I say, turning to her, 'how long are you here for?'

'Look,' she says, appraising me coolly. 'It's almost as if we're having a conversation.'

If I'm honest, she scares the shit out of me. But by the end of the evening I very badly want the English girl to be my girlfriend. My plan is to engineer this outcome as quickly as possible.

There are a few flaws in my plan: the English girl lives in London, and I live in New York; I already have a girlfriend of some four years' standing; the English girl does not appear to like me.

Nevertheless, at a New Year's Eve party a few days later, after several hours of the sort of unrelenting flirtation that might better be characterized as lobbying, I convince her to kiss me. She doesn't seem terribly flattered by my persistence, but I suppose a man who arranges to spend New Year's Eve apart from his actual girlfriend so he can try it on with a comparative stranger is, first and foremost, a heel. She has every reason to be circumspect.

I'm not normally this decisive, or resolute, or forward. A born torch-bearer, I managed to keep my feelings completely hidden from the first three girls I fell in love with: Sarah, aged eight, who eventually moved away; Paula, aged ten, who also moved away, and Cati, aged eleven, who refused to do me the kindness of moving away. I'd come to understand love as an exquisite private pain by the time Jenni, aged fifteen, cornered me long enough to become my first girlfriend.

It's not that I'd never pursued anyone before; I just normally did it in a way that took the object of my affections a very long time to notice. I preferred to play it cool: waiting around in places where the girl I fancied might possibly turn up later, that sort of thing. This way I left myself an exit strategy whenever rejection presented itself – the paper trail of my courtship was non-existent – although in most cases the girl in question simply found another boyfriend while my long game was still unfurling.

I don't have time for any of that now. I have just two weeks to break up with my girlfriend and convince the English girl that she should not only like me, she should take me back to England with her.

It is a difficult fortnight. The English girl's lacerating wit makes her a very hard person to have a crush on. We go out together several times, but we drink so much that I often have to reacquaint her with our relationship's forward progress the next morning. You like me now, I tell her. It's all been agreed.

I also discover I have rivals, including a guy who engineers sound systems for nightclubs and who, she

tells me, has a gun in the glove box of his pick-up truck. I can't compete with that. I don't have a gun, or a glove box to put it in.

I break up with my girlfriend one evening after work, in a bar called the Cowgirl Hall of Fame, an episode of shameful expediency I hope won't haunt me for the rest of my life, but it does a little. I have to ask for the bill while she's crying, because I have a date.

This is not how I usually break up with people: directly, implacably, while sitting on one hand to stop myself looking at my watch. In fact I don't have a usual method; I've never needed to develop a technique. Girls break up with me. That's what happened the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that.

After hailing a cab for my weeping ex-girlfriend, I walk to a bar – the same bar as that first night – where the English girl is waiting for me. We are meeting here because our mutual friends do not approve of our burgeoning romance. They see me, not without cause, as an opportunist. The English girl has only recently come out of a long relationship – not quite as recently as eight minutes ago, mind – and it is generally acknowledged that I am being reckless with her affections. I only that know I'm being reckless with mine. In any case, I am currently unwelcome at the apartment where the English girl is staying.

So we meet at this bar most evenings. We drink martinis and laugh and then go back to my basement apartment, which is dark and generally grubby, except for my room, which is squalid. I leave her there in the mornings to go to work, and at some point during the

day she comes and drops off my keys. Occasionally, for a change of pace, we meet at a different bar. Sometimes we go out with English friends of hers. They like to drink – a lot – and they don't seem very interested in eating.

One thing we have failed to do over the course of the fortnight is go on anything approaching a proper date. Finally, towards the end of her visit, we arrange dinner in a cosy and unhygienic restaurant in the Bowery. Our mutual friend Pat is our waiter. The hard living of the past two weeks, combined with full-time employment, has taken its toll on me. During the meal I begin to feel unwell. My stomach churns alarmingly and I break out in a cold sweat. I'm trying to be lively and charming, but I'm finding it hard to keep track of the conversation. I push the food around my plate. I manage a few glasses of wine, enough to realize what a terrible idea drinking is. Finally, the plates are cleared. I pay the bill. She offers to pay half, but I refuse. When I stand up from my chair, I feel something deep in my bowels give way with a lurch. I excuse myself and nip to the toilets, which are fortunately close at hand.

I do not wish to go into too much unpleasant detail. Suffice to say I needed to spend about ten minutes in the loo to deal with the matter at hand, and found it necessary to part with my underpants for ever. On lifting the lid of the wastebasket I discover that I am not the first customer to face that problem this evening. Even so, I decide to throw them out the window.

I come back to the table with all the nonchalance I can muster, but I know from looking in the toilet's scarred mirror how pale I am.

'Are you OK?' she says. 'You were in there for a very long time.'

'Yeah, fine,' I say. Our mutual friend approaches, no longer wearing his waiter's apron.

'Pat's finished his shift,' she says, 'so we'd thought we'd all go next door for a drink.'

'Oh,' I say. 'OK.'

I only need to drink two beers in a seedy bar to complete my charade of wellness, before our hugely successful first date comes to an end.

In the end the English girl flies back to London without me, but I have her phone number and her address. I write to her. I pick up a passport renewal application. Without telling anyone, I quietly lay plans to extricate myself from my own life.

How do I know the English girl is the one for me? I don't. And I certainly don't know if she thinks I am the one for her. Separated by an ocean, I begin to speculate about how I would feel if my holiday fling – an underwhelming American guy with a basement apartment and a dead-end job – kept ringing me to firm up what were supposed to be empty promises to visit. I would be distant and terse on the phone, I think – just like she is. I wonder if I am spoiling what we had by trying to prolong it.

Before I have even got my passport photo taken, she rings: she's found a cheap flight, she tells me, and is thinking about coming back for the weekend. It takes me a moment to process this news, which is slightly incompatible with her general lack of enthusiasm for

our long-distance love affair. I know she hates flying. I can only conclude that she must like me more than she's been letting on. I'm a little stunned by the realization.

'OK,' I say.

'Try not to sound too fucking thrilled,' she says.

When I catch sight of her at the airport I feel my face go bright red. I'm suddenly embarrassed by how little we know each other. Two weeks in each other's company, on and off, plus four phone calls and a letter apiece. We've had sex, like, eight times. We've been apart for a month. She doesn't even quite look the way I've remembered her. That's because I have no photo at home to consult.

There wasn't much time to prepare for her visit, but I have done one thing: I've bought a new bed. My old one was small, borrowed and lumpy. The new one, delivered within twenty-four hours, touches three walls of my room. The bare mattress, silvery white, stands in sharp contrast to the grubby walls and the small, barred window that shows the ankles of passers-by. I'm twenty-six, it's probably the most expensive thing I've ever bought, and I'm embarrassed by it. I had only wished to provide an acceptable standard of accommodation, but it looks as if I've hired a sex trampoline for the weekend.

The next day she is woozy with jet lag. We stay in bed for most of the morning. At some point I sit up and see something on the floor that makes my heart sink: an uncompleted work assignment – a mock-up of a new table of contents page. It's been on my 'Things to Freak

Out about List' for weeks, and I've promised to deliver it by Monday. I pick it up and look it over. I've done no work at all on it, and now, clearly, I wasn't going to.

'What's that?' she says.

'Nothing. Something I'm supposed to have done.'

'Let's have a look,' she says.

'That's all dummy copy,' I say. 'I'm meant to write the words, but I don't know where to start. To be honest, it's ruining my life.'

'It can't be that difficult,' she says. 'You just need a stupid pun for each heading, and then a pithy summary underneath.'

'It's a bit more complicated than that,' I say.

'No it isn't,' she says. 'Give me a pen.' She does the first one, scribbling the words in the margin.

'That's not bad,' I say.

'There you are,' she says. 'Only eleven more to go.' She sits there with me, in my new bed, a fag hanging from her lips, treating my dreaded assignment like a crossword puzzle, and completing it in under an hour. Two thoughts flash through my head simultaneously: Amazing! She can solve all my problems for me! and, Holy shit! She's smarter than I am!

Just before we finish my phone rings. It's my mother, who unbeknownst to me has driven into New York with my aunt to see some Broadway show. They are heading for a restaurant downtown, near me, and want to know what I'm doing for lunch. My heart starts to pound. I've never told my mother anything about the English girl who is smoking in my bed. I doubt she even knows I've broken up with my old girlfriend; she certainly didn't

hear it from me. I sit in silence, phone to ear, for so long that the English girl raises an eyebrow.

'Can I bring someone?' I say finally.

It is the single most alarming dining experience I've ever endured, including the one that ended with me throwing my pants out a toilet window. We have about fifteen minutes to get dressed and get there, and there is no time to brief the English girl on what to expect. The occasion is more formal than I'd anticipated: the restaurant, which I'd never heard of, is a bit grand, and my mother and my aunt are all dressed up. They have no idea who this girl from London is, or quite why I've brought her to lunch instead of, say, my girlfriend. I don't quite recognize the English girl myself: she has suddenly turned polite and circumspect, even a little demure. She doesn't swear once during the meal. I was surprised she'd even agreed to come, but she's making a better fist of the occasion than I am. My brain keeps leaving my body to watch from the ceiling.

There is no point in the proceedings when I can draw my mother aside and explain why I've turned up to lunch with a mysterious English woman. Whenever they look at me both my aunt and my mother have legible question marks furrowed into their brows, but they are afraid to ask too much, having no idea where the answers might take the conversation. And we have prepared no lies. This, I realize too late, is a huge oversight.

The most anodyne enquiries ('So, how long are you in America for?') are met with unintentionally

provocative responses ('Oh, not long. About thirty-six hours'). I'm trying to steer the conversation away from questions generally, especially the ones the English girl and I have never asked each other: what exactly is the nature of this relationship? But he lives here and you live there – how is that going to work?

By the time food arrives my mother and my aunt have begun to exchange meaningful glances. My biggest fear is that the English girl will go to the loo at some point, leaving me alone with them.

'That was weird,' she says afterwards, lighting a cigarette as we reach the safety of the corner.

'Sorry,' I say. 'But it's good you've finally met my mother. Now we can be married at last.'

'Fuck off,' she says.

In my new passport photo I look stunned, as if someone has just hit me on the back of the head with a skillet, and I have yet to fall down. I've only been abroad once before, on the eighth-grade French class's summer trip to Paris.

The passport shows that I first entered the United Kingdom on 2 March 1990. By the time of the last stamp on the back page, dated 28 October 1999, I will have three children. Whenever I take stock by asking myself that question – 'What the hell happened to you?' – I remember that the answers to that question are, by and large, indexed in this passport. It is the table of contents to the most tumultuous ten-year period of my existence. It's as if someone told me to get a life at the end of the 1980s and I took them literally. Looking at

the unshaven, stunned young man in the photo now, I can only think, 'You don't know the half of it, you git.'

On the morning of 2 March, I am sitting in a cafe in the King's Road, waiting for my new girlfriend to come and get me. My friend Pat, who has since moved back to London, is once again my waiter.

She picks me up in her car. As she drives me back to her flat in Olympia, I watch London scroll past the passenger window while making the sort of unappreciative remarks one might expect from a first-time American visitor of no particular sophistication.

'All these "TO LET" signs,' I say. 'Why hasn't anyone defaced them so they say "TOILET"?'

'Because no one here is that stupid,' she says.

'A lack of initiative, is what it is.'

The ten days go by in a blur. I have no bearings; I'm always lost. She drags me round a series of indistinguishable pubs to show me to a series of friends. On one such occasion I am wearing an old St Louis Cardinals T-shirt I found in a box of old clothes collected for a friend whose house had burned down – a shirt rejected by a homeless person with no possessions. 'This is my new American boyfriend,' she says, presenting me with two flat palms, 'in his national costume.'

I spend all my time trying not to look surprised by stuff, but every experience has something quietly remarkable about it. Cigarettes come out of the machine with your change taped to the outside of the box. There are more national newspapers than there are TV channels. Everybody has a tiny hotel fridge and no

one ever suggests it's too early in the day to drink beer. London is unexpectedly old-fashioned and louche, and I am mostly charmed by it.

One night the English girl drives me to a Greek restaurant.

'We're meeting my friend Jason,' she says as we pull up. 'He's the last person I slept with before you.'

'Are you kidding?' I said. 'I can't go in there now.'

'Don't be such a baby,' she says. 'Come on.'

Something else unexpected happens during these ten days: we fight. Not the whole time, but more than twice. I cannot now remember anything about these arguments other than the impact they had on me. Our relationship was, in face-to-face terms, barely three weeks old. It seemed far too soon to have rubbed away the veneer of goodwill that comes with initial infatuation. Why are we arguing already? Either she is the most disagreeable person I've ever met, or I am the most infuriating person she's ever met (I should say that, after twenty years of marriage, it's still possible that both these things are true).

I am also profoundly annoyed because being happy and in love had been a major part of my holiday plans. I keep thinking: I took a week off work for this! I broke up with my girlfriend! I didn't come all this way just to visit the Tower of London.

Worst of all, she doesn't seem to share my fear that falling out at this early stage is reckless, or a bad omen. She enters into these arguments without showing the slightest worry about the damage that might result. Maybe she doesn't care.

I've never before had romantic dealings with anyone quite so direct. When she gets angry she does not cry, or attempt to explain her feelings of exasperation. Disagreeing with her is like facing an angry neighbour who has told you to turn down the music one time too many. Two months after we first met, she still scares the shit out of me.

Having committed myself to the high-wire act of a transatlantic relationship, I find myself struggling to cope with the hour-to-hour business of being together. I begin to suspect there is an element of sabotage in her attitude; maybe she sees the bickering as a kind way to euthanize a non-viable love affair. The day of my return flight is fast approaching, and we have no long-term plans. We have no plans at all.

When the final morning arrives, cold and soggy, it seems like the end. I make my own way to the airport in a state of bereaved resignation. I'm not at all sure the English girl is still my girlfriend. This, I realize, is what most long-distance relationships amount to: a brief, heedless romance, an expensive visit apiece, and a tacit acknowledgement of defeat. The English girl has a new job, and is about to buy a flat with a friend. She is embarking on a life in her own country that has no room for me in it. As the Gatwick Express crawls through South London, I think about what I'm going back to: my dead-end job, my stupid life, my tiny room, my gigantic, empty bed. The last place I want to be is home.

It's ironic, I think to myself as I glare through the window at a stately procession of back gardens, that a

train service calling itself the Gatwick Express moves so slowly that I could keep up jogging along beside it. What a stupid country. After a few minutes the train comes to a complete halt. Twenty minutes later, it has still not moved.

I call her from the airport.

'I missed my flight,' I say. There follows a brief, unbearable silence.

'Christ,' she says, pausing to blow smoke. 'Come back in on the train and I'll meet you at Victoria.'

In comparison to the outward journey, the brisk thirty-minute ride to London is a mere flashback: suburban gardens and quilted scraps of wooded ground flash by, reversing, and to some extent undoing, the abortive first leg of my trip home. I'm prepared for her to give me a hard time for being hopeless, but as we drive back to the flat she's in a giddy mood.

'You picked a good day to miss a plane,' she says. '*Reach for the Sky* is on telly.'

So we spend the afternoon sitting on the floor with a bottle of Bulgarian wine, watching an old black-and-white film. The extra day feels like a reprieve, twenty-four hours of happiness robbed from an unpromising future. Having never seen *Reach for the Sky*, I'd been expecting a weepy romantic saga, not the life story of double-amputee fighter pilot Douglas Bader. It appears to be her favourite film of all time. I think this is probably when I know she is the one for me.

Midway through Douglas Bader's rehabilitation, her friend Miranda – the one she's supposed to be buying a flat with – rings to say she's pregnant. A little later she

rings again to say she's getting married. In an instant, the future turns fluid.

I catch a flight home the next day; the day after that, I quit my job. I write a letter to my English girlfriend, telling her that as soon as I get my tin legs I'll be flying again.

That's my version, anyway. My wife remembers events slightly differently, insofar as she remembers them at all. When I reminded her of this particular turning point recently, she claimed not to recollect anything significant about it.

'You missed your flight,' she said. 'I remember that. Then you left the next day.'

'And then I came back,' I said. 'In June.'

'That's right,' she says. 'Were you made redundant or something?'

'No, I quit.'

'Oh. With a view to what, exactly?'