

How to Talk to a Widower

Jonathan Tropper

Published by Orion

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

Chapter 1

Russ is stoned. You can see it in the whites of his eyes, which are actually more of a glazed pink under the flickering yellow porch light, in the dark discs of his dilated pupils, in the way his eyelids hang sluggishly at half mast, and in the way he leans nonchalantly against the pissed off cop that is propping him up at my front door, like they're drinking buddies staggering out into the night after last call. It's just past midnight, and when the doorbell rang I was sprawled out in my usual position on the couch, only half asleep but entirely drunk, torturing myself by tearing memories out of my mind at random like matches from a book, striking them one at a time and drowsily setting myself on fire.

'What happened?' I say.

'He got into a fight with some other kids down at the Seven-Eleven,' the cop says, holding on to the top of Russ's arm. And now I can see the lacerations and bruises on Russ's face, the angry, sickle shaped scratch across his neck. His black T-shirt has been stretched beyond repair and torn at the neck, and his ear is bleeding where one of his earrings was snagged.

'You okay?' I say to Russ.

'Fuck you, Doug.'

It's been a while since I last saw him, and he's cultivated some facial hair, a rough little soul patch just beneath his bottom lip.

'You're not his father?' the cop says.

'No. I'm not.' I rub my eyes with my fists, trying to gather my wits about me. The whiskey had been singing me its final lullaby, and in the freshly shattered stillness, everything still feels like it's underwater.

'He said you were his father.'

'He kind of disowned me,' Russ says bitterly.

'I'm his stepfather,' I say. 'I used to be, anyway.'

'You used to be.' The cop says with the expression of someone who's tasted some bad Thai food, and gives me a hard look. He's a big guy - you'd have to be to hold up Russ, who at sixteen is already over six feet tall, broad and stocky. 'You look young enough to be his brother.'

'I was married to his mother,' I say.

'And where is she?'

'She's gone.'

'He means she's dead,' Russ says contemptuously. He raises his hand and lowers it in a descending arc, whistling as it goes down, and then hissing through his teeth to generate the sound effect of an explosion. 'Buh-bye.'

'Shut up, Russ.'

'Make me, Doug.'

The cop tightens his thick fingers around Doug's arm. 'Keep quiet, son.'

'I'm not your son,' Russ snarls, trying in vain to tear himself away from the cop's iron grip. 'I'm not anybody's son.'

The cop presses him easily up against the doorpost to quash his flailing arms and then turns back to me. 'And the father?'

'I don't know.' I turn back to Russ. 'Where's Jim?'

Russ shrugs. 'Down in Florida for a few days..'

'What about Angie?'

'She's with him.'

'They left you alone?'

'It was just for two nights. They'll be back tomorrow.'

'Angie,' the cop says.

'His father's wife.'

The cop looks annoyed, like we're giving him a headache. I want to explain everything to him, show him that it's really not as screwed up as it all sounds, but then I remember that it is.

'So the kid doesn't live here?'

‘He used to,’ I say. ‘I mean, this was his mother’s house.’

‘Look,’ the cop says wearily. He’s a middle-aged guy, with a graying caterpillar of a mustache and tired eyes. ‘Whatever he’s been smoking, I didn’t find any of it on him. My shift is just about over, and I have no desire to spend another hour processing the kid over a stupid, parking lot scuffle. I’ve got three boys of my own. He’s being a hard ass now, but he cried in the squad car and asked me to bring him here. So this is how it works. I can take him to the station and write him up for a handful of misdemeanors, or you can let him in and promise me that it will never happen again.’

Russ just stares sullenly at me, like this is all my fault.

‘It will never happen again,’ I say.

‘Okay then.’ The cop releases Russ, who whips his arm away violently and then bolts up the stairs to his room, shooting me a look of unrefined hatred that pierces the blubber of my drunken stupor like a harpoon.

‘Thank you, Officer,’ I say to the cop. ‘He’s really a good kid. He’s just had a tough year.’

‘Just so you know,’ the cop says as he steps through the doorway and back onto the porch. ‘This isn’t the first time he’s been in trouble.’

‘What kind of trouble?’

The cop shrugs. ‘The usual stuff. Fighting mostly. Some vandalism. And he’s obviously no stranger to the weed. The kid is headed down a bad path. I don’t know your deal here, but someone needs to start enforcing a curfew, and maybe get him some counseling.’

‘I’ll talk to his father,’ I say.

‘Next time, he gets booked.’

‘I understand. Thanks again.’

The cop gives me a last, skeptical look before heading for the door, and I can see myself through his eyes, bedraggled, unshaven, bloodshot, and half crocked. I’d be skeptical too. ‘I’m sorry about your wife,’ he says.

‘Yeah,’ I say, closing the door behind him. ‘You and me both.’

Upstairs, Russ has crawled under the covers in the darkness of what used to be his room. Everything is just as he left it, because, as with just about every other room in the house, I haven't disturbed anything in the year since Hailey died. The house is like a freeze-framed picture of the life we once had, snapped in the instant before it was obliterated. I stand backlit in the hallway, my shadow falling on the bends and folds of his comforter as I try to come up with something to say to this strange, angry boy to whom I am supposed to somehow feel connected.

'I can hear you breathing,' he says without lifting his face off the pillow.

'Sorry,' I say, stepping into the room. 'So, what was the fight about?'

'Nothing. These assholes just started talking shit to us.'

'They go to your school?'

'Nah, they were older guys.'

'I guess it's hard to put up too much of a fight when you're stoned.'

'Right.' He rolls over and lifts his head to sneer at me. 'Do you really feel like you're the best person to give me a lecture on the evils of drugs, Captain Jack?'

I sigh.

'Yeah. I didn't think so,' he says, rolling back onto his pillow and burrowing his face into his arms. 'Look, it's been a long fucking night, so if you don't mind...'

'I lost her too, Russ,' I say.

He makes a sound into his arms that might be a derisive snort or a smothered sob, I can't quite tell. 'Just close the door on your way out,' he whispers.

You never know when you're going to die, but maybe something in you does, some cellular consciousness that's aware of the cosmic countdown and starts making plans, because on the last night of her life, Hailey surprised me by wearing a blood red dress, cut low and tight in all the right spots. It was almost as if she knew what was coming, knew that

this would be our last night together, and she was determined to keep herself from fading too quickly into the washed out colors of memory.

I couldn't stop looking at her, my eyes dwelling for longer than usual on the familiar curves and contours of her body, still lithe and toned after one child and forty-one years, on the soft pockets of her exposed clavicles, the satiny white surface of her skin, and I wanted her in exactly the way you generally don't want someone you've been sleeping with for almost three years. I found myself considering the practical implications of our sneaking away from the table to meet in the bathroom for a quickie, pictured us in the confines of the locked bathroom, chuckling at our audacity between deep kisses as I pressed her up against the wall, the red dress pulled up over her waist, her smooth bare legs wrapped around me, pulling me into her. That's what happens when you spend enough years living on your own with premium cable.

But even as the mental image aroused me to point of discomfort beneath the table, I knew it wasn't going to happen. For one thing, there was no way for both of us to slip away inconspicuously. For another, I was twenty-nine and Hailey forty, and while I liked to think that our sex life was good, better than most, probably, quickies in public restrooms were no longer part of our repertoire. Actually, they'd never really been part of it to begin with, since I'm somewhat germ phobic, and the thought of exchanging fluids in the presence of all that random bacteria would be more than I could handle.

On the drive home, my hand rode further and further up the smooth vanilla expanse her bare thigh, and by the time we'd pulled into the garage she was in my pants. I pulled up her dress in the darkness and bent her over the hood of the car, still hot and pinging from the drive, and then we were hot and pinging and we were teenagers again, except we were good at it, and we actually owned the car.

We must have been trailing afterglow like fairy dust when we came into the house a short while later, because Russ paused his video game, gave us a funny look, and then shook his head and told us to get a room. 'No need,' Hailey said, grabbing my hand and heading for the

stairs. 'We've already got one.'

'Gross!' he said and, having rendered his judgment, went back to nonchalantly annihilating the undead on the widescreen. And Hailey and I went upstairs to break the laws of God and the state of New York, and we went at it deliriously, with a renewed passion, kissing and licking and drinking and devouring each other. Like there was no tomorrow.

We'd been married for just under two years. I had left the city and moved in with Hailey and Russ, into the small colonial she'd lived in with her first husband, Jim, until she found out he was cheating on her and kicked him out. And I was still getting used to the transformation, to being a husband in suburbia instead of a prowling dick in the city, to being a stepfather to a sullen teenager and the youngest member of the Temple Israel softball team, to dinner parties and backyard barbecues and school plays. I was still getting used to all of that when she got on a plane to see a client in California and somewhere over Colorado the pilot somehow missed the sky. And sometimes that life we were only just starting seems as tenuous to me as a fading dream, and I have to convince myself that it was actually real. *I had a wife*, I say to myself, over and over again. *Her name was Hailey. Now she's gone. And so am I.*

But we're not going to talk about that right now, because to talk about it I'll have to think about it, and I've thought it to death over the last year. There are parts of my brain that are still tirelessly thinking about it, about her, an entire Research & Development department wholly dedicated to finding new ways to grieve and mourn and feel sorry for myself. And let me tell you, they're good at what they do down there. So I'll leave them to it.

Chapter 2

Most days, we get rabbits on our lawn. Small brown ones, with grey speckled backs and white tufts like frayed cotton around their hindquarters. Or, more accurately, most mornings *I* get rabbits on *my* lawn. There is no *we*, hasn't been *we* in over a year. Sometimes I forget, which is odd because usually it's all I can think about. It's my house. My lawn. My fucking rabbits.

It's supposed to be charming having rabbits on your lawn, a selling point, incontrovertible proof that you've made it out of the city and into the rarified country air of suburban Westchester. We may be driving enough minivans and SUVs to single-handedly melt the polar ice caps, may be retrofitting our stately, eighty-year-old homes with enough fiber optic cable to garrote the planet, may be growing Home Depots, Wal-marts, Stop & Shops, and strip malls like tumors on every available grassland, but we've got these goddamn rabbits, so case closed. We are one with nature.

New Radford is pretty much what you'd expect from an upper middleclass suburb. You've read the book, seen the movie. It's all here. The original, masonry homes, Tudors and Colonials from the 1930s, housing burgeoning families and imploding marriages, German luxury cars positioned in driveways like magazine ads, bored looking kids dressed in the faded pallet of Abercrombie & Fitch congregating nefariously in parking lots, morning commuters loaded like cattle onto the Metro North trains into Manhattan, minivans and midlife crises dotting the landscape like freckles. On every block, scores of immigrants

in creaking pick up trucks with wooden sidewalls built up over the beds arrive every morning to landscape, keeping the lawns trim and fertile, the hedges along property lines tall and proud.

It's no doubt these lush lawns that are to blame for the exploding rabbit population. Once in a while I'll actually see one emerge from the hedges and scamper across the grass, but usually I find them already poised on their haunches in the middle of the yard, still as statues, their little nostrils vibrating almost imperceptibly, as if they're tapped in to some minor electrical current running beneath the lawn. I find that that's usually the best time to throw things at them.

Bugs, Thumper, Roger, Peter, Velveteen. I name them after their storied counterparts and then I try my best to brain them. Because they remind me of where I am, marooned out here in this life I never planned. And then I get pissed at Hailey, and then I get sad about being pissed at her, and then I get pissed about being sad, and then, never one to be left out, my self-pity kicks in like a turbine engine, and it's like this endless, pathetic spin cycle where all the dirty laundry goes around and around and nothing ever gets clean. So I throw things at the rabbits. Small rocks mostly- I keep a stash stacked like a cowboy's desert grave on the front porch – although, in a pinch, I've been known to throw whatever is on hand; the odd unopened beer can or a gardening appliance. I once threw an empty Bushmill's bottle that landed neck down in the grass with enough force to stay planted for a few days, like a whiskey sapling.

Oh, calm down. It's not like I've managed to hit one of the little buggers yet. And they know it too, barely moving when my missiles hit the lawn three feet behind them or two feet to the left. Sometimes they'll cock an ear, other times they'll just look at me, daring me, mocking me, trash talking with their beady rabbit eyes. *Is that all you got? Shit, my grandmother throws harder than that.*

Energizer Bunny, Playboy Bunny, Easter Bunny, Harvey, Silly-Rabbit-Trix-Are-For-Kids Rabbit, White-Rabbit-With-The-Pocket-Watch in Alice in Wonderland. I'm sitting on my front porch, stone in hand, taking aim at the one that's wandered onto the driveway, when my cell phone rings. It's my mother, calling to make sure I'm coming to a

family dinner celebrating my little sister Debbie's upcoming wedding.

'You're coming for dinner,' she says.

There's no way in hell I'm coming for dinner.

'I don't know,' I say. The rabbit takes a tentative hop in my direction. Harvey. I draw a bead on him and throw my stone. It goes high and wide and Harvey doesn't even dignify it with a sideways glance.

'What's not to know? You're so busy all of a sudden?'

'I don't really feel like celebrating.'

Debbie is marrying Mike Sandleman, a former friend of mine, whom she had the great fortune to meet in my house while I was sitting shiva, which was something I hadn't really intended to do. I've never been much of an affiliated Jew – Ben Smilchensky, who sat at the desk next to me at Beth Torah Hebrew School, used to bring Batman comics that we would slide between the pages of our Aleph-Bet letter books, and that was pretty much the beginning of the end for me. It seemed absurd to start being religious now, at the very moment that God had finally tipped his hand and revealed that he didn't actually exist. I knew because I was there, standing beside Russ at the cemetery, watching from miles above as Hailey's coffin was lowered on two handheld cloth belts. Even floating way up there, I could hear the creak and scrape of the coffin as it bumped against the hard rock sides of her freshly hewn grave, and then the sharp thuds of the flint laden earth hitting the dry, hollow wood as they shoveled in the first few mounds of dirt. She was underground. My Hailey was underground, in a gaping wound of a grave in the Emunah Cemetery just past the reservoir, a half-mile from the Sprain Brook Parkway, where we used to drive in the autumn to see the leaves change colors. Hailey jokingly called it 'foilage,' and that became our own little word for it. And now she was underground and I knew I would always think of it as foilage and autumn would always hurt, and I'd probably have to move out West, someplace where they had fewer seasons.

Do not talk to me about God.

But my twin sister Claire insisted that the shiva ritual would be good for Russ, and I may not believe in God, but I believe in guilt and no

one wants to dick around with eternity, even if it isn't there. So we sat shiva, and it was as bad as I'd anticipated, sitting there all day with Russ, asses sweating against the vinyl seats of the low mourner's chairs provided by the Hebrew Burial Society, nodding and pursing my lips at the endless parade of rubberneckers through our living room; friends, neighbors and relatives offering lame conversational gambits from flimsy plastic catering chairs, before heading into the dining room to grab something from the buffet. Yes, there was a buffet; bagels, lox, salads, poached salmon, quiche, and gooey Hungarian pastries, all donated by friends of Hailey's from Temple Israel. Grief can be catered just like anything else.

And there was my kid sister Debbie, treating the shiva like a Soho bar, dressed to the nines in short skirts and push-up bras that raised the rounded tops of her medium sized breasts above the horizon of her V-neck sweaters like a couple of rising suns. At the best of times, no one wants to see their sister's breasts, but there was something particularly offensive about watching her wield them like cocked weapons in my house of mourning. And that's how it came to pass that she got busy in the den with my buddy Mike, so you'll forgive me if I'm not terribly invested in their happiness. If Hailey hadn't died they never would have met, and now their whole happy future together, their marriage, their kids, will all be the result of Hailey's death, and while I can rationally accept that this doesn't make them exactly complicit in her death, they're still reaping the benefits, and it just seems wrong to build your whole life on the cornerstone of someone else's cataclysm.

'It's not about celebrating,' my mother says. 'It's about spending time with your family.'

'Yeah,' I say, keeping my eye on Harvey. 'I'm not really up for that either.'

'That's a terrible thing to say to your mother.'

'That's why I went with the celebration line first.'

'Ha,' she says. She is one of those people who actually say 'Ha' instead of laughing, like she speaks in comic strip balloons. 'If you can be a wiseass, you can come for dinner.'

This is what passes for logic with my mother. 'I don't think so.'

She sighs, and the way she does it makes me picture the word 'sigh' in faint print, hanging above her in another comic strip balloon. 'Doug,' she says. 'You can't be sad forever.'

'I think maybe I can.'

'Oh, Doug. It's been a year already. Don't you think it's time you got back out there?'

'That's right, Mom. It's only been a year.'

'You never leave your house.'

'I like it here.'

There's no sense explaining the value of self-pity to someone like my mother. You either get it or you don't. Everyone deals differently. My mother, for instance, takes pills, little yellow ones that she transfers into a small, faded Advil bottle which she keeps in her purse at all times. I don't know what they are and she'll never tell, since to her, medication is like incest, a dark family secret that must be kept from the neighbors at any cost. Claire named them Vil pills, since the 'Ad' had long ago been rubbed off the label from my mother's constant handling. Back in the day, Claire and I would nick a few Vil Pills from her bag and wash them down with wine to get high. If my mother ever noticed she was short a few pills, she never said anything. And with my father writing the prescriptions, which he could still do back then, she had an endless supply.

'There's no talking to you when you're like this,' my mother says.

'And yet, you keep talking.'

'So I'm concerned. Sue me.'

'I'd settle for a restraining order.'

'Ha ha. There's no authority on this planet higher than a mother's love.'

'How's Dad?'

'He's having one of his better days, thank God.'

'That's good.'

'How's Russell?'

‘He’s okay. I haven’t seen him in a few days.’ Not since the cops brought him to my door, stoned and bleeding and hating my guts.

‘That poor boy. You can bring him if you like.’

‘Bring him where?’

‘For dinner. What are we talking about?’

‘I thought we’d moved on.’

‘It’s *you* who needs to move on.’

‘Yeah. I’m going to move on right now, Mom. Goodbye.’

‘Debbie will be devastated if you don’t come.’

‘Somehow, I think Debbie’s perfect life will go on.’

She knows better than to touch that one. ‘Just tell me you’ll consider it.’

‘That would be lying.’

‘Since when do you have a problem lying to your mother?’

I sigh. ‘I’ll consider it.’

‘That’s all I ask,’ she lies back. She starts to say something else, but I can’t hear her anymore because I’ve just fired my cell phone at Harvey, who has finally wandered out of the shadow of the giant ash tree on my front lawn. I miss the rabbit and hit the tree, and my cell phone explodes on impact, sending plastic shrapnel flying across the lawn. The rabbit looks at me like I’m an asshole. And my mother is probably still talking, even though no one can hear anymore.

Chapter 3

My mother warned me not to marry Hailey. She also told me when I was five years old that I would contract an incurable venereal disease if I sat on a public toilet seat, and that the exhaust from passing busses would turn my lungs black if I didn't hold my breath, and that fast food was generally made out of processed rat meat. So by the time I was twenty-six, which is how old I was when I told her I'd be marrying Hailey, there were credibility issues.

'You positively can't marry her,' she told me over dinner, her penciled eyebrows bowing under the weight of her conviction.

I had taken the train from Manhattan up to Forest Heights to see the folks and share the good news that their historically most useless child was actually going to be getting married. They weren't taking it well.

'It will be an unmitigated disaster,' my mother said despondently, clutching her wine glass so tightly I worried it might shatter and cut her spa softened hands.

'You barely know her.'

'I know enough. She's too old.' My mother had been a moderately acclaimed stage actress back in the day, nominated for a Tony award for her portrayal of Adelaide in *Guys & Dolls*, and even though the last Playbill in her scrapbook was older than me, like most retired thespians, she had never actually stopped acting. She was always enunciating, always projecting, always selling it to the cheap seats, her eyes wide and expressive, her mouth forever poised to break into some

concrete emotion to which she could finally commit.

‘She’s only thirty-six.’

‘A thirty-six-year-old divorcee. What every mother dreams of for her son!’ Divorcees were only slightly higher than pedophiles on my mother’s extensive checklist of defective people.

‘Her husband was screwing around,’ I said, annoyed by my defensive tone.

‘And why do you think that is?’

‘Oh, Jesus, Mom, I don’t know. Because he’s a dick?’

‘Doug!’ my father said reflexively, waving his hand demonstratively across the dinner table, in case I’d missed it. ‘We’re eating.’ This would be as much participation as we could expect from him, and you would think the chief urologist at a major New York City hospital could handle the word ‘dick,’ with his dinner.

‘Sorry, dad. I didn’t mean to wake you over there.’

‘Don’t speak to your father like that.’

‘Don’t speak to me like this.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like I’m a child. I’m twenty-six years old, for Christ’s sake.’

‘There’s no need to be vulgar.’

‘I thought the situation called for it.’

My mother downed her Merlot like a whiskey shot, absently holding her glass out for my father to refill. ‘Stan,’ she said wearily. ‘Say something to him.’

My father put down his fork and chewed thoughtfully on his London broil, thirty chews per swallow. When I was a kid, I would count them to myself to pass the time, placing silent wagers that this would be the night he only chewed twenty-nine times. I never won, and that’s as good an illustration of my luck as anything else. Even betting against myself, I could always find a way to lose.

‘You’re not exactly known for your sound decision making, Douglas,’ my father said.

Okay. Here’s what I’ve learned. You can live your life being nice to everyone, you can be a loving son, a moderately decent student, never

do hard drugs or impregnate anyone's daughter, be an all around good guy and live in harmony with all of God's creatures. But crash one stolen Mercedes in front of the police station when you're fifteen years old and they'll never let you forget it. My mother was scandalized, terrified about what the neighbors would think, although in this case she was somewhat justified since it was actually the neighbor's car, but that's why you pay for insurance, right? If you never file a claim, then they've beaten you.

'And you're not exactly famous for your emotional support,' I responded to my father.

'I take issue with that, Doug.'

Stanley Jacobs did not get pissed. He 'took issue.' He was an Ivy-league educated doctor, trim and fit at sixty-five, with lush, silver hair and gold rimmed spectacles, clinically aloof despite his deceptively warm Mentadent smile. I had no memory of ever being hugged by him. He did shake my hand heartily at my college graduation, though, and I still had the photo to prove it.

'Listen,' I said, wishing I'd paid heed to my earlier instincts telling me to stay home and phone it in. But these were the same instincts that had led me to believe that taking the neighbor's Mercedes on a joyride would get me laid, and they hadn't been right then nor had they gotten any wiser in the intervening years, so I'd gotten into the habit of basically ignoring them. 'I love Hailey and what we have works. She's beautiful, she's smart, she's a great mother, and she's heads above what I ever thought I could have found for myself.'

My mother let out a horrified gasp and the wine in her glass sloshed over the rim, staining the tablecloth red. She should really stick to Chardonnay when I'm around. 'She has a child?' she croaked, placing her hand against her chest, closing her eyes and taking labored breathes, like she'd just been stabbed.

I smiled. 'Congratulations, Grandma.'

'Sweet Jesus!' she wailed.

'Yeah,' I said, getting up to leave. 'I had a feeling you'd say that.'

The last thing I heard as I fled the house was my mother angrily

berating my father, like the whole thing was his fault. ‘Stanley,’ she cried. ‘It’s going to be an absolute train wreck.’ Inadvertently proving one of her favorite axioms that even a stopped clock is right twice a day.