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How to Fall in Love

Written by Cecelia Ahern

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How to Fall in Love



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1

How to Talk a Man Down

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

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

brand of sorrow and Roy would have known better than anyone that it was highly likely that this highly unlikely misfortune could occur again. Which brings me to the point of my story; the first of my two highly unlikely events.

It was eleven p.m. on a freezing cold December night in Dublin and I found myself somewhere I had never been before. It is not a metaphor for my psychological state, though it would be apt; what I mean is that I literally had never geographically been to the area before. An ice-cold wind blew through the abandoned Southside housing development, causing an unearthly tune to play through broken windows and flapping scaffolding materials. There were gaping black holes where there should be windows, unfinished surfaces with menacing potholes and upturned flagstones, pipework-cluttered balconies and exit routes, wires and tubing that began randomly and ended nowhere, the place a stage set for tragedy. The sight alone, nothing to do with the minus-degree temperature, made me shudder. The estate should have been filled with sleeping families, lights out and curtains drawn; instead, the development was lifeless, evacuated by owners who had been left to live in ticking time-bombs with fire-safety concerns as long as the list of lies they were told by builders who failed to deliver on the promise of luxury living at boom-time prices.

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

Forty-five minutes later I stood outside again, shivering, trembling and waiting for the gardaí as the 999 operator had instructed me to do. I saw the ambulance lights in the

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

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

You see, Simon Conway was holding a gun when I came across him. I think I was more surprised to see him than he was about my sudden appearance in his abandoned home. He seemed to assume I'd been sent there by the police to talk to him, and I didn't tell him that wasn't the case. I wanted him to think I'd an army of people in the next room while he held that black weapon in his hand, waving it around as he talked while I fought hard not to duck, dive and at times run from the room. While panic and fear welled inside me, I tried to coax him, soothe him

into putting the gun down. We talked about his children, I did my best to show him a light in his darkness, and I managed to successfully talk Simon into putting the gun down on the kitchen counter so I could call the gardaí for help, which I did. When I hung up, something happened. My words, though innocent – and which I know now I should have left unsaid at that point – triggered something.

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

2

How to Leave Your Husband (Without Hurting Him)

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

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

it made me want to stop pretending, it made me want to be real and for everything in my life to be true and honest.

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

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

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

himself. In retrospect, Barry had more detailed questions about the shooting than about the end of our marriage.

His behaviour since then has surprised me, and my own astonishment equally shocked me, because I thought I was well-read on such matters. I had studied before this great big life test, I had read up on how we both would and could be feeling if I ever decided to end the marriage – just to prepare, to be aware, to figure out if it was the right decision. I've had friends whose marriages have ended, I've spent many late nights listening to both sides. Yet it never occurred to me that my husband would turn out to be the kind of man he became, that he would have a complete personality transplant, become as cold and vicious, as bitter and malicious as he has become. The apartment, which was ours, was now his; he would not let me step one foot inside it. The car which was ours was now his, he would not let me share it. And anything else that was ours, he was going to do everything in his power to keep. Even the things he didn't want. And that was a direct quote. If we'd had kids he would have kept them and never let me see them. He was specific about the coffee machine, possessive about the espresso cups, quite frantic about the toaster and had a rant about the kettle. I allowed him to flip out in the kitchen, as I did in the living room, the bedroom, and even when he followed me into the toilet to shout at me while I peed. I tried to remain as patient and as understanding as I possibly could. I was always a good listener, I could hear him out, what I wasn't so good at doing was explaining and I was surprised I needed to as much as he required. I was sure that deep down he felt the same about our marriage, but he was so hurt about it happening *to him* that he had forgotten how there were moments we both felt trapped in something that had been wrong from the

beginning. But he was angry, and anger often deafens the ears to reality; his did, anyway, so I waited out the fits of rage and hoped that at some point we could talk about it honestly.

I knew that my reasons were right but I could barely live with the pain I felt in my heart over what I'd done to him. So I had that, and the fact I had failed to stop a man from shooting himself, weighing heavily on my shoulders. It had been months since I'd slept properly, now it felt as though I hadn't slept *at all* in weeks.

'Oscar,' I said to the client sitting in the armchair across from my desk. 'The bus driver does not want to kill you.'

'He does. He hates me. And you wouldn't know because you haven't seen him or the way that he looks at me.'

'And why do you think that the bus driver feels this way about you?'

He shrugged. 'As soon as the bus stops, he opens the doors then glares at me.'

'Does he say anything to you?'

'When I get on, nothing. When I don't, he kind of grumbles at me.'

'There are times when you *don't* get on?'

He rolled his eyes and looked at his fingers. 'Sometimes my seat isn't free.'

'Your *seat*? This is new. What seat?'

He sighed, knowing he'd been found out, and confessed. 'Look, everyone on the bus stares, okay? I'm the only one who gets on at that stop and they all look at me. So because they all stare I sit in the seat behind the driver. You know, the sideways one that faces the window? It's like a window seat, all tucked away from the rest of the bus.'

'You feel safe there.'

'It's perfect. I could sit in that seat all the way into the

city. But sometimes there's this girl sitting there, this special needs girl, she listens to her iPod and sings Steps for the entire bus to hear. If she's there I can't get on and not just because special needs people make me nervous but because it's my seat, you know? And I can't see if she's on it until the bus stops. So I check the seat to see if it's free, then I get off if she's there. The bus driver hates me.'

'How long has this been going on?'

'I don't know, a few weeks?'

'Oscar, you know what this means. We're going to have to start this again.'

'Ah man,' he buried his face in his hands and slumped right down. 'But I was halfway into the city.'

'Be careful not to project your real anxiety on to another future fear. Let's knock this on the head straight away. So, tomorrow you are going to get on the bus. You are going to sit *anywhere* there is a free seat on the bus and you are going to sit on it for one stop. Then you can get off and walk home. The next day, Wednesday, you will get on the bus, sitting *anywhere*, and you will stay on it for two stops and then walk home. On Thursday you will stay on for three stops, and on Friday for four stops, do you understand? You have to take it bit by bit, small steps and you will eventually get there.'

I wasn't sure who I was trying to convince. Him or me.

Oscar slowly lifted his face up. It had drained of all colour.

'You can do this,' I said gently.

'You make it sound so easy.'

'And it's not easy for you, I understand that. Work on the breathing techniques. Soon it won't be so difficult. You will be able to stay on the bus all the way into the city, and that feeling of fear will be replaced by euphoria. Your

worst times will soon become your happiest because you will be overcoming huge challenges.'

He looked unsure.

'Trust me.'

'I do, but I just don't feel brave.'

'The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.'

'One of your books?' He nodded at the packed shelves of self-help books in my office.

'Nelson Mandela.' I smiled.

'Pity you're in recruitment, you would make a good psychologist,' he said, pulling himself up from the chair.

'Yeah, well, I'm doing this for both of us. If you can manage to sit on the bus for more than four stops it will broaden your job opportunities.' I tried to hide the tension from my voice. Oscar was a highly qualified whizz-kid scientist who I could easily get a job for – in fact I had, three times already – but due to his travel issues, his job opportunities were limited. I was trying to help him overcome his fears so I could finally place him in a job that he would show up to every day. He was afraid to learn how to drive and I couldn't stretch myself to becoming a driving instructor, but he had agreed to beat his public transport fear at least. I glanced at the clock over his shoulder. 'Okay, make an appointment for next week with Gemma, and I look forward to hearing about how you got on.'

As soon as the door closed behind him I dropped my smile and scoured the bookshelf for one of my 'How to . . .' collections. Clients marvelled at the amount of books I kept, and I believed I alone kept my friend Amelia's small bookshop open. The books were my bibles, my go-to fix-it helpers when I was personally lost or needed solutions for troubled clients. I'd been dreaming of writing one for the

past ten years but had never gotten any further than sitting at my desk and turning the computer on, ready, wired to tell my story, only to end up staring at the white screen and the flashing icon, the blankness before me mirroring my creative flow.

My sister Brenda said I was more interested in the idea of writing a book than actually writing it, because if I really wanted to write, I just would, every day, by myself, for myself, whether it was a book or not. She said a writer felt compelled to write whether they had an idea or not, whether they had a computer or not, whether they had a pen and paper or not. Their desire wasn't determined by a specific pen brand or colour or whether their latte had enough sugar in it or not – things that were distractions and obstacles to my creative process whenever I sat down to write. Brenda often came out with pathetic insights but I feared that for once her observation of me might be true. I wanted to write, I just didn't know if I could and if I ever made a start I was afraid I'd discover that I couldn't. I'd slept with *How to Write a Successful Novel* by my bed for months but I hadn't opened the pages once, afraid that not being able to follow the tips would mean I could never write a book, so I hid it in the bedside locker instead, parking that particular dream until the time was right.

I finally found what I was looking for on the shelf. *Six Tips on How to Fire an Employee (With Pictures)*.

I'm not sure the pictures helped, but I'd had a go at standing in front of the bathroom mirror and trying to emulate the concerned look on the employer's face. I studied the notes I'd made on a Post-it inside the front page, unsure whether I was going to be able to do this. My company, Rose Recruitment, had been in operation for four years and was a small practice of four people, and our secretary Gemma helped us function. I didn't want to let her go, but

due to increasing personal financial pressures I was having to consider it. I was reading my notes when there was a knock on the door, quickly followed by Gemma's entry.

'Gemma,' I squeaked, fumbling guiltily with the book in an effort to hide it from her. As I was stuffing it into an already crammed shelf, I lost my grip and sent it plummeting to the floor, where it landed at Gemma's feet.

Gemma giggled and bent down to pick up the book. Noting the title, she flushed. She looked at me, surprise, dread, confusion and hurt all passing on her face. I opened and closed my mouth, no words coming out, trying to remember which order the book had told me to break the news, the correct phrasing, the correct facial expressions, the tips, *clarity, empathy, not too emotional, communicate with candour or without candour?* But it took me too long and by then she already knew.

'Well, finally one of your stupid books worked,' Gemma said, her eyes filling as she dumped the book in my arms and turned, grabbed her bag and stormed out of the office.

Mortified, I couldn't help but be insulted by the emphasis on *finally*. I lived by these books. They worked.

'Maguire,' the unwelcoming voice barked down the phone.

'Detective Maguire, it's Christine Rose.' I put a finger in my free ear to block the sound of the ringing phone wailing through the wall from reception. Gemma still hadn't returned after storming out, and as I hadn't been able to bring everybody together to work out how to share Gemma's duties, my colleagues Peter and Paul were refusing to do the job of someone who had been unfairly dismissed. It was everyone against me, regardless how many times I told them it had been a mistake. 'I didn't mean to fire her . . . *today*' was not a good defence.

It was quite simply a disastrous morning. But although it was obvious I needed to keep Gemma on – something I was sure Gemma was trying to prove – my bank balance disagreed. I still had to pay half the mortgage on the home Barry and I owned together, and from that month on I would have to fork out an extra six hundred euro to rent a one-bedroom apartment while I waited for us to sort it all out. Considering we'd have to sell an apartment that nobody wanted, for an eventual price that neither of us could really survive on, I imagined I would be digging into my savings for a very long time. And even in the event desperate times called for desperate measures, Barry had already waged a war on my jewellery collection, taking every piece he had ever given me and keeping it for himself. That was the voicemail I'd woken up to that morning.

'Yeah?' was Maguire's response, far from ecstatic to hear from me, though I was surprised he remembered my name.

'I've been calling you for two weeks. I've left you messages.'

'I got them all right, they clogged up my voicemail. There's no need to panic. You're not in any trouble.'

That knocked me off. It hadn't crossed my mind that I would be in any trouble. 'That's not why I was calling.'

'No?' he feigned surprise. 'Because you still haven't explained to me what you were doing in a deserted apartment block on private property at eleven o'clock at night.'

I was silent as I mulled this over. Almost everybody I knew had asked me the same thing, those who hadn't were clearly wondering about it, and I hadn't given anybody an answer. I needed to change the subject quickly before he tried to pin me down on it again.

'I had been calling to ask for further details on Simon Conway. I wanted to know the funeral arrangements. I

couldn't find anything in the papers. But that was two weeks ago, so I've missed it.' I tried to keep the irritation out of my voice. I was calling him for more information, Simon had left an enormous hole in my life and endless questions in my head. I couldn't rest without knowing everything that had happened and had been said after that day, I wanted his family's details so I could tell them all the beautiful things he'd said about them, how he loved them so much and how his actions had nothing to do with them. I wanted to look them in the eye and tell them I had done all that I could. To ease their pain or ease my guilt? What was wrong with wanting both? I didn't want to sound so desperate as to ask Maguire those exact questions, and I knew he wouldn't tell me anyway, but I couldn't just draw a line under what I had experienced. I wanted, I needed *more*.

'Two things. Firstly, you shouldn't get so involved with any victim. I've been in this game a long time and—'

'Game? I watched a man *shoot himself in the head right before my very eyes*. This is not a *game* to me.' My voice cracked, which I took as a hint to stop.

There was silence. I cringed and covered my face. I'd blown it. I gathered myself and cleared my throat. 'Hello?'

I waited for a smart response, something cynical and cold, but it didn't come. Instead his voice was soft, the background wherever he was had gone quiet and I was worried everyone had stopped to listen to me.

'You know we have people in here to talk to after an event like this,' he said, gently for once. 'I told you that night. I gave you a card. Do you still have it?'

'I don't need to talk to anyone,' I said angrily.

'Sure.' He dropped the nice-guy act. 'Look, as I was saying before you interrupted me, there are no funeral

details. There was no funeral. I don't know where you got your information but they've been telling you porkies.'

'What do you mean?'

'Porky pies, lies.'

'No, what do you mean, there was no funeral?'

He sounded exasperated at having to explain something that was glaringly obvious to him. 'He didn't die. Yet, anyway. He's in hospital. I'll find out where. I'll put a call through to them to let them know you're able to see him. He's in a coma though, won't be doing much talking.'

I froze, speechless.

There was a long silence.

'Is there anything else?' He was on the move again, I heard a door bang and then he was back to the room with the loud voices.

I struggled to formulate a single thought as I slowly sank into my armchair.

And sometimes when you witness a miracle it makes you believe that anything is possible.