

# ONE

Well, Sailor. Here we are once more, you and me in one another's arms. The Earth rotates beneath us and all is well, for now. You don't understand yet that what we share is temporary. But I do. I close my eyes and I understand.

Past midnight. I am the only one awake in the house. You cause me such trouble but look at you, just look at you. Delicious, a passing woman once remarked, and I held you a little closer. I tell you all the time that I love you, but it's not enough. *I love you, yes? I love you, okay? I love you, are you listening? Do you understand?* I'll exhaust whatever time we have left together pummelling you with this assertion and never feel I have driven home my point. What is wrong with me?

I push my face into your hair, place my lips on your neck the better to absorb you and it feels stolen. Stolen from whom, I don't yet know. She will reveal herself in good time, in bad time, or maybe it will be a he. They will not be good enough for you and I will smile a brittle smile and keep this knowledge to myself. Whatever it takes to keep you in my life. I am trying to prepare myself. This is me trying to prepare myself.

Do you know what I would do for you? I hope not. What would I not do, is the question. The universe careens around us and I shield your sleeping body with my arms, ready to

proclaim to the heavens that I would kill for you: that I would kill others for you, that I would kill myself. I would even kill my husband if it came down to it. I swear every woman in my position feels the same. We all go bustling about, pushing shopping trolleys or whatever, acting like love of this voltage is normal; domestic, even. That we know how to handle it. But I don't.

I'm too old for you. I see that now. Now that it's finally time to grow up. I thought I was young but then you blazed into my life and that was the end of that. I can barely keep up the pace. I try, I do, but it goes hard on me. By the time darkness falls, I can't face my old enemy, the stairs. I slouch there, trying to summon the wherewithal. Yet every night, no matter how wrecked I am, I gaze at your sleeping face. Yes, yes, I know: we scream at each other from morning to night but my love for you swells its banks while you sleep. I murmur it to your sleeping body. Which is no good to you, but still. Here I sit. Have you any idea of your beauty? Photos never quite capture it.

I am worried that one day we won't speak. It happens all the time. You'll turn around some day and blame me for everything. Things that haven't happened yet will be my fault. What I have done and what I have failed to do. And I ask this: that we will always talk. Don't cut me out of your life. One day you will leave and that is as it should be. Part of me cannot wait. And then there's this part. I dreamt that our names were carved upon a stone anchor for all eternity. And in a way they are.

It is late and I am tired. There are things I must tell you. Bad things, dark things, things I have concealed. Your trust is so blind that it hurts. I almost left you once.

A bad confession is worse than none at all. I did leave you. There you were, all alone. The wrongness of this image rears up at me at off-guard moments – when I'm rinsing a cup or putting on a wash, you just lying there with your perfect skin. I wasn't myself. Still amn't. I waited until you were asleep because I could not do it to your face. You would drift off and I would slip away. That was the plan. Later you would wake and look for me but I would not be there, and I would never be there again.

It was our first Easter together. I had been looking forward to the break for weeks. Relying on it, in fact. Big mistake. I was setting myself up for a fall. The dark months of our early days had been more arduous than anything I had ever experienced or even known routinely happened to women in the Western world, dragging myself through the graveyard shift, wounded soldier that I was. But Easter was on the horizon and the longer days signalled that the ordeal was almost over, that we had gotten through it, we had survived, that everything was about to get brighter, warmer, easier, the world was on the brink of bursting into flower, and in this Eden our happiness – oh our *happiness*, Sailor! our clean, white *happiness* – would prevail. If we can just make it to Easter, I coached myself all January, February and March as I inched steadily towards the crevasse. There is always an idealised image in my head of how a thing will

be, but it never matches up to the reality.

You are the sole exception.

The discrepancy between my expectations and how Easter panned out made my subsequent dismay vengeful. Self-pity is a dangerous emotion. I should know. I saw in the small hours of Good Friday in a black rage, a malevolent force pacing the corridors of my own home. I was an exhausted woman exhausting myself further and I seem to have broken through some barrier that night because reality ceased to be reality, not that I understood that at the time. To my mind I had experienced a staggering revelation. Namely: I was just a woman. I was just a woman! How had this not registered before? A woman was of less value in this society than a man. A man's time was more important, he had more important things to do. It was now time to step back and let the man do his more important things. No, Sailor, marriage was not what I had anticipated marriage would be. You leave yourself open when you plight your troth to another person. You place your well-being on a level footing with theirs. If they don't meet you halfway, well. Well, well, well, I thought as I stared at the door my husband had shut in my face earlier that night. Well, well, well, it's like that, is it?

When they come, this person you think you want to spend your life with, I will be watching. I will be smiling, teeth bared.

No, I won't. I will be happy for you. You know I will.

Dawn arrived on Good Friday and with it despair – no sleep but I must face the day. Everything felt weird. Weirder than

usual: I hadn't had an unbroken night's sleep since you'd exploded onto the scene – I love you, but Jesus wept. If I could just have had six uninterrupted hours to myself, maybe none of this would have happened.

Four. I'd take four. Three.

These are not excuses. There is no excuse. None of this is your fault.

It feels good to talk to you this way all the same. To have this time with you. We are together all day but we never have *time*, if you know what I mean? Of course you don't. You hardly know what time is.

My husband had managed to sleep that night. I had heard him – I had *listened* to him on the other side of that door – snoring away in the box room, those snug, contented snores I used to find endearing, the two of us tucked up together in the same bed on a cold night, except we were no longer in the same room. And soon we would no longer be under the same roof, nor even under the same stars. I could not get my head around it: how could my husband sleep under the circumstances? How was it physically possible? I was too wired to even yawn. Wasn't the adrenaline coursing through his veins too, making him jumpy and wild? I wanted to bellow it at his door: *How can you sleep in there? When you don't know what you will wake to? All bets are off, don't you get it?*

He wasn't even tired. That was the killer. He wasn't the one up every night. I kept slapping the crook of my arm with my hand, like a junkie drumming up veins, to stop myself from doing something stupid. These details are only coming

back now. It sounds demented because it was. Up and down I paced outside the box room slapping my arm and sort of panting, sharp shallow huffs as I tried to . . . what? Contain myself? I had never found myself uncontainable before. I had never been afraid of what I might do next. I gasped with the effort of not screaming, of not hurting myself, of not going in there and hurting him. I wanted to so much that I moaned. He should know what he had done to my world. I am just a woman, I rasped over and over in astonishment, hardly able to credit it. My husband had demonstrated this cold, hard truth to me. I wonder whether you can die of resentment, Sailor? Not instantly, but over time. Can it damage cells and trigger cancer? Weaken your heart? There were times when I resented my husband so much, I worried it'd kill me. If I didn't kill him first. Look at him, in there sleeping again. He'd been sleeping all winter. The more he slept, the more I seethed. The more I seethed, the less I slept. I kept blinking in the early days, do you remember that? Sometimes you used to smile and blink back, thinking it was a signal we were exchanging. I was squeezing my eyes shut to try to dispel the murky film that seemed to have built up on them. Nothing dispelled it. I made mental notes to replace the lightbulbs with brighter ones but do you think I could get around to it? It's gone, the murk. It was just exhaustion, the body diverting its energy. Or something. What do I know? Don't listen to me. As I've said, it was an ordeal and I am sorry that at a delicate time in your life the person you needed most was a mess. I got confused once when I caught sight of my coat

hanging on the back of a chair in the kitchen. I clapped my hands to my head, wondering how I was over there if I was right here.

'My husband,' I said, stepping back from the box-room door as if I had finally outed the real villain of the piece. It was as great a revelation in its own way as the revelation that I was just a woman. 'My *husband*.' The more I said it, the more peculiar the syllables sounded, until they detached themselves from their original meaning and became the noun describing the changeling that had replaced the man I loved. My *husband*: the enemy within, he who has taken me down. I cocked my head at the door, ears attuned to the snores, thinking: who is this individual? Where did he come from, this *husband* who has seen fit to finish me? Although he had been in my life longer than you, he felt provisional in a way you never could.

Is that wrong?

When my husband woke that morning I felt afraid. Not of him, never of him, but of the next act. It was time. You hardly knew what time was but it was time. He rose promptly when his alarm went off at six thirty but I remained lying in bed, tracking his movements around the house. Showering, eating breakfast, as if it were a day like any other. He was going, of all places, to work. My husband was not expected in the office that day. We had made plans but he was making a point: that his plans no longer included me. The fight the night before had been shocking. I understood that I was in shock. I understood that a lot of pain was coming down

the line – the train tracks were humming with it – but that it hadn't kicked in yet. The fight was over you, Sailor. We fought day and night over you. He'd had it, he'd informed me in a voice so unfamiliar it threw me. It was robotic in tone, an automated simulation, but it was coming out of his mouth. I stared at him in fright, witnessing – in my head, at least – a chilling phenomenon: the real man breaking through the facade he had deceived me with. He had sheared off his hair at some point that day, shaved it off himself with the clippers in the garage, a man heading off to war. There he stood, a steely-eyed mercenary in the doorway of the living room, my *husband*, wearing that cut-off hoodie because he'd been training again – he trained fanatically once you came on the scene. What was he training *for*? Night after night he was down in that garage doing whatever it was he did out there, getting leaner, stronger, harder. Defining himself in opposition to me, this wife who had grown weepy and soft. With the knotty arms and the buzz cut, he looked like a thug, an intruder in our home.

'It's like this,' the real him spelled out in no uncertain terms, one hand on the door handle and the other gripping the frame, because he was not about to set foot in the same room as this wife if he could avoid it. He had already moved his belongings to the box room. 'I want you out in the morning. From now on, we communicate through solicitors.'

'That isn't how this works,' was my reply. I blinked and I blinked but it wasn't the murk: my husband's hair was going grey. I had not noticed until that moment. Then, with



scathing courtesy, he wished me a good night and shut the door.

I felt no love for him then. I mentally patted my pockets as I slouched on the couch we had picked together that had a *his* and *her* side. Do I love him, I asked myself, and trawled through my body with my mind's eye as if an emotion could be located within the physical self, which, in this case, it could not.

He was so cruel that night. Yet I cannot call my husband a cruel man. I almost did not know him once you entered our lives, no more than I knew myself.

Little by little, the shock wore off.

By midnight, I was frantic. Said all that. By morning, I was resolute.

As soon as the front door closed I sprang from the bed, showered, put on make-up, did my hair, the works, fuelled by a manic energy. I raced through every room in the house, throwing open the curtains. The early morning light was somehow unsound. I was unable for it. The clock had gone forward the weekend before and I felt like I'd crossed several time zones. The dawn light penetrated the rooms in unfamiliar configurations, as if the house had tilted, projecting queer shadows too high up on the walls, and into the recesses of my head, casting light on matters I hadn't noticed before, specifically the ugly side that had been revealed of my husband, and the ugly side that had been revealed of me. My God, we *hated* each other. All along, we had been harbouring these unplumbed reservoirs of *hate* – I cannot tell

you what a fright this discovery was. You think you know someone, Sailor. You think you love them. You think they love you. Although I was standing in my own house, I felt myself to be very far from home. If home is a place of safety and sanctuary, then I was as far from it as I had ever been.

I stood by the fireplace biting what was left of my nails. I didn't cry – I was wearing mascara. Our living room and everything in it looked staged, a theatre set. I didn't buy it for a minute.

I ate my breakfast standing up, staring at myself chewing in the mantelpiece mirror. Been a while since I'd seen myself in make-up. An abrupt laugh although nothing was funny. I sounded mad so abruptly stopped, which sounded madder still. I put my cup and bowl in the dishwasher and then fished them back out. I washed them. I dried them. I returned them to the cupboard. Left no trace. My husband's breakfast dishes remained untouched in the sink. He generally cleans up after himself. I'll give him that.

What a treasure. It's so low, Sailor. The bar for men is set so low.

The place was strewn with my belongings, stuff that had gathered there because I had gone beyond sorting it out. Chaos was the medium I inhabited once you entered my life, once you became it. I swiped the chaos into black plastic sacks, dumped the sacks in the boot of the car. Back upstairs to reef all my clothes off their hangers. Seams ripped, buttons pinged. My clothes, some of them beautiful, no longer fit me. Loss of self, loss of self – hard to bear. I bagged them up, out

of sight, out of mind. I stuffed that sack into the boot too and blinked at it. Like a dead body, I thought, which it kind of was. I loved those clothes, loved the girl I had been in them, but she was gone. Up the stairs, down, up again, down – I was going about things in a haphazard fashion, making work for myself. Didn't matter. The main thing was to keep moving.

I placed the wedding photograph face down. Stripped the marital bed and put the linen on a boil wash. I hoovered up every trace of myself that I could find, poking the nozzle into corners and behind furniture. So much of my hair. Everywhere I looked there was more of it, a fine tracery veiling the floor the way the murky film veiled my eyes. The amount that had fallen out. I tried not to care. It's just hair, I told myself. Doesn't matter. Don't stop. The train tracks had started to thrum. Something big was coming down the line.

I extracted the bag of hair and dust from the hoover and threw it not in the wheelie bin by the back door but the litter bin at the end of the street. It had rained overnight and I had forgotten to take off my slippers. The wet pavement destroyed the soft soles so I threw them in the bin too and tiptoed back in my socks. I was wild, Sailor, I was out of my mind. I wish I knew where I got the energy. If I did, I would go back and get more.

When I was finished, my house – no, not my house any more – the house was in order. The cushions, they were plumped. The place looked great. I liked that house. It was a good house. No one could pin it on the house. It had surfaces again, polished surfaces reflecting the morning light.

The clean lines of my old life. You don't know what you've got till it's gone. Now there's a lesson only learned the hard way. I missed my old cat all of a sudden, though she was as dead as the girl I used to be. You think you're over something when out of nowhere a tentacle grips you. Skeins of pain unspooling across time: there is no end to it, Sailor. We are walking landmines. My old cat. It's stupid. What I wouldn't have given to feel her warm mass in my arms again. The urgency of that need scared me because I haven't yet lost a person who is close and if this is how bad the death of a cat is? Well. But I didn't cry: the mascara. I stood there, hugging myself. Then I opened all the windows, not sure why. It was time to face you.

When I saw you, I let on that nothing was wrong. I smiled, might have even sung. I wanted you to remember a warm presence, if you would remember me at all. And you responded, you always did. Your capacity for joy is a thing I prize in you, a quality I am determined to protect. You beamed back at me, your innocence recalling that of Ming, my poor cat. You know her, actually – she's the one in the photo. I offered her up to the vet one wet winter evening, holding her down as she struggled to escape, assuring her that everything would be fine while the vet shaved her dainty foreleg and inserted a needle. She was dead within seconds. I hadn't realised it would happen so fast. I thought she would fade away peacefully in my arms while I murmured to her that she was the best, most loving and loyal cat ever – while I thanked her, essentially, while I told her all the things she deserved to be

told – but no, she flopped on the table and banged her head. I gathered her up and she seemed to be looking at me, staring out in panic from her paralysed body. ‘Is she still alive?’ I asked the vet in horror. ‘Is she still alive?’ I asked again when he didn’t answer. He reached out and closed her eyes with the sweeping gesture of a hypnotist.

I’m always the one asking stupid questions. The world seems so much clearer to everybody else. I have no aptitude for the practicalities of this life. What can I possibly offer you?

Nothing. Everything. The whole of my heart.

I carried my dead darling through the packed waiting room that had terrorised her only minutes earlier, wiping my eyes and nose with the back of my hand as I paid the bill. I drove home with her curled up on the passenger seat growing cold and stiff and somehow hollow, and it was desperate, Sailor, so desperate, so grim, not the way to end things after all that I owed her. We set out in life believing we will forge so many enduring bonds when really we are blessed with so few, no more than three or four if we are lucky, and one of mine was with a cat. The only bond she got to forge was with me and she gave that her all. Ming was old and suffering and her kidneys were failing. Putting her to sleep was the merciful thing to do. Birth, death – you only get one shot. I got her death wrong and I cannot make it right. I know I’m talking about what I did to her to avoid talking about what I did to you but she sprang to mind when I saw you that morning because she had blindly trusted me too.

Around eleven, the pair of us headed out together. It was an unusually lovely day, or maybe it was just a normal one but I had acclimatised to everything being dire. It had been a harsh winter, the coldest on record apparently, but don't they say that every year? This was the coldest winter, that was the wettest spring, here comes an apocalyptic summer. I threw a blanket into the car to be safe. The back seat was jammed with the bin bags that wouldn't fit in the boot. I couldn't see out of the rear-view mirror as I reversed.

I knew where I wanted to bring you – I had given it some consideration the night before and chosen the cliff path for its beauty, a place you might want to return to some day after the dust had settled – and then we were in one another's arms once more. I held onto you for too long and not long enough. I should never have let you go. Nothing in my life had ever felt so good. The world rotated beneath us and we were the world. You did not yet understand that what we shared was temporary, that it was in fact drawing to an end. But I did.

I closed my eyes and I understood.

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Your dear head resting in the crook of my arm. Me, treasuring its weight. My thumb stroking your cheekbone, your temple, your brow. The blanket outspread on the verge beneath us; the warmth of the sun on our skin. I understood then why people used to smile when they saw us. We were beautiful together, you and I. We were the most beautiful thing I had