

Lots of things die. I don't have a problem with that. You let go. A pet rabbit, an ambition, a parent. Whatever. Sooner or later Truffles will nibble his last lettuce leaf and greet you in the morning with his little pink eyes half-closed, his paws cold and stiff, a fleck of red on his whiskers. That's the way it goes. You know too that outside the numb, cotton wool rooms of your mind, the real you – not the you you sometimes imagine yourself to be – won't dare quit that safe job in the bank and set up instead on your own as the proprietor of a small but defiantly independent bookshop. Insert own fantasy here. And Dad won't be around forever to show you how to bring your lawn back from the brink or how to love a woman and still be a man's man – no, I don't have a problem with any of that. You let go.

Relationships die too. Not Mam and Dad's, obviously, but other people's. Theirs didn't die until they did. My folks spent their lives gazing at each other. Maybe that was what got to me. No matter what I had with Sarah, it would never be as good as the infuriatingly beautiful aura that seemed to cushion and nurture my parents for as long as they both lived. An aura that comforted me as a child, embarrassed me as a teenager and stalked me as an adult as if looking for a home that it refused to believe I, a manifestation of itself, couldn't provide for it. It had more faith in me than I did.

At our best, Sarah and I were a bargain basement version of my parents. We seemed fine – no not just fine, better than that – but we didn't really stand up to close scrutiny. Not that anyone did much scrutinising. Not our friends. Not us. Certainly not me. If it ain't broke. Or at least, if it ain't broke completely. The odd rattle; you could live with that. Every couple rattles a little bit if you shake it hard enough, right? You go through the motions and eventually even the rattles become a comfort. They're better than the other times. The times you look at her and your insides seem to give way like a bad knee because you know you need her so much. Those exceptional, often lust- or drink-fuelled, times that you swear to yourself are the reason you're still together. But you're really together in spite of them, not because of them. They only make things worse. They remind you that most of the time – nearly all of the time – it's not like that. The rattles are better. They don't threaten. They tell you that you're normal. That other thing, that admission of, and submission to, some sort of helplessness is just too intimidating. It's only for people on TV. They deal with it in their lives so that we don't have to in ours, and even they get to take a week off between heart-rending crises. Meanwhile, we just pretend that we're functional and aware as we reheat yesterday's chicken slop with rice and eat it on the sofa with a glass or two of the cheap Cabernet that will do for a Tuesday evening, watching them strut and pout and hurt each other on the screen for our delectation.

I shouldn't have had the cheap Cabernet that night, but I did. I told myself, even as I started into the second half of the second glass, that I could still be out of the house before she arrived, knowing damn well that she'd be here any minute and that I wasn't going anywhere. The quiet house, the flickering fire, the thought of her on the sofa beside me where she always used to sit. Put them all together with the wine and you've got me feeling a bit lonely and primed to do something stupid. I was going to hang around instead of escaping to the pub to meet Paul as agreed. Cheap Cabernet that was just tart enough to mask the cardboard taste of two-day-old korma, and just strong enough to make me want to try and get her back, and make me forget or ignore how wrong that would be. You know when you're being stupid. I knew. Even before I heard two voices in the porch instead of just hers, I knew that I should have just gone out and met Paul.

Breaking up after four years had taken the best part of Saturday afternoon. Just after lunch, as I was about to go back out and tackle that overgrown bastard of a back garden again with our push mower, she asked me to sit back down. She was standing at the sink, cradling her mug of coffee like it was a precious bauble. I turned and sat, hearing something tight in her voice. A million thoughts rushed past, far too fast for any one of them to register, but I knew what was happening as soon as I looked at her. She was crying, just looking at me. She was doing it. Even as she started to speak I watched her in wonder. So brave. I could never have done it. Never. I didn't have the guts. I loved her more than ever just then. So brave. So right.

A couple of hours later she was getting into a taxi, face cleaned and a small night bag clutched to her lap. She was going to her mother's. She'd call. I saw her lean forward to the driver and he turned the car, using my driveway, and then she was gone. I watched them move up the street, remembering the driver's judging eyes as they caught mine from halfway up the driveway. Then I went out the back, pushing the lawnmower around with arms that felt too light and following it on legs that felt too heavy, the smell of the piled grass sickly sweet in my head. It always used to remind me of being young in the Summertime. Not that it probably would any more.

We died slowly, that was the thing. A torrid affair, an admission of confused sexuality, a furious row complete with flung crockery and stinging, vicious words – any of these would have lent our death a certain dignity. It would have been quick and painful, our sudden extrication sparking like static. But we couldn't even grace our separation with that much. We died as we had lived, like strangers. Slowly and politely. Never quite sure. We sat at the table, looking at our cold tea and avoiding each other, as was our wont. We could do that. Lots of practice there. Soon her tears stopped dripping onto the placemat. Then the tissue was put away. And then her eyes

were dry and she had finished mourning us. I hadn't even started and didn't know if I would.

It can't have been more than a second after she used the word 'over' that I first wondered if there was someone else. Staring at a toast crumb that she'd missed from breakfast, knowing that the biggest change of my life was taking place right then and there, I was only half-listening to us both muttering on about what was best. I stole glances at her and tried to find the nerve to ask her. Eventually I did and she said no. There was no one else. She didn't look me in the eye but, for us, that meant nothing. I only knew the colour of her eyes from memory. I wanted to believe her more than I wanted things to be okay between us. It was more important. We'd already agreed that we were finished. We'd fizzled out. We'd failed. I could handle that failure because it was ours. Another guy, though; that was different. If she was seeing someone else, then the failure was all mine. I was okay with things like drifting apart and moving on and it not working and all that bollocks that really means you just couldn't be bothered any more, but some mysterious stranger stealing her away from me was a different thing entirely. That cast aspersions on my manhood. It suddenly introduced biceps and cars and penises into the equation and was probably the one thing that could turn my quiet relief at our passing into a jealous, fuming rage. But she said there was no one and so my emasculation balanced on her word.

I was halfway down the hall when the door swung open and she stood, her eyes wide, like I'd walked in on something just by being at home, which I suppose I had. Would Paul still be waiting for me down the road? It didn't matter. I wasn't leaving now. I needed to find out who this guy in my porch was. After four years you'd expect to know all her friends, right? But this guy, someone I didn't even know to see, was the one to whom she had turned to help her pack four years of her life into that medium-sized suitcase she was carrying and move on. There was silence for a minute and I was just beginning to think that it was a good thing that I didn't know his name or exactly what role, if any, he was to play in what used to be my future, but soon I was denied even that trifling comfort.

Colin. The introductions were curt. Colin, Jason. Hello. Hello. A small nod. He looked like a Colin. Colin's from work, she said, and I nodded again. Ah. Work. And what was his job here, in my house, tonight? She was looking at me, still surprised that I was home. I was looking at Colin; his manner, his embarrassment, even a quick peek at his crotch where I half expected to find some wild beast at rest, it's rippling form straining the fabric. I found nothing. He was just Colin and he was just looking down and picking at a piece of fluff that wasn't there on the front of his shirt. Was he the reason? This nondescript, middling Colin? He was my twin. Earnest.

Anglican. Just five years away from his first cardigan. A hairstyle to make the most of things. I remember not being able to decide whether or not he would be preferable to someone else. Some Anti-Me. Assuming that he was the One. Assuming that there was a One in spite of what she'd said. Then she went upstairs to start filling the case, and I was bemused to find myself sitting in the armchair as Colin tried to make himself comfortable in my spot on the sofa. I reached for my wine in front of him and apologised that the bottle, my last, was empty out in the kitchen. He rattled a set of keys and mumbled something sensible, thanking me anyway.

I offered him tea as we sat and listened quietly to the faint thumps from upstairs. He declined with another solemn, polite murmur but I went out to put the kettle on anyway just to get away from the clinging air that hung between us. I waited until it had boiled and then, ignoring it, went back inside to him, slamming the door behind me. Was I trying to make him uncomfortable? God, it wasn't like he needed help. Neither of us did, but at least I had the advantage of home turf and the wine. I turned back to the muted TV. Someone in the Middle East was agitated about something and we both lip-read with interest rather than address any potential confrontation of our own.

I could look at him properly now, on the sofa. Not my twin. I've never worn slip-on shoes and even from where I sat I could see that there was no tell tale dot on his left lobe where a ring once adorned his personality as one did mine, years ago, when I felt my disposition lacked some such decoration. Funny; it probably didn't call for it at all back then. It screams for it now, but the hole is closed, the ring long lost and anyway my temperament is probably beyond the reach of trinkets. Colin could have done with some ornament, though. It was as though my daughter was getting ready upstairs, her young suitor sweating and trying not to offend. I looked at him, trying to find things about which I could rationally disapprove. There wasn't much. Not much of anything, in fact, so that would have to do. Colin didn't inspire any stance with regard to himself. His only distinguishing aspect was upstairs in my bedroom, and so I disliked him for that for the moment and tried to convince myself that I was more remarkable than he and that that was important.

Then she was standing in the lounge doorway, the case in her left hand and her body leaning far to the right, for balance. Four years didn't take up much space, but it did look heavy. She put it down then and we both stood up, not sure what was next. All I could think about, was whether or not she'd have brought him if she'd known I was going to be there. And what would have happened if it had just been her and me and the red red wine going to my head. Then I realised that his being there – in my house – wasn't even the point. His place in her life was the point.

Her CDs were already in a small carry bag. That was my contribution to her flight. It was probably more symbolic than anything. An admission that she wasn't coming back. I'd done it, sober, on Sunday night. It was easy, taking less than five minutes. All her CDs have girl vocalists. None of mine do. It wasn't going to put much of a dent in her workload this Tuesday evening, but I packed them up for her anyway. I suppose an American would have called it part of the healing process. They have a name for everything. I just did it because I wanted to.

Then we were all back in the hall again, Sarah having insisted that Colin take the small CD bag, leaving herself to hold that heavy case and lean awkwardly to the right once more. A week earlier I would have made a joke about that. Sarah voted Green. The door was open and she finally handed Colin the heavy case to bring out to his car. He shuffled off, relieved, and she turned to me. I could feel her looking at me, but I was watching Colin walk down the garden. She knew what was on my mind. Of course she did. She told me that Colin was just a friend, her hand on my arm. Just a friend, helping to get this stuff around to her mother's. I looked down and tried a smile that probably didn't come out right. Her eyes were wet. Not spilling over, just glistening in the hall light. I found myself wanting to hold her – for my comfort, not hers – but I didn't. I wanted to mourn us now, but I knew I'd have to do it alone. It was vintage Jason and Sarah. We never could quite get it together. Even right then at the end.

It was the apathy. The laziness. That was the creeping sickness that killed us. Our resolve to make do, not to rock the boat. To settle for things the way they were and hope that we be spared, as much as possible, those bad-knee moments of clarity that freakish couples like my parents considered par.

I found myself looking through the open door at the car starting up, wondering up to what stage we could have fixed things. Wondering if we could ever have been fixed. Wondering, if not her, then who? And of course, much more than anything else, wondering about Colin. Could I believe her? His hand had gone to steady her when she half slipped on a puddle getting into the car. He was ready. I would have been opening my own door, oblivious. He cares for her, I could see that. But what about her? Just a friend, she'd said, but I looked at Colin and I knew what he wanted. I still couldn't read her though, no more than than at any time in the past few years. All I had were her assurances. She'd do that for me. She'd assure me. She'd spare me my insecurities.

Colin turned the car in my driveway, just like the taxi driver had. Sandra was looking down, but he caught my eye. No judgment this time, though. I searched intently, briefly, for anything that might have resembled victory in his face, but I

couldn't find it. Something gnawed at me, though. Whatever he had become to her he was keeping it to himself, but that car in my driveway still grated. I closed the door and went back into the lounge, feeling the heat from the fire on my face. Someone else was mouthing irate allegations at me now from the TV. I filled my wine glass again with the last quarter of the bottle from the kitchen, not in the least ashamed of my earlier lie. I thought about him for an hour, gradually winning myself over. She couldn't have left me for him. I knew him. I could see him folding his trousers every night, never eating after nine, or having a drink before six. He was Sunday afternoon and paisley socks and Kipling poems. She couldn't have. Not me. Not for him.

I went to bed then, too drunk for a Tuesday but happily convinced by her words, my pride and the cheap Cabernet that he was just some guy from work. I stared at the black ceiling, finally thinking about Sarah and me, and not about Sarah and him. We'd talked on Saturday about always being friends. A nice idea, but I knew it wouldn't work out. If not Colin, then there would be someone else eventually. As her friend, I'd be expected to be around, to approve and discuss, and I knew I could never do that. We'd drift as friends as we had drifted before. If the only aspect of our relationship and its demise that could worry me was some perceived deficit of virility on my part, then I was hardly likely to dwell on a lesser affiliation with her. Anyway I'm not much one for having lots of pals.

I lay there, smug and confident, my manhood still whole, and saw his taillights disappear down the road in my mind. Bringing Sarah to her mother's home and closure – as the Americans would have it – to mine. I hadn't been able to help noticing that my car was worth twice his, and that felt good too. I saw his eyes on me from the driveway; the only intimidation that night had been his. I dozed and conjured up a happy future. All the changes I'd make. This was my big chance, next time would be different, all that; and I was almost asleep when my chest was suddenly gripped and my eyes flew open and I finally knew the cold truth.

It came to me then. A voracious jealousy that I knew would slowly consume me. A passion that, had I been capable of anything remotely like it when we were together, would have changed everything. Her words and my own pitiable vanity had swayed me, but my eyes had seen it all along, twice, in my driveway. I wasn't smug and confident any more. I wasn't hard and strong. I thought about those two cars turning and driving away up the street and about her mother's house, which lay in the opposite direction.

I sensed myself then, small and shriveled and impotent and, at last, knew grief.