

# DOLLY



# ALDERTON

# GOOD

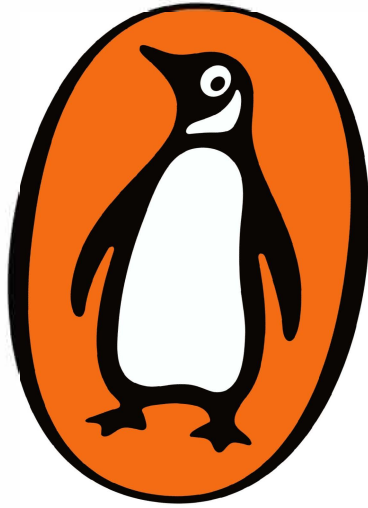


**'LEAVES YOU HEARTSORE BUT HAPPIER.  
IRRESISTIBLE' RICHARD E. GRANT**

# MATERIAL

**'THIS IS THE GREATEST. YOU'LL  
CRY AND LAUGH. I READ IT  
THROUGH THE NIGHT. AND  
I NEVER, EVER AVOID SLEEP'  
CLAUDIA WINKLEMAN**

**FROM THE BESTSELLING  
AUTHOR OF *EVERYTHING I KNOW  
ABOUT LOVE AND GHOSTS***



## About the Author

Dolly Alderton is an award-winning author, screenwriter and journalist based in London. She is a columnist for the *Sunday Times Style* and has also written for *GQ*, *Red*, *Marie Claire* and *Grazia*. She is the former co-host and co-creator of the podcast *The High Low*. Her first book *Everything I Know About Love* became a top-five *Sunday Times* bestseller in its first week of publication, won a National Book Award (UK) for Autobiography of the Year and was made into a BBC One TV series. *Ghosts*, her first novel, was published by Fig Tree in 2020. *Dear Dolly*, a collection of her agony aunt columns from the *Sunday Times Style* magazine, was also a *Sunday Times* bestseller.

*By the same author*

NON-FICTION

Everything I Know About Love

Dear Dolly

FICTION

Ghosts

Dolly Alderton

---

GOOD MATERIAL



# Contents

## Summer 2019

[Reasons Why It's Good I'm Not With Jen](#)

[Friday 5th July 2019](#)

[Monday 27th July 2015](#)

[Saturday 6th July 2019](#)

[Wednesday 10th July 2019](#)

[Saturday 13th July 2019](#)

[Sunday 14th July 2019](#)

[Tuesday 16th July 2019](#)

[Saturday 20th July 2019](#)

[Sunday 21st July 2019](#)

[Wednesday 24th July 2019](#)

[Friday 26th July 2019](#)

[Monday 29th July 2019](#)

[Wednesday 31st July 2019](#)

[Friday 2nd August 2019](#)

[Saturday 3rd August 2019](#)

[Sunday 4th August 2019](#)

[Thursday 8th August 2019](#)

[Saturday 10th August 2019](#)

[Thursday 22nd August 2019](#)

[Saturday 24th August 2019](#)

## Autumn 2019

[Friday 6th September 2019](#)

[Saturday 7th September 2019](#)

[Thursday 12th September 2019](#)

[Saturday 14th September 2019](#)

[Wednesday 18th September 2019](#)  
[Saturday 28th September 2019](#)  
[Friday 4th October 2019](#)  
[Monday 7th October 2019](#)  
[Friday 11th October 2019](#)  
[Tuesday 15th October 2019](#)  
[Friday 18th October 2019](#)  
[Monday 21st October 2019](#)  
[Monday 28th October 2019](#)  
[Saturday 2nd November 2019](#)  
[Friday 15th November 2019](#)  
[Saturday 16th November 2019](#)  
[Sunday 17th November 2019](#)  
[Reasons Why It's Good I'm Not With Jen](#)

#### [Winter 2019/2020](#)

[Saturday 7th December 2019](#)  
[Saturday 14th December 2019](#)  
[Friday 31st January 2020](#)  
[Reasons Why It's Good I'm Not With Andy](#)  
[Friday 31st January 2020](#)

#### [Acknowledgements](#)

#### [Permissions](#)

*For Lauren Bensted, queen of my heart*



*I expect you've seen the footage: elephants,  
finding the bones of one of their own kind  
dropped by the wayside, picked clean by scavengers  
and the sun, then untidily left there, decide to do  
something about it. But what, exactly? They can't, of  
course, reassemble the old elephant magnificence;  
they can't even make a tidier heap. But they can  
hook up bones with their trunks and chuck them  
this way and that way. So they do. And their  
scattering has an air  
of deliberate ritual, ancient and necessary.  
Their great size, too, makes them the very  
embodiment of grief, while the play of their trunks  
lends sprezzatura. Elephants puzzling out the  
anagram of their own anatomy, elephants at their  
abstracted lamentations – may their spirit guide me  
as I place  
my own sad thoughts in new, hopeful arrangements.*

*– A Scattering, Christopher Reid*

**SUMMER 2019**

# Reasons Why It's Good I'm Not With Jen

Can't dance. Has no rhythm at all. Used to find it adorable until I saw people laughing at her and hate to say I was embarrassed.

Once overheard her say 'Let's grab a cappuccino some time and we'll talk' to my teenage cousin who wanted advice about his university applications.

Generally has quite nineties ideas about what is glamorous, like cocktails or spending twenty pounds on a plate of tagliatelle in a 'little place'.

Refuses to get to the airport a minute earlier than ninety minutes before a flight takes off.

Don't have to persuade her to like where we live any more.

When she would go for a run in the evening she would come into the living room, stretch in front of the TV and say 'What's this?' and make me explain the programme I was watching even though she knew what it was, just to make a point that she was exercising while I was watching *Help, I'm a Hoarder!*

Talked too much and too smugly about coming from a big family, as if it was her decision to have three siblings.

Always used to boast about how she'd reject an OBE if it were offered to her because of her apparent lefty republican values but would never know why she'd be offered an OBE in this fantasy when I asked her.

Would definitely never reject an OBE if it were offered to her.

Would take an hour to go to bed, no matter what time she got in, because she'd do a seven-step skincare routine, browse shopping apps and listen to podcasts. And yet only left twenty minutes from her alarm going off to having to leave the flat in the morning.

Always late for me, never late for work.

Can't drive (childish).

Somehow managed to relate the plot of every film we watched back to her own life.

Her unbearable sister Miranda who carries nonsensical homemade signs at protests saying things like HISTORY IS WATCHING and who I know hates me because she always ranted about 'straight white guys' when she came round for dinner, no matter the topic. She used to say 'Sorry, Andy' but didn't by the end.

Her work friends: boring and cliquy and not fun *or* funny.

All talk about being some big adventurer but never followed through. Wanted to take a year off to travel because she never had a gap year ('next year'). Wanted to move to Paris ('not the right time'). Wanted to get an undercut ('work wouldn't like it'). Wanted to go to an outdoor sex-themed rave ('when my hay fever gets better').

Goes to therapy every week and has done since she was twenty-nine but would never tell me what they spoke about and I've never seen that she has anything wrong with her.

Was too connected to dogs and spoke to them as if they were people.

Her rude dad.

Her weird mum.

Comes from a family who go on long circular walks and play board games.

Annoyingly loquacious and was on a debating team at her school, which meant I didn't win an argument in nearly four years even when I was right about loads of them.

Always on at me about biting my nails, picking my feet, too much hair in my nostrils and bum hole etc., despite the fact she's always fiddling with her cuticles.

Talked at the cinema.

Pretended she's unsure about wanting children because she cares about the planet, but I think she just didn't want children with me.

Would never talk seriously about having children, despite knowing how much I want to be a dad, but would sometimes say 'That's one of my baby names' to people in conversation.

Those baby names included: Noah, Blue (?) and Zebedee.

Snob. Once said that she thought people who wear straw hats at the airport on the way to their summer holiday are 'regional'.

Lingered too long in museums at every artefact or painting and would have a go at me if I walked through the exhibition too quickly.

Once saw her nod respectfully at a TINY JADE SPOON in the British Museum.

Only saw her cry a handful of times in nearly four years together and it wasn't when we broke up.

One time was when we were watching a Joni Mitchell documentary.

Ruined my life.

## Friday 5th July 2019

There is a jumper and a shirt hanging on the washing line in my mum's garden that look like they're holding hands in the breeze. I stand at my bedroom window and watch their interplay change with the direction of the wind. I watch until exactly 7.03 p.m., when I pick up the phone to the woman I've loved for three years, ten months and twenty-nine days, who dumped me and smashed my heart like a sinewy piñata eight days and twenty-two hours ago.

We agreed I would call at seven but I wait until three minutes past to make a point that she doesn't get to call the shots any more. I scroll to her name in my phonebook: Jen (Hammersmith). We found it funny – my chosen life partner, reduced to a borough. It's not funny now it's lost all its irony. It's just a fact. I am about to call Jen (Hammersmith), a woman who I would probably never be friends with, who lives in a part of London I would never visit.

'Hello?'

'Hey,' I say, my voice breaking like a bagpipe. 'It's Andy.'

'I know.'

'Have you deleted my number already?'

'No? Why would I delete your number?'

'I don't know, just the way you picked up the phone and said "Hello?" like that, so formally, like you're answering the phone at a dental practice.'

'I didn't say "Hello?", I said "Hello!"'

'No you didn't, you said it like a question, like you were unsure of who was ringing.'

'I knew you were ringing. We agreed on the time.'

'I just thought because I was ringing later than we planned ...'

'We said seven,' she says brightly. 'And I know your number anyway.'

‘Why?’

‘Because at the beginning I used to delete your number all the time, so I ended up accidentally memorizing it.’

I think back to the conversation we had a few months into our relationship, straight after we told each other we loved each other for the first time. She admitted she used to delete my number after every time I texted, so she didn’t see my name on her phone and obsess over when I was going to message again. I don’t understand how this is happening. I want to go back there. How do they time-travel in the films? I’ll do anything. Fall from a great height. Electrocute myself. Go into a cupboard and spin around ten times. I suppress a sob and it sounds like a hiccup.

‘Oh, Andy,’ she says.

‘I’m fine,’ I say, honking like a bagpipe again. ‘How’s Miranda’s?’

‘It’s okay. The spare room is where the baby sleeps now, so I’m in the living room on a blow-up mattress, but it’s all right.’

‘Are you surrounded by placards that say “History is Watching”?’

‘No, I’m not,’ she says. One of our favourite jokes, extinguished along with our relationship. We were only allowed to make it when we were in cahoots; when we were so close that her family felt like my family, even though they drove me mad. But she’d crossed over now. I’m not her family any more, we are no longer playing for the same team. I am just a man from the Midlands who she would probably never be friends with, being rude about her sister.

‘How’s your mum?’ she asks.

‘She’s fine, she hates you, her Zumba class are plotting your death.’ Another arctic pause. ‘She’s devastated, obviously.’

‘Can I write her a letter? Then I won’t contact her again, I promise. I just want to say goodbye.’

‘She’d like that. She adores you.’

‘I’ve never met a mum like your mum.’

‘I adore you.’ More silence. I take a cigarette out of my pocket and light it.

‘Are you smoking?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Don’t, Andy, you worked so hard to give up.’

‘Don’t care,’ I snap, hoping I sound like a romantic outlaw. I inhale and feel the peculiar comfort of my lungs tightening.

‘I’ve started again as well. I might have one if you’re having one.’ I hear her rummage around in her handbag. ‘It’s weird, being here. Sleeping on the floor. Smoking and drinking as much as I want. Not seeing anyone. It sort of feels like Christmas.’

‘Like *Christmas*?’

‘Yeah. Just, like, my world has stopped for a bit.’ I stay silent. ‘You know what I mean.’

‘No I don’t, actually. Because it feels like the opposite of Christmas to me.’

‘What’s the *opposite* of Christmas?’

‘I don’t know. Easter? The worst birthday ever? My own fucking funeral except I’m alive at it?’

‘Andy – can we try to avoid the hysteria? I know this is awful for you, it’s awful for me too. But people break up all the time.’

‘Stop saying that! Stop referring to “people breaking up” like we’re a YouGov poll or a vox pop.’ My pride stops me from saying what I actually want to say, which is that ‘people break up all the time’ is a sentiment that only comforts the person ending the relationship. They’re not in love any more and they don’t want to feel guilty about it – I know because I’ve said it myself. I didn’t realize what a useless statement it is to the person being dumped.

‘My therapist suggested I do something this week that I found helpful, and I think you’d find it helpful too.’

‘Your therapist suggested that I “write a letter to my ego”, so I’m sorry if I’m not gagging to hear whatever she advised.’

‘Do you want to hear it or not?’

‘Go on.’

‘She said that at the end of a relationship, it’s useful to write a list of reasons of why it’s good you’re no longer together.’

‘I can’t write that list because I want us to be together.’

‘I don’t think you do.’

‘I do, that’s all I want.’

‘Try writing this list. I think it will help you separate the fantasy of us from the reality of us, which I think you know deep down wasn’t working.’

‘I can’t believe you’re being so clinical,’ I say. ‘I’ve never heard you talk like this before.’

‘I’m just trying to help us both move on.’



‘Whatever. No point discussing it any further.’ I can’t find my footing in this conversation – I lurch from desperation to indifference. I want her to know how much I love her and I also want her to think that I don’t care about our relationship any more. I don’t know what the desired outcome is. I wish I hadn’t had three beers. ‘I don’t think these phone calls are helping us,’ I say.

‘Neither do I.’

‘Maybe we should agree to not speak for a while.’

‘If that’s what you want,’ she says.

‘It is what I want.’

‘Okay,’ she says, taking a deep drag of her cigarette. ‘Have you told Avi yet?’

‘No.’

‘*Andy.*’

‘I’ll tell him when I’m ready. Please. I’d like to have a tiny bit of a say in this break-up.’

‘Who are you talking to?’

‘You’re the only person I can talk to about this stuff,’ I say, revolted by the baldness of my own love. ‘Please make sure Jane doesn’t tell him before I do.’

‘She’s sworn she won’t, but she can’t keep it up much longer,’ she says. ‘He’s your best friend. He can help you process this.’

‘We don’t work like that, Jen, but thanks.’ There is a pause that I wait for her to fill. She doesn’t. ‘So goodbye, then, I suppose,’ I say with weary cheer. ‘And we’ll just text if we need to talk about flat stuff or whatever.’

‘Yeah, sure,’ she says softly. ‘Look after yourself.’

‘I love you, Jen.’ I can hear her considering the risks of saying this back to me, her therapist on her shoulder saying things about codependency and boundaries.

‘Lots of love,’ she replies.

I hang up.

Mum comes in with two mugs and I throw my cigarette out of the window.

‘I thought you only smoked when you drank,’ she says, placing one mug on my bedside table and sitting on the edge of the bed cradling the other.

‘I’ve had three drinks and it’s not even eight.’

‘That’s all right, given the circumstances.’

I sit next to her and pick up a mug that has *I Support Aston Villa and This is the Only Cup I'll Be Getting This Year!* emblazoned on its front in burgundy Courier New.

'This tea tastes of marzipan.'

'I put some Disaronno in it,' she says.

I put my arm around her and she leans into me and smells my T-shirt.

'Do I stink of fags?'

'Yes,' she says, putting her face into my shoulder. 'God, it's good.'

'Jen wants to write you a letter. I've said she can. Hope that's okay.'

She nods. 'I love Jen.'

'More than me?'

She considers this. 'A *bit* more than you. She bought me lovely candles.'

'Fair enough.'

She gets up from the bed and walks over to the blue and silver CD player, its hardware scratched from decades of use. She picks up a case and takes the CD out.

'You can stay here for as long as you want, you know. I love having you here.'

'Thanks, Mum.' A tinkling sound and a surge of strings warm the room.

'What's this you've put on?'

'*In the Wee Small Hours*. The best break-up album of all time.' She returns to sit next to me. 'Listen to it every day until you feel better. I listened to it non-stop when your dad left.'

I imagine my mum feeling like this while I was a newborn baby, unable to make her tea or put my arm around her or play her albums. She pats me on the back and heaves herself up in that way she does since she turned sixty. I'm instantly comforted by Frank Sinatra's voice, the sound of every December. The kind of voice that lets you believe in an alternate world of luxury and elegance and romance and string orchestras.

'It feels like Christmas,' I say.

'Good!' she says cheerfully, closing the door behind her.

I walk to the window and stare out at the washing line. The sleeves take turns to reach out to each other as they dance in the air. Everything is a sign since she left. Everything is another clue to help me understand what's happening.

I think about our first kiss on her front doorstep.

I think about our first argument and our last argument and every argument in between.

I think about the first birthday presents we bought each other.

I think about her top lip and the mole on her side and the way her nose seems to change shape with every angle she turns it towards.

I think about the first night we spent in our flat together: lugging her across the threshold, empty rooms, Thai food, too much red wine, a drunk argument about the need for a magazine rack, a giggly fuck on the floor.

I think about the first six months we shared a bed and how she would fall asleep on my chest with my arms around her and we would wake up in exactly the same position.

I think about the shape we made in our sleep when we were comfortable. Backs to each other, bums touching.

I think about the first time I made her laugh and how that sound will always be the most satisfying noise in the world to me, even better than the laughter of an audience.

I think of the possibility that I will never hear her laugh again, never buy her a birthday present, never guess what she wants from the takeaway menu, never hear her secrets or kiss the petals of her eyelids.

I take a photo on my phone of the jumper and the shirt in case I forget what it feels like to be loved. I close the curtains and get into the bed I've been sleeping in since I was a little boy. And I cry and cry and cry and cry.

## Monday 27th July 2015

Thirty-first birthday parties were better than the thirtieths. The thirtieths had too much symbolism. Symbolism is good for a story but bad for a party. But by thirty-one, we knew where we were. One hangover a week, merino knitwear, DIY, IPA – the early thirties.

It was Jane's birthday, the girlfriend of my best friend. They'd been together for two years, she was pregnant with their first baby and I'd finally got the official promotion to birthday drinks attendee. The pub was in a Zone One no-man's-land – the result of coordinating twenty-five people's locations and travel times and babysitters' costs. You end up with a place where nobody would ever normally socialize.

'ANDY!' Avi shouted as I walked into the pub, sparsely populated with people I didn't recognize. 'BRINGER OF VIBES, HAVER OF FAGS.'

'Y'alright, mate?' I said.

'Fags! Fags! Fags!' he chanted. I took a packet of Marlboro Lights out of my jacket pocket and noticed the woman to his right, silently amused by his specifically-five-pint looseness. 'MY BROTHER!' he bellowed in my ear, holding my face and kissing my cheek. 'What did I say? You can always rely on Andy for cigs.' He grabbed the packet and pulled one out.

'Do you mind?' the woman asked, reaching for the pack.

'Go ahead,' I smiled. She wore jeans and heels and hoop earrings. Her shoulder-length blonde hair was tucked behind her ears. I couldn't remember if jeans and heels and hoop earrings had always been my favourite combination on a woman, or whether it was only now my favourite combination because it was on her.

'Oh, sorry,' Avi said, his breath soured from beer. 'Jen, this is Andy, my best mate. Andy, this is Jen. Jen is Jane's best mate.'

'Ah, nice,' I said inconsequentially. 'How do you guys know each other?'