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JONATHAN TROPPER

How to Talk



to a *a novel* Widower

"A mixture of mourning and mockery . . . surprisingly moving."

—*Entertainment Weekly*

How to
Talk to a
Widower

Jonathan Tropper

D e l a c o r t e P r e s s

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Also by Jonathan Tropper

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*For Alexa Rose,
who hangs with me
in the wee small hours
With love*

Acknowledgments

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all of the readers who have emailed me over the years. I hope you all like this one.

No animals were harmed in the writing of this book.

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 careless manner in which 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, 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 7-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 bourbon 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 this 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 Russ’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 into the house and 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, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “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. I don’t know your deal here, but someone needs to start enforcing a curfew, and maybe get him some counseling. The kid is headed for trouble.”

“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, 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 almost forty 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 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 the 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-eight and Hailey almost 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 slid higher and higher up the smooth vanilla expanse of 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 and 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.

MOST DAYS, WE GET RABBITS ON OUR LAWN. SMALL brown ones, with gray 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 rarefied country air of suburban Westchester. We may be driving enough minivans and SUVs to singlehandedly 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 rabbits, scurrying back and forth across the lawn like a goddamn Disney movie, so case closed. We are one with nature.

New Radford is pretty much what you'd expect from an upper-middle-class suburb. You've read the book, seen the movie. It's all here. The original masonry homes, Tudors and Colonials from the 1930s, housing expanding families and imploding marriages, German luxury cars positioned in driveways like magazine ads, bored-looking kids dressed in the faded palette

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 pickup 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 burgeoning 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 into 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 implement. I once threw an empty Bushmills 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 a yard to the left. Sometimes they'll cock an ear, other