

All Within

I broke the spine on the photo album at the weekend. The first time I've looked at it for years. I don't know why I did it: it was just there and I found myself reaching for it, taking it down from the bookshelf, opening it.

Historically, this has always been a bad idea. It's a gateway to snot and tears and feelings that empty you out, that cut you in two. I wish this were not the case.

I mean, these are just photos of me when I was happy, with someone who made me happy. It's a scrapbook of love. There I am doing a series of ordinary things with a big, stupid grin on my face. Look at that care-free saunter; look at the line-free face. Look at those idiot eyes, never seen a tear, staring at a horizon that is wide, blue and yonder.

The poor fucking idiot: she looks so fucking happy.

And so she should. I can't begrudge her. You can't live life covered in bubble-wrap, foam-insulated and lagged for winter. Though, of course, that's exactly how I'm living now. We can't go outside except for essential business and I have no business I call essential now.

I used to think you couldn't hide from life—you had to get stuck in a bit. Turns out I was wrong. I used to think you had to go out and meet people and get drunk and have sex and fall in love. That was the job, the job of life. Life is very short, some lives mayfly short and it's a crime to squander it.

But that is no longer the case. Now it is imperative for our survival that we all stay in our homes, that we board up the windows and nail shut the door. That we do nothing but watch *Tiger King* and this strange new iteration of *The One Show* where you get to see the double-chins and soft furnishings of celebrities, and Alex Jones has split ends and does her own make-up.

I'm good at this, or at least practised in it. I may be lagging slightly behind on the hand washing, but my self-isolation game is immaculate.

I get up. Or I don't get up. I switch on the TV. I make the tea or I don't make the tea. I ignore my phone. This is my time. I feel like I've been in training for a marathon and it is finally here—The Loneliness Olympics, self-isolation my specialist subject on *Mastermind*. On *Dragon's Den* I'd rock up to the panel with gloves, a mask and a briefcase full of leave-me-the-fuck-alone.

I had hoped to slip through the cracks, unknown to social services and not missed at the Co Op. A half glimpsed memory of someone you went to school with - you can place the face but not the name. Ah well, I expect she's changed beyond all recognition. You're not wrong. My own mother wouldn't recognise me, even if I answered her Skype calls. I want to soften into the soil and be consumed by it: my name, my face, everything that is me, gone to earth. That would be a fitting epitaph: over-grown by weeds and lichen, smudged out of existence.

But people don't leave me alone.

WhatsApp. Duo. Facetime. Zoom. Texts and Twitter. Emails and Insta. Phone calls. I've had *letters*. All of those nice, worried people, pushing themselves into my life. They warp the walls of my flat, their rude fingers stretching the wallpaper, their cheeks bleached with pressure, verruca white against my windows, brimming with concern and sentiment, love and friendship: a persecution of kindness. The constant beeps and bleeps, reminders that the streets are teeming with helpful people who have my best interests at heart. *At this difficult time. At this doubly difficult time:* alone and grieving.

Surely I must want to talk, to get it off my chest, to blow off some steam? To scream into a friendly, sad-eyed face.

Surely I want the company?

Do they think I want a *party*? Some nibbles and a conga line and a jolly chat over a prawn ring and a glass of acid reflux cava? Bland sandwiches, Baba Ganoush and a scream-a-long to Toto's "Africa"? A mascara thinning weep on the stairs with a friend to rub my back?

I just want to be left alone.

I want some quiet. And this should be the perfect time, the time to sit and do nothing, the time to hide. And still they come. I've not charged the phone. The computer is off. But I know they're there. I hear people in the street outside, the scuffles in the flat upstairs. The walls are thin. There are still knocks on the door, notes through the letterbox. People still care about me and I wish they fucking wouldn't because I don't.

None of which explains why I got the photo album out. Where did that sudden inspiration come from? How did I summon the energy? And what did I expect to find? Some respite? Or a brief holiday in somebody's happiness? Somebody being me.

I'm looking at the pictures of our wedding. I wore white. I looked beautiful. It was ridiculous. I never wanted any of this growing up; I was forever skinning my knees and losing teeth and knocking lumps out of the boys. That's who I was: I was scary and fierce, with wild eyes and bared teeth. My adolescence was a protracted wet afternoon of furious book

reading and daring anyone to come near me. I spent my twenties scaring away my friend's unwanted suitors in nightclubs. I growled. Sparks came out of my eyes. And yet here I was, rocking the full meringue. It wasn't a meringue actually, it was functional and smart. And I looked great...I lost half a stone from nerves in the week before the wedding. I was getting through a bottle of Ready-Remedy every morning.

Love is armour. Nothing could touch us then, nothing could get to us. We didn't know that it was already there. Nothing needed to get in. It was already there.

He had one suit, bought years before and he was slightly too fat for it. And, being him, he just assumed it would still fit him, until I made him try it on the week before the wedding. He was both mystified and outraged by the fact that the suit was too small, as though elves had sabotaged it in the night. How could he be fatter, he said, he didn't FEEL any fatter. But he had put weight on; you do when you're in love. Comfort eating, never going out, lying around the house talking nonsense and making each other laugh. If laughter burnt calories we'd have been twig thin. But it didn't, so we put weight on.

He could still put weight on then.

At the funeral the suit was hanging off him.

Love is a super-power. It's a shield of steel: mums lift cars off their trapped children. Pets are rescued from fires by pensioners. Superman flies around the planet to bring Lois Lane back from the dead. Love makes you invincible. No, love only makes you *feel* invincible, which is a very different thing. Love is like leprosy: it frazzles your nerve endings and blunts your pain sensors. You damage yourself and you never notice. One day you look down and see all the bits you're missing. The bits you never felt go because you were invincible, because you were in love.

There's not much of me left. But there's enough to put this book back on the shelf and there's enough of me to open the curtains. It's a beautiful day. I gather myself and plug in the phone. It pings as it charges, like the high-score on some vintage arcade game: every atomised space invader another point of contact. I put the kettle on. Today I will make the tea.