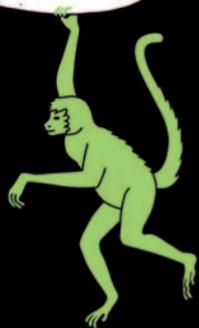


DANNY WALLACE

WHO IS TOM DITTO



**'Tremendous.
Funny, beguiling and
stealthily profound'**

WILLIAM BOYD



'Be well'

Ezra Cockroft, 1982

one

The evening of June the 12th was unusual for many reasons in the end, of course, but it was unusual mostly because the evening of June the 12th was the evening my girlfriend did not leave me.

Tom,

I have not left you. But I am gone.

Please just carry on as normal.

Love always

Hayley

I stared at the words and sat down in my chair.

tWO

I am not saying I'm not a trusting man.

I'm not saying you can't trust most people. But usually, when you meet someone you can trust, you know. It was as obvious with Hayley as her big blue eyes; as the curl of hair she'd keep tucking behind her ear.

Here, her – Hayley – *this* was a girl you could trust.

The second she gave me her number, I did the thing I always do when someone gives me their number.

I looked at it, then said, 'Wow, no way! That's my *favourite* number!'

It's a pretty good thing to say.

All you have to do after saying something like that is sit back and wait for the laughter to subside. It's a banker. A deal-sealer. If that doesn't get a laugh, you're doing it wrong, and maybe you should start questioning how you do everything else in your life, too, because maybe you can't even make a sandwich properly.

And now I sat in my flat, in the dark, on the chair in the corner, dialling that number again and again and again and again and again.

It was fast becoming not-my-favourite.

A strange thing, being left, while being assured you have not been left.

What are you supposed to do with that? Just switch to solo behaviour? Just think 'fine' and start buying meals-for-one?

Four hours had passed and I was still sitting in that chair. Jangling my keys. Listening to the dogs outside. Dusk had turned to dark. Confusion had turned to anger and settled, lump-thick, deep in my stomach.

Where had Hayley gone?

I guess that was my main question.

But also, and obviously ... why? How long would she be gone? Was she *gone* gone? Why didn't I *know* where she'd gone? Why didn't I know she was going? Why was she saying she was going but not gone?

Almost two years we'd been together. We had responsibilities. We had direct debits.

I'd left messages, of course, tonight. I sounded confused on the first one. Furious on the second. Worried on the third and fourth. Desperate as I hit the fifth, and sixth, and then silent seventh.

I'd texted.

Where are you?

Where have you gone?

Hayley, call me.

I'd made calls to other people, too. Lots of calls.

Her best friend, Fran. Her brother, her sister ...

'Annie, it's Tom,' I'd said, head down, shoulders hunched, headache starting, standing by the window, one hand against the wall, phone pressed too hard against my cheek, because this feeling, these nerves, they had to go somewhere. It was loud where Annie was. Restaurant? Maybe drinks? 'Is Hayley with you?'

A moment.

'No, Tom ...'

She knew. She knew she'd gone. It was right there slotted between the pause and where a 'What do you mean?' should have

been. So yes, her sister knew she'd gone, but worse – she'd known she was *going*.

'Why didn't you tell me?'

'Hayley wanted it to be a surprise for everyone.'

'A ... *surprise*?'

She sounded distant. What did that mean? Was Annie preparing to say goodbye to me? Backing off? Fading me out of her life? That was bad. The ex you can keep hold of for a while, they owe it to you while you talk things out, they're still in your life, but the friends, the family ... they start drifting away the second they see the iceberg from the ship.

'Well, it's definitely a surprise,' I said, loudly, angrily, trying to keep her engaged, stop her from jumping overboard. 'What does it mean, Annie? Where is she?'

'She's not left you, Tom, if that's what you're worried about.'

If that's what I'm worried about?!

But I had to play it carefully here. Annie sounded testy. Like I was overreacting. Like that was *typical* of me to overreact to the disappearance of a loved one. Like it was a *gerbil*, or something.

'No, that's what she says, Annie, and yet she *has* left me, if you look at the basic fucking facts.'

My voice was trembling now.

'Don't swear at me.'

'Where is she?'

'I don't know.'

'Bullshit.'

'Don't swear at me, and I don't *know*, Tom, honestly. Did she not tell you any of this?'

The backs of my eyes sparked with rage.

'Do you think I'd be phoning you up if—'

'Okay, Tom, sorry, yes—'

'Because this is quite a fucking shock to the system, and—'

‘Don’t *swear* at me, and look—’

‘Annie, she’s disappeared and you know where she is, don’t you?’

‘Take care, Tom.’

And there, in those final words, my biggest clue.

Take care, Tom.

Click.

She was gone, wasn’t she?

‘You know what’d be a good name for a band?’ asked Pippy, spinning in her chair. ‘REM.’

‘I think there’s already been a band called REM,’ I said, barely looking up, eyes sallow, skin dulled. ‘The world-famous band REM.’

It was 4am and I was at my desk.

‘I’m just saying, REM would be a good name for a band,’ she replied. ‘Not asking for you to recite all of musical history. I’m just saying, REM would be a good name if you were starting a band.’

‘It would be a terrible name,’ I said. ‘Because there is already a band called REM, and by that I once more mean the world-famous band REM.’

‘Because it makes you think of music, doesn’t it, saying REM?’ she said, oblivious.

‘It makes you think of the music of REM, yes.’

‘Bingo,’ she said. ‘So I say REM, you think music.’

‘Yes, I think REM music.’

‘Point proved, case closed, many thank yous and happy returns.’

Jesus, I wished Pippy sat somewhere else. Like maybe Belgium. She was nice enough – very short, heavy fringe, jumper with a dog on it – but such an unlikely producer for London’s #3 urban R&B station. You’d see her walking along the corridor with Bark and Lyricis like she was their care worker. She’s a little older than me, but acts a little younger. Wants to stay ‘relevant’.

‘You look knackered, mate, are you ill?’ she said. ‘Just sayin’.’

Pippy liked saying something insulting and then saying ‘just saying’ because she felt this meant she could be as insulting as she wanted without other people being able to take offence, because after all, she was ‘just saying’ it.

‘I didn’t sleep,’ I said, reading and re-reading the first line of my script again ...

It’s Wednesday June 13th, I’m Tom Adoyo with the stories you’re waking up to ...

‘Oh, you *need* to sleep,’ she said, like this was advice straight from the Dalai Lama. ‘Hashtag “earlies”, mate.’

I was covering for Kate Mann on Talk London’s *London Calling with Leslie James* all week. The breakfast show.

Two questions everyone wants to know the second they know you have a job like mine. The first is ‘what time do you have to get up?’. The second is ‘what time do you have to go to bed?’ The answer to both is ‘too early’, but here you go:

I aim for bed at 9pm. I Sky+ the things I’ll miss. I understand and accept this means I’ll always be slightly behind the national cultural conversation. I’m up at 3.45, on the bus at 4.10, in by 4.50, apart from days like today when being with Pippy at four in the morning is better than lying in the dark listening to the foxes mate outside.

Then I gather the news (by which I mean look at what the person before me has done), I plan ahead (by which I mean work out how to slightly change each bulletin to make it sound like I’m working), I check BurlI for audio, then the wires – PA, Sky, Reuters – and then see if there’s anything in from the police.

(And those, by the way, are the releases that need the most rewriting. Why do the police speak in their own weird language? ‘*The suspect was seen proceeding in a westerly direction.*’ No one speaks like that. Not a single functioning human being on God’s green

earth. There was that pop star they caught on the A6 recently. ‘*At oh twenty-two hours a suspect was spotted driving erratically and upon bringing the vehicle to a stop the strong aroma of intoxicants from the forty-six-year-old male driver was immediately detected.*’ Dude – you stopped a drunk driver. You’re not writing a perfume ad.)

I write my copy, I read my copy, I’m in studio at six and done by twelve.

I’m well aware this is pretend news. Very few people are doing the actual heavy lifting. I just help spread the word. I’m just part of this mass illusion. But at least I write my own stuff. Or at least rewrite other people’s stuff myself. Some newsreaders just read news. They have writers, they swan in and swan out. They’re ‘show and go’. But that’s when mistakes happen. If you write it, you know it. You know your own voice, how you say things, just when to pause, just what to stress.

Talking of stress ...

‘You’re never going to up your game if you come in sleepless,’ said Pippy. ‘Just sayin’.’

Christ, I thought, if you’re just saying it, just say it. Don’t say it and then say you’ve just said it. That’s not just saying it. Just saying it is just saying it.

‘Yeah, well, there’s a lot going on right now,’ I tried, and immediately I ached for home. I’m not one of those people who hate my job. I like it a lot. Though sometimes I worry I like it because I find it easy. That said, what the hell was I doing here? Four am in a strip-lit office with bright blue chairs and grey, grey walls waiting to start my shift in a city that’s still an acquaintance and, despite a woman called Pippy, completely *alone*.

I wanted to talk about it, of course I did. But there’d only been Hayley and Hayley’s friends since I moved to London. Everyone in Bristol – my old boss, my dentist, my best mate Calum – told me it was a mistake. It was too soon; I hardly knew this girl.

Only dad remained quiet. I'd phoned him late one night – it was about lunchtime for him, I could hear his wife and her kids in the background, I think they were on their way somewhere – and he'd told me to do what I felt was right. That he was sorry he wasn't there to meet her.

But before I knew it I'd found myself a job, moved my stuff to Stoke Newington, and now here I was. So no: I hadn't slept. And no: I didn't want to raise this with my friends back home, because maybe it was just a blip, maybe couples do stuff like this all the time and maybe I didn't want to look like the total tool they'd all quietly predicted I'd end up looking.

All I'd done last night was make it from the chair to the bed and just lie there. Stunned. Running through the past few weeks, trying to work out what had happened, what had been the catalyst, what had made her go.

'How's Hayley?' asked Pippy, maybe sensing something. She's one of those people who fancies herself mildly psychic and I'd made it my job to disprove this whenever possible.

'Hayley is *wonderful*,' I said, and then stood up to be somewhere else.

'Is she still working at Zara?' she asked, as I was halfway out the door, and I stopped.

Because that was a very good point.

'It's Wednesday June 13th, I'm Tom Adoyo with the stories you're waking up to ... Four arrests after man's body found ... Teacher speaks out about classroom birth ... and in sport, it's all change at Chelsea ...'

London Calling with Leslie James. 6 'til 10 in the capital and beyond. Some people tune in online from the States, or Singapore, or Australia, for a little slice of home and the opinions of Leslie James. Let's just say he's an acquired taste. Cabbies love him – they say he's one of them. Tells it like it is.

Kate – his regular news presenter, or ‘desk jockey’ as he says, expecting a laugh even on the thousandth time – is on maternity leave, and I’m the guy the news department sticks anywhere that needs it. I’m moveable. A man without a home. If I was a suspicious man, I’d say I’m given the worst gigs. Early mornings, generally. Late nights. It’s up to Maureen in HR, a woman who took an immediate dislike to me, based, so I hear, on my ‘moods’. Some of this is my fault. The rest I blame on the fact that my natural resting face is one of dark concern. People think I look deep, troubled, like a poet or a serial killer or a judge on some talent show wrongathon. Sometimes I am troubled, of course, but really I’m just as likely to be thinking about a dog, or badminton. So she said I needed to work on them. And in the meantime, she’d do nothing to help. It would be unkind of me – so unkind of me – to say she is a woman who relishes her minuscule powers.

I checked my emails.

.....

From: MAUREEN THOMAS

To: ALL

If you are UNABLE to place your pieces of paper in the GREEN RECYCLING BIN we will take these bins away from you as you are NOT FIT to use them. I am SERIOUS.

.....

Delete.

So one day I’ll be on Talk London, the next evening attempting to subtly change my accent so I fit in with Bark and Lyricis on Vibe.

SoundHaus takes up two-thirds of a strikingly bland building just off High Holborn, the third-biggest commercial radio outfit in

Britain, home to Talk London, Vibe, Jazz Bar, Rocket!, Harmony, and one or two others. And I'll tell you what – not one of those stations I'd listen to voluntarily. No way. Are you mental? They're stations you hear as you drive home in an illegal minicab. And they're all struggling to keep up with the stations of Global or Bauer ... except maybe Talk London and its stand-out star, *Hitachi Commercial Radio Talk Presenter of the Year (1 million TSA plus)* Leslie James.

Leslie James is not a man who will apologise for his opinions.

Here are some opinions Leslie James will not apologise for.

'Fox-hunting. Bad, yes, but I see both sides of the argument. And I make no apology for that, and I say that sincerely.'

'Women should have equal pay, but – and I mean this, and I do not apologise for saying this – the work they do should be equal too. Or greater!'

Just yesterday:

'The Muslim world *has* to take some responsibility for the actions of some Muslims who do *not* represent them all but do do bad things in their name, and I make no apology for that, but I must be clear, I am *not* saying *all* Muslims.'

It's pretty controversial stuff.

On-air he can be a bit of a dick, but off-air, he's actually a bit of a dick.

'... and in showbusiness, another award last night for Jay Z as Beyoncé took to the stage, and later in your Showbiz Update with Jen Latham, she'll be talking to pop star Aphra Just about her move to France, and the new man in her life ...'

I'd rather be reporting on Syria.

'It's 6.32, and now you're up to date ...'

I gathered my stuff together. I'd be back before seven. I try not to stay in studio during the show.

'I've forgotten your name again,' said Leslie, as the ads played out. He pointed at me, vaguely.

'Oh, it's—'

'But I don't like you saying, "now you're up to date". I think it's pretty self-evident that people are now up to date because you've just updated them.'

'Ah. Thing is, it's from the news team,' I said. 'They want everyone on the station using it. Sense of unity.'

'Sorry, is this the station or is this my show?' he said, which was a tricky one, because the answer was 'both'. 'I'm telling you to lose it. So lose it. And now *you're* up to date ...'

Five past twelve, shift over.

I'd done my handover notes in a hurry, then just googled, clicked, read.

Facebook. No updates.

Twitter. No update since the restaurant the other night.

I'd even checked her MySpace, which is where she would always joke she'd go when she wanted to be alone.

No updates.

Do I tell people? Because I have no idea what to tell people.

I tried Fran, her best friend, again. Fran likes me. We understand each other. But I was getting nothing back and it made me paranoid. Did Fran know? Was Fran in on it?

But Pippy made a good point: Zara, on Long Acre. She's Deputy Store Manager. Her colleagues would know where Hayley was. They'd have to. She'd have told them, because you have to tell your employers these things, don't you, if you're not coming in any more?

But what if you *are* still coming in? What if it's just me she's away from? And if she's in there as usual, then great, I'll confront her.

Cause a scene. Ask her what she means by all this. Ask her where she stayed last night.

Jesus, *where did she stay last night?*

I could walk there in ten minutes, and by the counter: result. I spotted Sonal. We'd only met maybe twice before, but I knew her name. And also, she was wearing a name badge.

'Sonal ...'

'Hi ...' she said, half-smiling.

'It's Tom. Hayley's boyfriend.'

'Tom! How are you? Did she forget something?'

'Oh. So you know?'

'I know what?'

'You know Hayley's gone?'

Busted. Gotcha. You knew, you bitch.

'Yes, I know she's gone,' she said, brightly. 'Of course I know she's gone. What do you mean, I know she's gone?'

'I didn't know she was gone.'

I sounded panicked and crazy. A couple of women holding a black dress – they're all black dresses in Zara – turned to look at me. Sonal lowered her voice and clearly hoped I'd lower mine.

'You didn't know she was gone?'

'Where's she gone?'

'Sorry – you don't know where she's gone or you didn't know she was gone?'

'Either. Both. I got a note last night.'

She blinked at me, once or twice, eyes widening for a second, then back.

'A *note*?'

'Where is she?'

'Hayley? She's gone *travelling*, I think.'

She called over to a colleague.

‘Jo? She said she was going travelling, Hayley, yeah?’

Jo nodded. All hooped earrings and scraped-back hair.

‘She said she was going travelling,’ said Sonal.

‘Travelling *where?*’

‘She said she didn’t know where.’

‘Oh, so just general travelling? Just like that? Sudden aimless travelling?’

‘Well, not just like that – she gave her month’s notice.’

‘A *month?*’ – fuck! – ‘You’ve known about this for a *month?*’

‘It was her leaving do last week,’ said Jo.

My knees weakened.

‘She had a *leaving do?* Sorry, just to be clear, my girlfriend had a *leaving do* last week and has now gone travelling?’

Sonal tried a smile, then a shrug, both unconvincing.

‘What night?’

‘What?’

‘What night did she have her leaving do?’ I said.

‘Um, Thursday, I think,’ said Jo.

Thursday. She has Pilates on Thursdays.

My head started to spin.

She’d known for a month. A month at the minimum. She’d even celebrated.

‘Well, this is very unusual,’ said Sonal, shaking her head, and now the world became just noise, just till rings and door beeps, just traffic and wind, and ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘This is very fucking unusual indeed.’

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Fiction:

Charlotte Street

Non-fiction:

What Not To Do (And How To Do It)

Awkward Situations for Men

Friends Like These

Yes Man

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

First published in 2014 by Ebury Press, an imprint of Ebury Publishing
A Random House Group Company

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Designed and set by seagulls.net

Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives PLC

Hardback ISBN 9780091919030
Trade paperback ISBN 9780091956554

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**Danny Wallace at
his very best.
Funny, assured and
relentlessly clever.
A brilliant novel.**
John Niven

**What would you do if you got home from the pub
and there was a note from your other half?**

They want you to know they've not left you.

But they want you to know that they've gone...

Who is Tom Ditto? is the brand new novel from Danny Wallace. He's the guy that wrote Yes Man, Join Me and Charlotte Street. You might have seen him on telly or heard him on the radio.

Oh, and he brewed the very tasty IPA you can buy from this fine Nicholson's pub.

Why not try a pint, and get a taste of his brand new novel while you're at it?

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Ditto - same again?

Cover illustration by Joel Holland
Author photograph: Adam Lawrence
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