

The beginning

It is 1999. I am a single mother, a committed academic and an emerging poet, yearning for love and never finding it. Finally I have given up on love—long after the betrayals and crushing disappointment of a fourteen-year marriage, long after a string of never-quite-right flirtations following divorce.

So I am taken aback when Greg appears, as if dropped from the heavens into our mutual friends' home on a Saturday night. I notice him right away—at the fireplace telling stories, at ease within himself, his face open and warm. We are introduced, chat, retreat to other conversations. But there is a spark, a possibility. That pressure in the chest—at once urgent, and afraid.

At subsequent dinners and lunches Greg and I are astonished to discover so much likeness. Both the eldest of three, we grow up on opposite sides of the world, with similar despotic dads, long-suffering protective mums (*you know your father has his ways*) and a strangling set of expectations as first-born. We both marry the wrong one, run away to desert climes, learn to live with years of parental silence and devastating disapproval. Later we send our only sons to the same school in Melbourne, yet never once sight each other—in parking lots or at parent-teacher nights—until now. Aged fifty-two and fifty-four years, long after our boys have flown, our moment, we meet.

In time we take the day off work to celebrate one year together. Enjoy a lavish lunch at a Yarra Valley winery. But I am anxious. Soon we will travel to New Jersey where Greg will be paraded before my family as the 'finally you found him' guy. I have worried how to warn him.

You know, I say, my dad's first question will be When do you plan to marry? Really, Greg says. Flabbergasted. Are you sure? (seemingly unaware that all our friends have already asked the same question). Well, he says in his deadpan way, what's the answer? There is a pause, a heartbeat. Me: I think the answer is yes. And him: I think yes. Definitely YES.

No rose petals or bended knee, no sky-written message or ring hidden in the soufflé. Just yes. Possibly the least romantic proposal ever. But we are old enough and scarred enough to know what we have found. On August the fifth two thousand and one we wed under the chuppah to *the one* our parents hoped we'd find so many years before.

Still I find it miraculous—this confluence of timing or serendipity that brings us together and keeps us together over the following two decades until now. In all the years before or since I never imagined such ease or compatibility to be possible. Herein lies the kernel of this collection—a desire to celebrate love that surprises and endures over time.

George and Jamie

by virtue of longer study—being older

no—you're THE bass player of our generation

for goodness sake

it's a recognised truth—so my

feminism kicks in—NO NO I can't have this

love now it will diminish me—I know it sounds

terrible but true—though the passion is torrid

I travel abroad to study and work for two

years with a world-class orchestra in Amsterdam—

I was born in Holland one of eight so I have

obligations for military service—when

they refuse my deferment for a second time

I exit promptly to begin with Opera

Victoria—that's when we get serious—for

six months we play La Bohème—great operatic

masterpieces

we hope to clear each other out

of our systems—do the full-on fling thing and be

DONE—but it doesn't work does it—we are SMITTEN

yes absolutely besotted—attracted to

each other in a multiplicity of ways

but convinced a long term relationship is not

good for either of us—then you get THAT phone call

I'm told the SSO is auditioning for

a bass in six weeks' time—I down tools completely

to focus—what a moment!—so intimate with

you and practicing the bass continuously

you play like a dream machine of course and win the

position—then I leave to study in Paris

the entire question mark of us hanging mid-air—

the next two years are a bit tricky—I visit

you in Paris we're volatile—burning cooling

burning—but on your return to Australia
we move in together

although I'm overseas
months at a time performing with early music
ensembles—my career is BIG in Europe—in
Australia I'm just seen as the GIRLFRIEND of
the Principal Bass for the Sydney Symphony

this has been one of our biggest predicaments—
you're a magnificent musician yet when you
audition for the orchestra they don't appoint
you—I'm gutted—want to do more— help more—but the
bass section's all male—you challenge their every
idea of what a partner-musician should be

well thank God for the Australian Brandenburg—
BRILLIANT—I can play full-on seasons followed by
superb breaks—and insist on taking the kids on
tour—HOW HILARIOUS—feeding Jackson backstage
Hold Interval Please! My baby's still on the boob!
Those years caring for little people—performing/
rehearsing/touring—it's just crazy frenetic

and we survive dreadful crises before the kids
are born—nineteen ninety-four we're busy zipping
around the world—I smash my elbow on the arm
rest of a chair—the ulna nerve is severely
damaged but I play on—can't stop—when disaster
strikes you work even harder right?—a year later
I'm diagnosed with MS—muscle groups shut down
for weeks—months—devastating physical symptoms—
I exercise eight hours a day with two mirrors—
when I see a twitch I zero in on it—turn
around the slightest movement

YOU'RE INCREDIBLE
raising up an arm—commanding your muscles to

MOVE with a singular focus few people have
Jamie supports me the entire time even when
I try to throw everything I cherish away—
my job our relationship—I'm spiralling down
ready to follow a woman I barely know
to Budapest

it's simply crushing to be told
he'll be wheelchair-bound in months—devastating to
watch his body fighting itself—but I return
overseas to consolidate my position
and support us both if need be—in retrospect
not a smart choice

you're at the bottom of a deep
hole—you fax me in London—The Relationship
is *OFF!* Leaving for Hungary—I'm like *WHAT?*—pay
out my contract and race back home to Sydney—*NO*
WAY this love of ours will finish on a fax!—I
give us six months to get sorted—or we end it
eventually I do come good—so do we—
it's an excruciating process—learning to
manage the symptoms—slowly build up stamina

it's a time of great change in neurology—we're
not cognisant yet of how to rebuild neural
pathways—I believe if they remove your brain and
dissect it they'll find you still have MS but have
created new circuits through sheer tenacity
I'm determined to find a way—regardless of
what the medicos say—I exercise months on
end to bring my body back—how much willpower
or how much good fortune I don't know—yet we still
love each other despite all the catastrophe

for years George is saying Let's get married—I say
No I can't *POSSIBLY* be a wife—my mum is

truly offended—but one day my fabulous
auntie takes me aside—For God’s sake Jamie get
over yourself!—you may not love George FOREVER
but if you last seven good years that’s more than most

I propose in the bathroom of our rental house
in Newtown—we’re back in the same country—and you
realise

it won’t kill me to get married—I
actually WANT to—we plan a big party
with all our loved ones—a proper acknowledgement
of our commitment to each other—perfect thing
to do—it remains the only time that our large
respective clans come together

in the foothills
of the Strathbogie Ranges at my family’s
farm—we marry under ancient river red gums—
I remember turning around to see all our
beautiful friends and I’m struck—they’re just here for us
—not for a concert or contract obligation—
they love us—what an extraordinary feeling
of community closeness—my deepest sense is
this rite of passage will change our lives forever
and it does—like starting a new conversation—
or a brand new chapter—life moves very quickly

I’m pregnant right away—Jackson comes into our
lives—Harry twenty-two months later—we buy our
first house together and a PRECIOUS double bass
presents itself—I either grab it or it will
disappear but I’m wracked with doubt—what if I can’t
regain my playing?—am I still a musician
or not?—this moment is a declaration—we’re
setting new markers—wedding/house/kids/instrument

the former Principal Bass says he sold his soul

to the devil to acquire this double bass from
London—and he offers it to you—an act of
faith when you're vulnerable—you're not next in line
that's right—but it's time to stake a claim—not leave life
to chance—of course the cost is astronomical—
we make it work

we do—it's perfect because you
never really fell in love with your previous
instrument did you?—the Italian Bella
my arms are long—she never felt completely right
and I'm hankering for her—now she's all MINE—my
own Bellissima—she made a fascinating
journey from Modena, Italy through Egypt
to Tassie then Melbourne—we know she arrives in
Van Diemen's Land in eighteen ninety-eight—now we
both have STUPENDOUS instruments—we're fortunate
there's always four of us in this relationship—
that's David's* take on things as well—when we perform
a duet at the Gallery of New South Wales

he attends—we narrate the story of Chekhov's
Romance with a Double Bass—hilarious tale
of blighted love—double bass player hopelessly
falls for a beautiful princess—it ends badly
a charming tragicomedy—David loves it—
but he says he'd like to write something for us—we
assume for our next concert—*The Witching Hour* by
Elena Kats-Chernin—he surprises us with
several new poems—two double basses in
conversation

ABOUT US through the prism of
our instruments— intensely personal—how can

* David Malouf

we recite these in public?—we do—interspersed
within Elena's fine music—FASCINATING
often people say You're the powerhouse couple—
it's not real—of course we interconnect
deeply and in everything to do with music—
but we've also had to endure devastating
health calamities—in two thousand eleven
Jamie collapses from extreme vertigo—she
has crushing headaches and shocking double vision

Mal de Debarquement Syndrome is diagnosed—
I can't walk can't talk without stuttering—can't think—
sleep sixteen hours a day and need to retrain my
brain to read—what do these symbols on the page mean?
sometimes I need to breathe into a paper bag
when my mind can't compute—but put me on a stool
with my darling Bella and I can play just play—
George is incredible during this scary time

I organise life as you would for me—buffer
our boys so they're not too disoriented—it's
terrifying—I'm worried sick

I'm perfectly
fine now although it takes a long time—but isn't
it ASTONISHING both of us suffer from these
cataclysmic neurological events—we
don't get normal things like colds!—yet we recover—
I'm sure it has to do with the musical brain

we overcome but we're still filled with doubt in the
creative process—just one disaster on stage
we move from hero to zero—reputations

dissolve LIKE THAT!—enter one bar early—no one
notices but you fall in a hole of despair—
you can't say OH SORRY I meant to play F sharp
the kids were vomiting last night I had no sleep

we're highly exposed it's impossible to hide—
judged on every performance—it's sobering

but isn't it DIVINE when we play together?

I adore the way you throw yourself into the
music—your passion intensely audible to
the listener—that's rare—I remember when we
played Haydn with Steven Isserlis—dynamic
cellist—we're electric—audience in rapture—
the power of communicating without words—
a precious space only we inhabit—it's the
preparation that's difficult

we need to tread
carefully—not offend each other—it's
complicated when we're at different levels
of fragility and technique or confidence

yes delicate—but we've learned to be each other's
best critic—we've been astoundingly productive
over a long span of time—although it does take
a while to accept your way of helping

OH GOD!

I remember going to the rehearsal room
early in our relationship—you ask me to
listen—I say Great let me know when you work it
out I'll help you insert the music—you just DIE—
how insensitive!—now my greatest joy is to
play WITH you—you're technically finer—I'm inspired
to take more care—try out new articulations

the boring stuff

not at all—you get me to cool
down even when I'm one hundred percent—pull back
to stay in control—when I sit beside you it's
wow—my internal conversations are MASSIVE

anyone can do that

NO—having technical
language allows artistic language to flourish—
we push to create greatness but know how to put
the critic aside—be empathetic—this is
the challenge it's taken our lifetime to get right
it is EXTRAORDINARY don't you think that we
found each other?—the one certainty is I will
NEVER take you for granted—in the end what's love?
knowing you're completely on my team—throwing our
heads back together to laugh hard and strong and long