

---

# HOW DID YOU KNOW?

**Phil Parker**

‘How did you know?’

‘Oh, honestly sweetie, we’ve all known for ages. Your dad and I guessed what would happen when you were kids. I remember the two of you sitting in this very room, reading The Hunger Games, arguing over Katniss and Peeta’s relationship.’

‘What’s that got to do with anything?’

I was starting to wish I hadn’t started this conversation. I should have kept my confusion to myself, like I normally did, I’d been stupid to think Mum had anything worth



saying on such a delicate subject as this. Better still, I shouldn’t have shut myself away in the reading room, Mum always knew something was wrong when I did that. The thought made me look at all the bookshelves, at the dozens of books which offered so many forms of escape. It was the third bedroom really, calling it a reading room gave it grander quality than it deserved, as if we had an east and west wing to our suburban home. More accurately, I’d turned it into a sanctuary throughout my teenage years, all candles and joss sticks, along with an ancient armchair.

Mum hadn’t answered my question, she watched me with the smile she wore when she’d worked out who the murderer was in one of her whodunnits. The epitome of smug. I’d started a chain reaction and there was no way out but to allow Mum to say her piece.

‘Are you saying you didn’t realise how things are between you and Jack?’

The answer was yes but I wasn’t going to admit it, not when it made me look so stupid, so insensitive. I shook my head, denial that caused tears to burn my eyes, I forced them back, the last thing I wanted now was Mum’s “charity voice” that she reserved for her motherly advice sessions.

‘I want to be on my own Mum. Just let me get my thoughts sorted out.’

She kissed my head and patted my shoulder, gestures that told me she wasn’t finished. This whole episode had got out of hand, I should be happy, ecstatic even. I

shouldn't be crying and feeling foolish but as soon as she shut the door, my emotions overcame my rational brain, I couldn't help it.

Why had I not known?

I took my mobile from my jeans pocket. I needed to tell Rachel, she'd want to be my Maid of Honour. Sure enough, after an endless succession of excited screams that pierced my eardrum, we sprinted through the issues of dates, locations and dresses. I dismissed each one with the same reply; I didn't know because I'd never thought about it. Then, there we were, back at the opening of the same conversation. She'd been waiting for the announcement so I asked the same question, hoping for a better result.

'How did you know?'

She traced her answer back to our sixth form years, when Jack and I were in *Much Ado About Nothing*.

'The two of you were so like Beatrice and Benedick that you didn't need to act. You spent all your time sniping, arguing like you hated one another but anyone could see what was causing it, just like in the play.'

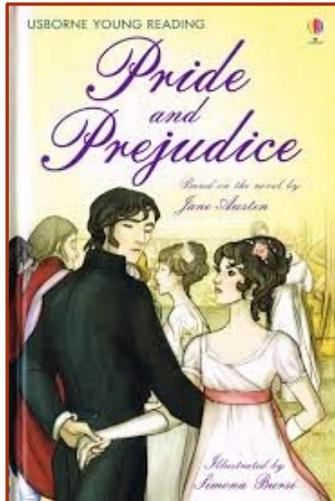


Apart from me it seemed. We agreed to meet for lunch tomorrow, I couldn't end the call fast enough, she'd successfully made me feel even more foolish. Nothing made sense any longer, during our teenage years my relationship with Jack had changed. I'd spent hours in this room upset by our endless arguments. Those cosy discussions we'd had as kids, about what we'd just read, always turned into bickering debates where Jack would storm out and leave me crying. Over time, that had changed but I couldn't work out how we'd arrived at this point in our lives.

I needed a man's perspective. On a whim I phoned Mike, as Jack's best mate he knew us both well, he wouldn't have seen this coming.

He had.

'How did you know?'



Mike gave his usual throaty chuckle that always made me smile. 'When we were at university on our Literature course, we were studying *Pride and Prejudice*, do you remember?'

'Yeah. I used to accuse Jack of being too much like Darcy.'

More chuckling. 'And Jack said you reminded him of Elizabeth Bennett, proud and aloof and unwilling to look beyond the obvious. He'd go on and on about how beautiful you were, how good you were for him and how he was going to marry you one day.'

'He said that?'

'Yeah. I used to tease him terribly.'

I put my phone away, I wasn't just foolish, I'd been blind. I'd sat in this very room so many times, telling myself that Jack and I were just good friends. As our English course at university had continued, we'd sat here, our noses stuck in some book or other, silently lost in its pages. Occasionally we'd read something out to the other, a sentence we liked, a vivid piece of description, an original metaphor and then we'd discuss it, just like we had at school. I couldn't remember a point when the bickering had stopped and our friendship had deepened so that when I looked across at him, I'd see the man who was the most important thing in the world to me. But I'd never thought to call it Love.

Love was dramatic, it made the world stop turning, it changed lives and turned them upside down. I'd analysed it in so many ways, I'd even written my dissertation on the subject, for goodness sake. How could I not have known it was happening and that Jack felt that way about me?

I tried reading but I'd reach the end of a page or a chapter and realise I had no recollection of what had happened. A walk would help clear my head until I glanced in the small mirror on the wall and realised how much work was going to be needed to look presentable.

The doorbell shattered my distractions, Mum's voice rose a couple of octaves so either she was arguing with Dad or she was excited by whoever was at the door. At least it

wouldn't be Jack, he'd got an important presentation to give to the partners of the literary agency where he worked, it was probably Rachel come around to get more details.

Footsteps on the stairs sounded heavier though, the fear of it being Aunt Susan filled me with horror. There was a knock on the door.

I opened it. My breath left me.

Jack stood there, grinning like an idiot with the biggest bunch of flowers I had ever seen. Pink roses, my favourite.

'Mike called. Told me what you'd said. So I got here as quickly as I could.'

'But your presentation?'

Those hazel eyes of his sparkled with mischief, I was putty in his hands when that happened.

'I developed a sudden bout of food poisoning. It was the tuna sandwich at lunch. I thought it tasted strange.'

My concern for him overtook the ones focused on my dishevelled appearance.

'Are you all right? Do you need to see a doctor?'

He chuckled. 'You are as gullible as they are. Or perhaps I really am a great actor.'

He stepped into the room and closed the door behind him, placed the roses carefully on the floor and then wrapped his arms around me. I could smell the distinctive scent of the Gucci fragrance I'd bought him for his birthday and inhaled it deeply.

'I really did surprise you with my proposal, then? Mike and your Mum told me you didn't realise what was happening in our little world.'

I couldn't bear to look at him, to acknowledge my blind foolishness. My tears returned but now they surged forwards, the flood gates had opened, they trickled down my hot cheeks, no doubt making my eyes puffy in the process. How could anyone be oblivious whilst being so ecstatic about being this wonderful man's wife? Jack took a tissue from his pocket and dabbed my face gently, smiling all the time.

'Shall I tell you why I think all this came as a surprise?'

I nodded. My throat burned and a lump the size of Gibraltar wasn't going to let me get a word out of it. He sat me down on the battered armchair then knelt in front of me, holding my hands in his. He gazed up at me.



'Do you remember your dissertation? How you argued that Love was a device that drove the narrative of the story?'

I gazed into those hazel eyes and started to realise I might have been a little naïve.

'We've sat in this room for years, analysing and discussing all the great stories, haven't we?'

I managed a sniff and a nod.

'I think that's what you've been doing with us. Analysing our relationship. Overthinking it. The thing is, where Love is concerned, the answer isn't here.'

He tapped the side of his head.

'This is where you find the answer.'

He did the same thing over his heart.

'I don't think you thought to look there.'

'How did you know? To do that, I mean?'

He leaned forward and wrapped his arms even tighter around me, we kissed, his lips were warm and I felt so good in his embrace. When he spoke, his voice was little more than a whisper in my ear but his words started to make sense of things finally.

'Oh, I've been listening to what my heart's been telling me for quite a while now. Perhaps it's time you did the same. What do you say?'