

UNDONE

by

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Chapter 1: Nathalie

I used to have a pet cat that loved chasing lizards. He wouldn't kill them, at least not straight away. Instead, he'd put one in his mouth and keep it there awhile, before spitting it out and chasing it all over again. On and on this went, until the poor lizard died of fright.

There were so many of them in my Islamorada childhood home that my cat could entertain himself this way for what seemed like hours. But I hated watching his little game – it struck me as being terribly cruel. And so I would try to discourage him from it, picking him up in an effort to distract him, shooing away the lizards, locking him in my room. Nothing worked, of course. He'd always end up back in the kitchen, waiting for his prey to crawl in from the garden through the crack under the door.

Lately I keep thinking of it though, his little game. The pleasure he must have got from it. The satisfaction.

The text message is innocuous enough. It is my husband's reaction to it that bothers me.

We are having dinner at Le Diplomate and he is showing me photos of Mexican death masks on his mobile phone. For some reason, he wants one tattooed on his back. The images are certainly striking, but my husband is a white, 49-year-old civil servant with absolutely no ties to Latin America, and I am trying to hide my bafflement. His last wife, Fiona, used to nag, you see, and I don't want to become the

harridan. For this reason, I smile and nod, and say, “So, why a Mexican death mask?” trying to sound genuinely curious, rather than bemused.

It is then that the text message appears.

Trudi Carlton. That’s the name that appears on my husband’s phone. I’ve never heard of her. The message simply says: “Okay.”

We are both holding the phone, and I am suddenly aware of an awkwardness between us. Does he shift slightly? Do his shoulders tense? We smile – I think uncomfortably – at each other. I release my hand.

He says: “I should probably respond to this.”

I think, *but it’s almost nine o’clock at night and it’s you and me and we’re having dinner...*

I say, “Of course.”

He is right there, across the table from me, but suddenly I feel as if I’m all by myself.

I excuse myself and make my way to the restroom. Normally I would walk slowly, take the opportunity to glance at other diners, see if there is anyone here of any interest – it’s a popular place with the DC establishment, they all come here. But right now I’m somewhere else, my thoughts consumed by what just happened.

When I lock the door behind me, I pull out my mobile phone from my handbag and realize that my hands are trembling.

My husband...he wouldn’t, would he? I want to say no. No, no, absolutely not...

Perhaps it is necessary at this point to tell you that I'm a journalist. It's difficult to explain, but I know when I'm onto something. People talk about gut instincts, but it's more than that. When I'm onto something, I feel it in my bones, between my legs. It excites me. Drives me. It is all consuming. A thrill. Right now, my hunch is nascent, not entirely clear, but, yes, I am onto something. I feel the same physical effects... heart racing, mind piecing together bits of information, adrenaline pumping through me...and yet the pleasure isn't there. Instead, I feel as if I'm about to fall.

Maybe I should slow down, take a deep breath. Think of things my psychologist used to say to me. *Is this a fact? Do you know this for sure?* No. No, of course not...

Last time I was married, my husband cheated on me, you see. It has coloured things for me. I know that this is the point where I should stop. Go back outside. Sit down and smile. Return to the moment before I got carried away. Trust.

It's too late though. I can't. I've already typed her name into the search engine on my mobile phone. 'Trudi Carlton.' 'Go.'

It occurs to me that at some point in the future, I will dwell on this moment.

Perhaps I will come to think of it as a curse. I will stare out my bedroom window on a rainy autumn day, cigarette in hand, thinking: "If I didn't see the message, it might not have *been*." It is an illogical notion, but heartbreak brings out the superstitious in me. I will think of the strange nature of timing, and what might have unfolded if she had sent the message a minute earlier or a minute later. I will

wonder what might have been if I had stayed with my husband, if I had forgiven him, if I hadn't made up my mind to leave.

Or perhaps I will shake my head, embarrassed at my paranoia, and marvel at how it almost broke my marriage. I will tell my daughter that she almost wasn't born because of it – the comically over the top reaction I had to a text message from a woman my husband barely knew. Ben will say it's what he loves about me – how passionate I am. "I've always had a thing for the crazy ones," he'll say, winking. We will laugh about it at the dinner table – maybe we will even make a toast to her.

Her. Trudi Carlton.

Scrolling down, a series of images appear on the screen in front of me, along with various snippets of information. According to her online profile, she is a waitress at a restaurant downtown – the sort of place where politicians, businessmen and lobbyists have long, boozy lunches. She is twenty-seven, which makes her roughly ten years younger than me. Half a dozen or so photos come up. In one she is wearing a tight red dress. Bits of it are cut out so you can see her stomach, her décolletage. In another she's wearing a low-cut top and a push-up bra which is visible underneath. I flick through the others, and see more of Trudi than I care to – legs, bikini-clad breasts, big blonde hair, inflated lips...the more I see, the more confounded I become. Why the hell is this woman texting my husband? And more importantly, why the hell is he texting her back?

The room is no longer a secure space around me. I'm gasping. I lean forward and press my hands and forehead against the wall – it's an instinctive thing when this happens, when my breath turns on me – when it goes from being some old

acquaintance whose presence in my life I take for granted to the slippery figure that unsettles me, one I must show deference to. I shut my eyes. *Come back. Come back. Please come back.*

When the moment passes, I look in the mirror. I still feel on edge – jittery. But I manage to brush my hair. Reapply lipstick with shaky hands. March back outside.

Back at the table, my husband starts talking to me. Nattering on about tattoos again.

No, no, no, I think, don't you dare. I interrupt him. "Who was that?"

He pauses. Looks surprised. "Hmmm?" he says. Publicists teach this technique in training seminars. How to buy time when you're asked a question you'd rather avoid, or something like that.

"The text you just got," I say, trying to sound casual. "Who's Trudi Carlton?"

He stares at me and opens his mouth slightly, but nothing comes out. Why doesn't he just answer?

"It was a work thing," he says finally. But what took him so long?

I want to tell him that I just looked at her social media profile, that I know she's a waitress. Of course, that would make me sound unhinged – I'm aware of that – so I say nothing. Perhaps my silence makes him uncomfortable. "She's one of the new assistants," he adds.

"Oh. So what happened to Barbara?"

"Barbara's still there," he says. "Trudi's just helping out. She's on trial, but so far so good. We'll see."

I feel my eyes watering. It's a mix of shame and relief.

I imagine that after years of surviving on tips – probably working two jobs – Trudi got sick of the hospitality industry and decided to go to secretary school or whatever the modern-day equivalent is. Maybe my husband decided to take a chance on her, even though she's inexperienced. He's kind like that – always rooting for the underdog. She just hasn't updated her LinkedIn page yet. It all makes sense to me now. I smile, reach out and clasp his hand. I feel things returning to the way they were before.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, I think. I couldn't bear being cheated on again. I think it would kill me – I really think it would.

“So why is she texting you at this time of night?” I say. “Is everything okay?”

“I have to go into work early tomorrow,” he says. “CNN wants to interview me about the trade negotiations with China.”

My heartbeat slows down and begins to return to normal, but my mind is still in overdrive. Did he pause for too long just now? Did his pupils dilate?

The waiter places our dessert down in front of us. I'm not in a state to eat. I push the plate gently towards Ben.

Later, when we are in bed, I feel quite calm again. Secure. Perhaps it is his breath that has this effect on me. The sound of it as he sleeps has always comforted me. Light, heavy – it doesn't matter to me. I don't understand women who complain about their husbands snoring. What could be more beautiful, more intimate, than this – to lie next to someone and watch them in this otherworldly state?

We live on a leafy street in Woodley Park, not far from the zoo. What would you make of us on an average day, if you found yourself here, in our home – for a dinner party, perhaps, or Sunday brunch? We entertain quite often. Of course you wouldn't be privy to the moments that delight me the most. The incidents that should, by all accounts, be unremarkable, but end up tugging at me throughout the day.

Unlike Ben, you would probably have the manners to knock on the bathroom door before entering. This morning, he walks in on me as I am standing in front of the mirror, looking at my reflection saying, "Wow." "Wow. Wow. Wow."

"What on earth are you doing?" he says, a puzzled smile forming on his face.

"Can't you knock?" I say, so self-conscious that I briefly cover my face with my hands before managing to meet his eye again. "It's face yoga."

"Face yoga?"

"Stop laughing," I say, gently swatting his arm. "It's meant to...I don't know. It's meant to keep you looking young and beautiful." I'm blushing now. I turn back towards the mirror and fiddle with my hair.

Seeing that I'm embarrassed, he comes up behind me and wraps his arms around me. "But you *are* young and beautiful."

"I know," I say.

Our eyes meet in the mirror.

"Don't be upset," he says. "I'm sorry. I'll knock in future. I thought you were in the bedroom for some reason. I didn't know you even did...what's it called again? "

"Face yoga."

I turn around. Press my forehead against his chest. I feel guilty now, for making him feel bad. We both start laughing.

So how does it go?"

"You're meant to say 'wow' twenty times in a row. Apparently it's good for the cheekbones."

"Well it's easy to say 'wow' when you're around, isn't it?"

He leans down and kisses me, and we hold each other for a moment.

"By the way, nice work on that story about the charity. Page three."

"Page three?" For some reason I assumed it would be further back in the paper. Page one is always the goal, but rarely attainable. Page three, though, is the next best thing. It's a win. "Are you still doing that interview this morning?"

"No, it got bumped," he says, reaching for his toothbrush.

"That's a shame. I like watching you on TV."

"Well, it's one less thing for me to worry about today. Besides, I hate doing all that stuff."

I've heard him say this before, but it isn't true. He loves being interviewed. Always asks for the clips to be emailed to him so he can watch them later, sometimes more than once. He says it's so he can study his responses, improve his technique, and to a degree I'm sure it is. But the truth is, he also likes watching himself for the sake of it – Ben is one of the vainest people I've ever met. Technically this should be a flaw, but somehow, with him, I find it endearing.

On one of our early dates, we went to a Spanish restaurant in Bethesda that I'd wanted to try. It was a warm night and we sat outdoors, sharing plates of tapas and

drinking sangria. I can't remember what prompted it, but at one point during the evening he admitted that while he'd been getting ready, he'd spent half an hour debating whether or not he should pluck the gray hairs from his eyebrows.

I found the thought of this alarming. "No," I said, placing the palm of my hand on his face, then moving it upwards, tracing my finger across one of his brows. "Don't do that. I like your salt and pepper hair."

He reached for my hand and held it tightly for a moment. It was a sudden movement, and his expression was so boyish, so exuberant, that it surprised me. It was thrilling for me to see this side of him. And then I thought, *and he let me see it too*. His vulnerability. His relief.

So now, in the bathroom, standing next to him, I think how nice it is – that there are still little moments like this that delight me. Moments that shouldn't mean anything at all. But the way he held me just now – it will stay with me for the rest of the day.

It is Friday night. We are walking hand-in-hand down Wisconsin, on our way to Tony and Cassandra's place for dinner. Tony is one of Ben's old work friends, although he recently resigned – doesn't like the new administration, and who can blame him? Now he works in the private sector and earns three times as much as he used to and drives a Porsche Carrera with personalised number plates and has become even more unbearable. I dislike Tony with such vehemence that it is probably irrational, although I would never dream of telling Ben this. It's just that my husband always seems so different around him, in a way I don't care for. It's like watching

two schoolboys together – not their behaviour, per se, but rather the dynamic that unfolds between them. I always get a sense that Ben wants Tony to *approve* of him, and he’s normally not like that, not round anyone.

On nights like this – our social outings – I always feel like I did as a child – shy, being dragged along to some family function when I’d rather just stay home. I keep pointing at things in shop windows, squeezing his hand playfully, looking up at him coyly, as if he might forget where we’re going and be content with just me instead.

We turn onto M Street. It is a warm evening – the sky is still light, and there’s a sense of exuberance in the air, as there always is at the start of spring, when the clocks have just gone forward, when people begin to notice that the cherry trees are coming into bloom. The street is crowded, as Georgetown is on Friday nights, and we keep having to maneuver ourselves side by side then straight in a row, then back again, to accommodate the passersby, but somehow it seems easy, graceful. Our hands remain clasped the whole time.

We walk past a series of high-end clothes shops, although one of them is new. What was there before? I can’t even recall it now, and I was standing in this very spot just last week. I feel the name on the tip of my tongue, but someone walks past smoking a joint. I suppose I should be used to it by now, the stench of it, but I hate it. When I first moved to DC, it was the smells that got to me. Weed had just been decriminalized and even though people weren’t meant to smoke it in public, it was everywhere - you could smell it on city streets, suburban streets, on buses, in parks. It would waft out car windows as I was waiting to cross the road. “The air, it’s so dirty

here,” I remember telling a friend back home on the phone. But it wasn’t just the weed. Every time I descended the metro station at Columbia Heights or Farragut North, I noticed the smell of urine. Foul odors would float up through the grates in the streets above the subway tracks. It was summer and the traffic, the garbage - it all seemed overwhelming. For some reason, I was surprised by this – disenchanted. The decision to move to DC had been a sort of panacea, but I felt let down. It never occurred to me that it was just a normal part of living in a big city. I suppose my reaction was partly because I was homesick for Florida, still heartbroken too. A colleague at work suggested that I might like Georgetown, but even there, as I walked down the steps to the waterfront, the air seemed dank, disappointing.

But it’s easier to get over a setback when you’re someplace new, and Georgetown appealed to me nonetheless. Even though I couldn’t afford the rents, it became a sort of refuge. I didn’t realize how much I missed living by the water, and so I liked coming here on my days off. I would walk along the Potomac, then wander around the neighborhood, past brownstones that reminded me of dollhouses, down cobblestoned alleyways. I liked getting to know the area’s quirks too – how there always seemed to be Secret Service cars parked outside Cafe Milano, no matter the time of day; how you could pick the locals by how quickly they walked, how they grimaced at tourists dawdling in front of boutiques or lining up outside cupcake stores. They do tend to congest the narrow footpaths, but growing up in Islamorada, then moving to St. Pete, I’m used to them, so the crowds don’t tend to bother me. Although tonight, here with Ben, I don’t think anything could put me in a bad mood.

“See that place over there,” Ben says, indicating towards a building over the road. “That’s where I’m thinking of getting my tattoo.”

I look at the tattoo parlor, then up at him, surprised. “So you’re seriously going to get one?”

“Why not?” he says, then leans down and nuzzles my ear. “Don’t tell my Mom though, she’ll kill me.”

“You can do what you want, Ben, you’re almost fifty.”

“You love reminding me of that, don’t you?”

When he mentioned it the other night, I thought it was just a phase. It just seems so unlike him – my straight and narrow, Ivy League-educated husband, on track to become Under Secretary. Why does he want to walk around with a tattoo hidden under his Zegna shirts? Will it make him feel different, when he’s in the boardroom talking about policy amendments and budget administration? Will it fulfill some desire that I’m unaware of?

“So, is this something you’ve been thinking of for a while?” I say.

He shrugs. “I don’t know, I guess.”

I’m not convinced though, and for some reason the conversation makes me feel uneasy. Who is this man I’m holding hands with? A silly thought, but one that flashes through me nonetheless.

“You’re not going to get the Mexican death mask on your back though, are you?”

He looks a little disappointed, but I can’t tell if that’s actually how he feels or if it’s mock emotion, him joking about.

“It might be better to start off small, that’s all,” I say.

“I was thinking I could get a quote,” he says. “Maybe something in Latin.”

(He didn’t even study Latin at college – *I* did.)

“Vivamus, moriendum est,” he says. “Let us live, for we must die.”

“The ancient Romans pronounced the ‘v’ as ‘w,’” I say.

“Well it sounds kind of silly when you say it like that. What about ‘pax optima rerum’?”

“Peace is the greatest good. Hmmm. What if they make a typo though and you end up with ‘rectum’ on your arm.”

He likes that – it makes him chuckle. But I can tell he wants to one up me.

“Maybe I’ll get a tally mark on my arm for every year Trump stays in office – prison style.”

“God, that’s a depressing thought.”

He puts his arm around me.

“What about ‘Nat Forever’?”

“Now, that I approve of,” I say. “Your mother, on the other hand...”

“Oh, she’s never going to know. When I was sixteen, she told me that if I ever got a tattoo, she’d disown me – cut me out of her will. I wouldn’t put it past her either.”

“Really?” I say.

Is that what this is, then – some teenage fantasy he once had? Does he want to be the bad boy, the rebel? But why now, I keep on thinking.

“Nat,” Tony says, drawing out my name. “Looking beautiful, as always.” An excuse to look me up and down with his piggy little eyes and put his hand on my waist, my shoulder, my back – whatever’s closest and most convenient. He’s the type of man who thinks that being tactile is charming, who believes in the power of eye contact and body language, who when making a complaint will find out the name of the person on the other end of the phone and use it to excess, thinking that this will make them feel special, when all it does is grate. I think that these habits are actually ‘techniques’ he has learned from personal development books on how to influence people, and seminars on neuro-linguistic programming, and articles in business magazines he reads on planes in between drinking scotch and trying to get the air stewardess’s number. He always thinks he’s the most interesting person in the room – his eyes glaze over when he’s bored and he’ll interrupt people mid-sentence because he thinks that what he has to say is more important. A kind of Napoleon complex, I’ve always thought – he’s rather short, you see. I Googled him once and was amused to discover that he used to look entirely different – doughy, geeky, balding, anxious. Sweat would drip off him during interviews and press conferences. Now he is confident, imposing and muscly. He could almost be considered sexy if his features weren’t so coarse and his personality so obnoxious. Somehow even his hair has grown back – thick and black, not a plug in sight – which confounds me.

I kiss Cassandra on the cheek and hand her the bottle of wine we’ve brought. She’s not too bad, which is fortunate, because after dinner Ben and Tony will go off and smoke cigars and talk shop, as they always do, and I will be stuck with her.

Tony and Cassandra lead us into the living room. It's the sort of home that might be featured in a magazine, described in some glib or pithy way: *Glamorous but edgy. Modern style meets old-world Georgetown charm.* But it has been stylized to the point of being unwelcoming. Floral gray wallpaper. Grotesque looking paintings of contorted naked women on the walls (I'm sure the only reason why Cassandra collects art is for the invitations to gallery openings and high-profile fundraisers that ensue). The two black leather sofas in the middle of the room seem to be ornamental more than anything else. I've managed to perch uncomfortably on them many a time, but I can't imagine them being functional in the way that our shabby old sofa is at home. It is for flopping down on, for lounging about on, for snuggling up and reading on, for cuddling and making love on.

I once tried to picture Tony and Cassandra home alone together, how they might interact with each other, but it was a struggle. There is a sterility to this house that gives nothing away. Then again, my mother was a bohemian, and I was raised to believe that clutter and mess were something to take pride in, a reflection that one was too preoccupied with intellectual or artistic pursuits to bother with mundane tasks like cleaning or tidying up. I like a bit more order than my mother did, but still, I can't help thinking that Tony and Cassandra's minimalist decor is more a reflection of the state of their relationship than it is a stylistic choice.

Throughout the night, there is lots of booze, lots of gossip. I enjoy watching my husband in his element – telling jokes, making Cassandra giggle and blush. It's impossible not to feel excited in his presence. Sometimes I pinch myself – *that's my husband*, I'll think, delighted, as if this knowledge is new to me. Cassandra feeds us

duck, which she says she cooked herself, although I find this hard to believe – it’s more likely that she bought it at Dean & DeLuca. Cassandra clings to her thinness as if it’s her most prized possession, and she always has an excuse to avoid the food on her plate. Tonight it’s that she had a late lunch – so instead of eating she drinks to excess. She doesn’t work – her family owns a large chain of car dealerships in the south and are incredibly wealthy. “Doesn’t she get bored?” I once asked Ben. “She’s doing an interior design course,” he said. I’ve never heard her mention it though, and I suspect that her days consist mainly of SoulCycle, shopping sprees, and trips to the cosmetologist. Lately her face has become a little too puffy, a little too tight around the eyes. She is becoming a caricature. Why? To keep Tony happy?

Ben is rattling off his latest bon mots. His distaste for arugula on pizza (“*If I wanted a salad, I’d order a salad.*”); how he just found out that the cathedral in William Golding’s *The Spire* is meant to symbolize the phallus (“*When I studied it at school I had no idea. I would have paid more attention if I’d known.*”); a recent trip to the optometrist about his eyesight (“*The diagnosis was, I’m getting old. She could have broken it to me more gently.*”)

Tony still has an active security clearance and his firm has a number of government contracts, so Ben talks rather freely around him. He starts telling the story of the Chinese vase, which he already told me earlier that day.

“So the delegation from China arrived on Wednesday and brought this gift, this vase, this ancient vase,” he says.

“An *ancient* vase?” I say. He has a tendency to exaggerate.

“Okay, maybe not ancient, but it’s from the Ming Dynasty. Or the Qing Dynasty.”

Somehow the way he says it makes it sound much funnier than it actually is. Or maybe it’s just the booze getting to us.

“What’s a few centuries here and there?” Tony says.

“Anyway,” Ben goes on. “They’ve gone to all this trouble of putting a plaque on the front of the vase – it’s inscribed, something about friendship and amity and cooperation – the usual kind of thing. But, as the saying goes, there’s no such thing as a free Ming Dynasty vase, and as soon as the delegation leaves for the day, our security team checks it out. And – surprise, surprise – there’s a bug behind the plaque.”

“That’s brazen,” Cassandra says.

“The gift that keeps on giving – to Beijing,” Tony says. “They’re relentless.”

Ben turns to me and looks at me sternly. “Not a word to anyone at the paper, Nat.”

It’s all for show though, Tony’s sake probably. He knows I’d never do anything to compromise him – even when my editor comes fishing round, asking me if I can use my connections at the Department, I say no. I promised Ben when we first started dating that he could trust me, and I meant it.

I raise my hands to protest. “When have I ever –”

“I know, I know. I just have nightmares that one day something I say is going to end up on the front page of *The Observer*,” he says. “I could tell Nat that I had

Cheerios for breakfast and she'd spin it into something scandalous. She'd do well at the *National Enquirer*."

"Now, now, you two," Cassandra says. "Save the lovers' tiff for later."

"It's a compliment," he says, winking. "So anyway, the security team takes the vase off-site to get rid of the listening device, but some idiot in the lab bumps it. So now there's a huge crack in the vase and the Chinese delegation has suggested a photo opportunity with it on the last day of the talks next week. So now it's with a Chinese ceramics expert in Charlottesville, who's charging a small fortune to patch it up over the weekend. And get this – apparently the cost has to come out of *my* team's budget."

"Surely the Intelligence and Security Division should pay for it," Tony says.

"You'd think," Ben says, shaking his head. "I'm going to have to put a sign up on my door: 'You break it, you pay for it.'"

"At work, we're being warned about phishing scams," Tony says.

"Apparently the Chinese hacked into the Harradine Foundation's network – got the CEO's login details and spent three months monitoring his emails."

Ben nods. "They did the same thing to the Aspen Institute a few years ago. *The New York Times* too."

"But why?" I say. "What are they hoping to find, hacking lobbyists and journalists and think tank staff? Surely they're more interested in government officials, aren't they?"

"With *The New York Times* it was because they'd just published a story that embarrassed the Prime Minister. With think tanks it's usually a simple exercise in

gathering intel,” Tony says. “But in some cases it’s about finding weaknesses that can be used to leverage people of influence, people with connections, especially if they have information about military or trade secrets. In intelligence, they call it the MICE principle. The idea that most people can be manipulated through money, ideology, compromise or ego.”

There is a silence in the room. As if everyone is contemplating what their own Achilles’ heel might be.

“Well, none of us have anything to worry about, do we?” I say, trying to break the ice.

Laughter follows, but it is awkward. Forced.

After we finish eating, the men go into the living room. Cassandra and I take our drinks onto the patio of their rowhouse. This is not yet a friendship, exactly, but rather an involuntary relationship that requires navigation. I spend many of our interactions trying to gauge how she feels about me, wondering what she used to talk about with Ben’s ex-wife, Fiona.

“Ben showed me an old photo of the three of you at a wedding,” I say casually. “Tony used to look so different.”

She grimaces and takes a sip of her gin and tonic. Have I touched a sore point, I wonder.

“Yes,” she says, sighing. “The great transmutation of 2014.”

I burst out laughing and then realize that perhaps this was an inappropriate response, but she doesn’t seem to mind.

“It’s just that Ben’s been thinking of getting a tattoo, and I don’t really understand it.”

“Really?” she says. “I never pictured him as a tattoo kind of guy.”

“I’m just worried it’s some kind of…”

“What, a mid-life crisis? Well, for Tony it started with CrossFit classes and ended with him giving me chlamydia.”

“My God, Cassandra…”

She laughs at this, in a drunk, maudlin way. “Oh, it’s alright now. It was a couple of years ago. Anyway, you have nothing to worry about. I mean, *you* were Ben’s mid-life crisis, weren’t you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Oh, there’s no need to be sensitive about it. I mean, it’s just the way men are…oh, God, I haven’t offended you, have I?”

“No,” I say. “It’s just I’m worried that Ben might be…well, the other night –”

I pause. I know I shouldn’t say anything, but I have the urge to tell her, to get it off my chest. Maybe it’s because she’s known Ben for longer than I have. Perhaps, I think, she’ll have some insight into his behavior. I go on: “He got a text message from a woman. He said it was his new assistant, but I just got this feeling.”

“Oh, honey. Ben would never cheat on you. My God, he *adores* you. He was miserable with Fiona – tell you the truth, *I* was miserable with Fiona, she was a total bore. Now every time I see Ben, it’s like he’s a different man. The way he looks at you – well, I can’t even remember the last time Tony looked at me like that. Every new bride goes through this. It’s normal, when the honeymoon phase starts wearing

off and you start to worry, when you start to think ‘where to from here?’ I mean...”

She leans forward and whispers. “When was the last time you two had sex.”

She puts her hand on top of mine. “Oh, come on, we’re friends aren’t we, Nat?”

“Of course,” I say. I shrug. “This morning.”

“Morning sex? Well there you go. He’s not cheating.”

“It’s Saturday,” I say, because I think she sometimes forgets what day of the week it is.

She leans in closer and lowers her voice even more. I want to pull away, but I’m worried that if I do I’ll come across as being rude.

“Tony and I? It’s been almost eight months.” She enunciates every syllable. “We do it once a year or so tops. Oh God, look at you. I’ve frightened you, haven’t I. Tony always says I only ever take one foot out of my mouth to put the other one in. Bottom line? You’ve got nothing to worry about, honey, trust me.”

I smile wanly, suddenly regretting saying anything. “There, there,” she says. “The boys will be back soon.”

On the way home, Ben tells me that Tony wants him to join his consulting firm.

“What did you tell him?” I say, worried. Ben loves his job. Lives for it. The thought of him spending even more time with Tony makes me feel uneasy.

“That I’d think about it.”

“I thought you were happy at work though,” I say. “And you’re so close to being promoted.”

“It isn’t guaranteed. For all I know it’ll end up being a political appointment. But I am happy, and I’ve never really been motivated by money, although it’s tempting. I was just saying it to keep Tony off my back more than anything.”

He squeezes my shoulder and I feel relieved. Cassandra’s right. Ben and I are lucky.

What makes me think of the Trudi incident again? I’m not sure.

Everything’s been fine the last few days. Wonderful, in fact. But now, out of the blue, I can’t stop thinking about her.

The problem with me is, once I feel I’m onto something, it’s hard to let it go. The only solution is to find out for sure. There’s nothing worse than not *knowing*. It eats you up. Gnaws at you. But there’s something else at play too. Of course I want to know if my husband is cheating on me, but I also want to know if my instincts are still intact. I want to know whether or not I’m *right*. This desire seems equally important to me.

We experience lies and gaslighting from an early age, don’t we. It’s understandable, of course. *What chocolate? There isn’t any left*, a parent might say to a child who spied candy in the cupboard that very morning. But sometimes these lies, no matter how harmless, can take on mythic proportions. They become disturbing, insidious. They damage our ability to elucidate the truth.

I remember going through my mother's dresser one day when I was a little girl. It was where she kept all her treasures – lipstick, perfume, jewelry, old notebooks that were moldy from the summer when the air conditioner broke and my mother, house rich but cash poor, couldn't afford to get it fixed. One drawer though – the bottom drawer – was always locked. I knew where the key was – she kept it in a decorative jade green box beside her bed, and never made any attempt to hide its whereabouts from me. But still, I never thought to unlock it, even though I would regularly tug at the drawer, hoping to discover the secrets that lay inside, always disappointed when it wouldn't budge. But that day I found myself lifting up the lid of the box and taking out the key. What was behind my transgression? I don't know, but I remember a flash of annoyance, a sudden resolve that I had a right to know what was inside. I had had enough of the mystery.

My mother was somewhere downstairs, I could hear her in the kitchen. And so I opened the drawer slowly, worried that the heavy wood or the metal pulls would make a noise. It was briefly thrilling, watching the drawer pull open, catching the first glimpse of what lay inside. What could she be keeping in there to warrant locking it up? I think I actually held my breath as I rummaged through the contents of the drawer. There were dresses, silk scarves, trinkets. Nothing that seemed particularly exciting to me. A false book that she kept her more expensive jewelry – the family heirlooms – in. But I had seen it before – she used to bring it out sometimes on special occasions and let me try on the ruby and emerald rings my grandmother and great-aunt had left her. At first, I felt let down. Then I came across some photos. A woman's body from the head down, completely naked. There were a whole series of

them at different angles. I was maybe nine or ten – an age when people seemed to spend a lot of time cautioning me about life’s dangers, so many of which centered around the female form. Warnings not to talk to strange men, conversations about the sanctity of one’s private parts, about what to do if anyone touched me where they weren’t meant to.

Somehow I knew that the naked woman in the photographs was my mother, but I wasn’t sure who had taken the pictures. All sorts of questions went through my head. That perhaps my mother wasn’t who I thought she was. That she had a darkness in her past that I was unaware of. But at that moment, she came into the room and, seeing the photographs in my hand, snatched them away from me.

“What are those?” I asked.

“Nothing,” she said, leaving the room in a harried way, photos in hand.

I didn’t argue. I don’t think I said anything. Her lie had been so blatant that there seemed to be no point. But from time to time, I would ask her about them.

She was consistent in her denials. *What photos?* she would say.

They were of...I would always pause, embarrassed at how I might describe them. They were of a naked woman. You know what I’m talking about. You grabbed them from me, right out of my hand.

Even years later, when I was an adult, she would insist that she had no idea what I was talking about, to the point where sometimes I wasn’t sure myself.

One day when I was in my mid-twenties, she came to visit me at St. Pete’s. We were at a cafe on Beach Drive and the black and white photos on the wall reminded me of the incident from my childhood, and so I asked her about it again.

She shook her head. “What photos?” Her usual response.

“Why do you always say that?” I said, frustrated. “I know what I saw. I remember it distinctly.”

She picked up a packet of sugar from the ramekin on the table and fiddled with it, tearing it open, then putting it down.

“I took a photography class once. We mainly did landscapes, but one day I was about to get into the shower and I decided to take some pictures of myself. I stood in the tub and photographed my reflection in the mirror. I don’t know why I even kept them.”

The truth was disappointing. What had I imagined? That my mother had had a sordid past? That she had dabbled in pornography? That she had invited men home to photograph her naked?

“Is that it?” I said. “Why did you lie to me about it all these years?”

She paused. Shrugged. “I don’t know. Wouldn’t you?”

“To a child, I suppose I would. But I asked when I was older – I mean, you know I wouldn’t have thought anything of it.”

I didn’t tell her how confusing it had been – to remember something so clearly, but to be told so adamantly that it hadn’t happened.

My ex-husband, whenever I asked him if he was cheating on me, would always deny it. *You’re going to drive yourself crazy*, he would say. And if I pushed the issue: *I’m beginning to worry about you. Where is all this coming from? Maybe you should make an appointment with someone.*

I started to believe it too. That I was paranoid. That there was something wrong with me. But the feeling I had...I was just so certain. Every day on my way home from work, I would feel a sense of dread. The conflict between wanting to believe him and wanting to trust my gut. I remember sitting in the car one afternoon, stuck in traffic, wondering if I should ask him again, or if I should go through his phone, or if I should just let it go. Try to accept him at his word.

I have a similar feeling now. I want to believe Ben, but something is telling me that Trudi doesn't work for him at all. I spend the whole morning debating whether or not I should call his office. I know that some people might not approve of this – think of it as a breach of trust. But surely it's better to know, to have one's peace of mind.

I pick up the phone and dial the number for the general switchboard.

“Could you please put me through to Trudi Carlton?” I say. My heart is pumping.

I hear the woman at the other end of the line typing on her keyboard. Dull sounds in the background. She comes back on the line. “I'm sorry, there's no one here by that name.”

“Are you sure? I think she might be new.” I spell her name. “It's Trudi with an 'i.'”

“Nothing's coming up, I'm afraid,” the woman says.

I hang up the phone and ponder what this means.

She's probably so new that her name isn't in the system yet. Yes, that's probably it.

We've only been married for one year – we're still in the honeymoon phase. Not just happy, but *really* happy. Just the other day, Ben turned to me and said, "How did I manage to luck out with you?"

It's how I feel too.

I want to focus on this, the bliss, because if I tell you about the other things, the things that have been troubling me, you'll get the wrong idea. But they've been preoccupying me – they're all I can seem to think of. They're just small incidents, really. Things I didn't pay much attention to at the time, but now...well, I keep dwelling on them. I'm confused about what they mean – if they mean anything at all. So much of what happens is the *feeling* you get, which makes it harder to explain, to convey the significance...and while I pride myself on my instincts, my history makes me second guess myself at times. Is it just because I've been betrayed before that I've come to expect it again?

This is the incident that looms largest:

I am in the kitchen, preparing salmon. Ben texts me to say he'll be home soon – he just has to work a little later than usual. I'm disappointed. Dinner's almost ready and it's already close to eight. I start making a salad, but the avocado, which felt just right when I picked it up in the store, is bad. I'm annoyed – Ben loves avocado – but it can't be salvaged, its flesh is dark and bruised. As I throw it in the trash, I think how good I used to be at choosing them, and wonder what has suddenly changed. It's the third time in a row I've had to toss one out.

I hear the garage door opening and run to the living room to check my reflection in the mirror, then return to the kitchen and pour him a glass of wine. Normally we would chat, laugh a bit. But tonight he is frisky. This isn't unusual, per se – we are active when it comes to the physical side of our relationship. But his energy tonight seems strange, frenetic. It's as if it started somewhere else – not with me, the way I would expect it to. He keeps coming up behind me in the kitchen with a sense of urgency, putting his arms around me, lifting up my skirt, tugging at my panties. I laugh and tell him dinner will burn, but then I think, what does it matter? I feel him grabbing at me, running his hands up and down my body. There is fumbling and more fumbling, then...nothing. He can't follow through.

I say it doesn't matter – it doesn't. But it leaves me feeling uneasy. Responsible. Did I do something wrong? Was it my fault? I re-adjust myself. He walks over to the counter and starts going through his mail. But his body is still giving off a kind of amped-up agitation that I've never noticed before.

He has no reason to cheat. I make an effort. I'm supportive. I do all the things the books say you should do. When he has to work late or travel for business, which he frequently does, I understand. I regularly tell him how much I appreciate him. I keep myself in shape. We make love most days, on the weekends sometimes more. After what happened in my last marriage, I try, I really try...although I tried back then too. That's the trouble. If anything, that experience taught me that sometimes there's nothing you can do.

It took me years to get over. Not the heartbreak, just the fact that someone can do a thing like that. In our last session together, my psychologist told me that I had to

think carefully about the choices I made – the choices I made about men. I found this advice to be perplexing, unhelpful. I wanted to ask her what she meant exactly – because I’d thought I’d spent our last twelve sessions explaining how devoted my first husband had been, how he really seemed to adore me, that he pursued me. Which made it all the more confusing when I discovered that he’d been sleeping with other women: his ex, a colleague, his best-friend’s girlfriend...there were probably others too. I truly don’t know how I could have predicted all that. But she’d already stood up, which was an indication that it was time for me to leave.

I go to work. The buzz of the deadlines keeps me occupied. Distracted. My job’s a drug and I’m grateful for it, especially on days like this. The newsroom is quieter on Sundays – not as high-octane as it is during the week. Many of the grey cubicles – usually humming with activity – are empty. It’s a high-pressure environment, but the people make it fun. We chat, we joke about, we get each other. There’s a camaraderie that I love.

But morale has been low in recent months. First the decline in advertising revenue, then the layoffs. Now Trump and his burgeoning attacks on us. It started off as a few Tweets here and there, a few offhand remarks accusing us of being “dishonest.” Peddlers of “fake news.” Then it escalated: a Tweet referring to us as the “enemy of the American people.” I still remember the speech he gave at CPAC last year, when he described us that way again, this time before a cheering crowd who gave him a standing ovation in response. We watched it on the TV screens here in the

office. A chilled silence fell over the room, and we kept glancing at each other as if to say, “is this real?”

Journalists deserve scrutiny, and there are certainly many, many occasions when we deserve to be criticized. But we pursued this career because *we believe* in the importance of what we do. *We believe* in the truth. The same way evangelicals believe in God, and now in him, our President, despite some of the more questionable moments in his past. But ‘enemy of the people’? No, we never deserve to be attacked like that. The political reporters bear the brunt of it, especially on social media, but even I’ve received hate mail from some MAGA types. It’s difficult to make sense of it.

As I make my way to my desk, I notice that someone - Julia in HR probably - has put a series of posters on the wall about mental health in the workplace. I can’t help rolling my eyes. Even with everything that’s currently going on, stress is part of the job. Sure, you can ask for a day or two off, especially when you’ve been working long stints – nights and weekends. That’s no problem. But if beyond that you can’t hack it, if you don’t enjoy the adrenaline of it all, then it’s probably not the right job for you. What would they do if you did ask for assistance, I wonder? Probably hand you a brochure and smile uncomfortably. It would be an inconvenience more than anything else. It’s the pretending to care that I dislike. The hypocrisy. If they’re so concerned about our emotional wellbeing, our work-life balance, then maybe they could just stop sacking us.

I turn on my computer. Start going through emails to see what's on the radar for today. Stan, the Managing News Editor, comes up to my desk and asks me to write a story about a potential cure for a rare and deadly form of childhood cancer.

“Find a survivor, get a quote, and send out a photographer. It'll be a feel-good story,” he says.

Stan's old school. He doesn't have a university degree – he worked his way up from the mailroom. He doesn't even have a mobile phone and says that if anyone wants to reach him, they'll find a way (and whatever you do, don't suggest that he should join Twitter). He smoked at his desk for years after it was banned until they threatened to sack him, so now he chews nicotine gum non-stop. He's the last of a dying breed. Even on the days when he drives me crazy, I adore him.

I look at the media release. “It says here that only ten percent of patients survive...it's Sunday, Stan. The hospital PR people, they're on call on Sundays and this is hardly urgent...”

“Gotta feed the dragon,” he says. He repeats this phrase throughout the day, although I'm never entirely sure who the dragon is.

I was promoted to Writer at Large last year – it was meant to be a promotion, anyway, albeit one without extra pay. The idea was that I would have more freedom to write about the topics that interest me. But ever since the last round of layoffs we're short-staffed, and Stan keeps giving me the same kinds of stories I was doing when I was Senior General Assignments Reporter. I suppose I should feel lucky that I'm still here, but I'm increasingly frustrated. And this certainly doesn't help. I hate scientific breakthrough stories – they are a personal pet peeve. Nothing ever comes of

them. And cancer stories, well, I don't want to come across as being too cynical, but they're just a bore.

“Stan, did you get a chance to think about that story idea I sent through?”

“Which one?” he says, rubbing his forehead. “Oh, yeah. O’Leary, the District Judge. I don’t know, Nat. Is this a story that’s worthy of *The Observer*? Looking at a private citizen’s dating profile and doing some kind of hit piece – it’s something the *New York Post* would do, don’t you think.”

“A judge who puts racial filters on his dating profile because he only wants to date white or Asian women? I think it’s racist and it raises questions about whether or not he should be presiding over cases involving people of color. I mean, if he has issues with black and Latina women, if he’s made certain assumptions about them to the point where he won’t even date them, then how can he do his job impartially?”

“But everyone has preferences about who they’re attracted to, about who they want to date, right? I mean, you might not like redheads or fat guys or men named Nigel.”

“Oh, come on, that’s a ridiculous analogy, and you know it. This is about race and misogyny. Surely you can see that.”

Stan is making what I call his face of deferral – where he looks over my shoulder and grimaces because he’s trying to figure out what to say. He doesn’t want to say no because it *is* a good story, but he doesn’t want to say yes either because he’s put it in the too hard basket.

“Calling it racism – that’s drawing a long bow. Besides, O’Leary’s well liked in DC. He’s a good guy. I don’t know if I feel comfortable about it. Anyway, how did you even come across his dating profile? What’s Ben going to say?”

Now he’s trying to make a joke because he can see that I’m annoyed. “Ha ha, very funny,” I say. “A friend of mine who’s single was showing me her matches the other day and I recognized O’Leary. I’ve got screenshots and everything. I’m looking into his case history too, to see if there are any patterns in his judgements, in terms of race and gender.”

“Let me think on it some more.”

“Okay,” I say, although I won’t hold my breath. As much as I love Stan, the reality is that he’s very much a part of the DC boys’ club, even though he’s made a genuine effort to mentor me and many other women in the newsroom. But I can only be so mad at him. He took a chance on me when I first moved here when no one else would. And he made sure I kept my job in the most recent round of layoffs, so that’s something.

I can see he’s about to head back to his desk.

“Stan,” I say, my mind returning to Ben and the text message he received the other night. “Have you ever been wrong about a hunch? I mean one you’re really sure of.”

“Is this about O’Leary?”

“No, it’s something else,” I say.

He looks at me and I can tell he's curious, but he doesn't ask. "For people like you and me, there are two kinds of hunches – the ones you're right about and the ones you haven't proven yet."

I smile, but I'm disappointed. I want to be wrong.

Later that night, when we're lying in bed, Ben turns to me and says, "Is everything okay? You've been quieter than usual."

Normally I love this time of night. It still seems delightful to me – the pleasure of falling asleep with him. My husband. But tonight I feel anxious. What if I am losing him? I can't bear the thought of it. I keep thinking over and over again if I've dropped the ball in some way – if there's something I've done.

"I'm fine," I say, and squeeze his hand.

When I hear him snoring, I reach for my mobile phone and look Trudi up again. I know I shouldn't – I just can't help it. With every photo I click on, pause at, zoom in on, my scepticism grows. It just doesn't add up. Certain things about her online presence don't make sense. The social media accounts under her real name are old and out of date. New posts and updates seem to taper off two years ago. But with a bit of digging, I find that one of them links to a more recent account she has under the name 'Trudilicious9'. She clearly loves taking selfies. She's also had a lot of professional photos taken – in some she's on her own, in others she's with a child, I assume her little boy. Other young women like her – types I categorize as narcissists, the ones obsessed with celebrity culture who think that they could have been, or

should have been famous – well, they want everyone to find them. Why make it hard for people? Why cover up your tracks?

I spend too much time looking at Trudi's social media accounts. I spend hours scrolling through her Twitter feed, her Instagram account. At the end of it I feel the same way I did when I was eight and locked myself in my room so I could devour all the chocolates in the advent calendar my mother had bought me in one go. It's too much. I feel nauseous.

Trudi is a poser. Takes selfies all the time. Presents herself as an intellectual. A quote-unquote bibliophile, although judging from her photo history, she's been reading *Anna Karenina* for at least eight months. There it is on the coffee table in August. There it is, strategically placed on her sofa in December. There it is resting on her bare torso as she lounges on what looks like a Caribbean beach in March (#feelingblessed #bookworm #sundayfunday). I mean, I know it's a big book, but come on. It's all so false. Curated. Why bother, I keep wondering. If Ben *was* to cheat, would it be with someone as vacuous as this? No, it's irrational of me to think so.

I switch my phone off and am close to drifting off myself, but then I think, what about *his* phone. It's right there next to him on the bedside table. I ease myself out of bed and walk across the room. He's sound asleep, but I decide that if he does wake up, I'll tell him it made a noise – an app beeping or something. I look at his messages – I see my name, his colleagues' names, his friends' names, but nothing from a Trudi Carlton. Which doesn't make sense, because there are still other messages from last week in his phone. I scroll up and down to double check, but

there's nothing from her there. I look in his contacts under 'T,' then 'C,' but there's no Trudi Carlton listed, which can only mean one thing – that he deleted not just the conversation, but her contact details too.

It seems so strange to me that I start to wonder if I imagined the whole thing.

Ben suggests a weekend away to make up for the fact that he's been travelling for work so much recently. We drive to Charlottesville. It's lovely. We stop at little antique shops on the way and check into a bed and breakfast place by Beaver Creek Lake.

None of it will ever get old for me. The sound of his voice. The way he breathes in before he starts a sentence. The way he says "come here" before he kisses me. That he chose me. I begin to think that I've been overreacting to the Trudi business.

I hardened after my divorce. I suppose on some level it was the best way forward. Some kind of evolutionary response. A way to survive.

I moved back into my mother's house when I discovered my first husband's infidelity. The week after I left, I went back to get some things. It was night, but he wasn't even there. Later he told me he'd gone to a concert. I was so angry. "I could barely even walk down the street without collapsing," I told him.

After about six months I started dating again. It was underwhelming. Me pretending to smile. Me pretending to enjoy myself. Me actually starting to enjoy myself then sobbing myself to sleep when I got home because how could I start all over again? I just couldn't. Eventually I stopped dating and decided I would be alone.

I didn't feel like I was missing out on anything. I moved from Florida to DC, and went from working at a mediocre magazine to a top newspaper. My work was a perpetual source of pleasure. I made new friends. Took Italian classes. Just enjoyed being by myself.

Then I met Ben. He was giving a press conference on the China tariffs and I went on behalf of a more senior reporter who was ill. I asked a question and when his eyes met mine he got tongue tied. Stuttered. He made a joke of it, but I saw that his face had reddened. I think mine did too. For the first time in a long time, I felt desire. I was so overwhelmed I couldn't concentrate for the rest of the afternoon.

How wonderful it is to want. To be wanted. I'd completely forgotten.

Other men had asked me out, tried to chat me up, but I felt cold to all that. Had no interest in it. Then suddenly, something inexplicable. Something mutual. Something that made me walk down the street the same way I used to when I was seventeen.

That night I got a text message: "Is it too late to clarify my quote?"

I knew immediately that it was him. And that him contacting me had nothing to do with the press conference that day – that it was all a pretense.

"Sorry, gone to press," I said. But I couldn't stop grinning.

I used to laugh when I told people that story. But now, right now, it worries me. It doesn't seem charming anymore. It's the modus operandi of many men. As a female journalist I've run into it before. Men who say they have a scoop. Want to give you background on something. Want to catch up for dinner or a drink to discuss

a potential story. But with Ben it seemed different. Like I was special. And I was, wasn't I? I mean, we got married.

A few days later he asked me out. We met at a wine bar on 14th Street. My God, he was charming. And to think I'd left him speechless – albeit briefly – a few days before. He had the waitresses wrapped around his little finger right from the get-go. They'd laugh at his jokes, smile in a kind of dazed wonder at everything he said. It wasn't flirting exactly, although it wasn't *not* flirting either. How do I explain it? Genuine charm is so rare that when you come across it, it's dazzling. He was confident, quick, a little eccentric. Commanded attention without trying. Being in his presence was delightful, disorienting. Frightening too. Once you meet someone like that, you immediately think, 'how will I ever go back to interacting with *normal* people?' Is it real though, I wondered. Is it an act? Is he like this all the time, with everyone? Does he have an off switch? The evening moved along so quickly it was hard to believe we spent five hours together. We talked non-stop. We both liked to read and I was impressed by the authors he liked – McEwan, Barnes, Ishiguro. But less well-known ones too – Max Frisch, Roberto Bolaño – he'd even read Katherine Mansfield. He made me laugh – absurd witticisms, delightful anecdotes. By the end of the night, I was enthralled, giddy.

It's addictive being around someone like that. You come to crave their attention. He would never choose me, I kept thinking, willing it at the same time – choose me, choose me. And he did. But even now that we're married, I want him to keep on going. Keep choosing me, Ben. Keep choosing me.

So were there red flags? I don't know.

The things I've always regarded as special, suddenly seem sinister to me.

Strangely, I've never been jealous. Not until now.

After we first started dating, I quickly realized that he had a whole fan club of women – journalists, colleagues, interns, friends, girlfriends of friends...I would see the way they looked at him when I visited him at work for lunch, when we were out at dinner, when he started introducing me to his social circle.

But he always made me feel assured. Like I didn't have to worry. And I never worried ever, not once.

For our third date, he invited me over to his place to play Scrabble. I thought it was a euphemism for something else, but no, he actually wanted to play Scrabble. It was winter and he'd built a fire, and had even cut up fresh limes because he knew I liked gin and tonics. I felt so at ease with him – we laughed, squabbled.

“What's a 'za'?” I said.

“Are you challenging me?”

“Use it in a sentence.”

He pulled out an official Scrabble dictionary and there it was.

“Wait, what's a tid?”

“A TID,” he said, pointing to its reference in the dictionary.

“You've got to be kidding me,” I said.

He smiled at me mischievously. “I have to say, I thought a journalist would be better at this game.”

We stayed up talking till dawn and, dubious Scrabble tactics aside, by morning I knew that I never wanted to be with another man again. Six months later, he proposed.

I want to tell you this story now, in the present, because if I wait too long I might forget the very things that make it seem important. I can't remember why I loved my first husband, you see. I know that at the time I did, but now, just thinking of him, I feel absolutely nothing. When I think of that time of my life, it feels like some strange equation that I could never figure out at school – the kind that adds up to nothing. From the notes in my diary, I know that I spent the year floating, gliding, dizzy in love. Maybe it's a survival mechanism – to forget. To get to a point where it feels distant. It's not to say I don't still feel things about that time, though. I still cry sometimes. I cry because I wish I could go back to the way I was before.

Ben. Would he cheat? I told him about what my first husband did. I told him what it did to me. He knows how hard it would hit me if he betrayed me. So if he did, it would hurt me even more, knowing that he went ahead regardless.

One afternoon after I finish work, I go to the restaurant where Trudi's LinkedIn profile says she works. It's quiet. I sit at the bar and order a gin and tonic. The bartender is young – in his twenties – but I can tell he finds me attractive. He gets chatting. Makes small talk.

“Is Trudi here?” I ask.

He cocks his ear, like he isn't sure what I said.

“Trudi,” I say again.

He shakes his head. “I’m only new here, but I don’t know a Trudi. Is she a friend of yours or something?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I say.

As I sip on my gin and tonic, I call Ben’s work. I know that Ben’s at a meeting, and that Barbara will answer in his place. I ask her how she is. Ask after her husband and daughter. It’s all very pleasant.

“Ben mentioned that someone new started recently,” I say. “I think her name was Trudi.”

Barbara pauses. “Hmmm. Maybe he meant one of the new people in accounting. But I don’t think there’s anyone called Trudi.”

“I’m probably just confused,” I say, laughing for good measure.

Barbara laughs too. Makes a joke about how forgetful she is. Says there have been people coming and going ever since the new administration came in. But something about the tone of her tone makes me think she’s just saying this to be polite – that she’s just cottoned on to why I called.

I hang up, a sick feeling in my stomach.

What are you up to, Ben?

I suppose you’re wondering why I don’t just ask him.

I won’t, because if it’s true, if he is cheating, I’ll lose the upper hand. He’ll start to cover up his tracks. I learned that in my first marriage.

The unsent letter. After I divorced my first husband, my psychologist suggested that I write one. The idea is that you get it all out on paper – your pain, your anger – all the things you want to say to the person who hurt you. You can write whatever you want, you just can't put it in the mail.

I suppose it's meant to make you feel better. It doesn't though.

Do you know that after my divorce, when I eventually started to daydream about men again, it always turned sour. My fantasies would start off romantic, delightful, full of tender moments. But then, without fail, they would become infected. I would discover the object of my desire in bed with another woman. On imaginary honeymoons, I would learn that he had slept with the bridesmaid the night before our wedding. Scenarios involving infidelity would always sneak their way in somehow.

This is what I want you to know. That I can't even daydream normally anymore. That for me, visions of rose petals and confetti always end in tears.

My first husband didn't need to write an unsent letter. For him, it was easy, moving on. He has a wife now. Three children. A dog too (the same breed we always talked about getting). They live in St. Petersburg – he is an accountant, she is a stay at home mom. For my ex to move on, he simply had to keep his pants on. For me, it was harder. Every day, I had to believe that a man wouldn't cheat. Maybe that sounds easy. But if it's never happened to you (although it probably has, you just don't know it), then savor this time. Savor your ignorance. Savor how your heart still works.

Sometimes I dream about him, my ex. In the dreams, he always ends up kissing me – right in front of his wife. I have no desire for him anymore, but that is how it always goes.

When we first started going out, I made Ben jump through so many hoops. I behaved wretchedly. I cancelled dates at the last minute. Picked fights for no reason. Broke up with him half a dozen times. But he jumped through all of them. I sometimes want to tell him how sorry I am, explain that I just wanted to know that he loved me, wanted to know for sure.

I'm sorry Ben. I'd do anything for you.

And every time he jumped, I'd end up in tears. It was partly wonder – wonder that he actually wanted me, and shame at my own behavior. I'm sorry Ben. You kept coming back.

You wouldn't cheat, I know that. I'm sorry.

Anyway, here I am, trying to tell you how much I love Ben, and not doing a very good job of it.

Incidents two, three and four:

Sometimes when he comes home from work the back of his hair seems damp. He tells me he's been at the gym, but lately he's been putting on weight.

The other night when I opened the door to the study – the one that we share – the door was locked. “Just a minute,” he said. I can't help wondering why the door was locked. It's never been locked before.

The hair on the bed. I was readjusting the sheets and saw it and just swept it away. It wasn't mine though. I just assumed it was our cleaner's, but now that I think of it, I'm certain it was blonde. She dyes her hair a light orange color. Was it blonde or orange, the hair on the bed? I can't remember. Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me...

We're watching TV on the couch.

Everything's okay, isn't it?

No, I mean with us. You're happy, aren't you?

You'd tell me if there was something wrong though, wouldn't you?

I know. Me too.

It doesn't matter what he says. I'm still worried.

A dowry chest. My grandmother told me she had one when she was a teenager. Filled it with dresses, quilts, linen.

I always thought it sounded so quaint and old-fashioned.

But when I first started dating Ben, do you know what I did? I started buying so many things. Dresses for dates he hadn't asked me out on. I would assemble outfits for every possible occasion. Hiking in Rock Creek Park. Sunday brunch with friends. An evening at the Kennedy Center. Lace bodysuits for when we became intimate. Swimsuits and kaftans for imaginary vacations in Tulum. Satin slips and kimonos for

lounging about in when he asked me to move in. New underwear. New shoes. Earrings. Coats. I dyed my hair. Got Botox. Eyelash extensions. Manicures. Pedicures. Got my ring finger sized on a whim as I was walking through Macy's – still a 5.5. Got into debt. Bought books on sex. Watched porn so I'd know what he might want, expect.

I just wanted to be perfect for him.

I tried so hard. I really did. I just want you to know that.

I begin to see Trudi everywhere, or at least women of her likeness.

I find myself staring at a blonde woman as she browses through the clothes racks at Bloomingdale's. *Is that her*, I think. The shape of the cheekbones, the exaggerated lips...but she looks slightly different than the woman I've seen online, and I come to think that I'm mistaken.

Another day I am sure I catch a glimpse of her on the metro, she is wearing a black dress and a trench coat, but it is crowded and I can only see a sliver of her face. I remain alert, waiting for her to shift, to turn. The thought of this – an encounter with her in real life – makes my heart race. What would I do if it was her?

I haven't thought that far ahead.

Chapter 2: Trudi

It's a wet, miserable day – the kind that always reminds me of what my mother used to say when I was young, that when it rains it means the angels are crying. Her implication being that somehow I should take the blame.

Luca is in the backseat of the car, telling me the story of Pinocchio.

“The moral of the story...” He keeps saying this lately. It's a phrase he must have picked up somewhere and now every story needs one. But do they? And do they always have to be so black and white?

“Sometimes,” I say, pausing...should I go on? Or will what I say be repeated to other children and cause some kind of calamity. Will Luca come to be known among other parents as the-little-boy-whose-mother-says-it's-okay-to-tell-a-lie.

I look at him in the rear-view mirror and consider this, but decide to go ahead regardless.

“...sometimes a little fib isn't the end of the world.”

He looks at me, his face all solemn. “But I thought lying was naughty.”

“Well, of course it is,” I say. “Most of the time. But it's *why* you tell a lie that really matters. There are times when people do it not to be mean, but because they don't want to cause another person any pain.”

He seems unconvinced, and I can see that it's too complicated a topic for him to grasp just yet. Maybe when he's older. I hope. For now, all I've managed to do is confuse him.

“You know what Grandma used to say, Luca? She used to say that when it rains it means the angels are crying.”

He looks up at the clouds as if to ponder this, then smiles. And him smiling about something that used to frighten the hell out of me makes me laugh.

How do I want my son to be? Like this. There is a softness to him that I hope he'll never lose.

Some days I wish I'd had a daughter, even though I feel guilty every time the thought crosses through my mind. But men I've never really understood. Or maybe it's that I understand them all too well.

The first time a grown man asked me out, I was thirteen years old. Me and my friends from school were drinking soda at a diner in Laramie – chatting, gossiping after class. A guy came up and gave me his business card. Said he was an accountant, just passing through. He told me I was the most beautiful girl he'd ever seen and asked if he could take me out to dinner. I tried to act all mature and, with the straightest face I could manage, said I'd think about it. When he left, my friends and I giggled – then shrieked – so hard that the other diners turned around to stare, and the manager on duty frowned and shook her head. My best friend Kendra snatched the business card from me – I could tell she was jealous. She kept turning it around in her hand saying: “He must think you're in college or something.” For the rest of the day I felt different – glamorous, grown up, not like the other girls my age. But you know what? A few years later I was looking at photos of myself from around that time. I was so skinny – my face didn't even look fully formed. And I thought, no, he must have known. Maybe not that I was thirteen exactly, but that I was far too young for what he had in mind.

There are other stories too, of course. When I was fourteen. When I was fifteen. When I was sixteen. I could go on...

Now I have a son, I worry. I keep thinking, how do I want him to be? I keep asking myself, how do I stop him from becoming like that, like so many of the men I've known.

But he's not like them. No.

We're stopped in traffic and Luca's still staring up at the sky.

"Should we get gelato on the way home?" I say.

My mother tells me that I spoil him, but I don't care. I just want, when he's all grown up, for someone to ask him if he had a happy childhood, and for him to be surprised – to not have to stop and think 'how do I answer that?' but to think, 'How else could a childhood be?' To say, 'Of course.'

Luca spends ten minutes umm-ing and ahh-ing, and taking full advantage of the kindness of the man behind the counter, who keeps giving him samples of gelato on little plastic spoons, before finally settling on two scoops of chocolate, which is what he always orders anyway. I ask for a tub to take home too, so he can have some for dessert.

The man behind the counter runs my card through the machine, then pauses. Smiles.

It is a smile I haven't seen in a long time. An awkward, embarrassed smile. A smile that is always followed by "I'm sorry, ma'am..."

"I'm sorry ma'am, your card has been declined," he says.

I think nothing of it, assuming I've made a mistake. "Oh, really? Here, let me try again." I enter my PIN more slowly this time, paying attention to each number as I go.

"Hmmm." The man looks down at the machine and frowns. "Nope, it isn't going through I'm afraid."

"That's strange. I definitely have money in my account..." More than enough. I turn around and realize that a line has formed. I smile apologetically at the woman behind me. She looks away.

"I'll just pay with this instead," I say, handing the man my credit card.

He inserts it into the machine, and I go to reach for the tub of gelato, but I can see from the expression on his face that it has been declined too.

"I'm sorry," he says, but his smile is too tight, the tone of his voice too chipper.

"That's not possible...I don't understand."

"Maybe it's our machine," he says, but I can tell he's just trying to be polite. He looks over my shoulder to the woman behind me. "Thank you for your patience."

Luca tugs at my dress. "Don't you have any money?"

"I have plenty of money, sweetheart. It must just be a mistake, that's all." I turn my attention back to the man. "I'm sorry, I'll pay with cash. I always forget about cash these days." I laugh, try to make a joke of it, but my face is red, and for some reason I feel as if I'm about to cry.

I give the man a hundred-dollar bill and tell him that I don't have anything smaller. It isn't true, I just want him and the woman behind me to know that I'm not broke.

He hands me my change, and Luca and I leave the store to make our way back to the car. I'm glad to be outside, the rain has stopped and the air feels cool, fresh. I can't help feeling anxious though. That both cards would be declined.

Luca keeps talking and I keep nodding and smiling, trying to hide the fact that I'm distracted. I have close to ten-thousand dollars in my checking account and two-hundred-and-thirty-thousand dollars in my savings account. My credit card payments are up to date and, besides, I have an overdraft. There's no reason for my cards to be declined. It must be some kind of glitch – a system error, a server down...

“Look at the flowers, mommy – should we take a photo?”

There is a pretty display of red tulips outside a gift store. Normally we would stop and take a photo – I would get Luca to take one of me, then I would draw him closer and reach my arm out and take one of the both of us. In fact, I'd noticed the flowers when we first walked past them and already had the caption planned – ‘Having gelato with this cutie. How #luckyinlife am I?’ I tell myself it's a hobby – photography, Instagram – that I'm documenting my life, Luca's life...but truth be told, I like knowing that people back home – people who thought I'd never amount to anything – can see what I'm up to. I imagine the little pangs of envy they must feel – little stabs that I hope will build up and up and eventually drive them crazy.

But I'm not in the mood for photos now.

“Not today, sweetheart.”

“But we always take a photo when we get gelato. We take photos every day...”

“I know. But mommy needs to go to an ATM.”

“But why? I thought you said you have money.”

“I do. I just want to check something.”

We make a detour to Elm St, where my bank has an ATM. I put my card into the machine and take extra care to enter my details correctly, but instead of the familiar whirring noise, a message appears on the screen telling me that my funds aren't available – that I will need to contact the bank directly for more information. I try again, but the same message appears.

They know.

It's all I can think. *The bank – they know.*

Suddenly I feel cold – my head, it's as if it's frozen – and there's a buzzing noise in my ears.

“Are you okay, Mommy?”

I look down at Luca and do my best to act like everything is normal. But I can't see him clearly. Everything has taken on a sepia tinge, a dull, yellow haze.

Black dots.

“Mommy?”

The air feels thick, as if it's coming at me.

“Mommy just needs to...”

There are some wooden benches on the sidewalk. I point towards them. Hand the bag with the tub of gelato to Luca.

“Let’s just sit for a little while.”

I put my head in my hands.

I’m so used to what I do, my job, it seems normal to me. I forget sometimes, the risk involved.

“Mommy, are you okay?”

Just the other day I thought how lucky I’ve been, then I thought, no, I mustn’t think like that – I’ll jinx myself. And I have, haven’t I? I was right.

“Mommy?”

I look up and see Luca’s face, his eyes. Oh God. I take a deep breath and squeeze his hand. “I’m fine. Just a little dizzy. Come here.”

I hug him. Tight. Too tight.

He always makes me feel better.

I manage to stand up and we make our way back to the car.

Other women with children smile at me as we walk past. Friendly, sympathetic we’re-both-moms-and-blonde-and-wearing-Tory-Burch kind of smiles. Men smile at me too – different smiles – not sleazy or disrespectful, not leers like I sometimes get. There is desire, yes, but it is cautious and restrained. There is recognition there, but they can’t quite pick me. Is-she-that-actress-that-waitress-that-call-girl-I-fucked-or-the-wife-of-my-neighbor-Chad kind of smiles. Half an hour ago I would have returned their smiles. Their acknowledgement of me an indication that I belong, that I am one of them, in a way. Acceptance. But right now, I can’t. And so I look straight ahead, pretending not to notice. I don’t want them to see me like this. I

don't want anyone to see me like this. I feel like a fraud. Like I don't belong. I can feel it, even in the way I walk. Anxious, too hurried, stiff.

I've always felt that how much money you have determines the way you walk. It was the first thing I noticed when I started making it – real money, that is. You don't walk freely when you're broke. You're always distracted, figuring out the number of days till payday, which bills are due when, and how much money will be left, if any will be left at all. It affects the way you hold yourself. You're in your head, all the time – everything you see, everything you walk past, every impulse you have curbed by how much or how little you have. These days, I practically float down the street. Instead of adding and subtracting and worrying and formulating, I can just *be*. It doesn't matter what comes at me, I can handle it. I don't need to kowtow to anyone, I don't need to grovel, I don't need to degrade myself. Not having to worry about money – it's as close to achieving inner peace as you'll ever get. Anyone who says otherwise is lying.

I hear a voice call my name.

Please no, I think. Not now.

“Look, it's Caleb and his mom!” Luca says.

I see Kate Mahoney and her two children coming out of Le Pain Quotidien. Luca went to kindergarten with Caleb, but they ended up in different classes this year, which I was relieved about – Caleb is too rough when he plays.

Kate waves at me. “Trudi!”

I wave back.

When I first moved to Bethesda, I felt constantly deflated. Always comparing myself, always coming up short. To the other mothers at Luca's school, I was something of a conundrum. At first, they assumed I was someone's wife. Then they found out I was a single mom. Not unusual in the area, but clearly I was too young to be some high-powered career woman, so how could I afford the fees for private school, the Bethesda townhouse? They figured I must come from money. I went along with it – talked about my family's ranch in Wyoming, the condo at Jackson Hole. I used to work in hospitality, said my family owned restaurants and bars. Figured they'd never know any better. You have to have a story to belong, and as soon as I realized that, everything fell into place. Whether or not the story's true – it doesn't really matter.

But right now I wonder. Maybe it's not the story that matters at all. Maybe it's just the money, the money that gives you the confidence to tell the story in the first place. And the thought of not having any money – my money – the money I've worked so hard for...

"I'm sorry, I can't stop," I say. "We're in a rush."

She smiles and calls out after me. "Let's get coffee soon."

I turn around and nod. Did she look at me strangely though?

Luca is lagging. I grab his hand. "Come on. Let's go."

The drive does me some good – forces me to concentrate on something else. When we get home, I put the TV on for Luca, feed the cat, pour myself a glass of

wine. Decide I'm just overreacting. It's probably an online update gone wrong, an error, a glitch. I've read about these things happening.

I call the bank anyway and explain what happened.

"I'm sure it's just a bug or something," I say. "It kind of freaked me out though, all my cards declining."

The woman is friendly, apologetic and I begin to feel much better. She'll sort it out, I think. She puts me on hold and when she returns, her voice, which was so cheery just a moment ago, suddenly sounds cool.

"Thank you for holding. I've looked in our system and it appears that your account has been frozen."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm sorry Ms. Carlton –"

"Frozen? What does that mean?"

There is a brief silence before the woman speaks again. "Your account has been identified as high risk. You should be receiving a letter in the mail within the next few business days with further information."

"You're not even going to explain this to me?" *Go on, I think. Say it. Just say it.*

"I'm sorry, Ms. Carlton. As I said –"

"This is unbelievable. I can't access my money and you don't even have the decency to tell me why? It's *my* money. *My money.*"

"I'm just trying to do my job, ma'am. As I said, you should be receiving a letter in the mail soon. Is there anything else I can help you with today?"

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” I say, hanging up.

Yes. They know.

How long has it been since I spoke to my mother? A few months, I guess. Sometimes when things go wrong, I have the urge to call her, although I rarely do. She’s not the type to give me any sympathy, which is why it’s odd that I want to hear her voice right now.

I imagine her shaking her head, trying to look stern and disappointed, but barely being able to contain her glee. For some reason, she’s always washing dishes in our imaginary conversations, as if I’m still a teenager, sitting there at the kitchen table. I can see her plunging wrinkled hands into soapy water – no need for extravagances like rubber gloves. *Well, there’s your comeuppance. What did you expect?* I imagine the lines on her chin becoming even more pronounced as she puckers her lips and twists them to the side, righteous, tutting in disapproval. *Thought I raised you to work hard, make an honest living.*

But I do, I want to say, even though I know there’s no point, that I’ll never make her understand. *And besides, look at everything I’ve done. Look at everything I’ve given Luca.*

I can hear him in the next room now, playing with his dolls – another thing my mother hates. *Barbie for a boy,* she scoffed, the last time she was here visiting.

How can it hurt? I replied. *He’s just a little boy. He likes them.*

He’ll get beaten up at school.

This isn’t Laramie, Mom.

She threw them all out one day when I was out running errands. There must have been at least a couple of dozen. Barbie dolls, Bratz dolls, Cupcake Surprise Dolls, Polly Pockets, an American Girl doll he got at a birthday party last year. I bought him a bunch of new ones, but it just confused him. He kept asking me where the old ones were.

Sometimes things just disappear, I said, not wanting to explain. He looked at me so sadly – I felt guilty about it for weeks.

I stand up and walk over to the living room. He's there lying on the carpet, holding a doll in each hand. There's something so sweet and funny about the way he makes them talk to each other – I can't always fully understand it, his little voice muttering and murmuring. He does it with such conviction though, as if it's all completely real to him, whatever scenario he's making up on the go. I suppose the day will come when *he'll* want to throw them out, his dolls. How old was I when I outgrew mine – ten, eleven? I can't remember, not that I ever had that many.

I sit down on the couch, trying not to think about any of it – my money, my mother...

He turns around and grins. Waves his favorite doll at me, Greta – the one with hideously matted orange hair and blue pen stains on her legs. It makes me happy that she's the one he likes the best.

“Come here and give me a snuggle,” I say, holding out my arms. It's all I want right now, the only thing I want.

It's the weekend, otherwise I'd probably go to the bank, try to get things sorted out in person. I try to stick to my routine though, deciding it will help keep my mind off things.

A few weeks ago, I signed up for a writing class. A continuing education course at the local community college. The class is run by the wife of a client, one of my regulars. He tells me about her sometimes, when we're lying in bed. Says she's been starving him of sex the last few years. I never know what to believe when men say things like this – I tell myself it's not really any of my business. But after the first time he told me, I looked her up, just out of curiosity. And when I discovered that she was an author, I felt the way I always do when I encounter people more accomplished than me. Not jealousy, exactly, but a kind of hopelessness. In many ways, my work makes me happy, but sometimes I feel like I'm burying some part of myself, a part that's essential to knowing exactly who I am. I've always been good at putting on a happy face though – that's the trouble with me. And what I do depends on anonymity. So I'll be forgotten one day. The idea of having your name in print though, it gets to me. It seems like the key to something.

So signing up for writing class was thrilling to me. Just the act of registering gave me a sense of accomplishment – made me think that at some point, I too can do something significant. Only later does it occur to me that it was a risky thing to do – that I might run into my client, say, if he picks his wife up after class. But I'm used to taking risks and this is not such a big one, it's something I can handle.

I go, leaving Luca with my neighbor, an elderly woman named Mrs Draper. Mostly I use a babysitter, but Mrs Draper seems lonely and she adores Luca, so

sometimes I figure, why not? I offer her money, but she never accepts. And so to thank her I buy her little presents – wine, macarons, pretty soaps.

On my way to class, I think of my client, Gabe, and wonder how he met his wife. I've developed a sort of crush on him. It happens, from time to time, especially when the guy is rich and single, or tells me that his marriage is falling apart. I start having little fantasies about stepping into their life on a more permanent basis. Becoming a real housewife of Georgetown or Kalorama or Chevy Chase or whatever neighborhood they live in. Gabe is a managing partner at a law firm. Has one of the biggest houses I've ever seen – not that I've been there in real life. I looked it up online one day and found myself clicking on photo after photo, wondering what it would be like to have that kind of money. You'd never have to worry about anything ever again. He has a holiday house in Saint Michaels too – right on the water. Said he'd take me there one day this summer, although I doubt he really will.

I see him every couple of weeks or so. We always meet at The Jefferson hotel on 16th St. After we have sex, he sings my praises. Tells me how good it is to be touched. How good it is to be with a woman in her sexual prime. Tells me that his wife lost interest in the physical side of their relationship years ago. As he tells me these things, I plant kisses on his chest. It means I don't have to nod or agree.

In class, I consider everything he's ever told me about her. But I like my teacher. I like the way she looks at me. Her eyes seem to regard me as interesting, full of possibility. Is what my client says about her true? No, I think this woman is a sexual being. The way she smiles so easily at things, how she talks – smooth, unhurried – as if she enjoys the very process of uttering each word. The slight

movement of her head when she's considering a question. I decide that my client has been lying to me. Probably he's just bored of her. It's why a lot of men come to me. Then again, sometimes it's not even about the sex. Sometimes there are other things going on at home. I have this one client, a property developer who's super rich. His wife doesn't work – and I mean, why should she? It's not like they need the extra money. But she insists on having a live-in au pair and, boy, does he resent it. “My wife, she doesn't even have a fucking job,” he always says. “Why do we need an au pair? We have one kid. One kid! What does she do all day?” I swear to God that's the only reason why he comes to me. It's his way of getting even. *Stingy old fuck*, I always think.

There are only twelve of us in the writing class - women, mostly. Funnily, two are called Patty – both originally from upstate New York. The room itself is a sad looking place. There are no windows and one of the fluorescent lights always flickers. Today, the whiteboard is covered in random Russian words from the previous class, but my teacher can't find the eraser to rub them out. But even though the environment isn't very inspiring, I don't care. We're only five weeks in, but I feel excited every time I walk into the room. It's a far cry from the first day of class, when I was so nervous that I almost turned around and drove home. I was convinced I'd be the dumbest person in the room, that I'd make a fool of myself. I'm beginning to think I'm okay though, even though sometimes I don't feel very confident at all.

Today, the teacher gives us a handout on a type of Japanese poetry called *Zuihitsu*, and tells us about a woman named Sei Shonagon, who wrote something called *The Pillow Book*. In my head I picture a young woman in a kimono, writing in

her bedroom, slipping notes between silk pillowcases. There's something so personal and intimate about the image – it thrills me.

When it comes time to write our own Zuihitsu, I feel stuck. The prompt is 'Wonderful Things.' But there are so many wonderful things – some of them seem too big to convey with words, and the smaller things just sound silly. Everyone else in the room is writing quickly and confidently, so I put my pen to paper and pretend I'm one of them.

Wonderful Things

Stories with maps in them.

Sleeping in till noon.

Walking through a ritzy neighborhood at night, looking through other people's windows and seeing chandeliers.

My son handing me a flower that he picked from my neighbor's garden.

Having a thousand dollars in my purse and not thinking it's a big deal.

I keep going. Big things, small things.

We go around the room, reading what we wrote. When it's my turn, I don't read everything on my list, just a few of the things I wrote. The other students laugh in a way that feels kind, encouraging.

Next, the teacher urges us to write about ourselves, our memories. I tell her that I don't know where to begin.

"My life..." I say.

“I suppose you think it’s boring,” she replies. “Everyone thinks their life is boring.”

The word I’m looking for is ‘complicated,’ but I nod regardless.

She pulls a chair up next to mine and sits. She is so close to me and her eyes are so warm, that I feel a sudden pang of guilt, that just a few days earlier I was in bed with her husband.

She tells me to keep a diary. To write down random things that interest me. To write down things I notice, or remember.

“Beauty can come from the most insignificant of things,” she says.

I look at my notebook and think of what to write. A thought. A memory.

When I was fifteen, I started seeing this one man everywhere. The first time I saw him I was walking home from school and he walked past me. A couple of minutes later I saw him on the other side of the street, walking in the same direction as me. So he must have crossed the road and turned around, which seemed strange to me. He was handsome. And very well dressed, in a suit with a vest. His hair was blonde and wavy and stopped just above his shoulders. I could tell he wasn’t from Laramie.

After that first incident, I started seeing him everywhere. I’d be shopping and he’d suddenly appear in the doorway of the store. I’d be eating pizza with my friends and he’d come into the restaurant and sit down nearby. He never approached me or tried to talk – instead he’d just stare at me.

One day I saw him go into a local antique shop. It turns out he was a British collector in town looking for pieces from the frontier period. I’d been reading lots of

Anne Rice books and came to the conclusion that he was a vampire. I only saw him in the late afternoons and evenings. He was pale and wore clothes that seemed kind of old-fashioned, a little fancy. And it seemed to me that being an antique collector was an obvious choice in jobs for a vampire. It made sense, that being immortal, they would be able to amass priceless goods over a long period of time. It never occurred to me that he was a creep, following me, stalking me. What does that say about me? That it seemed more logical to me that he was a vampire?

I write this down in my notebook.

When I get home, I look up *The Pillow Book* and learn that there was no actual pillow. It's just a metaphor, although I don't fully understand what the metaphor means. It feels important to me though, so order it online using an Amazon gift card one of my clients gave me. I tell myself that with my credit and debit cards frozen, at least I'll stop spending so much money on things I don't need. Try to see the positive in the situation.

It's Tuesday, but the letter from the bank still hasn't come. I debate whether or not I should go to my local branch and ask to speak to a manager. I decide against it though – there are too many ways to be humiliated in that scenario. I imagine the things they might say to me, the way they might look at me, the fact that someone I know might be there at the same time.

Everything's going to be alright, I keep telling myself. I have a few thousand dollars in my bedroom safe and I'm reasonably booked for the next couple of weeks,

so survival isn't an issue, at least not in the short term. But my savings...the whole thing has shaken me.

And the truth is, I'm angry. It's the principle of it, the insinuation that I've done something wrong, that I deserve this. It's like they want me to feel ashamed, like they get some kind of sick pleasure out of making me feel like trash. It's a reminder too, of how so many people would feel about me if they knew.

"Fuck you," I say to no one. To the bank. To myself.

I stare at my vision board which I keep on my bedroom dresser. It's how I want my life to look in a year from now. I've stuck all sorts of things on it. Photos of me and Luca. Pictures that I cut out of magazines: Bethesda mansions, an Aston Martin, a big black poodle with puffy ears, although I'm not sure my cat Misty would actually get along with a dog, and I keep thinking that maybe I should take that one down. There are places I want to go too – Monaco, Tahiti, Buenos Aires. I used to have a picture of Shell Beach near Gustavia on my old vision board, and then a client took me to St. Barts for a long weekend last year. So these things really do work. Although travel is hard with Luca – last time I went overseas I left him with a friend, and I worried the whole time. But the money I made – it was worth it.

I decide to call a lawyer friend of mine, and we arrange to meet for lunch at the Grayson Hotel in Adams Morgan. It's a place I like – busy, anonymous – the people there mind their own business. It's like they took an airport lounge but made it fancy.

John is an attorney, an occasional client. You wouldn't look at him twice if you saw him in the street – he's just another average-looking middle-aged guy with a

paunch. His nails are always perfectly groomed though, which I appreciate, and he has a certain style about him that I like. He has a thing for colorful pocket squares and, strangely, risque cufflinks. He insists on showing them to me every time we meet. He makes a real point of it, like he gets a kick out of it or something. Today he's wearing a Paul Smith pair. One of the cufflinks has a picture of a rooster on it, the other a cat.

“Do you get it?” he says, waiting for my reaction.

Oh, I get it, John, I want to say. I can't help thinking it's a little immature for a grown man to be amused by something so obvious, but if there's one thing I've learned in this line of work, it's that it doesn't matter how rich or high class a guy is, it's all about the cock and pussy. In real life or on cufflinks. So I smile flirtatiously and tell him how naughty he is, just like I always do.

There are two bars in the hotel lobby. The one in the east wing seems quieter, so we make our way towards it and sit down at one of the side tables. John orders himself a martini and asks me what I want. “A Bellini,” I say, even though it isn't on the cocktail menu. When I was younger, I was obsessed with Jackie Collins books. I used to borrow them from the library and keep them in my locker at school, just so my mother wouldn't know I had them – she wouldn't have approved of all the sex scenes. The female characters in them all drank Bellini's, which I thought was the most glamorous thing in the world. I'm not sure I even knew what a Bellini was at the time. I still like ordering them though, just because of that. It reminds me of my teenage self. How I used to read books in Laramie, dreaming of growing up to

become the kind of woman who sits at bars drinking Bellini's. As it turns out, it wasn't a very difficult goal to achieve.

John and I make small talk for a while, but then he asks me why I wanted to meet. I tell him about everything – my money being frozen, the bank's response.

“How much are we talking about here?” he says.

“Altogether? Close to two-hundred-and-fifty grand.”

“And how long have you had the accounts with them?”

“Maybe five years...”

“You're paying your taxes, aren't you?”

“Yeah, I have an accountant who sorts all that stuff out.”

“Well that's something. That's how most people get in trouble – tax evasion.

What did you list your profession as when you opened the account?”

“I think I said I was a freelance consultant,” I say. “I've heard about this happening to other girls, but they were all with the big banks. That's why I went with a credit union – I read that they were safer.”

He shrugs. “If you've been making lots of cash deposits it might have raised some alarm bells.”

“I've never had any issues before. I thought I was being careful, I did my research,” I say, suddenly feeling stupid. Sloppy. “Do you think they'll pass my details on to the police?”

“I don't think that's likely. Besides, if you're on top of everything with your taxes, you're already a step ahead. They'd have to work too hard to prove anything.”

“If anything happens to me, I worry. About Luca. I’ve been having nightmares. About getting arrested. I used to get them when I first started, but I haven’t had them in ages. The last few nights –”

“Look, if you’re ever arrested for solicitation, first time in DC it shouldn’t be an issue, you know that. It probably won’t even end up on your record. In Maryland and Virginia, it can be tougher though. But the financials? That’s where you really have to be careful – you don’t want to end up on the IRS or the Department of Justice’s radar, or any other government agency for that matter. You know the drill though. Any interactions with law enforcement, you say nothing and ask to speak to an attorney.”

“Are you my attorney, John?”

He gives me a wan smile. “I can write a letter on your behalf to the bank. But anything to do with the other business...well, I’ll give you the name of someone.”

He pulls out a pen from his pocket and writes down a name and number on a paper napkin and hands it to me.

I can’t help feeling hurt. Angry. It’s irrational, I know. But no one’s ever there for me when I need them. And I always thought that at this point in my life someone would be.

“I’m not a criminal lawyer,” he says, as if he can sense what I’m thinking. “And my wife? Well, she’d have some questions if I started representing –” he pauses, clearly searching for a word that won’t offend me – “a beautiful woman like you in court. Look, you’re careful, you’ll be okay. I mean, you’ve gotten this far, haven’t you? But in relation to your money, the truth is, your bank can do this. The

documents you signed when you opened the account would have had a clause relating to criminal activity, all that kind of stuff.”

He takes a sip of his martini. “What were you saving for anyway? A rainy day?”

“A house. The place I rent in Bethesda is beautiful, the kind of place I never dreamed I’d ever live in. I’ve just always wanted a place of my own. For the security. For Luca.” I pause. “Maybe this is punishment for being greedy. I already had enough for a small apartment, but I kept thinking one more year...one more year and I’ll be able to buy something even better.”

“We’ll get your money back,” he says. “It shouldn’t take more than a letter threatening them with legal action.”

“I was just beginning to feel like I was really getting somewhere too,” I say.

“Don’t beat yourself up. You’re a good person, Trudi. A hard worker. A caring mom. Smart. Resilient. It’s going to be okay. We’ll figure it out.”

He’s being kind, but this whole thing has made me realize that I don’t know who I am. Not really.

I take an Uber back to Bethesda. Get the driver to drop me straight at Luca’s school.

When we get home I go through the mail while he watches TV. Bills, catalogues, invitations.

A package from Amazon Prime. *The Pillow Book*. I flick through it and wonder if it’s the kind of book you should read from start to finish, or if you can open

it up anywhere, like you would with a magazine. It seems to be a bunch of random lists and thoughts, so I don't think it matters how you read it.

If Sei Shonagon was alive today, I feel like she'd be big on social media. Twitter, definitely. Instagram too. On one page she complains about how difficult it is to find a decent pair of tweezers. *Well, here we are hundreds of years later and women are still dealing with that issue*, I think to myself. Her thoughts, her musings are all so funny and charming. Imagine writing something that people are still reading centuries later. How do you do that? I keep flicking through the book, but I begin to feel guilty, distracted. I have work to do – emails to respond to, clients to screen.

I'm about to haul myself off the couch. Go upstairs to my study. But my phone starts to ring. My work phone. A private number. It always worries me when it rings. I don't list my number online anymore, but I guess it's still floating around on a couple of websites. Although even then, I always used to make it clear that if a new client wanted to book me that they had to text or email. My regular clients can text me, but they know not to call. Besides, most of my *real* regulars have my personal number.

So I let it go to voicemail. But it rings again.

Finally, I answer. I don't say anything, I just listen.

"Is this Trudi?" a woman's voice says.

I hang up. No one calling this number should know my real name, especially not a woman. Anyone who contacts me on this number should know me as Claudia. I block the number, but a few moments later it starts ringing again. Again and again until I switch it off.

Chapter 3: Nathalie

On Sundays, Ben and I play a game. It started the first few times I slept over at his house. I'd want to leave first thing in the morning, but he'd always try to make me stay.

“You have to have some breakfast,” he said the first morning. “Let me guess, you're a French toast gal.”

“A French toast gal? As opposed to, what, the regular bagel and cereal types you normally sleep with?”

“Come on, you're elegant, sophisticated...I have to make something special for you.”

“Oh, you're good.”

We were both laughing by this stage.

“What about pancakes?” he said. “Or I could make you an omelet – I have eggs in the fridge, mushrooms. I like to put a little truffle oil in too. Or I can go to the shops and get some pastries...”

I would say no to everything he suggested, at first because I really didn't want anything. But then, to see how far he'd go. It became a game, and I'd always wait until his fourth, fifth or sixth suggestion before finally saying yes.

Now it's become a Sunday morning ritual. Me in my pajamas drinking coffee and reading the papers while Ben dons an apron and makes me breakfast, or 'le petit-déjeuner,' as he sometimes says in an over-the-top French accent, or 'prima colazione' if he decides to do his impersonation of Brando in *The Godfather* because it makes me laugh. It's always a performance.

This morning, he's making crepes.

"I don't think you've ever made me crepes before," I say.

"See, there are still things you don't know about me."

I like watching him cook. There's something comforting about it.

On our fourth date, he invited me over for dinner. Steak and salad. Grilled asparagus. He made a dressing from lemons and squeezed them through his fingers, so the seeds wouldn't fall into the bowl. It aroused me in such an unexpected way. I had a sudden, overwhelming urge to take his hand and lick the juice from his fingers. I didn't follow through, but I remember it so vividly – the desire – that my mouth waters from the imagined tartness.

"Can I have lemon and sugar on my crepes?" I say.

"Of course you can," he says, kissing my forehead, before turning his attention back to the bowl filled with batter. "Lemon and sugar. You're adorable."

Maybe I *should* just ask him.

I almost do. I stare at his back as he cracks an egg into the bowl and whisks the batter and imagine how I might phrase the question. And what those words – a single sentence, *Are you cheating on me?* – would do to this moment, this day...

No. I can't bring myself to say it.

I meet my friend Karen for a drink after work the following night. I've known her for four years or so. She used to work at the paper but got sick of the long hours and bad pay, so now she works as a lobbyist for Disney.

As two single women new to DC, we bonded and hung out regularly – rooftop cocktails, Sunday brunches, shopping trips to Tysons Corner, but when I met Ben we started to see less of each other and now we only catch up every couple of months. I worry that she’s still a little hurt. But I need to talk to someone, and I’ve always trusted her judgment. She’s honest to the point of being abrupt, and I feel like that’s what I need right now.

We meet at Sequoia on the Georgetown Waterfront, and end up sitting at a table on the outdoor terrace that cascades down to the Potomac, drinking frozen mojitos and eating oysters. The sunsets in DC may not be as picture perfect as they are in Florida, but some evenings they’re glorious nonetheless. Tonight, the sky is soft pink.

Karen and I make small talk. Laugh at the number of consultant bros and preppy Georgetown grad students milling at the bar. She tells me about her recent trip to Florida, where her colleagues made her participate in the Disney Princess Half Marathon.

“Can you imagine me running in a pink tutu?” she says in her husky voice. “I may have also been wearing a diamante tiara – not by choice. It was the most humiliating thing I’ve ever done, but how could I say no? It would have been career suicide. This is my life now – I’ve sold my soul.”

“You can’t tell me all this without showing me the photos,” I say.

“Oh, that’s never going to happen. But enough about me.” She pauses. “You know, I hope you don’t mind me saying this, but you don’t seem like yourself. Is everything okay?”

“Is it that obvious?” I say, trying to smile. I look out at the water. A young couple is having their photo taken. I assume the photos are for their engagement because the photographer – a professional – keeps urging them into intimate poses. They’re too young, I think, to get married. I was twenty-eight the first time I got engaged, and even that seems too young in hindsight. I turn my attention back to Karen. “I don’t know. I think Ben...I think he might be cheating on me. In fact, I’m almost certain that he is.”

“Cheating?” she says, a look of concern on her face. “I don’t believe it. You guys are like the perfect couple. And you’ve only been married, what – ”

“A year.” I say. I begin to tell her about the text message. About Trudi. About all the holes in Ben’s story. About her name disappearing from his phone. About my calls to his office. My conversation with Barbara, who’d never heard of her. I pull up Trudi’s Instagram account and show it to her. “I mean, look at her. She’s a blonde bombshell. Why else would he be in contact with her?”

After I finish, Karen is silent for a while, as if she’s thinking everything over. “None of it looks good,” she says. “But it doesn’t make sense either. I mean, if he was cheating would he really text her back in front of you? That would be a whole other level of fuckery.”

“Maybe it would have been more suspicious of him *not* to text her back in front of me,” I say.

“Well, lying about her being a colleague – that just seems sloppy. And Ben’s never struck me as being the sloppy type.”

“You’re right. None of it makes sense. But I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s going on. All I can think is that he was caught off guard and improvised.”

“Could she be a contractor or a temp? That might explain why her name isn’t in the system.”

“But Barbara would have heard of her, surely, especially if Ben’s been working with her.”

Karen takes a sip of her mojito. “Did Ben cheat on his ex? That’s not why they split, is it?”

“No. He said they just got sick of fighting all the time.”

She leans forward and beckons her hand at me. “Here, let me see those photos again.”

I pass her my phone.

“Trudilicious9,” she says, rolling her eyes. “Seriously, millennials these days.”

She scrolls through, making jokes about various photos, then stops. Frowns.

“That’s interesting,” she says.

“What?”

“In one of these photos she’s at the White House.”

“You’re kidding,” I say, taking the phone from her.

“See look,” she says, pointing at the screen. “Here.”

I look at the photo – Trudi is standing in front of an ornamental display of pink flowers arranged in a giant brass vase. She looks different – more elegant than

usual. She is wearing a cream dress suit and her long blonde hair is styled high in a chignon. She is smiling, but awkwardly, as if she is nervous or uncomfortable having her photo taken. Strange, given the number of selfies on her social media profiles.

“Are you sure it’s the White House?”

Karen nods. “I was there – it was the State Dinner for the Italian Prime Minister. I recognize the flower arrangements – I kept thinking they looked like cabbages. It was Obama’s last State Dinner. October 2016. God, it seems like a lifetime ago.”

“I can’t believe I missed this,” I say. “What’s a twenty-something waitress doing at the White House?”

“Maybe she does work for the government. Or could she be someone’s girlfriend?”

“I can find out how she got on the guest list. I’ll ask Max or one of the other political reporters if they have a contact.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea? They’ll want to know why you’re asking.”

“I’ll say I’m just doing some initial research, that I’ll loop them in if anything comes of it.”

“Look, I get that this is in your nature – to want to investigate, to get to the bottom of it, but are you sure it’s a good idea? Wouldn’t it be better to let it go. Stop obsessing? I think you’re reading too much into everything.”

“I wish I could,” I say. “But I can’t. I just can’t.”

“Then ask him,” she says.

“What’s that Carl Bernstein quote again? His definition of journalism.”

“Hmmm. That it’s ‘the best available version of the truth.’”

“Yeah. Well, that’s what I want – the best available version of the truth. And if I ask Ben, I’m not going to get it, am I? In fact, it’ll just make it even harder to get the truth.”

She nods. Not in approval, but because she knows me and she understands.

According to the phone directory, Trudi lives in the suburbs of Maryland. A townhouse just north of Bethesda.

I know I’m crossing a line. That I could be doing something healthier, more productive with my Tuesday, but what choice do I have? It’s been vexing me, not knowing who she is. Why it’s so hard to find out even the most basic facts about her. Because this is something I’m good at. Something that should be much easier than it’s proving to be. So this, going to her house, is the next logical step in my investigation.

As I drive up Wisconsin, I consider what it will mean if Ben is having an affair. I try to think clearly, rationally. I spent the morning in tears, I got so worked up, and now I feel exhausted, as if there’s no room left for anything but detachment.

Could I forgive him? I’ve always looked down on women who stay with their husbands after a transgression. Pitied them, their lack of self-respect. But the thought of losing Ben, I don’t know...

My ex-husband and I tried to reconcile, but it didn’t even last a night. We were lying next to each other in bed and he tried to touch me. I shirked. His body seemed foreign to me – repulsive, clammy. I’ll never let this man touch me again, I

remember thinking. I got up and started packing again. He followed me out of bed, reached out, kept talking, pleading. I don't remember what he said. It doesn't matter now.

The tears come up again. I thought they'd all gone. What if it happens again? What if I don't know Ben, not really. It would mean I've been wrong about him this whole time. Maybe we should have waited. Maybe I should have listened to what people said, that we should live together first, that it's the only way to really get to know someone. But I was spending half my time at his place anyway. And I knew. I knew he was the one.

I picture him with Trudi. I imagine how he must look at her. The desire he must feel. I imagine that his lust for her is so strong that it washes everything else away. Makes him forget about me. Turns me into an annoyance. Something he regrets. I see them in our bed. In her bed. In a hotel bed. On the carpet. Up against a wall. On a desk. Him licking her, grabbing her, biting into her, running his hands over her breasts. It suddenly occurs to me that the other night he rolled me over roughly while we were having sex. He grabbed my hair, pulled my head back, then pushed me back down again and took me from behind. I enjoyed it at the time, the roughness of it – but it was unlike him. Is it something he does with her? Was he thinking of her at the time? Imagining – wishing – that I was Trudi?

The car behind me honks. The light has turned green.

What will I do if Ben *is* cheating?

I am not an Elin Nordegren. No. Wielding and waving golf clubs isn't my style. Theoretically, I understand the desire to smash something up in a moment of grief or rage. But it seems to me that it would only bring one short-term pleasure.

Will I just leave him? What then?

I am so certain that he is cheating, that it feels necessary to contemplate these questions.

I arrive at the address I have for Trudi. It is a pretty two-story townhouse near the Medical Center Metro. How does she afford it, I wonder? Regardless of whether she's a waitress or an assistant, the rent would be too steep. She must share it with someone, I decide. When I first arrived in DC all I could afford on a junior journalist's salary was a room in a dingy townhouse in Columbia Heights – and even that was pushing my budget. I just wanted to be close to the action.

I debate whether or not I should get out of the car. Knock on the door. The thing about being a journalist is you can do these sorts of things, to a degree. It gives you a kind of freedom to approach strangers, to ask them questions you never normally would. I'm not a confident person, but journalism is a kind of shield. It makes me feel more powerful than I really am. People dislike journalists, but they are also impressed by them. Intimidated.

What if I knocked on her door? Would she recognize me? I mean, if she's sleeping with my husband, there's a good chance she would be aware of me. She would have seen a photo of me, online perhaps. Surely a mistress would make it her business to know what her lover's wife looks like.

What have I got to lose? There's something thrilling about the decision. Liberating. I want to bring things to a head. I can't live like this anymore – the not knowing, it's making me ill. Standing outside her door, I pause. I'll introduce myself, say I'm writing a story on the metro extension, the Purple Line. Whether it should be extended to the Medical Center station. If I see recognition in her eyes, then I'll know. I'll know Ben is having an affair with her. If she doesn't recognize me, then it won't absolve Ben – it's possible that she doesn't know he's married, after all – but I'll feel less anxious.

I ring the doorbell and wait. There is no answer though and so I ring again, and then knock on the door. My heart is racing. But I can tell no one's home. I'm disappointed and ring the bell one more time.

“Are you a friend of Trudi's?”

I turn around. There is an elderly woman standing at the door of the next townhouse along. It looks as if she's on her way out.

“Do you know Trudi?” I say.

“Oh, yes,” the woman replies. “I look after her son sometimes. She's always running off to meetings.”

“To meetings?” I say.

“Yes. Who did you say you were again, dear?”

“I'm Nathalie,” I say. “I'm a journalist.”

“Oh, my,” she says. “Are you interviewing Trudi?”

Why does she think I'd be interviewing Trudi?

“Yes,” I say. “I suppose she's running late, still at work.”

“She might be picking up Luca from school. I look after him sometimes.”

“Yes, you said. So, Trudi, how is she enjoying work these days?”

“Well –” the woman pauses. “To be honest, I don’t really understand what it is that she does. I don’t know if she’s ever explained it to me properly. It’s so confusing these days, the job titles people have. Back in my day women were teachers or nurses or receptionists. Or just housewives. A consultant – what does that even mean?”

I nod. “A consultant. Well, if Trudi isn’t here, I’d better be off. But it was lovely talking to you, Mrs – ”

“Mrs. Draper. But you can call me Roma. Shall I leave a message for Trudi, for when she gets home?”

“Oh, no. Please don’t trouble yourself. I’ll call her myself.”

“Alright. Bye-bye, dear.”

She waves as I get into my car.

So, Trudi is a consultant. Why then, is there no mention of this online? Or did I just miss something?

There is an intern following me around at work. Normally the only interns we take are from the Ivy League schools. But Evan – a tall, lanky guy in his early twenties – attends the University of Maryland.

“Why do I have to babysit?” I ask Stan.

He tells me that Evan’s mother is dating the Chief Operating Officer and that I have to be nice.

“So nepotism is still a thing, is it?” I say.

Stan frowns, although the fact that he doesn’t say anything makes me think he probably feels the same way as I do about the whole thing.

But perhaps it’s a good thing, to have a shadow for the next few days. It might keep me more focused than I have been.

We go to Rock Creek Park to do a story on desire paths. I’d never heard of the term before I got the media release. The conservancy staff are trying to discourage people from walking across a small patch of grass, where a path has formed over the years. They’ve discovered it is home to a rare breed of moth.

“We put up signs, cordoned it off, but it became a sort of joke. People kept pulling the rope down,” a manager named Brett tells us. He has rhoticism though, and as he speaks, I keep thinking how unfortunate it must be to be given a name at birth that you’ll always struggle to pronounce. “No one cares about the moths though. It’s selfish – they just keep trampling across.”

“Why can’t they just walk another way round?” I say.

He shrugs. “It’s entrenched. Once the path is there – well, it’s there in people’s heads too. It’s difficult to erase. Not just the path, but the habit.”

“Yes,” I say. “I suppose it would be.”

On the way back to the office, I keep hearing Stan’s words ringing in my ears – *be nice* – and so I make small talk with Evan.

“So what’s Maryland like?”

“I got into Columbia,” he says, sounding a little defensive.

“Why didn’t you go? The journalism program there is meant to be excellent,”
I say.

“They don’t offer much funding, that’s all.”

I feel bad for him then. Embarrassed that I even asked – I should have guessed it was the money. “The University of Maryland has a good reputation too,” I say.

“Anyway, it doesn’t matter where you go. In journalism, the only thing that matters is if you get the story. If you want it badly enough, you’ll make it. I mean, look at me.”

“How did you get your big break? Working at *The Observer*, I mean. That must be every journalist’s dream.”

This makes me smile. I remember when I used to idolize journalists. Wonder how I could emulate their careers. “Well, after I graduated, I got a job at a local newspaper. I’d done an internship there, just like you’re doing now. And I fell in love. I couldn’t imagine doing anything else. But then I met a guy, got married. Ended up moving. And the first job offer I got was at a magazine. It wasn’t ideal, I was writing mostly lifestyle pieces, interviews with local businesspeople, Florida socialites, that kind of thing. But I guess my priorities had changed, at least temporarily.”

“So, the marriage didn’t work out, I take it?”

“Something like that.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. It made me realize how much I’d given up. I moved to DC without a job lined up and decided that I was going to make it here no matter what.”

“And you did. That’s amazing.”

I want to tell him that I haven't made it. That even though I love my job, I feel unappreciated some days. That I'd really prefer to be doing investigative work. That half the stories I pitch to Stan he turns down because he just doesn't get it – the perspective of a woman. Or because sometimes he lets his politics get in the way. And that we just lost ten percent of our staff in layoffs, so a raise is probably a long way off. But I don't have the heart.

“It is amazing,” I say. “Best job in the world.”

He seems encouraged by this. “Is there anything I can do when we get back to the office? I can help with research, or I can get you a coffee – whatever. I'm just grateful for the opportunity.”

This is refreshing. The last intern who trailed me was a stuck-up little diva who rolled her eyes every time I gave her a task.

“I might have a job for you,” I say. “I'm trying to find out some information about a woman. Her name is Trudi Carlton.”

Back at the newsroom I start typing up the quotes Brett gave me, thinking of an angle. I try to treat every story equally. I had a professor at college who used to say that if you went out on a job with the wrong attitude, you could miss something – that the biggest scoops often come from smallest incidents. Watergate is a case in point. Although, to be honest, covering a court case to do with a break in at the Democratic National Convention sounds a whole lot more interesting than being sent out to Rock Creek Park to cover dirt paths and endangered moths.

Maybe it's my background in magazines. Or that I'm not pushy enough. Stan keeps telling me that I need to be patient, that at *The Observer* everyone needs to do their time, the hard yards before being given the meatier assignments. That just having a job in journalism these days is something to be proud of. I suppose I should feel lucky that I'm here – and I do. I really do. The last year-and-a-half I haven't minded so much, I've been so caught up with things – Ben, the wedding...but lately, well. I still look forward to coming to work each day, but I've been feeling frustrated. I want more.

They started up an investigative unit recently. It's a small team of five senior journalists. All men, which is hardly surprising. They've mainly been looking into Trump. But as important as that is, I can't help thinking that we're missing out on other stories. I have at least a dozen ideas that are worth researching. Sometimes I find myself walking past their desks, smiling, nodding, stopping for a quick chat with Luke, who used to sit in the same area as me, wondering what the best approach is.

Suddenly fed up, I stand up and make my way over to Stan's office.

I wouldn't have the job if it wasn't for him, I know that and I'm grateful to him. I was so anxious during the interview, my hands were shaking. I'd even gone to a hypnotherapist the week before to try to get a handle on my nerves. Did it help? I don't know. But I made it through without having a full-blown panic attack or hyperventilating into a paper bag, so I guess it didn't hurt.

“Why did you give me the job?” I asked Stan a few months later. “I know I can't have been the most qualified applicant.”

He laughed. “You weren’t. But that’s the thing about this job, the qualifications don’t matter. At least, they shouldn’t, not to the degree they do these days. You reminded me of me. I could feel it – that you had it in your blood. The instinct.”

I knock on his door, which is half open. “Stan?”

He beckons me in. “What’s up?”

I take a deep breath. I haven’t thought through what I’m going to say.

“I love my job here, you know that – ”

“Geez, please tell me you’re not resigning.”

“No, of course not. But I thought when you promoted me to Writer at Large I’d have the opportunity to pursue...I don’t know, more hard-hitting stories. It just seems like I’m doing the same old stuff I was before.”

Stan reaches for the pack of nicotine gum that’s always there on his desk. Pops out two squares of gum and puts them in his mouth. Leans back in his chair.

“Pat Fischer is leaving soon – it hasn’t been announced yet, but I could probably arrange for you to take her place. Education – what do you think?”

“I appreciate that, but what I’m really interested in is the investigative unit. I know I’d be good at it – I have so many stories – ”

He sighs. “Nat, everyone in this building wants to join the investigative unit. Look, the truth is there are going to be some big changes at *The Observer* soon.”

“What do you mean?”

“They’re close to filling the Editor-in-Chief position and, from what I’m hearing, there are probably going to be more job cuts coming soon, if you can keep that between you and me.”

“More job cuts? We’re still hurting from the last round.”

“That’s how it is these days – doing less with more. Look, I know you’re ambitious. You’ve been doing great stuff. I’m your biggest fan, you know that. If anything comes up, I’ll go into bat for you. But at least think about the education beat. I can’t guarantee anything just yet, but I’ll try.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, how’s the intern doing? What’s his name again?”

“Evan. He has the right attitude. I like him.”

“What have you got him working on?”

“Just some general research.”

“Okay, well hop to it. Gotta – ”

“Gotta feed the dragon, I know.” On my way out I turn around and smile.

“Thanks, Stan.”

When I get home, there’s a package for me in the mail. Lingerie I ordered online. But its arrival doesn’t make me feel as excited as it normally would.

I bought the set in a moment of anxiety, panic. And now, as I try it on – a black lace corset with suspenders and a matching pair of briefs – I can’t help thinking of what prompted me to buy it. Or at least what had been preoccupying me at the time.

Incident five:

We are in bed after a night out in Georgetown. We'd spent the evening at the rooftop bar at the Graham Hotel. Tony and Cassandra stopped by briefly too, but they were on their way to a show at the Kennedy Center and left after just one round.

When we get home, Ben and I end up dashing upstairs to the bedroom. We kiss, strip down, laugh. Suddenly I am on all fours on the bed. He is behind me, about to enter me. I feel him against me, but he is too high up. I shift, maneuver the angle of my body.

"Wrong hole?" he says.

Did he really just say that? I think. I assume it is an accident. It is dark, after all, and we are tipsy. We fuck and I forget about it, at least for a while.

But the next day it keeps coming back to me. Was it deliberate? We've done it a couple of times, but honestly, I'm not that into it. And, besides, we always plan it first. *Wrong hole...* I mean, you've got to be fucking kidding me. Surely a man of his age knows his way around a woman's body, even in the dark. It was deliberate, I'm certain of it.

But despite those thoughts, I still end up shopping online for lingerie.

And now here I am, admiring myself in the mirror. I do look good, but the usual feeling I get when I've bought something new – the desire to show it off, to text Ben to let him know I have a surprise in store – well, it isn't there.

Just then, my phone beeps. It's Ben: "Home soon. xxx"

But would me not liking anal sex be enough for him to cheat? I mean, it's not like he's missing out in other ways.

Perhaps I should suggest it, I think. Just go along with it. Pretend I want it. The thought of doing so makes me tired though. Annoyed. At what point does compromise shift to something else? To being hostage to someone else's impulses and desires? To being trampled over, like the grass, the moths, at Rock Creek Park.

I take the lingerie off and put my clothes back on. I don't bother texting him back.

Later, when he gets home, he is in such a cheery mood that I forget about my earlier misgivings. For some reason, he's brought home a bottle of Veuve – my favorite.

“Well this is a nice surprise,” I say. “What's the occasion?”

He squeezes me. “Does there need to be one?”

“No, of course not,” I say.

He opens the bottle of champagne and we take it out onto the porch. The air is sweet, sultry. Blossoms from our neighbor's plum trees keep blowing into our yard.

Ben starts talking about work. It preoccupies him – he gets stressed so easily. He's annoyed because he keeps getting text messages.

“It's okay,” I say, scratching the back of his head. “It can wait until the morning. How's your assistant going?”

“Barbara's Barbara,” he says. “She doesn't cut me any slack.”

“No, I mean the other one.”

“Hmm?” he says.

“You know.”

He shakes his head.

“Trudi,” I say.

His eyes are wider than I’d like them to be. He’s thinking on the spot.

“Oh, Trudi,” he says. “She didn’t end up sticking around. That’s why it took me a minute to, uh, to figure out what you...” he trails off. Laughs.

There’s a look of relief on his face, as if he thinks he’s gotten away with it, his lie. He always did think he was smarter than me. I have a sudden desire to show him how wrong he is.

But instead, I nod and smile. I mean, it’s still possible that I’m mistaken, isn’t it? That there might be some other explanation. But that night I barely sleep.

When I get to work the next morning, Evan is already there. *God, he’s a bit too enthusiastic*, I think. He swivels around on his chair. Hands me a coffee.”

“Evan,” I say. “That’s thoughtful, but I don’t drink dairy.”

“Oh, it’s almond milk. I asked Stan how you take your coffee.”

“You asked Stan?” I say, wondering if I should tell him that it’s really not appropriate to be bothering an editor about something as trivial as that. “Did he mind?”

Evan looks puzzled by the question. “No.”

It’s amazing, isn’t it, the confidence men have. “Well, here, let me give you some money.” He protests, but I force five dollars on him anyway.

“So, um...” he hesitates.

“What is it?”

“I found out some stuff about Trudi Carlton.”

“You did? That’s great. What is it?”

“It’s what she does. For a living.”

I’m disappointed. “Oh. Well, I know that she’s either a waitress or a consultant, I told you that. I’m just trying to figure out where.”

Evan gives me a funny look. “Nathalie, is this to do with a story or is it – ” he pauses. “Is it personal?”

The question, a little cheeky, would normally bother me. But I’m also impressed at how perceptive he is. He’s sharp.

“Of course it’s to do with a story,” I say, trying to sound firm.

“Okay, good. It’s just that she’s not a waitress. And she’s not a consultant either.”

I shake my head. “So what does she do?”

“She’s an escort. Professionally, she goes by the name Claudia Choux.”

“An escort?” I say. “I don’t understand.”

Evan hands me his phone.

“I didn’t want to bring this up on the office computer – it’s not really safe for work,” he says. “But this is where she advertises. At least one of the places.”

It’s a website called Perfect Playmates. There are a series of pictures of a beautiful blonde woman wearing lingerie. Even though her face is blurred, cropped or angled away from the camera in each one, I know it’s her. The lips, the jawline, the hair...they’re unmistakable.

“How did you – ?”

Evan starts talking, beginning to explain it to me. Something about reverse searching an image. He's excited. As he should be. I try to smile. I'm proud of him, in a way. He's done a good job. A really good job. I know the feeling – of getting to the bottom of something, of uncovering a story. I understand it. And this was the moment I was waiting for. Mystery solved. But, oh, God. It suddenly hits me, why nothing about her ads up. Why it's been so hard to figure her out. Why Ben deleted her from his phone. Why he lied to me.

I feel myself leaning forward slightly. I place my hands on the desk. *This can't be true*, I think. But of course I know it is.

“Are you okay?” Evan says.

I nod. If I try to talk, I'm not entirely sure I'll be able to hold it together.

“I'm fine,” I say. “I sometimes...” I point to my chest and make a gesture.

“Will you excuse me for a minute.”

“Of course,” he says.

If I can just make it to the restrooms, I tell myself, then I'll be okay. My throat though. I try not to think about it, my breath, how I can feel it stopping just before it reaches my larynx. If I can just get inside and into a stall. If I can just manage to keep walking, even though my legs feel unsteady, even though my eyes are beginning to fill up with tears. I'll be okay. I can hold myself together till then. But Stan appears around the corner, and now he's coming towards me. God. I can't make eye contact, or I'll start to cry. But if I ignore him, he might ask me what's wrong. And then I'll really lose it.

“Nat,” he says.

“Morning, Stan!” I say, briefly switching on a smile. Then, as I walk past, a rush of relief that I managed to do that so well, but also a sense of dread. Because I’m so close to the restroom door and I know that as soon as I get inside, that’s it. No need to pretend. No need to keep myself composed. I’ll just be by myself in a stall, knowing that my life is shattering to pieces. That my husband has been fucking a whore.

And finally, just as it’s getting too much – the fact that my breath can’t come up or out properly – just as I’m getting to the point where it’s beginning to frighten me, the air trying to push itself out of me but failing, where I feel as if I might collapse – I manage to push the door open.

I never realized that my ability to breathe depended so heavily on the person I love. Right now, I can’t. Right now, I’m gasping. I’m crouched on the bathroom floor, barreled over.

Ben, what have you done? How could you?

I sit there sobbing, I’m not sure for how long.

I text Stan and tell him I need the rest of the day off. He says it’s no problem. He knows that I don’t make requests like this lightly. That when I ask for something, it’s because it really matters.

It’s lunch time and the streets are crowded. I walk quickly. I want to get as far away from the office as possible. I don’t want anyone from work seeing me like this. I waver between feeling numb from shock and crying uncontrollably.

It's not what you think. Ben says when I call. I don't even say hello. I just come out and ask it: "Are you using prostitutes?"

There is silence, and then he says, "Why?" What a strange way to respond. Even for him. I regret my question immediately though. I should have worded it differently. I should have baited him, thought it through more carefully. But we're beyond that now.

I tell him I'm going to leave. That I'm on my way home to pack my things.

"Don't do that," he says. "Please, Nat. I'm on my way home now."

I get an Uber. Text Karen. Ask if I can stay at hers.

When I get home Ben isn't there, thankfully.

I pack in a hurry. Throw things into the suitcase. Dresses, underwear, pajama pants. My hands are shaking and then I wonder if maybe I should be packing things for him to leave. But it's his house. I just moved in here after we got married. But I'd really thought that it was ours. That this was it.

He keeps trying to touch me. To stop me. To hold me.

I laugh. Then start crying again. It's more than crying though. I don't know what it is. It's awful though. Why don't I have any cigarettes? That's all I want right now. A cigarette.

"Don't come near me," I say, holding my arm out, indicating that I want him to keep his distance. "How could you do that?" I keep breaking down, then trying to continue with my packing. But instead I just end up walking around the room,

holding random items in my hand and sobbing. I'm currently holding a fedora hat. I don't know why I even picked it up. I've only worn it just the once.

"I didn't sleep with her. You've got this all wrong."

"Then why did she text you?"

He pauses. "Tony gave her my number."

"Tony?" I say. "Why would he do that?"

"I don't know. I think he thought – you know, it was probably a while ago. Before I met you. Maybe she just, you know I can't even explain it. She just texted me out of the blue."

"That makes no sense. Do you think I'm stupid, Ben? You're rambling. You sound like Donald Trump."

"Look, Tony gave her my number. It's the kind of guy he is. When he entertains his clients, sometimes he lines these things up. He probably thought he was doing me a favor. He – he just views marriage in a different way."

"Should I call Cassandra and ask her about it? In fact, I think I will. I think I'm going to call her right now."

"Jesus Christ, don't drag them into this."

"Then stop lying to me. Do you seriously expect me to believe you didn't fuck her?"

He sits down. Runs his hands through his hair.

"You're behaving like a child. If you're not going to believe me..."

“Are you serious? You cheat on me and then you get mad at *me* for being upset? That’s it. I’m leaving.” I throw the fedora at him, but it lands half-heartedly a foot away from me.

“Don’t go. We can talk this through.”

“Nope,” I say, zipping up my suitcase. “Not if you’re going to keep lying to me.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know.” I’m shouting now.

“Okay, okay. It happened. But just the once.”

I stop in my tracks.

“It didn’t mean anything. And as soon as it happened, I regretted it.”

This whole time, part of me had been hoping that it was some kind of mix-up. A misunderstanding. That it wasn’t true. So to hear him say it. Admit to it. Well...

I nod. “Okay. When?”

I can barely hear him speak. “A few weeks ago.”

“And it was just the once?”

“Yes.”

I wipe the tears away from my eyes. “Will you show me your phone records?”

“Excuse me?”

“No. Don’t get indignant with me. You don’t get to do that.”

“If we’re going to get through this, then you need to trust me.”

“You’ve been texting hookers and lying to me about it. You told me that she’s your assistant. And literally a minute ago you said you’d never slept with her, and just now you admitted that you did. So forgive me if, no, I don’t trust you.”

“I can honestly say it was just the once.”

I shake my head. “Do you know why I don’t believe you, Ben? Why I know for a fact that that’s not true?”

He looks at me and I can see that he’s concerned. That he’s really underestimated me. “Because you had her real name in your phone. If she was just some random escort, then you would have known her by her professional name. Claudia Choux. But her name was stored in your phone as Trudi Carlton. So you must have seen her more than once.”

He sighs. Sits back on the couch. Rests his hands on his knees. But he says nothing.

I go on. “And it doesn’t make sense that you would store her name in your phone. If you’d slept with her just the once and didn’t plan on doing it again, then why would you do that?”

I pick up my suitcase and head towards the door.

He stands up. Starts following me. “It won’t happen again. I promise. It meant nothing”

I don’t stop. I don’t even look at him.

Outside I walk for a while. Aimlessly dragging my suitcase along behind me. I don’t know what to do. When I check my phone, I see that Karen has texted me back. She’s in LA, says she can express-post her key to me, but it probably won’t get

here till tomorrow or the next day. I don't want to ask my other friends – Stephanie, a single mom who lives in a tiny two-bedroom apartment. Jen from work who lives in a share house. Dave and Tess? No, I don't want to be around a couple at the moment. And I certainly can't text any of my other friends. Our mutual friends.

I suppose I could get a room at the Omni for a couple of nights. It's inexpensive enough. But I don't want to be alone. And besides, it reminds me of Ben. Sometimes in the summer we book a room there, just to use the pool. Last time we were there, we snuck up to the sixth floor one night to see the suite that's meant to be haunted. You can't go in, they don't let anyone stay there anymore apparently. But it has a doorbell out the front. We stood outside for a while giggling like teenagers, then rang it. I thought I heard footsteps and so we ended up running down the corridor laughing, hand-in-hand.

I get my phone out of my handbag and text Stan.

You have a spare room at your house, right?

A few seconds later, he texts me back. *You can stay as long as you need to.*

The kindness of his message overwhelms me and I start to cry again.

The unsent letter is unsatisfactory. You get no response, no answers, no comfort, no hope. They're the things I really want.

I'm craving coffee earlier than usual, wine earlier than usual, and cigarettes, which I haven't craved in years.

I drink too much. I stay in bed all day. I get up to drink coffee then go back to bed. I get up a bit later to drink wine and smoke cigarettes and go back to bed. There are missed calls from Ben. Missed calls from my mother and messages too, telling me that Ben's been calling her. I don't feel like talking though. Sleeping and drinking and smoking are the only things that I can manage right now.

Something has formed inside of me, where people have trodden too heavily. As much as I try to go back to the way things were, try to wipe the slate clean, as it were, it's just not possible. Heartbroken. You might think it means a kind of yearning for someone. It actually means your heart doesn't work in the way it used to. It's always going to be a little bit faulty. The desire path, that sounds so beautiful, runs through me, but it leads to somewhere – someone – else.

Claudia Choux. *Choux*. It means dough in French – I can't think of a more stupid name. I keep looking at her social media profiles, trying to understand. What he wanted. Why he went to her.

I turn to the internet for answers. Never a good idea.

Articles, blog posts, online forums...

Wouldn't you rather him use a prostitute than have an affair? Ha, I think. As if it's an either/or. Yes, what a relief that my dishonest, cheating husband didn't get emotionally involved.

It's because they're craving intimacy. Oh, he got intimacy, don't try to pull that one on me.

Men are visual creatures. Monogamy isn't in their nature. They have biological needs. The old 'they need to sew their wilds seeds or oats or whatever it is' argument.

All the articles ask escorts and their clients about their motives. Hardly the most reliable of sources. They all have a vested interest to make it sound as reasonable as possible. Imagine if I wrote an article about drug use and only interviewing drug dealers and cokeheads? What a fucking joke.

Nothing explains my situation. I'm not one of those women who's lost interest in sex. I'm young. I'm good looking. I thought our relationship meant something. That it was passionate. I don't see myself in any of these stories. I want to talk to someone who might understand. But no one's talking about this. I may as well be the only person it's happened to, although I imagine it happens all the time.

I imagine trying to tell someone. *My husband uses prostitutes.* What will they think of me? People always blame the wife. "The poor guy," they'd probably say afterwards. "He mustn't have been getting any at home." I feel so embarrassed.

Why is it that men always want something else? Should I have been taller, thinner, blonde, curvier, more submissive, more aggressive, black, Asian, a redhead? Did you want me to be an A cup? A double D cup? Did you want me to be sweeter? Dirtier? Was it the things I didn't do? You could have just asked.

Even if it were possible – even if I had been all those things – it never would have been enough though, would it?

But you. You were always going to be enough for me.

There are supernovas. But our star – our beautiful, startling, inexplicable star – it didn't just collapse. You wrecked it, you trashed it, it's gone.

I just don't understand.

I find the websites where Trudi – and women like her – advertise. Did he just sleep with her or were there others? I imagine Ben locking himself in the study – our study – and going through them. What criteria does he use, I wonder. Is it the way they look? Their age? The size of their breasts? The things they're willing to do? How much they cost?

I wonder how aroused he gets when he's looking at them. Deciding. When I knocked on the door that night, did he feel guilty or was it some kind of thrill?

I ask him all these things. He doesn't answer. The excuses change and morph over the next few days.

I go back home one Saturday afternoon to get some more of my things.

He asks me to stay, but I say no.

I tell him I just want answers. That I don't believe he saw Trudi just the once.

Finally, he breaks down crying. The only other time I've seen him cry was on our wedding day. I've never seen him sob like this. *I'm the one who's hurting*, I want to say.

I don't know what prompts his confession. Maybe he's tired of lying. Or he can see that I'm not going to budge until he tells me the truth. He talks quietly. Looks at the carpet the whole time.

“You’re right,” he says. “I have seen her before. But it was a long time ago, before I met you. I can honestly say that I only slept with her once while we were together. A few weeks ago she texted me out of the blue. Said she’d been thinking of me. That she missed me. That she – ” he pauses.

“What?”

“She offered me a special rate.”

I make a face. “That’s disgusting.”

“I was flattered. I’d been stressed. I mean, I’m not stupid. I know she was just drumming up business. But when I was single, it was a habit I got into. I didn’t want a relationship. But I also didn’t want to, I don’t know, chase after women pretending that I did. And so I used to see her from time to time. But then I met you. And I stopped.”

“When did you stop?”

“Straight away. As soon as things got serious.”

“Were there others or just her?”

“Just her. After I split up with Fiona, Tony put us in touch.”

So that part is true, I think. Poor Cassandra.

“So she called you and you agreed to see her again. It didn’t occur to you that it could wreck our marriage? You didn’t care about that?”

“When I was going through the divorce, it was a respite. A thrill. I’d been so stressed out and, I don’t know, it was like a drug. When she contacted me, I felt the same old rush. I don’t know why I did it. I felt sick afterwards. I felt so ashamed. She texted me later to say that she’d had fun, that she hoped I’d make another

appointment again soon. I replied saying that I didn't want to see her again. That night when we were out at dinner, when you saw the text. That was her texting back, 'okay.' I wish I'd just blocked her number straight away. I did later that night when we got home."

I sit there in silence. Not sure what to say. My breathing still feels out of sorts from all the crying. "Do you remember when I said that if you were ever unhappy, that you'd tell me. That you wouldn't cheat, that you'd be open with me about it? It's the one thing I asked for."

"I wasn't unhappy. In fact, I've never been happier. I wasn't planning on any of this. It just happened. And I'm sorry."

"Is it because you wanted anal sex?"

"What? No."

"I just want to know why you did it."

"There was no reason. I can't even explain it to myself. I was stupid. I stuffed up."

"Did you sleep with her in our bed?"

"No, of course not."

"So what did you do with her?"

"Nathalie, I don't want to –"

"I want to know."

He's silent for a while. "She gave me a massage. We had sex. It probably lasted ten minutes max."

"What kind of sex?"

“Nathalie...”

“Tell me.”

“Regular sex. I don’t even remember. There was nothing special about it.”

“You paid a thousand dollars for ten minutes of regular, forgettable sex?”

“That’s not what I paid.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. I forgot. You’re such a stud that escorts call you up and beg you for it. They give you special rates.”

What do I say to him? I can hardly remember it in a legible way.

Was it...what...am I...too old...I’m young...am I... am I not...attractive...to you...anymore...is it...because...because I’ve put on weight...barely...barely even a dress size...anyway...I’m still...attractive though...don’t you...realize...men...men check me out...all the time...am I...not...not good enough...in...bed...I...tried...lingerie...toys...I never said...no...just once...when I had...when I had the flu...was there something...something you wanted...something kinky...if I’d known...if you’d just...just told me...I would have...I would have...done anything...were you too...afraid...to ask...was it that...did you want...more...if I’d known...I would have...you could have...just...said...why won’t you...tell me...it isn’t...fair...to not tell me...to not explain...I just want...to know...what I did...what I...should have done...

We meet again a few days later. But our conversation becomes vicious.

Nasty.

“What a stupid, sloppy thing to do. What if your work found out? What would happen?” I say. “You could lose your security clearance, you know.”

I can see I’ve rattled him. A look of panic in his eyes. The stress building up. His face going redder and redder. It’s beautiful to watch. There it goes—poof! Goodbye to the promotion. Goodbye to being appointed Under Secretary. Maybe you should have kept your fucking pants on.

“You want to be very, very careful right now,” he says.

I laugh.

“If you’re trying to threaten me, blackmail me...”

“Oh no,” I say sweetly. “I’m just asking a hypothetical question, that’s all. I’m genuinely concerned about your future, Ben.”

I catch up with a lawyer friend of mine, Omar, to discuss divorce proceedings.

We went to college together and both ended up here in DC. When I first arrived in town, we met up for drinks a couple of times, but I was always busy with work. Then he started seeing someone, and I started seeing Ben.

He suggests dinner.

“Why didn’t we ever date?” he says as we’re sitting at the bar, waiting for our table.

He’s flirting with me. But if I’m honest with myself, I didn’t call him up to ask him about a divorce. I just wanted to spend time with someone who desires me. I wanted to feel beautiful again. To forget for a few hours that my husband cheated on

me. To spend time with a man whose one goal is to get me into bed. The last couple of weeks I've felt so ugly. So undesirable. I keep comparing myself to her. To Trudi.

After too much champagne he asks if I'd like to go back to his place.

I feel halfhearted about the whole thing, but it's nice to feel desired. Desirable. Screw you Ben. Screw you Trudi.

He lives in a bachelor pad in Navy Yard. It's strange, to be touched by someone else. It feels wrong. I have a sudden desire to push him away, to leave. But the way he's looking at me...

I shut my eyes briefly. Wonder what Ben's doing tonight. If he's by himself or with someone. Then I put my hand on Omar's shoulder. Pull him closer to me. As he fucks me, I feel a surge of anger. That Ben has put me in this situation. That he has put me through all of this.

"Harder," I keep saying, as if that's the cure. And it works, temporarily at least. For a few minutes it makes me feel something other than grief and shock and pain and shame.

Afterwards, in bed, he holds me. Makes small talk. But he's wearing too much cologne. And he feels too slight. I want Ben's sturdy body next to me. This is the awful moment when reality starts settling back in, when I want to leave, but remember that there's nowhere I can go to escape all this. I feel my anger at Ben returning.

Omar tells me that he wants to see me again.

"Really?" I say, trying to sound enthusiastic. But as I'm lying there, all I keep thinking is, *what do I do with this rage?*

Stan gives me a talking to. Tells me to pull myself together. He's right.

I've used up all my leave and so I return to work. Stan goes easy on me. Gives me something from the wires to flesh out.

On my break, I stroll past Grant Morrison's desk. He spent three years in Beijing as China correspondent but came home a few months ago because his wife was homesick. Now he's been assigned to the trade and economy desk.

We make small talk.

"You know, I've been meaning to ask you: did you hear about the vase incident?" I say.

He looks at me quizzically, and I can see he's trying to figure out whether this is something he *should* know about.

"The vase incident?"

It briefly crosses my mind that this is the moment where I should stop. Think about whether this is a proportionate response. But I can't. Right now, it feels like the closest path to any sense of peace or satisfaction. And besides, maybe Ben should have been the one to stop and think. And so I keep going. I decide that this is *jus in bello*.

I lean forward and lower my voice. "So you know that vase the Chinese trade delegation gifted the Department --"

"Oh, sure, sure. It was a Ming Dynasty piece. We ran a photo of that a few weeks back. The parties did their little handshake thing in front of it."

"Yeah, that's the one. Well you wouldn't believe it..."

I tell the story just like Ben did. I even steal Tony's joke: "*It was going to be the gift that kept on giving – to Beijing.*"

"I mean, I know they try it all the time when our people visit the mainland," Grant says. "but they were trying to bug the Department here on US soil? That's..."

"Brazen," I say.

He can barely keep the smile of disbelief off his face. Then he pauses. "So, Ben told you this?"

I nod.

"I thought you two had a kind of Chinese Wall thing happening. Excuse the pun."

"We did, but we're getting a divorce, so the wall is in a state of disrepair."

"So, you don't mind if I..."

I shrug. "As long as you keep my name out of it. Anyway, I have to go and finish my story. Gotta feed the dragon as Stan would say."

I walk away smiling, feeling more energetic than I have in ages, wondering who Grant will call first. The Department of State? The Department of Commerce? The Chinese Embassy? Homeland Security?

Just thinking about it is delightful.

But then on my way home, the slump occurs. I start dwelling on Ben. On Trudi. Or should I think of her as Claudia? I think of all the things I don't know. All the things that Ben refuses to tell me. "Regular sex." No, I don't believe it. That was crueler than the betrayal itself. To leave me in the dark. Letting me imagine the

whats, the whys. I've called her. Texted her a couple of times, just asking her if she'd be willing to talk. To help me understand. But she either hangs up or ignores me.

On the metro on my way to Stan's, I look up Trudi's personal Instagram account. Then her professional one. I look up her personal Twitter account. Then her professional one.

In one post, there is a photo of her wearing lingerie, her hair swept in a way that hides her face. She is feeding caviar to her cat. In another, she's making jokes about some "crazy wife," treating me as if I'm some kind of annoyance, a bug to be swatted out of the way, while my life is left in pieces. I just want to know. What she and Ben did. If he's telling me the truth about it being just the once. The fact that he wouldn't show me his phone records, well...it's the not knowing that's unbearable. It means I spend all my spare time filling in the gaps.

And there's something so arrogant about her dismissal of me. Something nasty about it. Cold-hearted. As if she has no sympathy for my situation. I didn't blame her to begin with, I mean, I know that my husband is responsible for his decisions. But there's a smugness to her posts. As if she takes pleasure in being the other woman. "Does your girlfriend look like this?" she writes in one post beneath a picture of her stretched out on a bed.

Does she not realize the pain she causes? Or does she just not care?

She probably thinks that women like me are pathetic. That we're to blame for the situations we find ourselves in.

My mind returns to the photo of her at the White House.

I call Max, one of the political reporters on the sixth floor.

“This might sound a little out of left field, but do you remember Obama’s State Dinner for the Italian Prime Minister? Yeah, 2016. I’m trying to figure out how someone got an invite. Her name is Trudi Carlton. I think she went as someone’s guest. I was hoping you could do me a favor and look into it for me.”

Chapter 4: Title of Chapter 4

It's a filthy hot day, but he wants me to wear stockings. I oblige, of course.

He's a regular. An old, fat Greek guy who I've been seeing every month for the last few years. He's not much to look at, but he has his charms. Takes me to functions, events – usually introduces me as his assistant Kelly. It's become a running joke.

There are clients I'm there with and clients I'm there-but-not-there with. There are more of the latter but with Spiro I'm always *there*. He almost feels like family. Never just books an hour, always at least two or three. Sometimes a whole night or weekend. Michelin star restaurants. Trips to Manhattan, Vegas. You name it. Once he even took me to the White House. Who'd have thought I'd ever be invited to a party at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue NW?

But today I'm not in the mood for entertaining. My lawyer called – told me he had good news and bad news, something I thought people only said in the movies. The good news is my bank will unfreeze my money. The bad news is, they'll only do it if I can provide proof of my income for every deposit I've ever made. A catch-22.

“Even if I *could* do that, it'd just confirm what they suspect,” I told him.

He suggested that I speak to my accountant. Said he'd keep looking into “alternative avenues.”

I try my best to put it out of my mind. Right now, I have to go and smile and stroke the ego of my client and pretend there's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be.

I've always felt that if you're going to make love to someone, you should love at least one thing about them. It's practicality, more than anything. Not long after I started, I realized that it makes everything more believable if you can latch onto something special about them. Sometimes it's easy – the way a client laughs, the way he strokes your hair. Spiro may be short and going bald, but he makes me feel like I'm the most beautiful woman in the world. I like to cozy up to him afterwards. We just lie there, talking and cuddling. I don't care about his big belly or his hairy back, it's nice just being in his company.

Of course, other times it's not so easy. I screen them thoroughly, check their references with other providers, but the uglies – men who are violent, mean, who get off on the power, who have a desire to humiliate – they always get through the cracks. Last month, a guy slapped me on the face right before he left. It stayed with me for days – the look of pleasure on his face. I should have known, the way he kept telling the waitress at the Georgetown Steakhouse that he was a regular. “You recognize me, don't you? You've seen me here before?” he kept asking her. And the joke he made about needing consent to even talk to women these days. He was softly spoken too, to the point where I kept having to ask him to repeat himself. You'd think that that would be a sign of a guy being thoughtful or sensitive, but it always gives me the creeps. And then I read in a book about how to pick a psychopath that they're often softly spoken, although I can't remember why.

I didn't let it get me down though. Business has been going well. I've been busy – booked up for pretty much the whole month. But the thought of my money – two hundred and thirty thousand dollars – being frozen, out of reach. I feel distracted

all the time. Angry too. Sometimes it's like there's something trapped inside of me. A bird, a butterfly – I don't know – flapping and fluttering, trying to escape. But it can't. And the more it flaps and flutters, the more agitated I become. I want to throw something. Smash something. It's fleeting – only lasts a moment – but the feeling, it keeps on coming back. It's there inside me now.

Luca.

I say his name to myself over and over again. *Luca, Luca, Luca*. Think of all the different ways he makes me smile. It helps keep my mind off things. A few weeks ago, I was cleaning out his closet and discovered that he keeps a diary. I found it hidden in an old shoe box. Now, every day when he's at school, I take a look. Maybe it isn't right, to pry, but I can't help it. There's something kind of magical about it, seeing what he writes. Mostly they're little snippets of things – thoughts and musings. Pictures too. *The Human Mind!* he wrote on one page. Beneath it was a drawing he'd done of a head in side profile, filled with cryptic looking squiggles and arrows. *My one wish is for lemonade*, he wrote on another page, which perplexed me, because that's something we usually have in the fridge. On another page he'd stuck a dirty Q-tip and labelled it, 'My earwax from Monday.' Any more dirty Q-tips and I might have to say something – I don't want him forming bad habits. But still, I couldn't help laughing. It's like I'm getting to know another side of him. This strange little boy came from me, I always think as I flip through the pages.

I decide that I'll tell Spiro about it. He'll think it's funny. He knows about Luca – not all my clients do. For many it would be a turn off, the thought of a companion having a child. It would ruin the fantasy. Besides, you have to be careful

who you trust with personal information like that. But Spiro always asks after him. “How’s the kid?” he’ll say.

Normally I meet him at my in-call in Dupont. It’s convenient – close to the metro. Nothing fancy, at least not on the outside, although I’ve decorated it nicely enough inside. But it’s discreet – no front desk staff, and the other tenants seem to be mainly students and interns, a few recent divorcés who occasionally try to chat me up in the elevator. Which suits me well – you don’t want nosy neighbors wondering why you have so many male visitors coming and going throughout the week.

But today Spiro suggests a hotel. The Mandarin Oriental – one of my favorites. He must have remembered me telling him that. And even though I’m in a bad mood because of everything that’s been going on, as I make my way there, I begin to cheer up. There’s something nice about a familiar face. A familiar body. Even his voice when he calls makes me smile. I think he was the first person I ever met from New Jersey and it seemed delightful to me then, the same way I felt when I saw the ocean for the first time. *So this is the ocean*, I remember thinking, looking out at the Atlantic when I was eighteen years old. *So this is what someone from Jersey is like*, I remember thinking when he first opened the door of his hotel and said “Come in, sweetheart,” so warmly, like we were old friends, and I did, my legs shaky, like they were every time I met a new client for the first few weeks. I always like it when he calls me sweetheart, although sometimes I wonder if he’s just temporarily forgotten my name. Claudia. Kelly. Trudi. He knows me as all three.

What surprises me today is that he’s gone all cloak and dagger. Texts me to let me know he’s left a key to the room – which will also allow me access to the elevator

– in a little alcove off the lobby, where the hotel’s ATM is. Says he left it on top of the machine. Normally behavior that is out of the ordinary bothers me, but I’ve known Spiro for so long that I let it go. He’s been in the news lately. Has his fingers in all sorts of pies. Property development. Lobbying. Fundraising. There’s talk that he might enter politics himself one day. They mentioned him on CNN just this morning—something about a PAC he’s formed for one of the Democratic candidates, so maybe he’s being cautious, with the primaries approaching. Or maybe he’s trying to spice things up, although I can’t help thinking it would just be easier if he came down to meet me in the lobby.

The key to entering a hotel without arousing suspicion is to be confident. Personally, I like to pretend that I’m an executive from KPMG, in town for an interview with the DC office. But I’ve been to the Mandarin Oriental several times and so I know my way around. I look like a businesswoman, in a conservative skirt and blouse, carrying an expensive tote bag. But no matter how well dressed you are, when you’re a hot blonde hanging out in a hotel lobby by yourself, well...people are going to draw their own conclusions. There’s the I-know-you’re-a-hooker-but-I-can’t-prove-it smile on check-in. The I-know-you’re-a-hooker-but-I-don’t-care smile on check-in. But I’ve heard of other providers being questioned by front desk staff, grilled on why they’re staying there. Had their luggage searched. Being asked to leave by security. But some girls aren’t particularly discreet either. They post selfies of themselves lounging about, drinking green juice, wearing the hotel’s monogrammed bathrobes. Take photos of themselves half-naked in bed, when it’s so easy to identify a hotel room from its decor. I mean, I take photos like that too, I just

don't post them right there and then. You've got to be smart about these things. It just takes one angry person – a wife, a jealous provider, a pissed off client – to report you. I think some people get off on it – the humiliation.

So I smile at the doorman and nod politely at the front of house staff like I'm a guest, and make my way to the alcove to get the key.

A woman walks past me. Makes eye contact with me. Looks at me in a way that unsettles me. There's something about her that seems familiar, but I can't quite place her. She has a delicate face. A small frame. I spend a lot of my life being looked at, admired. And I'm vain, I'm the first to admit it, although I have good reason to be. But she has the kind of features that make me feel large. Cheap. Obvious. I've always been confident in my looks, my sexuality. But once in a blue moon I'll see someone who throws me off kilter.

I spend a lot of time watching biopics. I don't know why, because mostly I just sit there thinking that the actress playing Audrey or Marilyn or Jackie or whoever doesn't look all that much like them. In *The Audrey Hepburn Story*, I remember Jennifer Love Hewitt, in character as Audrey on the set of *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, feeling down in the dumps because she'd learned that Truman Capote had wanted Marilyn Monroe in the role instead. That surprised me. I thought everyone would want to be an Audrey. But I guess there were times when Audrey wanted to be a Marilyn. I wonder if Marilyn wanted to be an Audrey. A Jackie maybe. I guess an Audrey and a Jackie are kind of the same thing.

One of my clients is married to a ballerina. He told me it was love at first sight. He knew that he'd marry her the moment he saw her on stage for the very first

time. She's an Audrey, although he still comes to me. So many of them end up coming to me. Audreys are put on pedestals. Women like me – well, I brand myself as the woman at the bar – the 'ten' they'd never dream of chatting up. The cheerleader at school who was out of their league. The playmate they used to jerk off to in their daddy's dirty magazines. Men don't see me as an Audrey, on a pedestal. They see me as a Marilyn, there for their pleasure, on my back on a bed, bent over a desk, on all fours on the carpet, perched on the bathroom bench. I guess that's how I want them to see me. But I remember reading a book called *The Last Days of Marilyn Monroe*. Apparently there were photos of her taken a few weeks before her death. She was at a party, she'd been drugged, a man was degrading her. I hate to think of that. That she was treated that way, so close to her death.

The card is there on the top of the ATM. "On my way up now," I text Spiro, and make my way back through the lobby to the elevator, thinking of Audreys and Marylins and Jackies and all the rest.

When I knock on the door to the suite there's no answer, so I let myself in. Head straight to the bathroom where I always instruct my clients to leave my money in an envelope. I count the notes and put them in my purse. It never gets old, counting money. Two hours. Two thousand dollars. Something doesn't feel right though, and I realize that I can't smell him. He wears Paco Rabanne, which I can normally smell whenever he's within a few feet of me. I always imagine him humming in the shower, looking forward to my arrival, trundling out, his big belly flapping, dousing himself in the peppery scent. He has a face like a wombat I once saw in a National Geographic magazine. I like to kiss it all over when I see him.

“Spiro?” I call out. But there’s no answer.

I walk into the suite and stop. The woman – the one I walked past in the lobby – is sitting on the sofa gazing out at the Potomac. She turns and looks at me.

As soon as I see her, I know I should leave. But something stops me. Maybe it’s because she looks familiar. Or that I still expect Spiro to come into the room. I experience a rush of thoughts. Perhaps I’m in the wrong room, although she doesn’t seem surprised or concerned by my presence. It crosses my mind that he wants a duo, that this is another provider he’s booked, but surely he would have run that by me first. He’d know to do that. Law enforcement? It seems unlikely – she’s just sitting there, not speaking.

“Where’s Spiro?” I say.

“He couldn’t make it.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I just want to talk with you,” she says.

I go to leave. Decide I’ll call Spiro from the lobby and try to figure out what the hell is going on.

“Please stay,” she says. Her voice sounds hoarse, shaky. “You’ve been sleeping with my husband.”

I pause. Turn around. “But Spiro isn’t married.”

“No, not Spiro. He just helped set this up. My husband’s name is Ben. Benjamin Thwaites.”

Ben. Of course. And this is his wife, the journalist. I remember now. I looked her up that time.

I know it might sound cold and heartless, but there's no point engaging. It's not the first time I've been confronted by a wife, although it's the first time I've been confronted in person. Normally they call, text or email. Sometimes obsessively. But there's nothing you can say, nothing you can do, to make them feel better. To be honest, I'm irrelevant. The indiscretion could have been with any girl.

"I'm sorry," I say. "But I can't help you. I hope you can sort things out with your husband."

"Please," she says. "I just want. I just want—"

I ignore her. Make my way to the door. But just as I'm about to open it, I hear a crashing sound. It startles me and for a moment I feel frightened, wondering if she's thrown something, become violent. But it's not that. She's fallen to the ground, collapsed. The china tea set that was on the coffee table is on the floor too. She's curled up on the carpet, gasping, as if she's trying to speak, but nothing comes out. Her face becomes redder and redder, and her eyes are watering.

I'm not sure what to do. Her hands make a grasping motion, at nothing — just the air. Then she places them on her chest, her throat. I can't tell if it's a panic attack or something more serious, but the expression on her face alarms me.

"I'll call for someone," I say, dropping my handbag to the floor and walking towards the phone. The last thing I need is to be seen leaving a hotel room with a dead woman in it.

She shakes her head. Tries to say something, but she can't get the words out.

"I think you need an ambulance. I think I should call someone."

She indicates to something. A bottle of water on the dresser.

I get it for her. Kneel down on the floor and hand her the bottle. Her hands are shaking too much though and she spills it. So I put it to her lips myself. Place my hand on the back of her head to steady her. She drinks.

Her breathing slows, but every now and again she'll let out a heavy gasp.

"Are you alright?" I ask after a while.

She nods. "Thank you."

Our faces are so close, but I worry that if I move, it'll happen again. That she'll collapse. Stop breathing.

Eventually she speaks. "He won't tell me the truth. His story keeps changing. I just thought if I spoke to you –" She trails off.

"Men – when they come to me – when they're married – it doesn't mean they're unhappy," I say. "Sometimes they just –" I pause. "Sometimes they just can't help themselves."

She shakes her head. "But what did he want? What did he ask for?"

I don't know what to say, but it doesn't matter. She keeps going, and I just sit there listening. It's almost as if she's talking to herself. Mostly she just stares blankly at the coffee table. Occasionally she looks up at me.

"When you saw him. Was it for one hour? Or for two? Was it in the daytime or at night? I always believed him when he said he was working late. We have sex every day, you know. The only time I ever said no was when I had the flu. Did he want something – something kinky? I try to look nice. I wear lingerie. I read books. On sex. I try. My last husband cheated on me too."

She's crying now. Sobbing. Like Luca used to when he was younger, sometimes over the smallest thing, like it was some kind of tragedy. I guess for her this is a tragedy though. I don't know if I should touch her, but I do. I put my hand on her hand. Then her shoulder. And then I stroke her hair a little. Her whole body is shaking.

"What's wrong with me?" she says.

"It's not your fault," I say.

"Why won't you just tell me. Please. I just want to know. What the two of you did."

"I can't," I say. "My job – I have to be discreet. But I didn't know that he was married."

She looks up at me and I can see I've made a mistake. Stupid of me to say anything when I don't know what he's told her.

She laughs and pulls herself away from me. "Oh, come on. Don't pretend you're like a lawyer or a doctor or a priest. Like you're bound by some ethical code of conduct. You didn't even use a condom when you sucked his cock. He told me that. Admitted that I should get tested."

I feel my face go red. "I get tested every month. I'm clean."

"Well that's good to know. I'll sleep easy tonight." She's silent for a moment and then she continues. "I read your website. You say you bring joy to people's lives. You can tell yourself that, but at the end of the day what you do is ugly. I've lost everything. Do you know what that's like? My marriage is over. Every single happy memory of my husband, ruined. Everything I thought my future would be...gone."

You're just a stupid, selfish, narcissistic little girl, trampling over other people to get what you want."

"You don't know me," I say.

"I've seen your Instagram page. Your Twitter account. You spend your days shopping for lingerie and Louboutins, drinking champagne, posting pictures of yourself feeding caviar to your cat. Meanwhile, I've been trying to figure out how to get through the fucking day. Is it worth it? The pain you cause. I guess you don't even care."

It's laughable, the way people think that what I post on social media is anywhere close to my real life.

"That's not my life," I say. "I'm a single mom. My mother doesn't speak to me. My bank accounts are frozen and I'll probably never get my life savings back. So I know exactly what it's like to lose everything."

She stands up. I go to help her, but she pushes my hand away. "My husband told me that he used to see you when he was going through his divorce. That when he met me, he told you that he wasn't going to be needing your services anymore. But then you texted him. Why would you do that? Why would you text a married man soliciting for business?"

She seems like a completely different person to the woman who was sitting next to me crying just a few seconds ago, the woman who looked like she might break.

“When I slept with your husband I was just doing my job. It was nothing personal. You should speak to him, not me. He’s the one who’s done the wrong thing.”

“I’m dealing with him,” she says. “Anyway, I’m sorry you’ve experienced some temporary financial discomfort. But I’m sure you’ll get your money back eventually. As for me, my marriage is over. That’s something I can’t get back.”

She walks towards the door. Slowly, wearily. Before she leaves, she pauses. Turns around. “I take it you got Spiro’s money from the bathroom. Maybe you can buy some caviar for your cat. I hear Osetra is good, but what would I know? I’ve never tried it.”

After she leaves, I stay sitting on the carpet for quite some time, too shaken to even move. For some reason I want her to come back so I can explain that the cat thing was just a joke. It was just a silly photo I posted on Instagram.

On my way home, I call Spiro, but he doesn’t answer. I leave three messages on his phone before he calls me back.

“How could you do that to me? Put me in a position like that?” I say, tears running down my face.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. I was hamstrung. It’s a sensitive time and she works for *The Observer*. She found out I took you to the White House State Dinner that time.”

He keeps apologizing, but there’s something else bothering me.

“You asked me to wear stockings,” I say. That’s the thing that really gets me, that he’d ask me to dress in a certain way, when he wasn’t even going to be there.

He hesitates. “I know. I don’t know why I said that. But you got your money, didn’t you? And I’ll make it up to you, but for now – for now I think it’s best if we lay low. Don’t see each other for a while. I won’t lose your number though, and don’t you go losing mine.”

I hang up on him. Later I get an email from him – a gift voucher from Amazon for a thousand bucks. “Sorry again for the trouble,” the message says.

Screw you, I think.

Last time I saw him we didn’t even have sex. We just talked and snuggled. We were lying next to each other and I wanted to kiss him. But he had his arm around me so tight and the only place I could reach was his armpit. So I kept nibbling at it. And every time I did, he’d laugh and kiss the top of my head. He’d just gotten back from his beach house in Stone Harbor – took his daughter there for spring break. And he brought me back a shell. Normally I’m fussy about gifts – I can’t stand it when men bring me sad looking gerberas from the supermarket or Ghirardelli chocolates they picked up from the service station on their way to see me. “Don’t you know who I am?” I want to say, although of course I never do. Cartier bracelets, a watch from Van Cleef & Arpels, lingerie from Agent Provocateur, House of Sillage perfume...they’re the kinds of gifts I’m used to getting. But of all the things I’ve ever got, that shell seemed to really matter. I don’t know why.

“We went shelling,” he said when he gave it to me, like it was an actual verb. I mean, maybe it is. It was the size of my hand, with black and white stripes. I put it

in my bathroom and whenever I had a bath, I would press it up against my ear. My shell from New Jersey. And I would picture him and his daughter walking along the beach, wondering what it would be like to have a father like him. Wealthy, important, influential. How would I have turned out? I bet his daughter doesn't even realize how lucky she is.

All I ever wanted was a nice life for Luca. To be able to buy him whatever he wants – to never have say 'no' to him. To raise him in a real home, in a real city, so he never has to feel embarrassed about who he is or where he came from.

Or maybe that's not true. Maybe I'd do it anyway. Is that so bad? That I want to be able to buy flowers for the house each Friday. To get my hair done once a week. To eat sushi every day for lunch. To drink expensive wine. To have nice clothes, nice things. What's so wrong with that?

When I get home, I toss the shell in the trash and as I do, I can hear his raspy voice in my head. *Hey sweetheart. How are you, sweetheart? Give me a hug, sweetheart.* And then I turn on all the taps so Luca won't hear me cry.

When you sleep with a man enough times, eventually you begin to feel something for him. Is it real or not? I don't know. It's hard to say.

I'm standing in line at the supermarket, looking at the covers of magazines. Pregnant princesses. Women who were once fat and are now thin. I pick up *TIME*. The cover says *Can Bad Men Change?* My mother once told me that I'd burn in hell. Afterwards, I kept thinking, 'if only she knew the happiness I bring my clients. The joy.' So I used the word 'joy' on my website, to try to explain what it's like – the

experience of being with me. But now I keep thinking about what the wife said. My writing teacher keeps reminding us about the power of a single word. “Think about the choices you make,” she says. My choices. I think about that woman, the wife, gasping on the carpet. I think about her face going red. I think about her sobbing. I think about her standing up, looking down at me, and me just sitting there on the carpet.

Why did I text him, her husband? I don’t know. It was just marketing. I do it all the time – reach out to old clients. It was nothing personal. I used to see him a lot, Ben. He was single at the time. I quite liked him. He was funny. Charming. Always made me laugh. One night we were lying in bed – we’d just had sex – and he told me he’d met someone. Said he wouldn’t be seeing me anymore. It always stings a bit. Why did he tell me that, I remember thinking? Why not just stop contacting me. A few months later I saw his photo in the wedding section of *The New York Times*. In the photo he was looking down at her. His hand was on her waist and they were both smiling at each other. That’s what joy is. I bring them pleasure, satisfaction. Maybe that’s different to joy. Maybe she was right.

But he still ended up coming back to me.