

# Tethered

When did I know?

At the wedding? (But that's too easy, it exonerates me to some degree. I must have known sooner. Still: at the wedding, certainly.)

The assembled guests were silent, straining to hear our voices over the wind, the birds, the caterers going about their business in the background. "What are they *doing*?" That was the small, clear voice of a child. Gentle laughter rippled across the lawn, followed by a mother's hushing. That's a good question, I thought. My heels were sinking into the soft ground, hairpins tugged at my scalp, a gnat skimmed across my nose and I brushed it away—my hand still ringless, though not for long.

My own question had been taking shape in my mind all day like a bruise, and now it was a gaudy, guilty purplish-blue, impossible to ignore as I stood face to face with the man I was about to marry—my love, I thought, my prize: *Who are you?*

It was a terrible question and I knew it, but I didn't feel responsible for it; it seemed to have a life of its own—like the gnat, undiscouraged.

His head on the pillow that morning, profile sharp and unyielding, mouth ajar, a light snore raking his throat. Stale breath of bourbon. *Who are you?* Scowling at the weather forecast: "Fifty percent chance of showers, scattered late afternoon thunderstorms. We're fucked." Thrusting the letter I'd left on the kitchen table at me—the one announcing that my dissertation on Jean Rhys had been accepted for publication: "Do we really need to eat breakfast with it?" Criticizing the bartender's method of chilling the wine.

Now he was tuxedoed, smiling past me—not a real smile: fixed and false. Fair hair, small icy eyes, freshly shaven face, raw. *I don't know who you are.*

It didn't rain but the sky was ominous, which made everyone restless, ready to flee for the cover of the tent. I don't remember saying the words, the all-important legally binding ones. That is, I could hear myself saying them, but it was as if I were hovering in the trees above with the birds and happened to hear the woman below shaping human sounds with her painted mouth. I do not remember the feeling of them in my throat. Nevertheless I

was married, and though my husband still seemed disconcertingly unfamiliar, I trusted that odd sensation would pass. I even thought I might tell him about it later that night, in bed perhaps: *There was this funny moment during the ceremony when I almost felt like you were a stranger, this weird dissociative experience, do you know what I mean?* But he drank far too much wine at the reception and passed out before anything could happen. I had mixed feelings about that. Righteous indignation (*how dare you pass out on our wedding night?*) competed with unspeakable relief. I tried to remember earlier nights: other vacations, other hotels—music and candles and the urgent removal of clothing. Those memories felt like dreams I'd had, filmy and improbable. They had nothing to do with the man sprawled snoring in this king-sized bed. My husband.

I couldn't sleep. I stood at the window of our expensive hotel room, pushed the heavy curtains aside, and looked down. The tent where the reception had been held was still standing; it caught the moonlight and marred the dark symmetry of the lawn and gardens. I imagined myself slipping out in my clinging nightgown, bought for the occasion, a pale graceful shape flitting among the shadows. You are not a person in a movie, I told myself, and tucked myself along the far left side of the bed, away from his sticky radiating heat.

Even then I feared that he knew, somehow; he had divined what I was thinking and he blamed me for it, not altogether unreasonably.

And that was not my only offense: racing out of Rome two days later in our rental car, a little red Fiat that felt like a toy, I could not stop myself from clutching the door handle as he swerved from lane to lane and I peered hopelessly at the map he had tossed on my lap. "That won't save you," he remarked—meaning the clutching, not the map. "And it doesn't help me that much either." His sarcasm wasn't new, but it had acquired a new edge. Before, it had included me; now it carved me out. (When had that happened?) Nevertheless, he had taken on the task of driving (though couldn't we have taken a train?), and I should have been grateful; most certainly I should not have shown that I didn't trust his driving (though I did not, and he had drunk steadily on the long flight, I suspected, while I dozed through endless movies). Another strike against me: when we arrived at our hotel, a beautifully restored medieval hilltop borgo in Umbria, I was so tired I wanted only to take a nap.

"You have to power through it," he said, more exasperated than solicitous. "It's the only way to beat jet lag." He'd traveled a great deal; I'd traveled little. Trust me, he meant. But I was so exhausted I couldn't think straight, and the drive had destroyed my nerves.

"Just an hour," I said. "And then I'll be fine, and I'll do whatever you want." He looked so crushed. I was heartless. "I can't help it," I said. "Sorry to be a bad wife." That was meant to be a joke. I turned my face up to kiss him after I said it, to make that clear. But he had already turned away. (My face is a decade younger than his, and it's possible that I offered

it as a kind of gift. It's possible I had always done that. If so, we can certainly add this to the case against me.)

"I'm going to go find a drink, then," he said. Meaning that I had driven him to it. And at that moment I honestly didn't care. I would have given anything for sleep. My PhD, my firstborn child (if there was to be such a thing, which suddenly I could not imagine)—anything.

I was only thirty, just out of grad school. As I said, I had traveled little. The poppy-strewn hills of Umbria were like a fairy tale to me, an impossibly beautiful backdrop for my impossibly beautiful life. My Italian honeymoon, my perfect husband—the beloved professor who had chosen me.

I slept longer than an hour, as he had known I would. When I awoke the room was dark but there was light on my pillow, and it took a moment to realize that it was the moon. I felt groggy still, but hungry. My husband wasn't there. But why should he be?—he must have gone to dinner, I thought, guilty. I dressed quickly but not carelessly (if I looked disheveled, wouldn't he see that as another affront?). Swiped on lipstick, put my hair up. Descending the stairs that led to the ground floor, my feet slipped into depressions in the stone steps worn by countless feet over countless years. What kind of shoes would medieval people have worn? My husband would know; I would ask him. He would like that: it would give him an opportunity to hold forth. And maybe he would become his familiar self again; maybe I could recapture the feeling that had drawn me to him in the first place, sitting rapt in his classroom.

The dining room was dim, the guests departed, the tables cleared. Only in the kitchen was there still life—voices, laughter, the clatter of pots, the churning of the dishwasher. I paused at the threshold, wondering where to look next; I hadn't even explored the hotel in my hurry to sleep.

And then I saw him, sitting alone at a table on the terrace that extended from the main dining room, looking out toward the dark hills beyond the sharply sloping grounds. One small candle burned on his table and the light flickered kindly across his profile, revealed the bottle of wine beside him, its shadow stretching across the ghostly white tablecloth.

I crossed the room silently, not wanting to startle him. "Good evening, husband," I said softly as I neared.

"Hi there," he said, turning toward me, his voice so unsurprised that I wondered if he had heard me after all. I was relieved to hear no reproach in his tone, only muted pleasure. He looked tired, I thought, and a little older than usual: but he looked like himself. Relief washed through muscles and nerves I hadn't even realized were tensed; for the first time in days I wanted to put my arms around him, though I did not. It would be all right. Everyone had moods. I had not married a stranger. We would begin again and it would be all right.

“Look,” he said. “I saved you something.” He indicated a glass of white wine, soft gold in the candlelight, and a plate of delicate, beautiful little pastries. His teeth were wine-darkened. His own wine glass held only blood-red dregs; his hand curved around a snifter of something deep amber.

“Feeling better?”

“I am,” I said. “Much. Thank you for humoring me. I guess I needed that.”

“You’ll be sorry tomorrow,” he said—but still, I detected no judgment. “That’s OK, though. We’ll take it easy in the morning, maybe just explore around here on foot. There’s a chapel with some interesting frescoes, and a gallery, and some hiking trails. Later in the week we can check out some of the other little towns around here. Oh, and I booked that kayak trip today. The one I told you about. That’s for Wednesday—they didn’t have any earlier openings.”

“That sounds fun,” I said—convincingly, I hoped, because it didn’t, especially, not the kayaking. When I imagined Italy, kayaking was not part of the picture. But that was all right: it would be fine, and he was excited about it. It pleased me to hear him making plans, ordering our world; it was comforting, familiar. That’s what he had always done, when he was a professor and I was a student, and I had let him; I had liked it. I smiled at him, and he smiled back, and I told myself again: see? We’re OK. Everything is fine. The kitchen lights blinked out and the staff vanished through some door we couldn’t see. We were alone.

And then I remembered to ask him about medieval shoes. After pointing out that it wasn’t exactly his area of specialty, he became reassuringly professorial and delivered the expected lecture. I watched him at first, shadows playing across his features as he explained the medieval processes for curing leather, shaping footwear. As his voice rose and fell I felt something stir within me for the first time in days: *love*, I thought gratefully. It had not abandoned me after all. I felt myself smiling absurdly in the dark as the feeling took shape, settled in as if I were a house. Love. Or “love,” as we always said, suspicious in our academic way of a word so impossible to define. I still “loved” my husband. Thank God. After a while, soothed, I turned my eyes to the hills, their dusky purple outline just visible by moonlight now that my vision had adjusted to the darkness.

I waited for him to propose heading to our room—it was our honeymoon, after all; he’d passed out on our wedding night, and we’d spent the next night on a plane. (And it had been a while, in fact, since he’d turned to me in the night. Hadn’t it? Why hadn’t I paid more attention? We’d been so busy. With the wedding, of course. And my dissertation defense, my manuscript edits...) But he kept talking, his snifter replenished as if by magic, long erudite sentences spinning around me and drifting into the night; they comforted me but they lulled me, too. At last I interrupted, as gently as I could. “Coming to bed?”

My husband's eyes turned to me, but I couldn't read them in the dying candlelight. "You're leaving me already?" There was the reproach again—and once more I heard an unfamiliar note, that new tone, flat and cold. "I'll come in when I feel tired," he said, though it had been a full day, surely, since he'd slept. I shivered, though it wasn't cold, and if I was a house then I felt my "love" slink into the dark corners of an unfurnished room, crouching out of sight. For once again my husband had become a man I did not know.

Maybe I should have stayed. On that night, our first in Italy, perhaps it was not yet too late. I'll always wonder. But sleep tugged at me again, and my attention had begun to wander. He'll be himself in the morning, I told myself; tonight was good, mostly—*we'll be all right*. And I went to bed alone.

On the morning of the second day I awoke to find him gone. His clothes from the night before lay on the floor beside the bed: proof that he had returned at some point, though his pillow was smooth, undented. I looked at the crumpled shirt and pants for a minute. He was tidy, in general. Meticulous, even. This was new, this carelessness. (Wasn't it?) Oh, there had been exceptions—an occasional late night at the pub. The rejection of an article he'd submitted. The time we had run into his ex-wife at a restaurant: that had sent him spinning, provoked a bout of day-drinking, later a nasty fall. But it had passed; all those moments (for there had been others, hadn't there?) had passed, and I had all but forgotten them. (Deliberately?) I thought of his ex-wife, a professor in the philosophy department. She was his age but looked older. No wonder he left her, my fellow grad students had said early on when we were smug and very young and quick to judge. Later someone told me it was the other way around, that she had left him, that he had then disappeared for a semester due to some mysterious illness; it had seemed so improbable that I had dismissed it. He never spoke of that time, had resisted my tentative efforts to learn more. She had written to me once through campus mail, invited me for coffee. There are things I think you should know, she had said. I'd ignored the note, wondered if she were a little unhinged. How sad, I'd thought.

But it came back to me now.

I had a cappuccino and a pastry on the sunny terrace surrounded by well-dressed vacationers chattering in half a dozen languages, then went in search of my husband. I found him in the chapel standing before a fresco, chipped away on one side to reveal a fragment of another one, brighter, beneath it. I had the unnerving sense that he had been speaking just before I entered, though no one else was there.

I wanted to call out a cheerful good morning, stand on tiptoe to kiss his cheek, start the day off on a happy honeymoon note; I tried to make myself do it but I could not, any more than I could have kissed an unknown man standing there. Because once again

something unfamiliar had entered even the arrangement of his limbs, the tilt of his head. My optimism from the night before collapsed; fear slunk in to replace it. I went to stand silently beside him. “There was an earthquake,” he said without prelude in that strange flat voice. “In the ’80s.” The chapel was badly damaged, but they discovered that there was a much older fresco beneath the existing one.

“People were killed,” he added as an afterthought. “I’ve been waiting. We should go.” He didn’t look at me; I had the distinct sense that I was being punished. I followed wordlessly, thinking of the curly-shoed medieval woman I had imagined the night before as he lectured. Had she trudged along in her husband’s wake, chastened?

We wandered the grounds, gazing up at the smooth walls of the *borgo* rising out of the hill as if they were an extension of it, built to ward off marauding neighbors, plague victims; circled the base of the crumbling tower behind the hotel, the one part of the *borgo* that had not been exquisitely restored. I wondered whether the expense was prohibitive or if they had decided to leave it as a lone reminder of the history that was elsewhere curated—not erased, but tidied, made comfortable. The heat became more oppressive as the sun rose and I was delighted when we reached the swimming pool I remembered from the website, sparkling blue, practically empty. “We should come here this afternoon,” I said impulsively, forgetting my resolve to follow him, to obey his whims, regain his favor.

“The water will be too warm,” he said, his face twisting in that new way it had. “But you go ahead, if that’s what you want to do.”

So I did, and he didn’t. I settled onto a white lounge chair, the sun so dazzling I could hardly see. On that first afternoon at the pool I felt almost obscenely happy to have escaped his strange, weighty presence, ponderous and accusatory and unfamiliar—but almost as powerful was guilt: a sense that my poolside happiness was a betrayal. But of whom? In my defense, it was a betrayal of the man I had promised to marry. And the man I had left behind in the hotel, wandering toward the bar in search of a drink, unwilling to meet my eyes, the man who had not touched me since the wedding—that was not the man I had promised to marry. I couldn’t explain it, it made no sense, and yet all the same I felt it to be true.

When I was so hot I felt as if my bones might melt, I dove neatly into the pool, and the water felt so welcoming and affectionate that for a moment I forgot everything.

On that second evening I joined him in the dining room as the sun set over the hills. *Bellissima*, the waiters said when I arrived, eyes sparkling as they led me to our table, positioned my chair, playing up their Italianness and my Americanness. He pretended to love it, as if my *bellissima*-ness were an accomplishment of his, but I could see that he did not. Everyone knew we were the honeymoon couple and they made much of us—the

waiters, the other guests, even the chef, who brought us inventive, delicious little morsels to try. My husband, avoiding my eyes, put on a show, became the boisterous American, full of questions and demands, curious and exacting. He wanted them to admire not me but his Italian (merely serviceable, I had realized) and his discerning palate and his charm. (Was this because I was failing to supply the necessary admiration?) He wanted to talk about the kayaking trip. They humored him but I could see that they didn't quite buy his performance; it interested me to see that even they, not knowing him, detected that there was something...off. (But was this new, entirely? I had a sudden memory of other servers eyeing him sideways, slow to replenish his drinks, eager to bring the check. Curious glances at me. Had I stuffed this memory into a drawer, like a bill I couldn't face? Were there others?)

After dinner we took our little snifters of Amaro and headed to the billiard room, where he took grim pleasure in beating me at pool, though not as badly as he should have—by then he was unsteady, off his game, and I adjusted mine accordingly. And then we wandered to the rooftop terrace, standing far from the other guests. Leaning against a stone railing, looking out at the dark hills, he grew bitter, railing at the state of medieval studies, for although his first book had made him a rising academic star and his second had been well-received, his third languished in the hands of an editor who was demanding major revisions—revisions he refused to make based on premises he rejected. I listened sympathetically. I tried to distract him. “Love,” I said during a pause, forcing myself to touch his hand, hot against the cool stone. “Quotation marks.”

He turned toward me, eyes darker than the night, depthless. “Don't bother,” he said. “I don't even know who you are anymore.”

It felt like a blow. But it also felt like an echo: he had torn the words directly from my own mind.

At first it made no sense, but I turned it like a kaleidoscope until it did: if he was not himself, how could he possibly know me?

Alone, I returned to our rooms.

At breakfast on the third morning we pretended none of it had happened. (I did not ask him if he had slept, where he had slept. The sofa in our sitting room, I supposed; or not at all. He was wearing last night's clothes.) I read the *Times* on my phone while he pored over an Italian paper. I drank two cappuccinos and he consumed endless espressos. Occasionally one of us remarked upon something in the news, our tones perfectly civil.

“Coming to the pool?” I said when we finally rose from our table.

“Maybe later,” he said, his insincerity palpable, the first hint of a furrow creasing his brow.

At the pool I lay beneath the hot sun and watched the sky through dark sunglasses, scanning for the first signs of the clouds that seemed to gather slowly throughout the day, innocent enough at first. I tried to read, but the words on the page drifted out of focus, felt irrelevant. Instead I traced a map on the sky, turning a cold eye on the past in order to plot a path from there to here, linking it from wispy cloud to cloud, from one point to the next to the next to the present. Trying to see the present as just another point on that map, beyond which there were others.

The first point on the map was easy to pinpoint. I signed up for Dr. King's medieval seminar my first semester in the PhD program because I had heard he was a great professor, not because I had any particular interest in medieval lit. From the start he paid too much attention to me. Sometimes he seemed to lecture right at me; I felt conspicuous. I liked it—being singled out. He smiled encouragingly at my tentative (probably pretentious) answers to his questions, spun my half-baked observations into sparkling riffs on obscure Old English texts. Beautiful dead languages I didn't understand flowed seductively from his tongue.

Once it was common enough for male professors to carry on flirtations—and more—with young women in their classes; everyone knows this, just as we know those days are gone, and good riddance. There are rules these days, both official and understood. We did not break the official rules, but we tested the unwritten ones. (We were different, we told ourselves, each other: the rules did not apply to us.) He didn't ask me out until after the semester was over and my A was securely under my belt. "I want to convert you," he said disarmingly over wine in the corner of a dark restaurant. "Anyone can do the modernists. You're a medievalist at heart." How flattering it is when someone claims to know you better than you know yourself—to know your heart! I was hungry for whatever else he might reveal, what secret talents he might have divined, vain creature that I was and probably am. (And yet I knew he was wrong; I was no medievalist, did not wish to be converted. This should have mattered more; put it on the map.)

The other graduate students had dated each other in a frantic, borderline incestuous game of musical beds; when they began to marry off I had thought it seemed almost arbitrary, who ended up with whom. And I had felt above it all, too, for I hadn't participated in the messy games—I had snagged the real prize and held onto him, to everyone's surprise. The necessary discretion had undoubtedly added a kind of extended frisson, a sense of getting away with something. Which I had enjoyed!—I admit it.

I closed my eyes: the sun was blinding, even through sunglasses and the brim of my hat. I looked back, merciless, looked past the indisputable charm and the flattering attention, catalogued the things I had discounted, refused to see: dark moods, flashes of cruelty, bouts of drinking, blank spots in his history. He was gifted, he was complicated, he had chosen me. That was all that mattered, I had convinced myself. Everyone wanted



him; I had won him. He'd vowed never to marry again, and still he proposed. Oh, I had fallen in love with him! Surely. But hadn't I also seen him as a prize?

I had. *Guilty*.

And I liked prizes. I thought of my parents, who had not gone to college, much less graduate school. I remembered photographs of their courthouse wedding, my father's ill-fitting suit, my mother's pale blue dress. Our rented houses, worn carpet harboring the ghosts of other people's dinners, pets, sorrows. I had wanted other things, had pursued them, had won them. Including this: my perfect honeymoon. My degree, my book. I had won everything.

When I got too hot to think straight I dove into the still blue pool, slicing through the water like a perfect fish, like a knife.

While I swam and dozed and connected the dots on my map, I was dimly aware that my husband prowled the grounds, sat in the shadow of the old tower, leaning against rough stone, the dust from which I would later shake loose from the back of his shirt. A bottle of wine at his side and no doubt another in his backpack. Half-drunk by noon. I thought of the Michael Antonioni films we had watched in preparation for the trip (he had seen them before, and I had not; his low-voiced commentary upstaged the dialogue and the atmospheric silences and later I had rewatched them alone, surreptitiously). I wondered which one he imagined he was in: was he crashing around that terrible barren island in *L'Avventura*? Roaming aimlessly while falling out of love like the heroine of *La Notte*? The sun is so cruel in those films, and the beauty so empty; love is never real, no one truly knows anyone. How sad and terrible, I had thought, but also: how false. Life was not like that. Didn't have to be like that. Not unless you let it.

A sudden storm drove us in from the terrace that night, swallowed the hills. We watched the lightning from the shelter of the dining room. If you just wanted to lounge by a pool, he said at dinner, we could have gone anywhere. Maybe Florida would be more your style. (He hated Florida, I knew.) In the billiard room afterward, he explained coldly why I shouldn't go on the academic job market in the fall, new book contract in hand. (When the letter from the university press arrived just before the wedding, I'd expected delight and had gotten silence; that was on the map.) It was selfish, he said. I cared only about my own career. How could I expect him to uproot his? I'd be nothing without him, he said. He could certainly guarantee me adjunct work, and maybe at some point there would be the possibility of a spousal hire. Marriage was about compromise, he said, but I thought only of myself, I was impossible. I sank down in the corner of the room, hands over my face as if I could ward off his words. At last I retreated to our rooms, tear-streaked and raw, leaving him to the dark sky and his wine.

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On the fourth morning, eyes still swollen from crying, I agreed to an excursion into the countryside. He'd been proposing this every morning, but I had come to dread the idea of being alone with him even during the daytime when he spoke little, mired in muddy silence in which terrible things unspoken quivered beneath the surface like ponderous beasts. I could hardly stand to think of the kayaking excursion that loomed before us, and tried not to. But on the fourth day, wanting to prove I was not impossible, I agreed. We'd go to an abandoned hilltop town; the hotel would pack us a picnic. In the car he played the radio so loudly that conversation would have been impossible even if I had known what to say. He took a wrong turn at one point and I could see his anger begin to build, stacking behind his eyes like the clouds behind the hills did each evening.

He drove too fast to the pinnacle of the hill where the empty town perched, stark white and cream and rosy pink against a blinding blue sky—veering around switchbacks, clinging to the edge of the road where the ground dropped away. Not a guardrail in sight.

In the hot dusty town nothing stirred. In one house, lace curtains hung behind an open window, unfluttered by wind. I pictured the villagers lying dead in their beds, wiped out by some long ago plague, picturesquely attired in modest linen nightclothes of another age (though that was not why the town was abandoned; it was some economic crisis that had driven people to the cities—he had told me, no doubt, always the professor, and I had forgotten, no longer the attentive student). But I could not shake the sense that we were surrounded by death. In the duomo, preternaturally wizened baby Jesuses scowled knowingly down at us from faded frescoes and our footsteps echoed, hinting at centuries of people who had walked there before us. I positioned my left hand close to his, available for holding (though really it was too hot). It would be an opportunity for him to apologize without words, I thought, though by then I shrank from the very idea of his touch. But he did not take it.

The basket lunch was almost too pretty to eat—bread and cheese and olives and grapes and sausage and sparkling water. And local wine, of course. We picked at it on the steps of the duomo, too hot to be hungry. A fly submerged itself in my wine and I watched it struggle for a while, mesmerized; he watched me watch it drown. *Say something charming*, I thought, *say something brilliant, remind me why I "love" you*. "For fuck's sake, just fish it out," he said finally. "It won't kill you."

A dark cloud appeared out of nowhere and it rained on our way back to the car. That should have been our cue, I thought, to grab each other's hands and run laughing through the sun-spangled shower, collapsing at last into the shelter of the car and kissing madly. Instead we plodded glumly, hair plastered to our faces, dust turning to beige paste beneath

our shoes—his sensible, mine less so. When we reached the car he swore beneath his breath and blasted the air conditioning until we shivered in our wet clothes.

On the fifth day I slept late, missed breakfast; I begged for a coffee and went straight to the pool. I had not seen my husband since our grim, silent dinner the night before. It had stormed; we had pushed food around our plates and watched the lightning stabbing at the hills. Beneath the Antonioni sun I returned to my map. Was I impossible? Selfish? For the sake of argument, I thought, let's say it was true. But what about him?

His father had been a classics professor with an endowed chair and his mother, who had family money, had given up her law practice to raise my husband and his brother. He played tennis and golf, he had gone to private schools, they had summered (they called it that) on the Vineyard (they called it that, too). My father was an electrician and my mother worked in the post office. I had worked in the summers; scholarships and financial aid had gotten me through college. His mother thought I was beneath them and made little effort to conceal it. Did he think he had saved me? Did he think I owed him something? I thought of his mysterious semester off. I thought of his drinking, perhaps (certainly) always excessive, now out of control. I thought of his anger, once (mostly, usually) latent, now shimmering and dangerous. I thought of the ex-wife and the things she had wanted to tell me. I composed an email to her and did not send it. *Who are you. Is this who you always were?*

The only other guest who spent as much time at the pool as I did nodded to me each morning then chose a lounge chair on the opposite side, amiably aloof. She slathered herself carefully and completely with sunscreen in a mesmerizing, unhurried ritual and remained snowy white; she left an oily, glimmering sheen on the surface of the water after she swam. I had assumed she was Italian, but she spoke to me that day as she passed and I realized she was English. “You’ll burn,” she said. “You’ll be sorry.” For a startled moment I thought she was sentencing me to hell.

That night on the terrace I tried to talk to him. Tell me what’s wrong, I said. Tell me what’s changed. Tell me what I can do. If I had to ask, he said carefully—because he was very drunk—there was no point in telling me. And then he turned and looked right at me, but even his eyes seemed to have been rearranged somehow. “We’ve made a fucking awful mistake,” he said, slurring a little.

I tried to take some comfort in the “we.”

On the sixth day we set out on the kayaking expedition. During the hour-long drive he ignored the speed limit, passed other cars, and became so voluble that I longed for his usual daylight silence. He explained at length what was wrong with my dissertation. It was

too trendy, he said, and Jean Rhys wasn't nearly as important as I thought, and chapter three was really a mess, and certain of my conclusions were unearned; a dissertation wasn't really a book, after all, it was its own strange animal. Maybe after a full rewrite it would be ready for publication, but it would be a mistake to rush it into the world just because I could. Tell them you need a year, he advised, his old professorial tone jarring after days of vitriol. I'll think about it, I lied, hoping this would stop him. He'd always been so pleased when I won prizes, awards; my own pleasure in my academic successes had been amplified by his approval. But he had been a professor then, and I a student. Had he somehow imagined I would be a student forever? Was that really all it was?

No, I thought, still plotting points on my map. That might explain some things—the bitterness, for instance. It didn't explain how he had come to be a stranger.

At last we reached a narrow, angry river that carved through steep hills. A river adventure outfit had already positioned kayaks along the shore and other adventurers milled about in tight sporting attire. I was similarly outfitted, having purchased appropriate gear online, but I felt fraudulent; I had kayaked before but on a polite, glassy lake, so clear you could look down and see the fish below. This was something else entirely. I studied the river—it was rough, and the current looked strong. The cliffs rose sharply from the banks, stubborn twisted little trees protruding at intervals from crevices—you might be able to grab onto one of those, I thought, if you were in trouble. What worried me most were the clusters of rock jutting out of the water here and there, splitting the current. But maybe that meant the river wasn't very deep? And the kayaks looked small and sturdy, and at least one of the other kayakers looked like a teenager—how dangerous could it be? I can do it, I told myself, longing for the poolside, even more afraid of my husband's judgment than I was of capsizing or foundering on the rocks.

Because he was looking at me with something worse than concern, worse than doubt.

We gathered around the guide, whose well-defined muscles were clearly visible beneath red and black lycra. He spoke in rapid Italian as he delivered what I assumed were safety instructions. "Don't worry," my husband said. "I'll tell you everything you need to know." But he told me nothing as we fastened our life jackets and headed toward the bright line of sleek crafts; he steered us toward the last ones. I found myself thinking of a novel I'd read for my PhD exams, Dreiser's *American Tragedy*, in which the main character takes the girl he no longer desires canoeing on a quiet lake in order to drown her. The thought shocked me: had I really come to fear him? (*Overdramatizing*, I added to the list of charges against me, genuinely appalled at myself. *Paranoia*.) "Don't worry," my husband said again, though I had kept my fears to myself while I pictured Clyde bashing his Roberta over the head with an oar. "I have an idea." As the others began to launch themselves into the river, he opened his backpack and removed a length of rope—brought for this very purpose, I

realized; he had planned whatever he was about to do. I watched, speechless, as he tied one end of the rope to the back of the first kayak and knotted the other end to the second with fingers that trembled, as his fingers had taken to doing. I felt cold, suddenly, as I began to understand his plan. “See?” he said. “All you’ll have to do is paddle enough to keep your kayak straight. Just keep it lined up with the back of mine.”

“Is that...safe?” I asked, my voice carefully neutral. “Should we check with the guide?” But we had fallen behind—by design, I realized—and the guide had already entered the water. “I’ll be fine, you know. I’m not completely hopeless” — (at that his face contorted in a bitter laugh)—“but if you don’t think I can do it, I’ll just stay behind. I wouldn’t mind. I just want you to have fun. This”—I looked at the tethered kayaks—“doesn’t really look fun. For you, I mean.” And the thing was, I *did* want him to have fun. I had been hoping that this expedition would cheer him up. Restore him to himself. (And if he became himself again, would my love spring back to life? My “love”? Would his? I didn’t know; it seemed unlikely. But I still wanted it to, then, or at least part of me did: I remember that now. In the moments before we embarked, despite everything, I still wanted to love my husband again.)

“Do you really have to argue with everything I say? This is how we’re going to do it,” he said, and began dragging the front boat toward the slip. I grabbed the prow of mine and pulled it toward the water, stifling the rebellion rising in my throat like sickness. “The hardest part will be the launch,” he said. “My boat will want to tug yours out the minute I’m in the water, and you’ll need to be ready. You’ll have to be fast,” he clarified, as if this might be hard for me. I nodded. There was nothing worth saying, at that point.

And somehow I did manage to wedge myself into my kayak in the second before his was swept downstream, so that when the rope tautened I was seated and gripping my paddle as I swung out behind him, and then almost immediately the momentum of his boat jerked me straight. But as I dipped my paddle in the water, I could already feel that my task was going to be impossible. I knew little about kayaking and less about physics, but as I struggled to align the prow of my little craft with the stern of his, I thought about velocity and momentum and objects in motion and perceived dimly why it wasn’t going to work. The current drove us downriver, but it also pulled hard to the left. However valiantly he paddled to keep straight and however fiercely I rowed on the left (the right was useless), my kayak would always tug the tail end of his to the left, yanking him off course. My fears were confirmed within minutes, and as he struggled to keep his boat pointed forward I could see fury settling into his rigid back, his straining shoulders.

By then the others were well ahead. Looking back, the guide yelled something to us. He sounded angry, I thought, but the wind swept his words away. My husband twisted around and called to me, vicious: “All you have to do is fucking stay straight.” I tried. I re-

ally did. I looked to neither bank, I ignored the sun dancing on the waves; I fixed my eyes on the stern of his orange kayak, the clumsy knot that tethered us (I prayed that it would come undone, but somehow it held), and paddled as hard and as accurately as I could, some mysterious instinct prompting me when to row and when to hold, when to drive my paddle vertically into the water to force my little boat—which felt like an awkward extension of my tense body—to spin in the right direction. But it was never enough, and we zigzagged drunkenly along, the laughter and shouts of the others drifting back to us, making a mockery of our bizarre enterprise. Sometimes they swept around a curve in the river and we were on our own for a stretch, and in those moments a terrible panic rose from the depths of my stomach and I even considered wrenching my lower body free and hurling myself into the water, where surely my feet would find purchase and I could make my way to the bank without serious injury. But I did not, and we lurched along, a single length of rope and a bulging knot and a sliver of orange expanding to become my entire world. I would not look at his back, furiously erect. I watched the rope, sometimes almost straight, usually cutting sharply to the left, and I paddled until my arms burned.

The rocky protrusions jutting out of the river appeared swiftly, without warning. Had we been with the group we would have been following the others, no doubt heeding warnings from the guide, and it would have been easy to give them a wide berth. But on our own we had no way of anticipating them. After we had passed two of them, I began to suspect that my husband was cutting closer to them than was necessary, heading straight for them and then swerving just in time to miss them. Was he flirting with danger for his own perverse pleasure, I wondered, or did he mean to frighten me? I honestly didn't know. His mind—which I had once thought I knew as well as you *can* know the mind of another person—had become a black hole, illegible. I had no idea what he was thinking. But when the third outcropping appeared and we rushed toward it on what seemed like a collision course, I knew I wasn't imagining it.

He was looking straight ahead, paddling fiercely; he had to see it, and yet made no move to veer around it. It was a little larger than the others, the rocks sharper, and I had time to imagine what would happen if we hit it; he would take the brunt of it, of course, and I would smash into him almost instantly. Could he really mean to do it? I braced myself for impact, hoping the shell of my kayak would protect me from serious harm, hoping it would stay upright; I could almost feel the shock of the crash. Suddenly he drove his paddle into the water, spun to the right, and cut around the rock at the last possible second. Even then I thought it might be too late for me; my kayak wouldn't respond quickly enough, and I would swing sideways into the little island, hitting it lengthwise rather than head-on, which might even be worse. I closed my eyes, drew my paddle in, and waited. But then I felt a jolt as the rope yanked me sideways, and my eyes flew open in time to see

the rough surface of the rock as I slid past it, close enough to touch, grazing the side of my kayak—and then the river opened up before me again, and for a minute I let the current take me, not paddling, waiting for my heartbeat to return to normal, absorbing the fact that the collision I had already played out so vividly in my mind had not happened.

My husband did not look back. Not to make sure I was all right, not to apologize, not to make sure the knot had held, not to offer reassurance. He didn't turn his head. In that moment I knew. There would be no salvaging anything. *He didn't turn his head.* He didn't love me, or even "love" me. I could scarcely believe he ever had.

And I didn't love him either. I would have been glad to cut the rope and watch him swirl around the next bend in the river and disappear on the other side, never to be seen again.

At last, maybe half an hour later, the river slowed and we pulled into a little cove and disembarked. I could hardly stand. The guide approached and began to rail at us—I didn't need to understand a word to know he was livid. My husband defended us, gestured toward me and shrugged helplessly, as if my very existence were sufficient explanation for his reckless behavior. The guide was unmoved, and as the others began to pull water bottles and energy bars from their packs and we still stood before the guide like bad children before the principal, I understood that the trip was not over but that we had been booted from it. And although I do not like to be yelled at, I could have hugged the guide; I almost wept with relief. Soon enough a van appeared to take us back to the starting point.

On the drive back to the hotel I tried to explain why my task had been so much more difficult than he realized, but that I had done my best, I really had. He ignored me, eyes on the road. He had pulled a little flask from his pocket (and now I understood how his snifters seemed to magically replenish themselves) and drank steadily from it. I watched the countryside slip past, fields of red flowers, impossibly beautiful as ever. Poppies, I thought, half-delirious with exhaustion and something that felt like grief. Poppies.

When we parked, he turned to me at last. "You didn't try," he said, his voice tight and furious. "You never try. You ruined it on purpose." He flung his car door open, swung his feet out. "You ruin everything."

He didn't come to dinner that night. "Not hungry," he said bitterly, jabbing a corkscrew into a bottle of wine, as if I had robbed him even of his appetite. I went alone. "He's not feeling well," I said when the waiter inquired after him. Which wasn't a lie, after all.

I enjoyed my dinner, a graceful, delicate fish gazing at me from my plate, mournful but forgiving. It still fixed me with a single eye when I had devoured it, hungrier than I had been for days. I lingered over my sorbet, encased in a golden pastry in the shape of a perfect lemon. I had an extra glass of wine. The waiters were attentive but discreet; they had turned against my husband days ago. He drank too much even at dinner, by their standards

(by anyone's, really), and no doubt they were aware of his nighttime perambulations (for he never came to bed). Who knew what else they had seen or heard. They had remained painstakingly polite but a glimmer of contempt had crept into their fastidious manners, and the bottles of wine had appeared more slowly the more doggedly he consumed them.

At last I retired to my empty suite, slipping my feet into the ancient grooves in the stone steps. I imagined my feet strapped into hand-stitched leather, long pointed toes curling out from beneath my stiff gown, old already at thirty.

I tucked my aching body between smooth cool sheets, thought: one more day. Just one more day and then home. I didn't let myself consider what home would mean, though I knew I had to think, to plan. I'd do that tomorrow by the pool. For now I would sleep the sleep of poppies, a magical city looming in the distance.

I awoke when I heard the doorknob turn. I opened my eyes just enough to squint at the clock beside the bed: three a.m. I breathed slowly and deeply as he entered the room, allowing my mouth to slacken, feigning sleep. I shifted a little, as if restless; it would make sense for my sleep to be uneasy, he would expect that. I dreaded the boozy thud of his weight dropping onto the mattress beside me so intensely that it was all I could do to preserve the gentle, false rhythm of my breath.

Instead I heard the jingling of straps and zippers—his backpack, retrieved from a chair. The gentle buzz of a zipped compartment opening. The whisper of cotton against vinyl as he scooped clothes off the floor, stuffed them in the backpack. Footsteps unsteady but also stealthy: he didn't want to wake me. *Good.*

Finally, the clink of metal against plastic as he lifted the keys to the rental car carefully from the bedside table. My nerves were so alert that I could feel the air he displaced as he moved—crossing the room now, feeling in the dark for the doorknob, twisting, opening. Through narrow slits I watched his retreat, his form briefly silhouetted against the faint light from the next room.

And then he was gone. He was leaving.

I had been a wife for a week. He was my husband, and he was leaving, and I was glad.

After a minute had passed I arose and went to the window, set deep in medieval stone. I pulled the white curtain aside and leaned out. A pale arc of moon revealed only the faintest outline of the Umbrian hills beyond; they were too dark to be beautiful and that was a relief, somehow. Down below, a man was crossing the parking lot, moving in and out of shadows. My husband. A stranger. Long torso, slim hips, light shaggy hair. A slight swagger. The bulge of a backpack. He walked unsteadily, groped in the pocket of his jeans for keys. Walking while groping proved too much, and he paused until he found them, then proceeded, his path uneven. Heading for the car. Lurching, leaving. For the night, for good? Back to Rome



and the airport? Into the dark hills, all narrow roads and razor-sharp turns and plunging cliffs? I knew I should care. I, the ruiner of all things. In the end there would be enough guilt to go around. Who was he? I didn't care. Who was I? Impossible.

He never looked back. Never saw me framed in the window, like some medieval woman watching men go off to battle, fearful but perhaps relieved, too. A cloud slid across the moon. Somewhere a bird screeched, a dog barked.

I held my breath as he opened the car door. *He shouldn't be driving*, was what any decent person would have been thinking.

I thought: *Drive*.