

M. M. De Voe
Keep Watch

2:30. Do not call. Not under any circumstances.

2:35. Check your watch, a gold Tourneau: gift from him kept smothered in lingerie unless you're traveling. Time his delinquency. The second hand echoes your impatience.

2:39. Has anyone in this rinky-dink airport noticed you? Is there a broad-shouldered porter somewhere whose eyebrow might rise? A muscled torso expands against his orange uniform; a hand beckons. And if you go? If you wordlessly follow this unknown union worker into an ammonia-rank supply closet, or better yet, a cold, sharp staircase? Would Carey even notice the mussed clothing, the hair, the bruise purpling like a sunset-framed mountain across the small of your back? The happy wives of the world pass with their toylike children and their precious dogs in cages. *Adulteress*, their designer skirts hiss.

3:00. Flight #467 from Los Angeles kisses the cracked tarmac. The next planeload of the tanned and the blonde crowd past. You wear their uniform: khaki pants, crisp button-down oxford, navy blazer, expensive shades. The right shades, dark enough to mask the eyes. Hiding like ostriches. This part of Oregon is the newest undiscovered getaway. The airport wilts as it empties; the fabulous arrivals evaporate in hired cars and limousines. No one has eyes for the clipped brunette checking her shiny gold watch against airport time. Waiting for her ride. So to speak.

3:11. Carey's number (speed-dial 9) seems to be heating up the chestnut leather of your Coach overnight bag. Do not reach inside for that phone; the bag has been warmed to supple by the friction of your arm. Do not move. Make a mental list. Fifteen minutes until you abandon this tryst and take a flight home to see your daughter's play. Ten minutes until you leave a nasty message on Carey's voicemail. Five until you call your husband in Hong Kong and ask how his trip is going. Make another list. You are a bad wife. A worse mother. An indifferent lover. A good lawyer. A great woman. Laugh at the image of your life, a bell curve on a chart; hope the laughter doesn't turn into uncontrollable tears. Your cellphone crouches quiet as a lurking panther in the deep recesses of your soft leather pouch. Do not touch it.

3:16. Press the international code for Hong Kong with your thumb, get ready to explain why you are calling in the middle of the night. As if summoned, Carey's silver Ferrari growls at your calves like a tamed lion. Your lover's rental cars, like his lies, get more elaborate with each business trip. Swallow the sulfur flare of anger. Reconsider the reproofs he merits. Brush your lips statically on his cheek, buff the stubble. Find sea foam and tanning oil in his scent. Ask: *Have you been on the beach?* He says: *Drove down to California on a lark, isn't the ride smooth? The purr, the power! Management meetings ended early.* Exchange the expected. (*Sorry. Sorry.*) Note the smirky wink you once adored, now loathe. Tell him: *No problem.* His balmed lips curl away from just-whitened teeth. Dance the tip of your finger on his forearm; tell him you're eager to see his tan lines. You, too, can be adept at prevarication.

3:58. Dashboard like a pilot's cabin; even the digital clock has a million functions. *Can it still tell time? Ha-ha.* Carey guns the engine. Realize he took the joke as reference to his tardiness. Poke at the buttons; breathe the new car smell, the beachy coconut tanning oil. Wonder: His? Or some other Hers? In northern California, the beaches are not warm. Did he drive to L. A.? Look out the window at all the massive boulders, wonder at their strength and size. This trip will be fine, assure yourself. No fights, okay? Search for the musk of your respective marriages, but do not find it. Celebrate your fifth anniversary of affronting society, of lurking in each other's expense reports. Devolve into bickering, sneering, and worse.

5:33. Arrive at the Pink Shell Hotel. Pretend the last hour never happened. Throw open the door that will hide you from prying eyes. A sweet suite. The Pink Shell. Pink's Hell? Giggle at your Nabokovian creation. Toss a thrice-begun, half-finished *Lolita* onto the glossy bedside table, marking your side of the bed like a lioness marks trees. The lioness hunts; the lion sleeps—this is the real pride of lions. Oriental furniture, a balcony overlooking Mt. Siskiyou . . . Lean on the railing, wonder what it would take to make the cold iron give. The mountains—ridiculously green. The Rogue River sparkles down below, a diamond bracelet flung in abandon. Suck the floating clouds into your lungs, and feel your soul. Lean out toward Nature. Vertigo plucks, pushes you mentally over the edge, plummets you where you stand. Carey approaches from behind: a prickling of the skin on your arms and then his hand heavy on your waist. Did his thoughts also flash on the image of his lover plummeting

into the distant river, pushed? Let him kiss your neck. Arch into him by memory. It has been two weeks. You are ready to unearth him in person.

7:03. Make love. Try not to time it, even though the digital clock on the bedside table is at eye level. Sony. Sony. Sony. You see it every time he thrusts. Lust in Japanese logo. Quick. Efficient. Before you are fully aroused, Carey grunts his finish. The clock morphs into a new set of stick figures. Try to concentrate on your genitals. Think of sex. Try mental filth since actual romance fails you. Imagine awful things involving men and bearskin rugs and your open legs. When Carey rolls off the bed, try to suppress your sigh of frustration.

7:13. The mattress is firm; the covers still crisp despite your lovemaking. Try to hide disappointment. Realize that your sunglasses are still holding back your hair, a three hundred dollar headband. Remove them. All the fabric of your skirt is bunched around your waist. Feel like a midnight burrito nuked and devoured at a 7-11. Note that the expensive panties are gone—a theft? a souvenir? Nothing else has been moved, inside or out. Break the damp silence—suggest dinner. Vanish into the bathroom, as if to get ready.

7:21. Check the Tourneau; learn that your ass has rested on the toilet seat several minutes longer than adequate. Where have you been? In what fantasy? Examine the evenly spaced Crabtree & Evelyn products, the peach wallpaper, the gold spigots labeled *chaud* and *froid*, the black and white patterned octagonal floor tiles. Let the needy silence drag you to your feet. Wish your daughter luck on her stage debut. Wonder what you are doing here. In Hong Kong, it is the beginning of a different day. Miss being alone.

7:23. Rinse your hands; clamp your eyes against the distinct tendons, the spiky knuckles, the bluish vein-trees that grow more elaborate with each year. Avoid the mirror. Enfold your wet hands in an expensive towel, and forgive yourself again. Find your left thumb active in the damp hinge of your ring finger, spinning the gold band. Become amazed that you never remove the ring anymore. Neither does he.

7:24. You locked the bathroom door. How funny.

7:25. Carey, sprawled diagonally across the bed, stares at the ceiling, asks if you're okay. Make a child's face and say: *Of course*. He does not move to make room. Let the moment pass. Ask if he's still angry about the car. Emotions will twitch his eyebrow but will be gone when he says: *No, why would I be?*

7:30. Tell him he looks like Sean Connery in his dinner jacket, though he won't take it as a compliment. Stand before the long mirror in just a bra and panties. Remove the bra. Reminisce about your past as third-year associates, spending secret money on French dinners in the city. Taking separate buses: to Berkeley, to Fillmore. Him in tie and suit, you in sequins; playing dress-up like children. Wonder aloud if the move to L. A. changed you. If donning the rich-girl uniform had anything to do with anything. He isn't listening. Ask him to bring the key card so you don't have to bring your clutch purse. He nods, absent. Feel like a wife.

8:02. Talk about what might have been if not for HIM, if not for HER. THEY are nothing but heavily stressed pronouns, have been for some time. Avoid names, faces, guilt, commitment, conversation. Pull on a blue sheath dress created in a sweatshop run by Donna Karan; offer an expanse of bare skin to *Zip, Please*. Wait for him. He will eventually remember to say, *You're beautiful*: the compliment is as dried out as the wedding flowers in a keepsake album. As soon as he says you are late for your reservation, run a brush through your hair, put on some lip liner, and remember that you haven't chosen earrings. Ask for another minute.

8:12. He will tick off the passing seconds in a Mickey Mouse voice. The gold loops will not do, nor will the silver florets. Do not bring up the hour-long fight in the car. He will shift from foot to foot, playing his fingers across the inner pocket where he keeps his wallet, European-style. Beautiful fades to fine: *You look fine. You look fine.*

8:25. As the door clicks shut, ask if he's remembered the room key. He will make a face of horror, then break into a sly chuckle. Find a smile somewhere, and briefly apply it for the revival of this five-year joke. He treats you like a wife. Treat him like a husband. Remember your

line: *I love you, you crazy*. Say crazy as if it's an endearment. Take his arm, and walk down the stairs like a prom date.

8:36. When you take your menu from the hostess, flourish your wrist. Carey will say: *Oh, you're wearing the watch*. Reply, sincerely: *I love it*. Notice the time. Back in L. A., the "Guys and Dolls" overture has begun. His wife is doing your job: enough audience for two families. Lexi and Shari are in the chorus, best friends, closer than cousins. It must be nearly intermission. Nearly time for HER to tell them, *I'm so sorry both of your parents are away on business, Lexi, but turns out Shari's daddy couldn't come either; want a sleepover, mon petit filles? Make the best of things? Ice cream tubs all around?* Pretend to read the menu, but instead, wonder if the girls miss you. Wonder if they're old enough to suspect, or if, like your respective spouses, they don't notice enough to care. Realize you've stopped calling them your "spice." Wonder when that happened; whether it was at the same time you stopped sweating while picturing your daughter's face: her eyes, just like HIS. The horrorstruck question she must eventually ask: *But do you love him, Mom?* Distract yourself by watching a couple on the dance floor. Notice the balloons, everywhere.

8:50. It is the fiftieth anniversary of the bistro. A waiter with a creamy accent asks if you would like to join the party. It's begun early; you were the only paying customers in the place. He fetches his brother, the manager. Carey nods. You are welcomed into *la famille*. Toast your good luck with a complimentary glass of 1992 Burgundy. The wine soars across your palate, fireworks as the waiter removes his apron. He's been working for twenty years, he says, it's time for a night off. Pat the banquette. He will happily sit next to you. He will nudge Carey. *Luckiest man alive*, he will say, his accent transforming the cliché into an exhilarating dip on a long rollercoaster ride. Blush while Carey laughs. The Burgundy gets impossibly better. Squeeze Carey's forearm. Carey's great forearm. Believe in crime without punishment.

10:17. The overtones of cassis, earth, blackberry, pepper, tobacco, and yes, rasiny-grape go to your head; Carey invites you to dance before dessert. Wheel with him, allowing the country pipes to move you. Don't mention that his pseudo-waltz seems to transform every few steps into a foxtrot. Stumble once, unharmed but humbled. After the near fall, listen closely while Carey says, *Try to keep your mind on what you're doing*.

Swing your head to his eye level. Say (sweetly): *What do you mean?* He will reply (irked): *You know perfectly well what I mean*. Pull him tight, feeling his arms close in. There is music, art, food. Laughing men shout in French, women respond. Ignore the feeling of impending doom.

10:40. Order decaf. Listen patiently as Carey orders a second glass of port. Enthuse over the touted crème brûlée. Confide that you're feeling woozy from the wine. Hear him mutter: *You don't know when to stop*. Instead of reminding him of your coffee order, smooth the napkin on your lap. Hear: *Don't give me that look*. Immediately, plaster a seductive leer on your face, and do your best to keep your eyes from narrowing in anger. Hear: *Just drink your coffee*. Point out that it hasn't arrived. Bite off the word *yet*. Hear: *Drink your water then*. Give him more than he wants. Drain the entire glass without breathing. Hand him the empty. Say: *Happy?* The coffee arrives. Add sugar so you can listen to the sound the spoon makes on its sullen tour of the porcelain.

10:55. When the waiter brings the crème brûlée, thank him in French. He will compliment your accent. Become deliriously grateful that you suffered through two semesters of the hateful professor Rechaute breathing garlic all over your dictations. It is summer and Paris again: you live with cousin Monique in a dismal apartment in a horrible quarter of town that you adore. Recall the rats and the stink and the grout between the cobblestones and the wonderful gyro sandwiches you begged from the thick Armenian boys along the river. *My hero*, you used to say (giggle, groan).

In rusty French, tell the waiter that you spent some time in Paris; his nod is all you need to save this awful evening. Become cheerful again, ready to savor the crème brûlée. Your husband is in Hong Kong with his own array of mistresses. Your daughter is spending the night with her best friend, celebrating the success of their musical debuts. Cousin Monique has grown fat. You have slept with her husband. How French. How droll. Laugh at nothing. Wave Carey's questions away. The dessert is crowned in golden stained glass; the custard tastes like toasted sunlight. Savor the spoonful, roll your tongue around it, raise your eyes to Carey to see if he is watching your playful ecstasy. He is staring into his empty port glass.

10:54. Say: *Is anything wrong?* as Carey stares into his empty port glass. Call him *honey*. Inflect it as a question. *Honey?*

10:56. Rise to step away from the loaded silence to the ladies' room. Sink back down when he tells you that if you don't know what's wrong, then you're either the stupidest woman alive or willfully trying to make him angry. Modulate your tone. Tell him, quietly, that of course you don't want to make him angry, and re-ask, re-ask. Forget the other option (that you are stupid). Beg the answer. *What is wrong, dear, what is wrong?* Stop. Laugh. Ask something new: *Is this the most tired question in the history of gender relations?* He will glare at you, but at least he's not looking into his empty port glass anymore.

11:07. Finally, ask if it is about the argument you had on the road. He will say, *Of course not, we already worked that out.* He will repeat his curt apology: *Sorry, I was snappish. I was just tired of driving, wanted to get to the hotel. I said some things—I admit—things I wish I hadn't said.* His voice, so earnest. So milky. Reply to the apology with a small breathy noise, a laugh of sorts. A snort.

11:07. Your faster-than-time brain replays the voice as it was in the car—not milky, not at all. Curdled. Shouting: *Will you just shut that goddamn hole for ten fucking seconds?* Has he forgotten? Erased the tape? Stare at him.

11:08. Pick up the teaspoon, make an unsafe joke: *You're so formal and polite most of the time.* He wants you to apologize. Stir your coffee. It cools. Apologize. Get informed of your condescending tone. Say, *This is getting ridiculous.* Hear the reply, a non sequitur: *You are the one being ridiculous, flirting with the waiter like a cheap whore.*

11:08.

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11:09. The word *whore* smacks into you. Let a small breathy noise escape to cushion its blow. Wonder when you lost adulthood. Aren't you still a mom? A grown woman? A well-respected lawyer, for chrissakes? Feel like a cartoon character: the ground suddenly vanishes. Plummet. Sit very still so no one can see you fall. Under the table, press your knees together. Do not, under any circumstances, speak. Scrape the

teaspoon over the bottom of the dessert dish as if everything were normal. Remind yourself that you are the one who speaks French and knowing another language makes you an intellectual. Hold that thought. Use it as a shield against all the invectives Carey is hurling across the table. *Stupid whore. Sluttish hag. Useless piece of ass.*

11:32. The waiter's hair is slick in the way rare people can make sexy. What would happen? Could you walk over, grab a handful of that hair, tug his ear to your lips? What would the suave Frenchman do if a leggy brunette in a blue dress strode over and told him she wanted a good fuck? *Je veux un—?* Would he take her to his room? Wouldn't Carey spit tacks? Wouldn't he? Reassure yourself. You could have that stupid waiter. You could have that old lump of a restaurant manager in his spindly chair. You could even have the drooling busboy, a virgin judging from his ever-shifting posture. You are not the stupidest woman in the world. You had your husband once, back when it mattered. You just can't seem to keep Carey.

Travel through time, back to Paris. Wish hard. Taste salt in the back of your throat.

11:58. Do not leave the restaurant, but act as if it doesn't exist. Let the adrenaline surge until you don't feel the least bit tipsy anymore. Shout, if you must.

What do you mean by that?

Face it, you were flirting with the waiter.

So what if I was? I'm going home with you, aren't I? It's not as if we're married.

What are you saying?

Am I somehow a special case because you just fuck me? Or are you like this with HER too? No wonder she can't stand you.

And then you've said it, and the coffee is refilled, and the fight is refueled, because, of course, the waiter speaks to you in French again, and what are you supposed to do, capitulate? Be the good little wife?

12:13. Tell Carey how bloodshot his eyes are. Become aware of the remaining party guests cuddling over Muscat in candlelit corners. Suggest taking the discussion upstairs. Make sure you call it a *discussion*, though it is clearly a fight. See the manager chewing an unlit cigar, his corpulent fingers shifting abacus beads. Worry about Carey's volume. You are inured to the actual words. His content is

always the same: you flirt. All the rest is incidental. Refuse to be provoked. *Simplement mots, seulement mots.* Just words, only words. *Mots* they said, would never harm you. Take a deep breath. Interrupt. Explain, using your lawyer voice, that you were not flirting; you were simply speaking French. Him (spitting): *Same thing.* Bite off the words, *So learn some French,* realize that he might hit you if you said that.

He might hit you. Wonder why you are still sitting at the table.

12:25. Carey is still enraged about this flirting that he can't stand anymore, your failure to divorce, and, like an old song, he will bring everything back to your doings in the car. *What the fuck were you thinking when you said I was a child with a new toy? Or were you just being a petty bitch because I was late?*

Watch his body language. Like arterial blood, adrenaline is surging, mingling with equal spurts of testosterone. This jealous lover makes your husband look like a dull amateur. Twin veins over Carey's ears are bulging, his tanned skin is flushed the red of a fevered tongue. His hands are shaking with his effort to control those muscular forearms you love. Ask to return to your room. Beg. Say you are tired. The fist slamming is coming. Watch it surge through him like a tide he can't control. Determine to save him from the spectacle he is about to become. In your imagination, however, keep him in this public place, put a cigar into that clenched fist and paint him. Show him to himself. A fat, smug, middle-aged bully. An embarrassment.

12:50. Look up when the waiter gently asks if you'd like your check. Nod smartly. Loss and dismay will scissor across Carey's face, leaving a network of dents and lines. Behind his dark irises are his alcoholic mother, his father's testicular cancer, his fierce devotion to his only child. Love him only a little. Quietly.

1:00. Chairs are feet-up on most of the tables; Carey is sorry for his temper. Try to discuss it as the manager crosses the empty room to bring you a token check for the hors d'oeuvres. The waiter is standing in the door of the kitchen; you can see him, but Carey can't. When Carey's eyes lower to the figures on the bill, shrug as if to say: *C'est la vie.*

Notice that the waiter's mouth is barely upturned. Find no come-on in his eyes. No rescue for the maiden in distress. She is too obviously in the dungeon of her own free will. Carey is bent from the shame of yet another fight, in a restaurant, surrounded by patrons

and barmaids. Another place crossed off his list. You, however, you must forgive him if you want to continue the fantasy of this love.

Whatever you do, stop your thoughts. Stop telling yourself that you are nothing but a hollow orifice. These thoughts lead to such dangerous realizations as: *My grand affaire is but a cheap casual fuck in a random hotel.* The idea that, years ago, you and Carey fell in love (with romantically errant timing) is the silk negligée that hides the spider veins. Without it, you would be crippled by the ugliest of guilts.

Strain to hear whatever it is Carey's mumbling. Watch him sign his name to the check. Half-believe his promise that this sort of thing will never happen again. That he will go to double sessions of therapy. He points out that he is getting better, that this fight was not nearly so bad as the ones he has with HER. He didn't call you any names, and he didn't even raise his voice too much. Don't correct him, though the shouted word *whore* still rings in your ears. Be glad he is trying to change. He isn't sure what comes over him. He promises to bring this to his therapist on Tuesday night. Remember suddenly that Tuesday night is when your husband returns from Hong Kong. Wonder if there is still time to order a cake. The waiter gives you a thumbs-up. Nod as imperceptibly as you can. Take one easy breath—it's all you will get.

Watch your lover see the reflection of this gesture in the dark windowpane. Carey's entire body will stiffen as if his teeth have found a grain of aluminum foil in his morning muffin. Perhaps he has read your mind, seen your mental shopping list. *Cake. Party balloons. Lingerie.* His eyes will flash a hollow, dismayed green. His lips peel back and his whitened teeth scrape together. Get goosebumps. No trace of your lover is left. This inhuman replacement vanishes from the restaurant, a phantasm. His chair clatters to the floor, upended like an unfortunate spider.

Stand because there's nothing else to do. You're trapped now in the pattern, walking down the center of the well-worn rut, knowing precisely where these actions will lead. Wish you had your book, so you could curl up next to the fire in the lobby and read.

1:15. Glance at the lovely watch, gift from him. Sigh. Lift the chair from the floor. The French waiter materializes at your side, clouded in cologne. Together, straighten the fallen piece until it is precisely centered. Do not look into lovely Guillaume's eyes. You do not want

him to see that you have no tears left, that this sort of thing happens all the time.

Allow a fantasy to remove you from the center of the small restaurant. In the fantasy, lovely Guillaume takes you by the arms and turns you toward him. He holds you at arm's length, his eyes full of desire. His gaze never once wavers, his right hand slips up the curve of your waist, traverses your ribs, until his fingertips touch your breast. They trace it, lifting lightly, as if it were your entire body, as if it were your face he was turning upwards toward the light. His eyes close, and his lips lower. The kiss is tender, young. It is the first kiss of your life. It is the hesitant, unknown and unknowable except by experience, first kiss of new lovers. It promises more. Let him hold you. Show him a smile. He kisses you again, this time his lips warm and open. Melt into him, then pull apart. Hear him murmur—*Revenez à ma pièce*. Look at his angles and his unknown body and gently say no.

1:15. Release the chair. Watch Guillaume return to his station. Walk slowly away from the table, head held high. Think to yourself: *No, there's nothing wrong. Don't I look wonderful in this gown? Do you really think these sapphire earrings bring out my eyes? Well, thank you. They're real, yes. Carey gave them to me for my thirty-fifth birthday; lovely, aren't they. Ha-ha! He's fine. No, ha-ha, he's just drunk. I'm not an abused wife, don't be silly.*

You're just a girlfriend.

1:19. Knock on your own door.

1:20. Mutter at the door. Listen to the rustling behind it. Refuse to knock again. There is no place to sit. Feign interest in the Monet knockoffs spaced evenly down the hall. Water lilies, bridges, speckled stillness framed in dark wood, six altogether. Go all the way back to the staircase. Consider booking a different room. Remember you have left purse and credit cards inside with the second key. Look at the carpet. Notice how thick and soft it feels beneath your stilettos. Love it for its luxurious pile. Keep staring at it to avoid thinking of Carey. Feel your shoulders slope, heavy with depression. Decide you are the stupidest woman on earth. Take your shoes off.

1:25. Knock again. This time the door swings open. Carey's mouth is sewn tight. Say the correct line: *Are you still angry?* His line is: *Of course*

I'm angry, what the fuck do you think? He delivers it well, without melodrama. Say your next line in a subdued, passive way: *Do you want to talk about it?* Congratulate yourself on your performance as he steps back, allows you into your own room. Remove your earrings, place them on the bedside table next to the clock, unclasp the watch. Time his answer on its flat gold face. Watch the minutes and seconds pass.

1:27. *I don't know*, he says, *I just don't know*. Place the gold watch beside the clock on top of *Lolita*. Caress its face. Turn so you can see the digital clock reflected in the dark television screen. Time in reverse. Red squiggly Alice in Wonderland numbers/letters. Try to guess how long until the reversed numbers make a word.

1:36. Wake up when he yells, *You aren't even paying attention to me right now!* His fist crashes onto the coffee table: frozen steak hitting a marble counter. The thick glass doesn't break. It's not you. Keep your voice level.

You were just saying that it really hurts you when I flirt because it makes you feel inadequate. His eyes squint, but he can find nothing wrong with your logic. Take pleasure in the fact that he's not happy with your transcription.

You can parrot my words, he finally says, *but you're not paying attention*. Sigh and try to keep your eyes from rolling; a topic long-ago exploited. Wait for his anger to subside. Occasionally say things to calm him. He turns your words upside down, criticizes your expression and your attitude. Let him. You are winning. Time is winning. Like a child's rubber raft left in the pool overnight, he is slowly deflating. Testosterone and adrenaline are soaking back into their respective glands. Think about Hong Kong. About going away with Charles next time; it will be peaceful and dull. You will be left alone a lot.

2:02. Read a private message sent by the clock reflected in the television screen. It says: 50:5. Though Carey is still ranting about the waiter, smile. SOS. It's just too perfect. Even the goddamn clock has had enough. Prepare yourself for complete surrender. Smile wider, get ready to apologize and move on. Decide to clear the last of the violence from the air.

Before you can speak, watch him see the smile. Reach your hands toward him ineffectually as he grabs your watch off the table and hurls

it. Watch it shatter against the reproduction of an iron doorstep. Listen to the crash of gold dust and glass. Wince away from the shrapnel.

Hear him say: *You know what? I don't give a fuck.*

Think: *Liar.* Keep the following speech bottled up:

"If you didn't give a fuck, you wouldn't be in this torment. You would *not give a fuck*: definition. Hello, you would not be breaking the lovely furniture, our little fragile life away from home. The wall. My fucking *watch*. You would be not-giving-a-fuck. There is a huge difference between being in such pain that you must break things and not giving a fuck. For example: people who do not give a fuck never buy flowers for their wife the day after they see their lover. They do not spend hundreds of dollars on 24-karat guilt for their daughters. They do not sit in dark rooms for hours on end wondering what the hell is wrong with them. They do not grind their teeth. They do not have nightmares. They do not freak out when their lover asks them about AIDS. They wear condoms. They do not treat their ailing father like an unwanted mutt, ordering him around and laughing about the day he will die as if that is funny. They are not so afraid of death. And life."

Instead, repeat the words that you know irritate him more than any others: *You are such a child. Grow up, already.* The last time you said it, you were in the car. That also did not go well. Keep your memory short. Remember your posture. Chin up. Eyes steady. Be strong. Fight to win.

Hear him say: *Next time it won't be your fucking watch, it will be you.*

Curse at him. Say: *Fuck you, you immature prick.* Do not under any circumstances say: *I loved that watch. That watch was us, was you.* Keep that a forever-guarded secret. Stare at the shards of him on the floor. Try not to weep.

2:03. Without your watch, time slows. Step outside your body. The man who should have stayed a watch rises in a fury. Feel his hands encircle your shoulders, fingers drilling painfully under your scapula. Note his strange self-control, as if it's a wrestling hold, as if he is planning to hurt you but not to kill you, as if his body can't decide if he should transform the move into an apologetic hug. Do not struggle. If he loses control, he might kill you. Acknowledge the risk. Let him hold you in this awkward embrace until you are shoved to the floor. It takes less than ten seconds. Crumple onto the thick blue carpet, emptied. You are made of rice paper. Float down into the scene of the crime.

Now: fill yourself with rage over Carey's tweaked and withheld violence. How dare he hurt you? This violence was meticulous. Just enough. Not a true loss of control, but a threat of what might happen—if. Let your anger explode in gold shrapnel. Rise from the floor, a mass of brown hair and curses, a banshee. Fly at his bare chest, scratching, hitting, slapping. A forty-two-year-old alley cat. He will grab you by the wrists and keep you at bay. Twist there, flail like laundry caught in a tropical storm.

Eventually: stop. Realize what you've been screaming is, *I love you, you stupid fuck, you stupid ignorant asshole. I fucking love you, you pile of shit.* Feel stupid.

3:32. Read Time's wisdom in your Alice in Wonderland TV/mirror. 5&5. SEE.

See the couple sit quietly at opposite ends of the finally mussed bed. Ponder Time's secret message. Open your eyes. See. You are fighting with your lover in a posh Oregon hotel. *Lolita* is on your nightstand. The window is open. Some Oregon nightbird is making bird sounds in the dark. It might be a frog. Your gold watch is in a thousand pieces on the floor. Instead of falling on the thick carpet, it hit the decorative iron doorstep. Sometimes catastrophes are unavoidable.

Rub your back. It is sore where it hit the bed frame. Accept that it will bruise by morning. Worry that it won't fade by Tuesday. Steal a look at the other end of the bed. Carey has five perfect lines down the center of his right breast like a tribal tattoo. He stares down at the pinpricks of blood congealing in the welts. Wordlessly offer him a tissue from the floral box on your side of the bed. Watch him dab at the blood. Quietly check your legs and arms, remembering a time you used to check for his lovebites. All seems fine except for your back. Rub the pain to ease it. Say: *I don't imagine we'll be heading out to the pool much this weekend.*

7:35. Wake hours before the alarm clock is set to ring. Feel the stiffness in your back. Note your thirst. Roll from the bed and flinch from the streak of pain that flashes across your eyes. Pad across the carpet to the bathroom, pausing to peek out the blinds. The mountains are dark against the distant blue dawn. In the bathroom, arrange the makeup mirror so you can see your own back. There is a long blue line across it, a perfect copy of the morning landscape. Try to invent a plausible excuse for this bruise. Fail. Imagine undressing on Tuesday night,

imagine Charles running his hands down your back, finding the bruise, pulling back as if snakebit.

The secret of married peoples' affairs is that people wish their spouses would touch them like their lovers.

Charles reads the *Financial Times* while you undress. His hands are too occupied by his Palm device to discover a bruise. He is a good provider, a good father. He is above reproach.

It is very early or very late. Regret your lack of sleep. Not quite hung over, know you'll be feeling the wine eventually, so drink an oily glass from the tap. Feel a twinge as you tilt your neck back to swallow an aspirin. Hate the bruise. Hate Carey. Think about the insular gym you frequent Wednesday and Friday mornings, and wish that someone would ask. Not casually: truly concerned. One of the regulars you see every week, perhaps the older woman who walks the Stairmaster while reading Dutch romance novels. Invent words for her to use. Look in the mirror, and watch your lips form the word *abuse*.

Get out of this. Fear you deserve it.

7:58. Slip under the covers. Recoil when Carey's hand pins yours. *I'm really sorry*, he whispers. *It will never happen again. We'll make sure. I love you, honey. I am so sorry.* Find yourself unable to move, though his touch is lighter than a dusting of snow. Recall the waiter's pursed lips, his greasy hair. Monique's elaborate wedding. Your daughter's eyes.

7:59. Your line is: *I love you, too.* Remain silent. Listen to the vacuum cleaner buzzing in the hallway. Keep your eyes open in the dark. Wait for the clock to catch up with tomorrow.

8:00. Three sharp raps, a French accent in the word *housekeeping*. Decide.