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Opening Extract from...

The Silent Wife

Written by A.S.A Harrison

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THE SILENT WIFE

A.S.A. HARRISON

headline

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Part One
Her and Him

1
Her

It's early September. Jodi Brett is in her kitchen, making dinner. Thanks to the open plan of the condo, she has an unobstructed view through the living room to its east-facing windows and beyond to a vista of lake and sky, cast by the evening light in a uniform blue. A thinly drawn line of a darker hue, the horizon, appears very near at hand, almost touchable. She likes this delineating arc, the feeling it gives her of being encircled. The sense of containment is what she loves most about living here, in her aerie on the twenty-seventh floor.

At forty-five, Jodi still sees herself as a young woman. She does not have her eye on the future but lives very much in the moment, keeping her focus on the everyday. She assumes, without having thought about it, that things will go on indefinitely in their imperfect yet entirely acceptable way. In other words, she is deeply unaware that her life is now peaking,

that her youthful resilience – which her twenty-year marriage to Todd Gilbert has been slowly eroding – is approaching a final stage of disintegration, that her notions about who she is and how she ought to conduct herself are far less stable than she supposes, given that a few short months are all it will take to make a killer out of her.

If you told her this she would not believe you. Murder is barely a word in her vocabulary, a concept without meaning, the subject of stories in the news having to do with people she doesn't know and will never meet. Domestic violence she finds especially implausible, that everyday friction in a family setting could escalate to such a degree. There are reasons for this incomprehension, even aside from her own habit of self-control: She is no idealist, believes in taking the bad with the good, does not pick fights, and is not easily baited.

The dog, a golden retriever with a silky blond coat, sits at her feet as she works at the cutting board. Every now and then she throws him a slice of raw carrot, which he catches in his mouth and joyfully grinds up with his molars. This vegetable toss is a long-standing predinner ritual, one that she and the dog have enjoyed from the time she brought him home as a roly-poly pup to take Todd's mind off his yearning for progeny, which sprang up, seemingly overnight, around the time he turned forty. She named

the dog Freud in anticipation of the fun she could poke at his namesake, the misogynist whom she was forced to take seriously at university. Freud passing gas, Freud eating garbage, Freud chasing his tail. The dog is endlessly good-natured and doesn't mind in the least being an object of fun.

Trimming vegetables and chopping herbs, she throws herself bodily into the work. She likes the intensity of cooking – the readiness of the gas flame, the timer marking off the minutes, the immediacy of the result. She's aware of the silence beyond the kitchen, everything rushing to the point in time when she'll hear his key in the lock, an event that she anticipates with pleasure. She can still feel that making dinner for Todd is an occasion, can still marvel at the stroke of fate that brought him into her life, a matter of rank chance that did not seem to favor a further acquaintance, much less a future of appetizing meals, lovingly prepared.

It came to pass on a rainy morning in spring. Busy with her graduate studies in psychology, waiting tables at night, overworked, exhausted, she was moving house, driving north on State Street in a rental van loaded with her household goods. As she prepared to change lanes from right to left she might have looked over her shoulder or maybe not. She found the van awkward, didn't have a feel for it, and on top of this her windows were fogged and she'd missed

her turn at the last set of lights. Given these conditions she might have been distracted – a question that later came to be much discussed between them. When he clipped her driver's-side door and spun her into oncoming traffic, there was a general honking of horns and squealing of brakes, and before she could pull herself together – before she fully realized that her van had come to a standstill and she was perfectly alright – he was screaming at her through her closed window.

'You crazy bitch. What in God's name do you think you're doing? Are you some kind of maniac? Where did you learn to drive? People like you should stay off the road. Are you going to get out of your car or are you just going to sit there like an imbecile?'

His tirade that day in the rain did not give a favorable impression, but a man who's been in a car crash is going to be irate even if it's his own fault, which in this instance it was not, so when he called a few days later to ask her to dinner, she graciously accepted.

He took her to Greektown, where they ate lamb souvlaki washed down with cold retsina. The restaurant was crowded, the tables close together, the lights bright. They found themselves shouting over the din and laughing at their failure to be heard. What conversation they could manage was pared down to succinct phrases like, 'The food is good . . . I like it here . . .

my windows were fogged . . . if it hadn't happened I would never have met you.'

She didn't go out on many bona fide dates. The men she knew from university took her for pizza and beer and counted out their money. They'd meet her at the restaurant scruffy and unshaven, still in the clothes they'd worn to class. Whereas Todd had put on a clean shirt, and he'd picked her up, and they'd driven to the restaurant together – and now he was looking after her, refilling her glass and checking on her comfort level. Sitting across from him, she was pleased with what she saw – the way he casually took up space and his air of being in charge. She liked the homey habit he had of wiping his knife on his bread and that he put down his credit card without looking at the bill.

When they were back in his truck he drove her to his building site in Bucktown, a nineteenth-century mansion that he was reconverting – from rooming house back into single-family dwelling. Guiding her up the crumbling walk he lightly held her elbow.

'Careful now. Watch your step.'

It was a Gothic Revival eyesore of decaying brick, flaking paint, and narrow windows, with spiky gables that gave it a menacing upward thrust – a vulgar aberration on a street lined with square-built structures that were fully restored. In place of the front porch there was a ladder to be climbed, and in the

entrance hall a massive chandelier lay on its side. The front room, a vault-like space with an implausibly high ceiling, featured heaps of rubble and dangling wires.

'There used to be a wall here,' he said, gesturing. 'You can see the footprint.'

She looked at the floor with its missing planks.

'When they turned it into a boarding house they built a lot of partitions. The way it is now, this is back to the original layout. You can really see how it's going to shape up.'

She found it hard to picture any sort of end result. It didn't help that there was no electricity, the only light a pale wash coming from the streetlamps outside. He lit a candle, dripped some of the melting wax into a saucer, and fixed it upright. He was keen to show her around, and they carried the candle through the empty rooms – the would-be kitchen, the long-lost parlor, provisional spaces defined by walls that were down to the lath-work. Upstairs, the rooming house it used to be was more in evidence, the bedroom doors fixed with latches and the walls painted in unlikely colors. The musty smell was strong up here and the atmosphere was eerie with the old wood creaking underfoot and the candle creating ripples of light that cast the two of them as specters on the walls and ceiling.

'It's not a restoration,' he said. 'It will all be

overhauled and modernized. Oak floors, solid-core doors, double-pane windows . . . This will be something that everybody wants, an old house with personality but one that's absolutely solid and up to date.'

He had taken it on single-handed, he said, learning the trades as he went along. He was doing this instead of university, had borrowed money, was living on credit and optimism. She understood just how stretched he was when she saw the rolled-up sleeping bag in one of the bedrooms, and in the bathroom a razor and a can of foam.

'So what do you think?' he asked, when they were back downstairs.

'I'd like to see it when it's done,' she said.

He laughed. 'You think I'm in over my head.'

'It's ambitious,' she conceded.

'You're going to be impressed,' he said.

By the time she hears him come in, both lake and sky have receded into a velvety dusk. She switches off the overhead fixture, leaving the valance lights to orchestrate a mellow glow, removes her apron, and licks her fingers to smooth the hair at her temples, a gesture that is pure anticipation, listening all the while to his movements in the foyer. He fusses over the dog, hangs up his jacket, empties his pockets into the cast bronze bowl on the console table. There's a brief silence as he looks through the mail. She arranges

a smoked trout on a plate with a fan of crackers.

He's a big man with hair the color of sand, slate-gray eyes, and a whopping charge of vitality. When Todd Gilbert enters a room people wake up. That's what she would say if someone asked her what she loved most about him. Also that he can make her laugh when he wants to, and that unlike a lot of men she knows he's good at multitasking, so that even as he's taking a call on his cell phone he can do up the clasp on her necklace or show her how to use a two-step sommelier corkscrew.

He swipes her forehead with his lips, steps around her, and reaches into the cupboard for the cocktail glasses. 'Looks good,' he says. 'What is it?' Referring to the golden, pastry-encrusted meat, which is out of the oven and resting in the pan.

'Beef Wellington. We've had it before, remember? You like it.'

It's his job to make the martinis. As she whisks together a marinade for the vegetables, she's aware of the clatter of ice cubes and the sharp fragrance he makes with his knife, cutting into a lemon. He bumps against her, knocks things over, gets in her way, but she likes having him near, the comforting bulk of him. She takes in the smell of his day, gravitates to his body heat. He's a man whose touch is always warm, a matter of animal significance for someone who is nearly always cold.

Having set her martini in front of her on the counter, he carries his own, along with the trout, to the living room, where he puts up his feet and opens the paper that she's left for him on the coffee table, neatly refolded. She places the French beans and baby carrots in separate steamers and takes the first sip of her drink, liking how the vodka instantly hits her bloodstream and streaks through her limbs. From the sofa he throws out comments on the day's news: the next Olympics, a hike in interest rates, a forecast of rain. When he's swallowed most of the trout and the last of his martini he gets up and opens a bottle of wine while she carves the beef into thick slabs. They take their plates to the table, where they both have a view of the lustrous sky.

'How was your day?' he asks, loading up his fork.

'I saw Bergman,' she says.

'Bergman. What did she have to say for herself?' He's shoveling in the beef with steady concentration and speaks without looking up from his plate.

'She reminded me that it's been three years since she made the pudding commercial. I think she had it in mind to pin some of the blame on me.'

He knows her clients by the code names she gives them. Since they come and go while he's at work he's never encountered even a single one, but she keeps him up to date, and in a sense he's intimate with

them all. She doesn't see any harm in this as long as their real names remain secret. Bergman is code for the out-of-work actress whose last job – the fabled pudding commercial – is a distant memory.

'So now it's your fault,' he says.

'She gets that it's her desperation that's putting people off, and why haven't I helped her with that, she wants to know. Hell's bells. We've been working on that for weeks.'

'I don't know how you put up with it,' he says.

'If you could see her you'd understand. She's feisty, a real fighter. She'll never give up, and eventually something will change for her.'

'I wouldn't have the patience.'

'You would if you cared about them. You know my clients are like my children.'

A shadow crosses his face and she understands that the mention of surrogate children has reminded him of the actual children he doesn't have. Reverting to Bergman she says, 'I worry about her, though. It's one of those cases where she can't believe in herself if no one will hire her, but no one will hire her because she doesn't believe in herself, and the thing is I don't know if I'm actually helping her. Sometimes I think I should fire myself as her therapist.'

'Why don't you?' he says. 'If you're not getting anywhere.'

'Well, we're not getting *nowhere*. Like I said, she's

at least figured out that she's doing this to herself.'

'I love this beef,' he says. 'How did you get the meat inside the pastry?'

As if it were a ship in a bottle, but she knows he isn't joking. For a man who can raise walls and sink foundations, he's surprisingly simple-minded when it comes to cooking.

'It's wrapped,' she says. 'Think of insulation around a pipe.'

But he's staring into space and doesn't appear to register her answer.

He's always been prone to these lapses, though it seems to her that lately they've been more frequent. Here one minute, gone the next, carried along by a river of thought, conjecture, worry, who knows? He could be silently counting backward from a hundred or mentally reciting the names of the presidents. At least she can't fault his mood. For a while now he's been distinctly more cheerful, more like his old self, to the point where she's starting to think that his depression is a thing of the past. At one time she feared that it might be permanent. It went on for so long and not even Freud could snap him out of it. Freud as a puppy, with his goofy antics, was as good as a court jester.

At least he could always fake it at a dinner party – keep the liquor flowing, turn on the bonhomie, make people feel good. Women respond to Todd

because he's so ingenuous and open-handed. *Rosalie, you've been drinking from the fountain of youth again. Deirdre, you look good enough to eat*. He gives it up to the men, too, letting them talk about themselves without competing, and he gets people laughing with his mimicry: the East Indian naturopath (*You are taking too much tension . . . you must go slowly slowly*), the Jamaican mechanic (*De car wan tree new tires . . . fly di bonnet, mon*).

He's definitely better now, more alive, ready to laugh even when they're alone, more easygoing and relaxed, less of a worry, more like his old self, the way he was in the early years – although the days are gone when they used to get naked in bed to read the paper and watch the game and share a bowl of cornflakes, the milk carton balanced on the bedpost, sugar spilling out of the Domino bag onto the sheets. Back then they had the freedom of knowing each other barely at all; they were in gleeful possession of a leisurely future with all the doors still open and all the promises still fully redeemable.

'Penny for your thoughts,' she says.

His eyelids flutter and he gives her a smile. 'This is delicious,' he says. He reaches for the half-empty bottle and refills their glasses. 'What do you think of this wine?'

He likes to talk about wine. At times, what they are drinking can form the hub of an entire dinner

conversation. But now, instead of waiting for her answer, he smacks his palm on the side of his head and says, 'I meant to tell you. There's a fishing trip this weekend. Some of the guys are going.'

'A fishing trip,' she says.

He's polished off his two slabs of beef and is mopping up the juices with a piece of bread. 'Leaving Friday after work. Back Sunday.'

Todd doesn't go on fishing trips, and as far as she knows neither do any of the guys. She understands immediately – there's no doubt in her mind – that he's using the term 'fishing trip' euphemistically.

'Are you going?' she asks.

'I'm thinking about it.'

Still working on her meal, she's trying to hurry now. The way she sometimes eats – taking minuscule bites and holding them captive in her mouth – can try his patience, she knows. She swallows a tidbit that's only half-chewed and it lodges in her throat, triggering her gag reflex. Gallantly, he leaps up and pounds her on the back as she sputters and heaves. At last, the shred of matter that caused the problem erupts into her hand. Without looking at it she places it on the edge of her plate.

'Let me know what you decide,' she says, using her napkin to blot the corners of her eyes. 'If you go I might have the carpets cleaned. And make some marmalade.'

She doesn't plan on doing either of these things; it's just something to say. She has always counted it a plus that he doesn't lie to her, meaning that he doesn't embroider his accounts of himself with the kind of detail that would turn them into lies. The problem here has nothing to do with his circumlocution. The problem is that he doesn't go away for the weekend; that going away for the weekend is something he's never done before.

'Hey,' he says. 'I got you a present.'

He leaves the room and comes back with a package – a flat rectangle roughly the size of a paperback book, wrapped in brown paper and secured with masking tape. He puts it on the table next to her plate and sits down again. He often gives her presents and she loves this about him, but she loves it less when the presents are meant to placate her.

'What's the occasion?' she asks.

'No occasion.'

There's a smile on his face but the atmosphere is crackling. Objects should be flying across the room; heads should be spinning on their stalks. She picks up the package and finds it nearly weightless. The tape peels off easily, and from a sandwich of protective cardboard she extracts a beautiful small picture, a Rajput painting, an original. The scene, blocked out in blues and greens, portrays a woman in a long dress standing in a walled garden. Surrounded by

peacocks and a gazelle, adorned with elaborate gold jewelry, she is evidently not plagued by any material worries or worldly concerns. Leafy branches arch protectively over her head, and the grass beneath her feet is a wide green carpet. They study the scene together, comment on the woman's hennaed hands, her little white basket, her lovely figure seen through the voile of her gown. As they take in the fine detail and flat blocks of color, their life unobtrusively returns to normal. He was right to get it for her. His instincts are good.

It's nearing bedtime as she clears the table and starts on the dishes. He makes a perfunctory offer of help, but they both know that it's best if he leaves the clean-up to her and takes the dog for a walk. Not that Jodi's so terribly exacting. Her standards are not unreasonable, but when you wash a roasting pan it should not be greasy when you're done, nor should you wipe the grease off with your dish towel, which you are then going to use on the crystal. This is common sense. He isn't careless when it comes to construction. If he were putting up a shelf he wouldn't set it at an angle so that objects placed on it slid to the floor and broke. He'd pay attention and do the job right, and nobody watching would call him a perfectionist or accuse him of being fussy. Not that she's inclined to complain. It's a known fact that in certain contexts people's great strengths become their

epic failings. His impatience with domestic work stems from the fact that his expansive energy overshoots the scale of the tasks to be done. You can see it in the way he fills a room, looming and towering in the limited space, his voice loud, his gestures sweeping. He's a man who belongs outside or on a building site, where his magnitude makes sense. At home, he's often at his best asleep beside her, his bulk in repose and his energy dormant in a kind of comforting absence.

She moves through her lovely rooms, drawing drapes, plumping cushions, straightening pictures, picking lint off the carpet, and generally creating the setting that she wants to wake up to in the morning. It's important to have everything serenely in its place as she begins her day. In the bedroom she turns down the covers and lays out pajamas for him and a nightgown for herself, smoothing the fabric and folding back appendages to make the garments look less like uninhabited bodies. Even so, something about them gives her a turn – the white piping on the dark pajamas, the silky ties on the nightgown. She leaves the room and steps outside onto the balcony. There's a raw wind, and in the moonless night the vista is a bottomless black. She leans into the bristling darkness, indulging a sense of isolation, liking the fact that she can control it – linger till she loses her taste for it and then go back inside. She's grateful

for the stability and security of her life, has come to treasure the everyday freedoms, the absence of demands and complications. By forgoing marriage and children she has kept a clean slate, allowed for a sense of spaciousness. There are no regrets. Her nurturing instincts find an outlet with her clients, and in every practical sense she is as married as anyone else. Her friends of course know her as Jodi Brett, but to most people she is Mrs Gilbert. She likes the name and title; they give her a pedigree of sorts and act as an all-round shorthand, eliminating the need to correct people or make explanations, dispensing with awkward terminology like *life partner* and *significant other*.

In the morning, after he's left for work, she gets up, dresses, and takes the dog along the waterfront to Navy Pier. The sun shimmers in a milky haze, casting a net of silver over the lake. The onshore breeze is pungent, scented with the heady marine aromas of motor oil and fish and rotting wood. At this time of day the pier is like a sleeping giant, its pulse slowed and its breath subdued. There are only the locals – the dog walkers and the joggers – to witness the rocking boats, the slapping water, the abandoned air of the carousel and Ferris wheel, the gulls diving for their breakfast. When she turns back toward the city the skyline appears like a vision surging up along the shore, dramatically lit by the rising sun. She came to

Chicago as a student more than twenty years ago and felt immediately at home. She lives here not only physically but temperamentally. After the privations of a small town she was thrilled by the soaring buildings, the crush of people, the lavish variety, and even the dramatic weather. This is where she came of age, forged her identity, learned to thrive as an adult and a professional.

She started her practice the spring she finished school. By then she was living with Todd in a tiny one-bedroom in Lincoln Park. Her first clients were referred by her university contacts, and she saw them in the living room while Todd was at work. Having decided early on, while still an undergrad, that her approach would be eclectic – that she would draw on whatever she had in her repertoire that made the most sense in the situation – she practiced active listening, took a Gestalt approach to dream interpretation, and openly challenged self-defeating attitudes and behaviors. She counseled people to ask more of themselves and take charge of their own well-being. She gave them encouragement and positive feedback. During her first year she discovered how to be patient and bring people along at their own pace. Her greatest asset was her genuine friendliness – she liked her clients and gave them the benefit of the doubt, which put them at ease. They spoke well of her to others, and her practice grew.

For nearly a year she skimmed along nicely, getting her stride, developing skills, gaining confidence. And then one day a client of hers – a young man of fifteen who'd been diagnosed as bipolar, a good boy who did well in school and *seemed* perfectly fine – Sebastian was his name – dark hair, dark eyes, curious, engaged, liked to ask rhetorical questions (Why is there something rather than nothing? How can we know anything for sure?) – this client of hers, young Sebastian, was found dead on the pavement underneath the tenth-floor balcony of his apartment, the apartment where he lived with his parents. When he failed to appear for his regular session she called his home and heard the news from his mother. By the time she found out, he'd been dead for five days.

'Don't blame yourself,' his mother was kind enough to say. But he'd jumped on the very day of their last session. She'd seen him in the morning and he'd ended his life not twelve hours later. What had they talked about? Some small problem he was having with his eyes. He'd been seeing things in his peripheral vision, fleeting things that weren't really there.

That's when she enrolled for additional studies at the Adler School, and that's when she started picking and choosing her clients.

She crosses Gateway Park, passes the time of day with a neighbor, and stops at Caffé Rom for a latte to go. While eating her soft-boiled egg and buttered toast

she reads the paper. After breakfast she clears away the dishes and then gets out the file on her first client, code name the judge, a gay male lawyer with a wife and children. The judge has certain things in common with her other clients. He's hit a wall in his life and believes or hopes that psychotherapy will help him. He's made a commitment to himself to see it through. And he doesn't bring to the table more than she can handle. This last point she has determined through a screening process. People with self-destructive behaviors are referred elsewhere. She doesn't take addicts, for example, whether it's drugs, alcohol, or gambling, and she rejects anyone who has an eating disorder, has been diagnosed as bipolar or schizophrenic, suffers from chronic depression, or has thought about or attempted suicide. These are people who should be on medication or in rehab.

Her schedule allows for just two clients a day, before lunch. The clients she ends up with, after screening, tend to be stuck, lost, or insecure, the kind of people who find it hard to know what they want and make decisions based on what is expected of them or what they believe is expected of them. They can be tough on themselves – having internalized the judgments of insensitive parents – and at the same time behave in ways that are irresponsible or inappropriate. On the whole they can't get their priorities straight, fail to create personal boundaries, neglect their own best

interests, and see themselves as victims.

The spare bedroom, which serves as her consulting room, comfortably holds a desk, a filing cabinet, and a pair of armchairs that face each other on a six-by-eight-foot antique kilim. Between the chairs is a low table that holds her clipboard and pen, a box of Kleenex, a bottle of water, and two glasses. The judge is wearing his usual dark suit with black oxfords and vivid argyle socks, revealed when he sits down and crosses his legs. He's thirty-eight and has sensuous eyes and lips, set in a long face. Taking her place across from him she asks how he's been keeping since she saw him last, a week ago. He talks about his visit to a leather bar and what happened in the alley out back. He goes into detail, maybe hoping to shock her, but sex between consenting adults is not going to do it, and anyway this isn't the first time he's tried her patience with something like this. He's talking fast, changing direction midstream, reliving it, doing his best to draw her in.

'My pants were down around my ankles – imagine if someone had – oh my God did the garbage stink. I focused on that – the garbage – to slow things down – I had to do *something*. He'd been staring at me in the bar. I'd seen him there before but didn't think – I haven't been to that bar in ages.'

As the story peters out he watches her slyly, eyes glistening, lips slick with saliva. He'd like it if she

laughed and said naughty boy, you're a wicked one, but her job does not involve filling in gaps in the conversation or performing social rescues. He waits, and when she doesn't speak he fidgets and looks at his hands. 'So,' he says finally. 'I'm sorry. I really am. I'm very sorry. I shouldn't have done it.' These are words that he can't say to his wife, so he says them to his therapist.

His pattern is denial followed by indulgence followed by a renewed period of denial. The denial stage is cued by statements such as 'I love my family and don't want to hurt them.' The remorse is genuine, but he can no more give up his gay pursuits than forgo the security blanket of his home life. Both play a part in fulfilling his needs, and both are important to his sense of identity. He pretends to himself that his interest in men is a passing phase and doesn't see that abstinence and guilt are ways he has of charging his batteries for a fully loaded thrill. Like many people who cheat, he likes to self-dramatize. He's more of a queen than he knows.

'You be the judge,' she tells him. But he's still a way from owning up.

Wednesday is cheaters' day. Her next client, Miss Piggy, a coy young woman with chubby cheeks and freckled hands, maintains that having a lover stimulates her appetites and keeps her marriage alive. According to Miss Piggy her husband suspects nothing

and would have no right to complain if he did. It's unclear why Miss Piggy is in therapy or what she expects to get out of it. She differs from the judge in her lack of a nagging conscience and the practical way she goes about things – on Monday and Thursday afternoons between shopping for groceries and picking up the kids from school.

Miss Piggy appears to be less conflicted than the judge, but from Jodi's point of view she's a greater challenge. Her anxiety flows beneath the surface in underground streams, rarely bubbling up or creating a disturbance. Tapping into it and bringing it into her field of awareness is not going to be easy. Whereas the judge is simply an open book, a sensitive man who's landed himself in a pickle. Eventually, with or without Jodi's help, the judge's problem will come to a head and work its way out of his life.

In spite of Miss Piggy's belief that her husband is in the dark, Jodi thinks that he probably has his suspicions. There are always signs, as she well knows. For instance, the cheater is frequently distracted or preoccupied; the cheater dislikes being questioned; inexplicable smells cling to the cheater's hair and clothes. The smells can be anything: incense, mildew, grass. Mouthwash. Who uses mouthwash at the end of the day before coming home to bed? A shower can eliminate telltale body odors, but the soap the cheater uses in the hotel bathroom is going to be

different from the brand he uses at home. On top of this there are all the usual clues: the stray red or blond hairs, lipstick stains, rumpled clothing, furtive phone calls, unexplained absences, mysterious marks on the body . . . not to mention the curious acquisitions – the fancy key chain or bottle of aftershave – that appear out of nowhere, especially on Valentine's Day.

At least he does his best to be discreet and as a rule does not advance on her friends, although there have been times. There was a couple they used to be chummy with, people they met on vacation in the Caribbean and bonded with over margaritas and snorkeling lessons. The couple ran a business selling prefab cottages, and Todd had nothing but contempt for this. Nonetheless, for several winters running they made a point of meeting up with this couple at designated resorts. She suspected that Todd and Sheila had something going on but put it out of her mind until the afternoon they disappeared from the poolside and reappeared a while later looking like cats who had lapped up a big bowl of cream. This alone she might have overlooked, but then there were the subtle displacements in Todd's swimming trunks and the dab of something gelatinous glistening in his chest hair.

And yet, none of this matters. It simply doesn't matter that time and time again he gives the game

away, because he knows and she knows that he's a cheater, and he knows that she knows, but the point is that the pretense, the all-important pretense must be maintained, the illusion that everything is fine and nothing is the matter. As long as the facts are not openly declared, as long as he talks to her in euphemisms and circumlocutions, as long as things are functioning smoothly and a surface calm prevails, they can go on living their lives, it being a known fact that a life well lived amounts to a series of compromises based on the acceptance of those around you with their individual needs and idiosyncrasies, which can't always be tailored to one's liking or constrained to fit conservative social norms. People live their lives, express themselves, and pursue fulfillment in their own ways and in their own time. They are going to make mistakes, exercise poor judgment and bad timing, take wrong turns, develop hurtful habits, and go off on tangents. If she learned anything in school she learned this, courtesy of Albert Ellis, father of the cognitive-behavioral paradigm shift in psychotherapy. Other people are not here to fulfill our needs or meet our expectations, nor will they always treat us well. Failure to accept this will generate feelings of anger and resentment. Peace of mind comes with taking people as they are and emphasizing the positive.

Cheaters prosper; many of them do. And even if

they don't they are not going to change, because, as a rule, people don't change – not without strong motivation and sustained effort. Basic personality traits develop early in life and over time become inviolable, hardwired. Most people learn little from experience, rarely think of adjusting their behavior, see problems as emanating from those around them, and keep on doing what they do in spite of everything, for better or worse. A cheater remains a cheater in the same way that an optimist remains an optimist. An optimist is a person who says, after being run over by a drunk driver and having both legs mangled and mortgaging the house to pay the hospital bills: 'I was lucky. I could have been killed.' To an optimist that kind of statement makes sense. To a cheater it makes sense to be living a double life and talking out of both sides of your mouth at the same time.

In asserting that people don't change, what she means is that they don't change for the better. Whereas changing for the worse, that goes without saying. Life has a way of taking its toll on the person you thought you were. She used to be a nice person, nice through and through, but she can't make that claim anymore. There was the time she tossed his cell phone into the lake, complete with the message from the female caller who addressed him as 'Wolfie.' The time she put his boxers in the wash with a load of colors. The many times she's seen to it that he misplaces

things. She is not proud of these misdemeanors. She would like to think that she's above this kind of behavior, that she accepts him for who he is, that she's not one of those women who feel they are owed something by their men after going into it with open eyes, but she counts her own transgressions as slight compared with the liberties that he freely takes.

Having shown Miss Piggy out, she proceeds to the gym on a lower level of the condominium, where she lifts weights and cycles 10K. Following a lunch of leftover cold vegetables with mayonnaise, she takes a shower and dresses for a round of errands. Before leaving she writes out instructions for Klara, who comes in to clean on Wednesday afternoons. Daily routine is the great balm that keeps her spirits up and holds her life together, warding off the existential fright that can take you by ambush anytime you're dithering or at a loss, reminding you of the magnitude of the void you are sitting on. Keeping busy is the middle-class way – a practical way and a good way. She enjoys the busywork of scheduling clients, running her household, and keeping herself fit and groomed. She likes things orderly and predictable and feels secure when her time is mapped out well in advance. It's a pleasure to flip through her daybook and see what she has to look forward to: spa visits, hair appointments, medical checkups, Pilates sessions. She attends nearly all the events organized by her

professional association and signs up for classes in anything that interests her. Evenings, when she isn't cooking for Todd, she has dinner with friends. And then there are the two extended vacations – one in summer and one in winter – that she and Todd always enjoy together.

Driving around in her Audi Coupé, she puts the windows down and soaks up the noise and commotion of the city, taking pleasure in the din and tumult of things going on everywhere: the vendors, street musicians, and outdoor markets – and even the crowds, sirens, and traffic jams. A teenage girl with a bunch of balloons dances across the street. A man in a white apron sits in full lotus on the steps of a restaurant. She stops at the framer's with the Rajput painting, picks up a travel book, buys a kitchen scales to replace her broken one, and on the way home sits down with a frappuccino at her local Starbucks, leaving herself enough time to walk the dog and broil a chop for dinner before attending her class in flower arranging.