

I keep the stack of divorce paperwork in the small walnut table next to my side of the bed in my side of the room in my side of the great divide between us. I have printed it 52 times and signed and dated every copy, assuming I'll present it once a week, every week, all year long and that each presentation will have the same result. I place documents, signed and ready for filing, next to his coffee pot on his side of the kitchen, one of his blue Zebra ballpoint pens laid on top, and he, after ignoring it for two to three days, will tear it exactly in half, and toss it in the paper recycle bin on my side of the kitchen, in my side of our world.

We'd handled our last home buying experience the same way though with significantly more reverie and audible communication. Because the house I had my eye on was a military foreclosure — the VA would only reject or accept offers, never counter. Our realtor's only real offer of assistance was "write up a bunch of offers, pre-sign them, and I'll submit them one after another, day after day, until they accept." Our realtor was worthless, but right. And on day seven, our seventh offer was met with acceptance and the other eleven prepared offers were shredded and forgotten.

The divorce paperwork is not forgotten. I assume I'll submit it, with no counter, just a rejection, over and over until acceptance. But acceptance is a long way down a long road. I'm tired of the repetition, wishing for remedy, but I am resolute.

This morning, Ben is already awake when I get out of the shower, leaving me to my threadworn towel and steamed mirror and silence. A few years ago he wired the house with connected digital speakers likely only to annoy me — his music suddenly blasting from the kitchen into the room that we divided and conquered. When it comes to music, I'm easy to please. My playlist contains everything from acoustic folk and fiddle to what Mel's kids call "mumble rap." But Ben is trapped in the 90's and I cannot stomach Nirvana or Metallica or motherfucking Incubus for God's sake and I cannot stomach Ben.

My legs are dry. The warm vanilla bean lotion I received in my Christmas stocking two years ago is glued closed with a chunk of old yellow gunk on the pump top but I peel it out and proceed as if I'm usually the sort of woman who puts lotion on her legs. The truth is, I haven't thought about dry or hairy legs for a good long time. I assume Ben, like I'd imagine most partners, prefers smooth and silky legs but it's been long enough since we spoke of this that I can hardly remember or care about any of his preferences — though the long blonde hairs, so unlike mine, that I found in the shower drain a few months ago at least leads me to a guess. Today though, I took time in a steamy hot shower to run a razor I found in the back of the drawer (on my side of the vanity, on my side of the bathroom, on my side of this divide) along my legs and now — who am I? — I'm adding old lotion that doesn't smell too bad, I decide, and rub away like a woman with a plan.

I do have a plan. When something shifted in this house, in this silence, a few months earlier, I decided that if monogamy wasn't for Ben, it wasn't for me either. Just this knowing, this quiet decision, one I'd never spoken of to my husband of 11 years, had shifted something glacially or galactically. Suddenly every colleague I'd never considered as a potential conquest or needed to attract or assume could be an object of affection seemed to have a glow. We flirted once across a conference table? Maybe we should hook up. You looked me over on the elevator? Want my number? One time, in the coffee shop on the corner his hand touched my hand as we both went for the napkins at the same time and, excuse me, would you like to fuck?

Today's plan is a little more concrete than I'd admit to myself or to anyone because these sorts of things are really better off when they're spontaneous and happenstance — the sort of silly story you tell your grandchildren when you laugh over morning mimosas at a family reunion on the Greek coast — after you've lived some sort of adventuring long life. It's less romantic to think that you've made a schedule to fuck a colleague in a corner office that's currently vacant. Less exciting when you think of fluorescent lighting or the need to shave your legs. I lean forward, seated on the toilet, telling myself not to think too hard about the things I'm thinking too hard about, and try to smell my vagina just in case. This is crazy. I am crazy. Oh well.

Ben's fucking music ends abruptly — leaving “Anna Molly” mid sentence, “I picture your face....At the back of my eyes.....A fire in the attic....” Now the goddamn song is stuck in my head. Now the goddamn song feels prophetic. Now I'm contemplating all of the micro choices that lead me to this one. Do I even want to fuck my colleague Mitch? I close my eyes and try to picture his face but all I see is the long stream of sexy text messages he and I have sent over the last three weeks. Squinting, pinching my own gut and rubbing my thumb in circles across my navel, I can imagine his midsection and maybe he's fatter than I want to think. Grayer, too. We are all pushing onward and older than we want to reckon with. “We should quit this, you know,” he texted me yesterday. “Or,” I answer, “we just finally fuck it out and get it over with. At least then we'll know.” “Yeah.” And then silence.

An hour later, “but a month from now I'll remember how you taste and then what?” My fingers brush the inside of my own thighs, feeling desire again, as I did when those words broke on my screen. I wonder what the magic will be like as it shatters. Everyone is better filtered and across a screen — with properly formed sentences and autocorrect. I don't think I like Mitch's shoes. I don't think I like the way he wears cargo shorts when he goes fishing with his kids. I stopped following him on social media a year ago when he launched a podcast and, after listening to one episode, I realized that he was simultaneously the most convinced of his own amusement and the most boring man on earth.

But today I push that away because, damnit, if Ben's a cheater, I get to be too. Rubbing the remnants of chunky yellowed vanilla lotion into my kneecaps and pulling on a pair of jeans, shredded (but tastefully — ha!) from thigh to calf, I tie a knot in my tank top right at my midriff

and survey myself, head to toe, in the full length mirror that is no longer steamed over, just dripping into the shag rug below. I am no longer steaming — just dripping with desire and wondering if it'll be worth it, wonderful, wandering — watching his hands explore the body I've kept to myself as long as I can remember. Could touch be anything near as good as the anticipation of it? Deliverance is never as desirable as desire itself.

Everything is exactly as I imagined it. I wave at the receptionist and walk down the hallway like I own the place, which, very much, I do not, though 7 years of late nights and little for raises should give me some sort of stake. A lot is at stake, but simultaneously, nothing really is. What difference does it make if I walk in these doors one person and walk out a different person entirely? I'm at the point in my reality where I'm unsure any of it matters at any depth or with any gravity, anyways. Mitch told me he'd be in the corner office "doing some shit" from 10am until "whenever we fucking wanna be done," so I've got a wide timeline to play with and a deep desire to play. It isn't even his office, but I've known him long enough to know he'll inhabit the space as if it is. As an old radio guy, Mitch has that bravado that extends further beyond a microphone than it really should. Big ego, big opinions, shock jock for fifteen years on a rock station. Who is this guy? Why the fuck am I playing this game?

I duck into the ladies room halfway down the hall for one more glance at my teeth, one more check of my conscience. For eleven years, maybe twelve, I've imagined some semblance of this moment - where I finally stop dreaming about what would happen if I was exactly as unfaithful as I've always let my mind or my fingers be. But now - in the heat of the moment, at twenty minutes after eleven AM it feels impossible that I'm about to close an office door and do the thing that I haven't even wanted to do with Ben for at least two years, or something close to the thing. I sit on the edge of a closed toilet on the third floor and foreshadow Mitch's hands in my hair, the arc of my back as I lean against the desk, how wide I spread my legs, the perception of eager - the question of am I a whore?

For some unknown reason my mind flashes to my grandmother, not exactly the sexiest place for your mind to travel but, I imagine here that she is urging me onward. "You only get one life," she says, eyes all twinkle and desire shining behind them. One time she told me about a clandestine plan her friends and herself had hatched as young married women in Detroit in the 1950s. Across the river, in Windsor Canada, there were legal all-male, fully nude reviews. It was her decision that her married girlfriends and herself would experience this secret thrill once in their lives, between polka parties and spit-up rags, catholic schools and supporting their blue collar men. Pretending to have a bunco night, they'd pooled limited resources and rented a limo to take them to the strip club and back at the end of a selfish and naughty night - sworn to secrecy. One friend caved in panic and told her husband of the plan, which was then dismantled in shame and sadness. A deep seated desire left unmet. In her 80's now, she carried that with a

longing. “Maybe someday,” she’d say. But someday wasn’t coming for Nana. I still stood a chance.

In the mirror again, I study the lines in my forehead, relax my brow. I blink slowly and look at the lines I’d drawn with dark brown in the steamy mirror a few hours earlier, look at the tan lines on my ring finger. Slip the ring off, into my pocket and then realize it stands out, like a sore, on my thigh. I put it in my purse, push up my breasts and straighten my bra, and walk back into the hallway like a woman both fully put together and completely unhinged.

He barely looks up from the desk in the office he’s assumed as if it was his own, for the day, for this encounter, when I come in. The slight upturn of his lip and the way his left hand deftly reaches for the whiskey glass set next to his keyboard, swirling slightly, then lifted, to his perfect mouth as he finally makes eye contact and acknowledges me with a soft, “You came,” tickles my neck. I laugh because this is actually ridiculous and then I apologize, swiftly. “I’m sorry, ha! I’m just. You know. This is. It’s so Mad Men right now that it’s almost funny.” He grins and leans back in the chair, tapping his fingers on the mahogany desk. “I’m more of a Hunter S. Thompson guy. When I got into communications, in college, I was completely driven by the idea of rogue journalism and storytelling. I thought with enough booze and time I’d write a bestseller or some sort of investigative breakthrough. Candor! A few furrowed brows from the higher ups when I used “fuck” but meant it.” He laughs, reminiscing. “Who knew the bulk of my career would be convincing some mom and pop businesses to put more dollars into print advertising while our sales are down and our staff talent diminishes.”

He takes a sip. There’s a tiny floating piece of ice in the top of the glass but it’s mostly melted now. I wonder how early he got to the office. I wonder if his knees are shaking under the desk or if the alcohol is a crutch for the butterflies wisping his navel like mine. I nod towards his whiskey. “So do you have another glass?”

There’s a full bar cart to his right, under a framed photo of the newspaper’s founding journalism team - 1940’s bright eyes in black and white clarity with stacks of papers under each man’s arms. I wander to the cart, my back to him, and, before I bend down, I consider the angles he’s about to enjoy. My jeans are cut just tight enough to hug the curves I’m lucky enough to maintain into my middle-age and Mitch has told me, before, that he’s a fan. So with intention, like I’m playing a version of someone else in a version of my alternate life in some version of a movie, I bend slowly over and take a highball glass from the lowest shelf. I am startled, but not surprised, that his hands are on my hips as I straighten back up. Leaning back, against his chest, I turn my face towards his graying chin and smile. “In a hurry?”

“No, no. I’m being an ass. I’m being forward. I just - well you know. This is something we’ve walked around the edges of for so long and when you bent over I just. Well. I thought....” Mitch’s voice trails off and I follow his breath down to the bottle I uncork and pour, neat, into the glass. Swirling twice I tip it towards my mouth and swallow. “That’s better,” I turn around.

We are face to face and I am caught in the familiarity of his gaze. Staring into his hazel eyes is like staring into my own. I feel mirrored and seen and raw and open and scared and silly all at once. “We should....”

He drops his hands from my waist and then, on second thought, twists his forefinger into the belt loop at the front of my right hip and pulls me with him as he walks back towards the desk. “In my fantasy of this moment you,” he gently lifts me onto the desktop, “are sitting right here.”

Here’s the thing about Mitch. He is so damn likeable. Where Ben is known for brevity and conservatism - Mitch is levity and liberal in his laughter and his time. When I was hired at the paper, seven years ago this summer, I was new to journalism. I’d taught high school English for five years after finishing graduate school - convinced that if I couldn’t BE the next great writer, I’d train the up and coming brilliance. As school shootings became more common and ALICE drills were part of our education, I started wondering if my voice and passion for truth telling couldn’t take a journalistic slant. During a gap year after quitting my teaching position, I traveled to Sri Lanka and Spain - spending three months each place and reporting on the splendors and horrors for an American audience. Travel writing was different from truth telling but painting vivid images with words became life-giving.

It was an April morning in Anuradhapura, while I was sitting on the outdoor front patio of a westernized hotel, sipping my morning tea and mango juice and eating what was likely leftover fish curry from the night before, I received a phone call from Ben, back home in South Dakota. “My father’s cancer is back.” Though he didn’t say it, the brief phone call was full of subliminal messages. I need you. Come back. You’re foolish to be gone. We’re married. We’re supposed to support one another. We’re supposed to be there when things are hard. For better or for worse. In sickness and in health. I called a car to Negombo and stayed the night with Juliette, a reporter from England, before getting on a plane to leave my freelance dreams, civil war reporting, and tea plantations behind and to settle into hospice care alongside Ben’s stability and long-suffering stature. Being the perfect wife meant wandering into the local newspaper’s office on a Tuesday and working my first reporting job that Wednesday.

The hours were long then but thrilling enough and I fancied myself climbing the ranks and telling the stories. Now, years later, I suppose I have the seven-year-itch. Surely there are tales to be told outside of the 47 miles I cover on my lifestyle beat. Surely there is truth to be told outside this city, or deeper into its underbelly. My mind shifts back to Ben. I am bored at work.

Am I bored with him? Am I just acting out because I don't have the fortitude to finish much of anything. I take inventory of my completions and find myself lacking. My eyes must have glassed over as I dig into my memories. Mitch breaks my silence, "hey you're far away."

He's so damn likeable. His black belt and fashionably cut jeans hug a waist that is, actually, trimmer than I remember. I want to ask him if he's been working out but I don't want him to know that I've studied him from a distance for far longer than we've flirted. I don't want him to realize my gaze lingers below his belt buckle but I'm certain he does. There's an art to being vulnerable and honest, sure, but there's a genius to playing it cool. I'm clearly neither artistic nor gifted - just stumbling on my tongue and rocking back off my toes onto my heels. Do I have what it takes to go on with this.

"Sorry. I think. I think I'm overthinking," I blush as I sweep a stray hair off my forehead. Am I sweating? That's gross. Am I gross? Fuck.

Mitch takes a few steps back and rolls his desk chair underneath him, sitting down and looking up at me, still perched on his desk. "Look, maybe we're just supposed to be friends," he smiles a disarming and youthful smile that breaks the awkward tension and heaviness. "When I was a kid I played in a band called The Shallows. A group of us had met in college and started banging out late night practices in this kid Matt's barn. We were mostly transplants from around the state, well Charlie was from Nebraska, but Matt was local and his parents had this big barn on the end of their property that was only a few miles from the dorms. Charlie had a Ford Festiva so we'd pile all the equipment into the car and he'd make the first trip out, then he'd drive back to carry the band members and we'd all pile in there on top of each other to drive out there and play. We weren't very good but we weren't very bad, either." Mitch reaches for his glass and kicks his feet up on the desk next to me. He's wearing cowboy boots. I didn't expect that. "I'd even go so far as to say Charlie was actually talented. I was just the drummer but the band was so important to me that I would have done nearly anything to keep us playing. There were times when I felt so far away from the small town I'd grown up in and so far from my grandpa who had always steered me right that banging on the Slingerland drum kit I'd bought after getting a band scholarship was my therapy. Anyhow we got decent enough that we were playing bar shows every weekend and even traveling up to North Dakota and Wyoming and like, I get it, we were small potatoes in a big cornfield but we managed to make a few bucks playing and the band probably saved my life when I could have gone to some dark places. Charlie was a helluva guitarist and had a voice that coulda probably really gone somewhere but after graduation he had no ambition of staying in South Dakota and we were all farm kids with no street smarts or plans to leave so when he moved to Minneapolis, the band dissolved."

I don't know why Mitch is telling me this but I do know that I like watching his lips move and I remember that's how we ended up here - me watching him give presentations and him telling

anecdotal stories that sometimes had to do with the meeting and sometimes were just memories he'd share with a captive audience. And maybe not everyone loved being captive to Mitch's stories but he was just so damn likeable we listened, mostly enthralled.

“So I was working at a radio station in 2000 and I message on MySpace from Charlie that he was coming back to town for a contract position with this local wind energy company and wanted to get the band back together. He comes rolling into town in his same Ford Festiva - fucking little golf cart driving down I-90 - and crashed with me for a few weeks. And we practiced non-stop when we weren't working and it really felt good to be banging out those tunes again but Charlie had picked up a habit in Minneapolis and his voice wasn't what it had been and his energy was just different, you know. Like we had this expectation that the band would be what the band used to be and it was just hollow and sorta forced.

We booked a show in Lincoln Nebraska that was supposed to be this reunion show with a bunch of Charlie's highschool friends and fans and when we got down there and set up it just sucked. Like every bit of it was wildly different than what we'd wanted. The fans were drunk and didn't know our songs they just knew Charlie or knew that he'd bring shit down with him from the cities and we all got drunk and felt like shit and by the time we got in my truck to drive home the next morning we weren't a band anymore and we weren't even really friends anymore.”

Mitch's drink is gone and there's a faraway look in his eyes. He looks back up at me and grins. “I guess what I'm saying is that sometimes the lead up is better than the reality.”

He stands and stretches. Placing his hands on either side of me, he leans in until our noses almost touch. “Look kid, we gotta keep the magic by not fucking it up. I'll always wanna know what this could be like, but that is what makes it so worth prolonging.” He traces a finger down the side of my face. “Don't be sad. This isn't a rejection. This is me being a selfish prick and wanting to keep the crazy sexual tension as long as I can. I wanna keep getting off to the “what ifs” of this imagination for a bit longer.” He twists his wedding ring on his finger and drops a kiss on the top of my head before stretching and opening the door. “You first?” And just like that, so fucking likeably, we head back to work.