

## Sit and Watch

A lot of people would be upset to return home and find their wife in bed with another man. And if you had asked me to respond to this hypothetical situation – before today, before now, when the scenario actually confronts me – I might have said that I would have become upset. I might have walked right into my home, opened the bedroom door, told the guy to get out, and confronted my wife. I might have completely misplaced my temper, smashed the windshield of the guy’s car that sits in my driveway, burst into the house, yelling and threatening. Or I might have just walked into my house whistling, hanging up my coat in its usual spot, sauntering into the bedroom as if nothing was out of the ordinary: “Hi, Susan, how was your day?” I might have turned to the man lying naked in my bed and said, “Oh hi, I don’t believe we’ve met, I’m Wes Cummings.”

If I had been asked yesterday about my reaction, I would not have told you that I would just sit and watch. Not me. An hour ago, when I first discovered the affair, I did consciously consider each of the aforementioned courses of action – and they still linger as possibilities. Each of these possible actions has its theoretical selling points, and each speaks to some component of the man whom I would like to think I am. But now what I want to do more than anything else is just sit and watch, unobserved and entertained. And if someone asks me in the future what I would do were I to come home early and find my wife in bed with another man, I would now unequivocally be able to give the correct answer.

So I sit and watch through the bedroom window. My position offers both a good view, and, thanks to the bushes surrounding me, camouflage. They are both sleeping now, his arm thrown sloppily across her midsection. My knees ache from crouching. I climb down from my bushy

hiding spot and walk around to the back of the house. The moon is full and bright and I can easily find my way. I quietly open the patio door, step in the sunroom, and let my eyes adjust to the fuller darkness of the indoors. Something smells different, smoky. I walk through the sunroom then into the kitchen. There are two wine glasses sitting in the sink, one with lipstick smudges. In the dark I can't see what color lipstick but I want to know.

I walk down the hallway to my study, take a flashlight from my desk, and walk back to the kitchen. Red lipstick, bright red. I turn and shine the light on two sets of shelves in the living room. My family's smiling faces look back at me from pictures, in different locations, poses, and stages of life.

The stairs bring me to the second floor. I open Ashley's door slowly as quietly as I can. Moonlight streams through her window. The iridescent plastic stars, moons, and suns that she loves shine down from the ceiling. I open the door wider and walk inside, realizing how few times I have been in my daughter's room. I tilt my head back and look at the celestial ceiling, letting myself get dizzy. Steadying myself, I walk over to Ashley's bed until I'm looking right down on her. A lock of her fine, golden hair falls across her forehead. Her delicate features expand and contract in the midst of some apparent dream.

I walk past the twins' room without entering – Susan had told me the boys are sleeping at their friend's house tonight – and arrive at what I had previously considered my bedroom. Leaning my head against the door, I can hear Susan's distinctive soft snoring. I wonder about the identity of her companion. I slowly slide down until I'm sitting on the floor, my ear still against the door. The door is smooth against my face and I let my hands fall into the carpet. The house is completely silent except for the steady breathing I hear through the door.

I am surprised about today's development. I have often said in conversations (which strikes me now as bragging) that no one surprises me. People, I have always thought, are simple. Once you understand a person's motivation – his or her real, driving emotions – then every action is a natural outcropping of such emotions. These motivations are uniformly common, basic, and predictable. This theory of basic motivation and human predictability has been proven to me so consistently that I have embraced it as a core tenet of my personal philosophy and basis for my professional diagnoses. I hear the ruffling of sheets and blankets from inside the bedroom. A cough and mumble, one of the lovers just rolling over. The snoring continues, louder at first then falling into its same slow pattern. But now my wife and I – the two people that I should know the best – have each done something that I would have thought completely out of character.

I stand up, give a brief massage to my aching knees and smooth my wrinkled suit. I walk slowly down the hall, down the stairs, out the patio door and back into the night. Something small and shiny gleams in the moonlight. I walk over the bricks past the pool to the hot tub. My flashlight shows an ashtray with half a dozen cigarette butts sitting on the ledge of the tub. I pick through the butts, noting that about half appear to have red lipstick on them. I smile, remembering Susan's complaints about smoking.

It occurs to me that my car sitting in the driveway might raise suspicion. I drive it down a couple blocks, turn into a dead-end street, and park out of view. Returning to my house, I climb up on the bushy platform outside my bedroom window and retake my position with the good view. Around 5 a.m., the guy gets up, stretches and puts his clothes back on. He walks around to the side of the bed, pats my wife on the behind and leans down to whisper something in her ear. She turns slightly to face him before he leaves. I hear the front door close and his car pull out of the driveway. Susan sleeps for another hour and a half, rolls over and stares at the ceiling for a few minutes before getting up. She does not look nervous. Of course she does not need to be. For

the twelve years since I joined the firm, I have traveled Monday through Thursday to different clients throughout the country and world. Never have I come home early to surprise Susan. Any itinerary changes were always well-communicated and planned. Thanks to various work emergencies, I had forgotten – until yesterday – that my annual review is today. I decided that I would surprise Susan with an early arrival rather than alert her to my change of routine. The front door opens, and I can hear Susan and Ashley’s voices before Susan’s car pulls out of the driveway.

The hot tub ashtray has been moved, as have the wine glasses. I go up to my bedroom and lie on the bed. Looking toward the window across the room – my window – I can see only the curtains, reflection on the glass, and remnants of the reddish-pink glow of sunrise. Only with my eyes less than a foot from the window can I really see through to the bushes and ledge outside. At night I am convinced my observation post is virtually invisible. I take a shower, put on fresh clothes, and walk down the street to my car.

Soon after I get into my office, my assistant Jessica taps on the door and then peeks around the corner.

“Hey there,” she says. “Weird to see you here on a Thursday. Nice to get home for a change?”

“Really nice,” I tell her, smiling. “What’s on tap today?”

Jessica walks in and hands me a paper bag that I know contains a sesame bagel and fresh-squeezed orange juice. She sits down in the leather chair adjacent to my desk.

“Sunil at 9, Kim at 10:30,” she says, referring to the managers of the two projects I am leading. “Then your review – you’re meeting Will O’Carroll at 12:30 downtown at the club – do you want me to arrange a car?”

I pause and look out my window at the park across the street. “No need. I’ll walk.”

“OK,” she says, skeptically. “Anything else for now?”

“Nope, that’s it. Thanks.”

I take my computer out of my bag but look out of the window instead of at my screen. It may be cold outside, but the sun is shining brightly. A few people stroll through the paths in the park, mostly young mothers – or maybe nannies – pushing strollers. I have not slept in over a day but I am not tired at all.

Sunil, then Kim, come into my office. They show me their work, looking for feedback, sign-off, maybe praise. I try to pay attention. I ask them questions and point out concerns, but I don’t think that anyone cares. I am another step in the process for them, necessary approval. When the projects are over, I will give them a performance review based on their work. Their work, not mine.

After Kim leaves, I write the five emails to clients I had promised. I have one stop to make before my review. I grab my jacket and walk past Jessica, out of the office and outside. I start walking quickly, through the park, down the main street and past the boutiques. I enter the outdoors superstore and purchase a duffel bag, collapsible chair, and binoculars – everything camouflage.

The heavy wooden doors of the St. Jacques Club open as I approach. This club – the oldest social club in the city – has always served as our office’s location for partner reviews, which the firm prefers to conduct off-site. The greeter takes my overcoat and bag of hunting supplies. I straighten my club-mandated jacket and tie and walk up the grand staircase to the second floor.

Will O'Carroll waits for me in a tweed suit, crimson bow tie, and high-backed red leather chair. His fingers repeatedly and habitually run through his combed-back gray hair. On his lap are a stack of emails that his assistant must have printed out for him.

“Wes, hello, nice of you to join me today,” he starts, laughing cordially.

“Will, so sorry I'm late.”

“Don't be silly. Gave me a chance to catch up on all of these damned emails,” he says, placing the printouts back into his briefcase. “Now let's have some lunch.”

Will guides me into another room that has a long, dark wooden table and two place settings. A gold-framed portrait of an anonymous old man hangs over a marble fireplace. Three tall windows comprise the wall across from me, offering a plain view of the hotel across the way. As Will makes light talk – the early winter, my current clients, our places of birth, the state of our families – two waiters bring several courses of lunch. I finish my food quickly and look up.

Will meets my gaze with a warm smile. “Well, we should get started,” he says, gesturing for the waiters to clear the table. He pulls out a large leather binder. Over the last few months Will has talked to my colleagues, clients and teams to develop what the firm calls a comprehensive picture of my performance. The firm, I have been told more than once, invests a great deal into thorough assessment. And now, this professorial old man is about to summarize my worth for me.

“Wes,” he begins, looking directly into my eyes, “Every once in a while, I am fortunate to be able to have conversations like this.” He pauses and smiles. “You have had a truly outstanding year.”

“Thanks, Will,” I offer. Will continues to describe my performance, breaking it down into subsets of skills and situations. He must have conducted reviews like this hundreds of times; his order and cadence well-practiced. I try to stay here, pay attention and listen to what

he is saying, but I cannot stop my mind from wandering. I look out the window, see the hotel across the street. For the last twelve years hotels like that have been my home. He is showing me a chart that somehow explains my relative performance. I nod. I am suddenly very tired. I look down at the table, at Will, at the hotel, and the old man over the mantle. Will continues, describing actions and contributions of mine of which he does not – could not – have the same level of understanding that I have. These things happened to me, comprise my life. I think about Susan and her friend and my perch in the bushes.

I look right at Will, who continues his even speech. He strikes me as a thoughtful man. Many of my colleagues speak reverentially of Will. He speaks consistently of values, integrity, and service. He does not check his own email. I could, I think, solicit his honest opinion.

“Will,” I start, but the words are not coming easily. He looks at me expectantly. “Will, I appreciate those kind words and the work that you have obviously put into this. I did have a question, though.” He nods willingly. I do not feel nervous, but I do not know exactly how to say what I want. “Will, do you ever feel guilty? In terms of what you do or don’t do?”

Will shifts in his chair and squints at me like he’s trying to get a better look. “Wes, you know the firm is very selective about the projects we pursue – if you are doing something that makes you feel uncomfortable...”

“No, sorry, I didn’t explain myself,” I interrupt him. “It’s not the content of our projects – it really doesn’t matter to me whether my client is a tobacco company or we’re involved in firing people or anything like that.” I see I have him confused now. “I’m talking about what I do, my contribution...and what I don’t do but what I could do. What I mean is – I know I’ve worked hard at the firm since I started; I’ve tried to do a good job. But that’s just it, I’ve been thinking that doing a good job only means getting people to think that I’ve done a good job. Real

contributions, actual work, the tough decision, the dissenting view, the key piece of information – those have barely even seemed relevant. My teams do all the real work.”

Will chuckles even though I was not joking. His expression softens and the proud grandfather returns. “Wes, I think I know exactly what you’re talking about – and you wouldn’t be the first to feel that way.” He takes off his glasses and cleans them with his monogrammed handkerchief. “Obviously as you progress, you’ll have less hands-on work. I know many people who transition to upper management miss doing the actual work. But I feel that you’re talking about something more, something else...”

“Yes, of course,” I say, more curtly than I intended. “I’m just wondering about the work... I just wonder about the contribution I’m actually making. I mean, I know my teams are working hard and things are generally going well...”

“But you can watch,” Will interjects.

“Pardon?”

“You can watch your teams, your clients, everything,” Will continues. “Some of my greatest joy in this job has stemmed from letting go, watching a young manager step up and stretch to the next role. I find that if you take a step back and give people space, they can surprise you. And that can be tremendously rewarding in its own right.”

He flashes me an avuncular smile; I smile back. There are a lot of things I can say but none is the clear winner.

“Will,” I tell him. “I want to sincerely thank you for this conversation.”

He gets up and shakes my hand. “Wes, the pleasure has been all mine.”

The cold wind wakes me up as I step outside. Will’s words continue to spin in my mind, and I am overwhelmed by a desire to go home and see my wife.



Susan's car is gone when I get home. James and Drew come to greet me. They are fighting but want me to play soccer with them.

"Ten minutes," I tell them. Inside the house I hang up my coat, loosen my tie and begin to flip through the mail.

"Hello Mr. Cummings, welcome back," says our nanny Anna from the kitchen.

"Hi Anna." Anna appears to be straightening up a counter that looks immaculate.

"Where's Ashley?"

"She is taking a nap. It's probably time for her to get up though," Anna says, turning to head out of the kitchen.

"No, that's OK, Anna," I stop her, "I'll go get her up." I put my bags in my study and walk up the stairs. Ashley is already up, at her desk, concentrating on her task.

"Hey, Ash," I say as I knock on her door, "What are you doing, drawing?"

"Hi Daddy!" she says, flashing me a quick glance before returning to her drawing. I give her a hug and examine her work. She agrees to let me have one of a farmhouse, a self-portrait, and one greenish-blue abstract piece. I try to commission a family portrait, but she apparently has a backlog of items she needs to draw.

The boys are already outside when I go out the back door. We kick the ball around, back and forth. It's still cold and getting dark, but it feels good to be outside and running around. I hear Susan's car come in the driveway and then I see her a minute later in the kitchen talking to Anna, debriefing the day. Susan feels guilty about hiring a nanny – just for the afternoons, before she gets home, she would quickly add if I brought it up. She's been back to work part time for a year, but she does not want to miss anything. The ball hits off my leg and I hear James yelling at me for not paying attention. Drew picks up the ball and is running with it; the game has devolved into some sort of rugby. I run over, scoop up Drew in one arm and head the opposite direction.

James tries to tackle me, but I give him a gentle stiff arm as I high-step into my pretend end-zone past both of the giggling boys.

I wait in the living room for Susan to finish talking to Anna. On the wall across from my chair, my favorite picture of Susan and me looks back at me. We are in college, smiling and hugging, young and happy. I'm wearing a ratty T-shirt and jeans. Susan is wearing her one good jacket that she always wore. Photograph Susan smiles at me and I have known her for such a long time. I close my eyes with college Susan vividly in my mind. I try to picture current Susan but can't quite get it right. I hear real Susan say goodbye to Anna. Maybe I should do something and stop just waiting, but I don't want to lose the electric anticipation of seeing my own wife; unfamiliar, thrilling.

"Hey, you're home early today," she calls to me.

"Yeah, I had my review," I tell her. I get up to walk into the kitchen. "And I wanted to see you guys."

"Really?" she said, "I didn't realize that was today...How'd it go?" She doesn't look any different or sound any different, of course. But my weakness is different. I pause for too long and she turns toward me.

"Good," I offer, "Very positive."

"You don't sound convinced."

"No, the review definitely went well," I answer, "it's just that today at work was strange."

"Good strange or bad strange?" she asks, going back to her search for something in the cabinet.

"Good...I think," I tell her. "How was your week?"

“Oh, busy, fine. Kids fine. Work fine. I’ll tell you more at dinner.” Her search has ended; she has found the pepper and heads out the door.

My heart has returned to its normal rhythm sometime during the conversation. I feel very tired but need to go out to my car. I open the trunk, unwrap the binoculars and chair and put them inside the camouflage duffel bag. It’s getting dark and the family is occupied. I take the bag and walk quickly to the side of the house. Back on my viewing platform, between the bushes and the house, the bag fits securely. Our gardener could find it, but he will not be back until spring.

Dinner steadily drains the lingering electricity from me. It is the same, completely normal. Susan talks about her work and the weekend plan. The boys perform their usual antics; James launches into some invented story that is strangely entertaining. I look at Susan as much as I can without being obvious. She is the same as last week, a stark juxtaposition with last night’s show. She looks tired. Small bags underline her eyes, her hair frazzled. I notice her nails are not done and she has no makeup on, no lipstick. Unplugged.

The office is quiet when I get in early the next morning. I should do some work, but instead keep looking out the window, along the park paths, at the leaves falling from the trees, at the winter coming in.

Back at home my weekend continues to ground me, obscuring my vision of last Wednesday night. Saturday afternoon and Sunday night provide time when Susan and I are able to talk. I could bring up what I saw, lay it out on the table. I could just tell her, “Susan, I saw what happened on Wednesday. I know I should have brought this up right away, but I didn’t know how.” I would be very curious about her reaction and explanation. It is so tempting that I almost mention it, but I know that talking about it would end it – at least in our house and in my view.

So I keep our secret. I try to hold it in my thoughts, even as life returns to its normal fogginess.

With my expected departure, Monday brings the possibility of an encore performance. I pack my suitcase and leave the house at my normal hour. Instead of driving to the airport, I drive toward the city and check into a roadside motel. I've driven by this motel often and always wondered who would choose to stay here. But it is close and easy. I drop off my suitcase at the motel and drive into work. Jessica brings me my breakfast. Sunil calls, Kim calls. I talk to a few clients. I stare out the window. I leave right at 5:00 and drive back to my hotel.

My hotel room does not smell good, I realize during my first step inside. A previous occupant has apparently ignored the non-smoking rule and also may have gotten sick somewhere. I set up my suitcase on the stand, change into some jeans and halfheartedly return some calls. As soon as it's dark, I drive home. Electricity surges through my body as I sneak through my neighbor's yard. My camouflage bag is right where I left it, and I get out the folding chair – much better than crouching. I see nothing but an empty room. I wait. I catch a glimpse of Susan and the boys passing by the doorway. Susan eventually comes into the bedroom, turns off the light, and unceremoniously goes to bed alone. Empty.

My week continues to degenerate. Each morning I wake up in a crappy hotel room, each day I watch the clock, and each night I am disappointed by the normal functioning of my household. I come home Thursday night like normal but more exhausted. My suit is rumpled – the motel room lacked an iron – and the room's unsavory smell has seeped into my clothes, my hair, my skin.

“Tough week?” Susan asks.

“Disappointing,” I answer, and that is all the discussion we have about it.

The weekend drags on like the last one. It is possible that Susan's affair was a one-time event, and my fortune will be lost forever. But I don't think so. There was something too familiar about their interaction, from the pat goodbye to the guy letting himself out. There is hope.

Hope takes a back seat to work on Monday and Tuesday. I need to attend to my projects in Houston and Chicago, and things have not gone particularly well during my week at home. I try to help Kim on Monday in Houston. Tuesday afternoon I fly to Chicago and try to help Sunil. I am struggling to pay attention, even more than normal. I wonder what's going on at home while I'm away. It could be anything, or nothing. I really do not know; I wonder if I could be surprised again.

Tuesday night I can't sleep. I am in the wrong place. Wednesday I'll go home, home to the smelly hotel, home to my camouflage bag and bushy perch. Susan leaves a message about a conference she has on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, the kids will stay with her parents. She apologizes for the late notice. These conferences could mean anything.

The next morning I am on fire. Despite the sleeping difficulty, I unleash my energy on all of the problems that Sunil and the team are facing. In the afternoon Sunil drives me to the airport. He talks about the project, about the clients. I do not even pretend to listen to him. I stare out the window. It is a spectacularly gray day; fog and mist cover everything. We leave the gray highway and get to the gray airport, my concrete terminal rising from the asphalt plain. I endure the turbulent plane ride by thinking about Susan and staring out of the window. As we land, I can see the snow pouring sideways in the day's waning sunlight.

I get to my car as quickly as possible. Snowy road stretches out in front of me. I feel the car slide underneath me and realize I do not have much control. A guy on the radio talks about the storm;

unusually early in the year, officially a blizzard now, stay inside if you can. I swerve by the few other cars on the road, undoubtedly going too fast. So much snow covers the road, the shoulders, the ground – it's hard to imagine a crash would be anything but soft.

I park my car several blocks from my house. Snow comes up to my knees and soaks my feet. I see my house, smoke coming from the chimney, another car in the driveway. Electric. The bedroom is dark and empty. I grab the binoculars and trudge around back. Through the kitchen window I can see two pairs of legs in the living room, on the couch, close together. I wait, forced to be patient. My feet are numb, legs sting, ears burn. I sit down in the snow - I am soaked and being any colder seems impossible. I watch them, legs intertwined. They get up and head to the bedroom – I quickly run around the house, back to my perch. The pain in my ears is overwhelming. I take off my tie and wrap it around my head so that it covers my ears. I am well past the point of embarrassment.

I get the full show, not like two weeks ago when I happened into the middle. The cold metal of the binoculars burns circles around my eyes. I watch, not blinking any more than I absolutely have to. It is the most incredible thing I have ever seen. And then it's over. The guy gets up, stumbles to turn off the light, and they are asleep. I finally can breathe. I watch them sleep, trying to sear the image into my mind so that I do not forget it.

I drop down off the perch into the snow below. I make my way around back, shuffle into the living room, and move close to the heating vent. I rub my blue hands together through the stream of hot air. I take off my wet socks, shoes, and jacket. The room is a mess. Plates, silverware, bottles, clothes. His pants hang carelessly over the side of the couch, the wallet has dropped to the floor. I could take the wallet. I could drive down to the Four Seasons and use his credit card. I could order room service, massages, anything. I could replace the wallet when I return home. I wonder how they would handle that, if Susan would ever mention anything.

My hands are still blue and now shaking. My whole body is shivering actually. I grab the blanket from the couch and wrap it around myself. I see the picture of Susan and me, my favorite picture. There we are – two college kids – smiling back at me. I look closer. We are in the laundry room of our dorm.

We met in that laundry room. Right now I can't remember the last time I did laundry; I'm not even sure I would know how. I do not do my own laundry, mow my own lawn, make my own food, or raise my own children. I go to work everyday, but I don't do my own work. Someone else brings me my breakfast, organizes my calendar, and even makes love to my wife.

But I can sit and watch, and – if I'm lucky – still be surprised.