

Ten Strange Short and Very Short Stories

Crash Witness

Jacking

Deep Water

Pock Marked

TV

Soap Opera Stars

Disintegration

Pot Holes

Dawn Raid

Divorce

September 2019

CRASH WITNESS

I mean, the whole point of a shock is that it's unexpected; that's one of the defining features. Like so many days, it was just a regular day, until it wasn't. I did all the usual things and there was no sense of foreboding, no sort of intuition or instincts.

I'd been having a sort of affair – more of an emotional affair though at the time we were moving towards something closer. She worked in the same building I did. It had taken four slow months of gradually engaging with her, paying attention but not too much attention, showing interest but not too much interest, engaging but not overly so. This week, we'd figured on having lunch together. I knew this kind of cool spot down by a disused old out-of-town mall. There were two small businesses still open, out of a 26 store strip mall. If you park down at the lower end of the car park nothing's ever going to touch you, and it's a decent sweeping view of the valley. There's a fairly large 6 lane freeway running the centre of the valley and it sort of sweeps close to the lower end of the car park. There's a small muddy deep river running sort of alongside the freeway. At night it's good for taking those long exposure style photographs if you like that kind of thing. Also at night, it's good for that kind of edgy obscene public behaviour; the sort of thing which obsesses the tabloid newspapers. I'm not really interested in that sort of thing but I've had friends who were really into it. The point is, it's sort of isolated.

So me and this girl Wendy are sort of filled with anticipation because I've played things just right for a change, and I know she's interested and I'm sort of interested but not really, which is the best way to be. She knew I was married, but we didn't ever discuss that. Much of the time I just listened to her and that worked a charm. She's kind of interested in food, so she'd said she'd make sandwiches, which I don't really like, but there's a lot of things I don't like that I'll go along with to please or impress a girl. We pulled up and I sort of angled the car so that the view is of the valley, and also the freeway, with our backs to the deserted mall. The tops of the bigger trucks are all that's visible, the road half hidden by some sheets of corrugated metal.

We had the radio on and she was singing along with some dumb country and western song. She had a nice voice, and I told her that, and she smiled and blushed a little. She took out a couple of sandwiches, and she started to tell me how she knows I don't really like sandwiches – she never seen me eating sandwiches so guessed that I don't like them. She says, that's why I also made this, and gets out some carrots and some hummus, some other vegetables – she made it all at home for me this morning, before work, and I'm impressed. The news comes on the radio, and I flick it off, there's just no need to know anything right now, other than what's going on right here. We eat lunch, she eats very quietly which I like, and we sort of chat a little about her background, about how you make hummus, about how things were with her family, who were a typically dramatic and dysfunctional set of people.

I grabbed a bottle of water off the back seat and drank a little. I offered the bottle to her and she took it and looked me dead in the eyes while she drank, then wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and her lips were that natural full sort of pinky red colour and I remember thinking that shade of red looks great, and she quickly pulls out a lip balm and without really hesitating she runs the lip balm over these red lips and it leaves them sort of shiny and sort of fuller and the radio is still off so it's quiet save the sound of the cars and traffic on the freeway and I make a comment about all the people heading to god knows where and who are they all anyway? And she sort of smiles and says it's an interesting thing to say and even though I don't think it's particularly interesting I sort of nod. My hand is right next to her thigh and then every so often there's some kind of contact between the back of my hand and her thigh and she's sort of leaning towards me a little and running her hands through her hair and I'm thinking this lunchtime is a pretty good lunchtime.

I sort of push my entire arm against her body and she sort of moves towards this pressure and we hold still for a few seconds and her breathing picks up a little and I'm about to close my eyes when this screeching sound, a high keening metal-on-metal sound, starts up and then gets louder and louder and we have a quick look around but there's no obvious source of the sound and this all happens very quickly.

In the next few seconds the corrugated metal barrier rips like wet tissue paper as a huge 24 wheel truck bursts through and slams into a sort of cross between a ditch and a small hill and the back half sort of jackknives awkwardly across the road and then everything stops for a second and some of the debris sort of settles for a moment. I look towards her and her eyes are staring out the window. I say are you ok and she makes this sort of choking noise like she can't say anything. I follow her eyeline and you can make out the distant shape of an even bigger truck. The truck is moving quite fast and it's clear that it's headed in one direction. I sit there with this girl and we're both fixated on what's about to happen and there's a strange sense of helplessness as we watch in what appears to be slow motion two separate events which are about to coincide with each other. Slowly but surely this huge tanker rushes towards the jackknifed truck and you can see the panic in the driver's eyes through the glass as the heavy truck slams into the trailer and then the side of the driver's cab and there's a couple of small fires and the air is filled with all sorts of car and engine and body parts.

For eight to ten minutes we sit in the car and watch as the dust settles and then the emergency services turn up and the tv crews. From memory we didn't actually talk, being too stunned to process what happened. I remember driving her back to the office and I remember we never mentioned anything about it and the affair died at the same time. A few months later we had to work together and it was like we were both somehow numbed or maybe over-stimulated – either way we could barely maintain eye contact and I breathed a sigh of relief when the project was cancelled.

JACKING

Honestly it all started when I was 12. This is from memory and it was a long time ago, but I'm absolutely certain this is what happened. As you hit puberty you and your friends probably discuss some of this stuff; it's not a given, but usually there's one kid who's grown up surrounded by pornography; maybe they're just a bit deranged or have an older brother who's a bit deranged, or something. So everyone's talking about jacking off, and everyone's sort of furtively figuring things out. So the first time I ever masturbate, I got a copy of some dumb catalogue - you don't really need much in the way of material when you're 12 - and I sort of set about sort of rubbing away and you know... sort of getting a feel for it. Being 12 you don't really last very long. So I'm feeling things sort of build-up and honestly I've never felt anything like that before - you might remember from your own childhood - so it goes off and I'm sort of shocked at the waves of pleasure and sort of numb and tingling all at the same time and I step out of the bedroom to grab some tissue from the bathroom. I'm covered in a light sweat and I'm basically post-coital, heart racing, flushed and sort of elated and that's when I saw this cockroach which was just dumbly travelling on the carpet, beetling from one crack in the wall or a pipe to another. I've never liked cockroaches - it's irrational, because they really don't want to bother you, they're not going to hurt you, but still I always hated them. This one sort of accidentally seemed to head right towards me, they do that sometimes - I'm not sure they even have eyes - but to a 12 year old, well it's coming towards you anyway.

If you can picture a 12 year old bursting with energy and waves of new sensations and every nerve end on fire and then you picture that same 12 year old having to deal with a cockroach almost immediately, and the neurons are firing chaotically as you move from whatever the opposite of a crisis mode is to sudden panic; picture an excitable kid - already excited - coming across this cockroach, and grabbing the can of Insect-O-Repel and spraying it on the cockroach and then watching the cockroach sort of end up on its back and it's scrabbling away until it slows and sort of melts. But at least the house was empty and no-one else was around.

I mention that because three days later, just the second time I'd dug out an old beaten up catalogue, just the second time I'd experienced those sort of warm pleasurable waves sweep over me, the exact same thing happened and that time I fainted and my mum came back to find me maybe ninety minutes later, trousers round my ankles and this can of insect-o-repel in my hand and it seemed just before I passed out I'd sprayed this roach so there was a sort of mushy shiny cockroach right next to me and a strong chemical 'lemon' scent in the air when she turned up.

Honestly I think I can really trace all my insecurities sexually, the convictions for public obscenities and voyeurism, my failed relationships, the 5TB digital adult library I've curated, my addiction to sniffing Insect-O-Repel directly from the aerosol, all the content on the websites which I already talked about; all those primal and base needs for high octane thrills, and a majority of my fantasies back to those first two times, and I do wonder how differently it all could have worked out.

DEEP WATER

'My wife's a bad driver. She borrowed the car the other night. She came home and said 'Honey, I think there's water in the engine'. I said, 'where's the car?'. She said, 'In a lake'.

Since my life took a turn for the worse, I've become fascinated with documenting the process of what happens when a car falls into a river or a lake or any large body of water. Since I'm working a crummy job, I can switch off for a while and draw diagrams, construct complicated calculations, make estimates. Really try to think it through, which is something everyone from teachers to my long suffering mother have always criticised me for, not thinking. I've conducted experiments with toy cars. I've established which brand of toy car has the most realistic features, which car comes with windows that will wind down. Which car has an electric or electronic safety system that upon failure will render a car into a solid dead shape like an obelisk that only some kind of industrial machinery can open.

The point is, this is not work for the faint hearted. Let's take the example of an accident. Although an accident shares some similarities with an incident, an accident can be expected to have higher levels of panic and adrenaline. I'm speculating to a degree. In the accident, a car is cruising along quite nicely and maybe the radio is on, the driver is daydreaming about some girl he used to screw; the passenger is dreaming of the bagel with cream cheese and jelly which she's been promised. If either of them had any children, they left them at home. They're not necessarily husband and wife. Sometimes it's interesting to come up with a composited and complete backstory, sometimes it just adds to the complexity and doesn't help. The car is moving along with a 100% safety record – the steering has never failed, the wheels have never fallen off, the rear axle is performing as expected.

The point is, people need to be distracted or emotional; perhaps happy or sad. In one version of events, the guy remembers the time he came all over this one girl's face and hair and unknowingly he visibly tenses and at the same time a small animal – think along the lines of a skunk or a big rat or maybe even something really dumb, like a duck – appears in the road. This unique set of circumstances and coincidences are further exaggerated by a large pothole and a badly maintained barrier on a curved corner of the road.

The surprised daydreaming driver almost involuntarily swerves left, then right then left again to try to correct things and he's accidentally stamped on the accelerator and the car instead of cruising along the road leaves the road and launches into space – not like in the films, where the car shoots skywards and then rolls acrobatically. In the real version, the car more sort of stumbles towards the surface of the water. Post-accident interviews record that the driver perceives this as happening slowly but at the same time 'too quickly to process'. The word 'freefall' seems to accurately describe this. Gravity can be very blunt and un-forgiving. The weight of the car, the position of the passengers, the speed of the motion, the angle of incidence all impact on the type of freefall.

As the car hits the surface of the water several changes are worth noting. The pace of things changes. Instead of things moving loosely with speed, time seems to slow down. With the slowdown in the perception of the events occurring, the panic and fear have a second to really take hold before converging into a practical set of next steps which could be subtitled, 'How can I save my own life?'. The noise of the accident is also mentionable: between the time when the road-walking duck or the skunk emerged, there was that steady sort of hum of an engine, the air conditioning and maybe some music. If the music isn't turned on that loud, post-accident reports (where available) usually suggest that 'everything goes quiet'. Doctors speculate that some kind of panic response simply blocks the brain from processing aural information. Studies on the effect of adrenaline also promote this thinking. Or maybe it's just that every other sense is thrown into overdrive so sharply that the overwhelming of the neural system is enough to cause a lack of clarity. It's sort of irrelevant, but the interesting thing is that the first 'splash' or 'crash' of the moving object as it hits the water is something all post-accident reports comment on.

One to two seconds later and the water in the engine causes electrical failure. Some modern cars this can be up to 20 – 30 seconds. In almost all post-accident reports, no one ever mentions how the radio or the music was 'too loud'. No one has been able to suggest that Heavy Metal improves the ability of anyone to save their own life. No study has been carried out to find if classical music reduces the fear and panic even slightly. It's not the sort of scientific experiment you can get government funding for. No one in the car manufacturing world is really asking, what music may help a driver ('customer') survive an unexpected accident; what type of sound promotes the most effective response in the light of a minor driving error which, like the flapping of a butterfly's wings, irrevocably launches a sequence of events in which 96% of those people involved do not survive.

Based on the examples above, it makes some sense that classical music would be the less intrusive, calmer choice, but the energy of heavy metal may sustain some sort of similarly energetic response. In this example, imagine the radio was blaring AC/DC, perhaps the passenger was even singing along or maybe humming a memorable riff or solo. The radio cuts out. Instead of a wailing electric guitar with a pounding drum beat, there is suddenly total silence. There may be a slight noise as the electrics in the car get frazzled by the light speed watery short circuiting of the car's sound system. The silence signifies a change. At this point, many post-accident reports will comment on the loudness of say, their heartbeat. If they comment at all, it won't be that it was jarring to cut the music so quickly. It won't be that they felt they needed to listen to the end of the song. It won't be that although the synth line is memorable, it's a little depressing.

Some people describe a moment of clarity, some people claim there is a frighteningly silent calm moment as the brain tries to adapt and cope with the reality of the situation. If anything, the moment is certainly transitory. Around 3 – 5 seconds in, water is leaking in through the floor and any other openings (ie. windows) in most modern hatchbacks or 5 door saloon cars. Experts say, there is an opportunity around the 4 – 8 second mark where, while the water is quickly gushing into the car with some force and pressure, and the car is sinking 50cm-ish per second; a relatively slow sinking, for a window to be opened, which may just save your life. This is provided the electrics are still working, or that you have the sheer force to be able to break the window with your bare hands. Scientists have found – mainly due to the adrenaline levels they speculate - that a slim and physically unimpressive person can bend steel, crack glass and hold up multiples of their own body weight. When the choice is certain death, or performing a feat of superhuman strength, people seem to prefer the latter. Interestingly, in nearly 85% of all accidents participants manage to unlock their seatbelt. Almost 100% of them have no recollection of doing this though perhaps this statistic is not representative, based on only a small sample size. At the time when air conditioning was becoming more standard in cars, the American Automobile Association did launch a warning campaign to highlight the dangers of closed car windows. Most people aren't expecting to ever find themselves in a rapidly submerging car in a lake or river with no-one around to even watch them sink. Most people wanted cooler air in cars and the campaign closed.

A major – if not *the* major - obstacle to escape occurs around the 8 – 10 second mark. At this point: the electrics have fritzed, turning the car into an immobile empty steel monolith, in spite of all the vehicle's safety features. Water has gathered in the lower half of the vehicle. The weight of the water and the pressure of the water steadily increases and inflow into the car may increase too. Clothing is wet which is reported to have an unexpectedly high impact on the situation. According to post-accident review, the demoralising effect of wet shoes and socks, wet trouser legs significantly accounts for a large drop off in expectations of survival and of the ability of the individual to escape. Around the 8 – 10 second mark, it becomes clear that the car is sinking relatively quickly. Around the 8 – 10 second mark, the engine will have sputtered and totally cut out. Any passenger who was asleep will now be awake. Studies have shown that at some point in between the 11th and the 13th second, the regular individual will scan the horizon/ riverbank/ road etc for any other living creature and will appeal in whatever way is possible. Usually this will be either banging on the window of the car, or shouting/ screaming out of the window. The car horn is actually often still working, due to the kind of capacitor used, even though electric windows and central locking functionality has stopped, and a quick thinking person may attempt to press this horn. It should be noted that usually at some point between 8 – 15 seconds the horn will stop

sounding, usually becoming a mangled muffled sort of sound first, like record or tape player running out of batteries. This sound also has a second immeasurably high demoralising effect on the subjects in the car.

At the 10 – 15 second mark, this is where things really begin to disintegrate drastically. The remote chances of survival are dissipating and disappearing fast. Even if another living creature has been sighted, this is no guarantee of anything apart from at least it won't be a total mystery what happened. At the 10 – 15 second mark, the reality begins to sink in. The water rises at an increasing rate, pouring quickly into the car, which is also undeniably sinking. Not totally dissimilar to both ends of a candle burning; the time runs out fast. Around 15 seconds, in an average family hatchback, the water is around your thighs. 15 – 17 seconds and most subjects are pressing their head against the ceiling as water floods in and the car sinks further and the available air begins to disappear and the doors are impossible to open and the windows also impossible to open even though at this point the mind is racing faster than it has ever raced in a desperate attempt to come up with some kind of strategy which will prevent death. In a rare number of cases, some extraordinary external event or coincidence occurs, like a team of expert Police divers hearing the splash and being on hand with Scuba equipment to save the subject and provide expert medical attention. Sometimes the windows shatter, but at precisely the moment that waves of relatively high pressure water suddenly and powerfully flood into the car. More likely, the vehicle is fully submerged. With no air left to breathe, the average human will try to breathe water but this is not really an option and merely leads to the lungs filling with water, leading to lack of oxygen to vital functions including the heart and soon enough everything just stops.

POCK MARKED

Recently I've been picking my spots, leaving shiny red pock marks all over my face.

TV

My last therapist I said to him I feel like life is like a TV show and he says you mean you think everyone's watching you and the cameras are always on and I said no I feel like all I can ever do is watch like I'm not really a part of it and he laughed even though it's not that funny just watching TV your whole life all the time.

SOAP OPERA STARS

I watch a lot of TV. Me and the soap opera stars, we're all getting old together.

DISINTEGRATION

Recently things have been sort of stacking up and falling apart and receding and overall just not making much sense. You're not sure if your take on reality has sort of loosened or if these things are really happening.

You're not sure but recently you leave for work in the morning and you notice small scraps of paper – this has happened at least once a week for the 10 months so far since you moved in – you notice small scraps of paper that seem to be yours and they flutter around damp on the floor like fallen spring blossoms and you've been collecting them even though they're often a bit damp or a bit sort of mangled and it doesn't make much sense but you're not exactly sure what to do or what it means or how they got there.

The strangest thing recently has been the older woman – she's got some sort of a hearing aid and she's got these dark sort of glasses and scabs on her face and when you're sitting in the local café killing an hour or two on the weekend to stop yourself from feeling so isolated and remote she comes up to you and she says the same thing every single time; maybe seven or eight times now she comes up to you and you're not sure but she seems to address you directly and she says 'Who writes your dialogue?'. The first time your mouth actually dropped open – you know this because you were facing a mirror and you watched your own mouth gape. Since then when you see her you either try to avoid her, or you try to engage with her and either way nothing works because she doesn't respond and you're left wondering is she a ghost but you don't really believe in ghosts, so you're hoping she's just a figment of your imagination.

POTHOLES

'It's just so disappointing' I tell her. I don't smile. She says nothing for a long time, then looks up at me, takes another drag from her cigarette, stubs it out. Looks at me some more. Sighs heavily. She mouths the words 'I hate you', her lips barely moving. She no longer needs to actually make the sounds, I know exactly what she means. And it's no wonder she's upset again.

I'm not telling her the truth, but I am telling her some of the truth. In theory, I'm meant to be telling her the whole truth, but I don't really see what I would gain from that. The truth I'm telling her is whatever I think I can get away with. I'm leaving out details, I'm glossing over events. The couples therapist, she's pretty overweight, she's been married three times, Miriam, says 'I'm pleased, we've made some good progress today'. I've been fucking her for the last few weeks. It wasn't exactly an accident but there was a coincidence, and I suppose light blackmail. The thing was, I bumped into her by accident, and she was vulnerable, and I guess I listened to her, and, next thing, Miriam the Therapist trusted me. That was her first mistake.

The thing about potholes is, it's fundamentally a surface weakness in the material. Then what happens is it rains, then that water freezes and expands into the weaknesses, which exacerbates the weakpoint. Before you know it, the weakest parts of the material are crumbling, falling apart. It's a sort of quiet stealthy invasion, a corrosion that undermines the fundamental. Breaking down in our previous session, my wife confessed to bad mouthing me to her family. I'm not exactly surprised, is what I didn't say. I felt bad because it's not exactly fair the way she's been treated and now she's inevitably ended up hating me and I'm neither surprised nor shocked. It's worse: I'm neutral.

She said that breaking down made her feel better, and she judged my reaction as sensitive, more sensitive than I had been for a long time. I guess I got better at pretending to be sensitive, is what I didn't say. The tears rolling slowly of their own volition down her sad cheeks she gave me the same crooked smile she ended up giving me the first time she found out I'd been cheating on her. It's a smile that fills me with dread and unease because it's so sort of warm and well-meaning, and I'm aware I'm neither of those things. Occasionally I want better for her, I think she deserves better than me. But then my own life support systems kick in and I'm not about to martyr myself for no good reason.

The first time, I've found, is always the hardest one. But once it's out of the way, it's easy to carry on. Later, the seventh or eighth time, you sort of hit this sweet spot where you can really make this sort of thing work for you. But I've found after the eighth, things get worse – the depression usually comes on pretty strong. It's amusing because she'll come home from the doctors all weepy and distraught and sort of can't believe she's been prescribed anti-depressants and you're like, I'm not surprised. I'm surprised it's taken you this long to figure it out. And to clarify, no, it's not going to get better, is what else you don't say.

DAWN RAID

Lying on his back and staring blankly at the ceiling David presumed that things were about to happen. Calls had been made, promises had been broken, secrets had been exposed, information had been shared, patterns had been identified and the involvement and attention of the authorities was imminent. It was 5am, still half dark outside and David, who normally slept heavily all the way through the night was wide awake and watching the clock. Beside him his wife lay still and sound asleep, her face calm and beautiful. "This is going to hurt" said David quietly to no-one in particular; "There is no way this isn't going to hurt". Lying on his back he was waiting for a siren – no, probably not a siren – for a start, sirens are really only used when there's a specific need to rush, and they're also not great for surprise dawn raids. He was waiting for car doors to slam, for the kind of sound you get from a congregation of people, for the ring of the doorbell. Or maybe the first thing he would hear would be that harsh grainy fuzzy sound from a police radio. David thought back to the times as a child, hearing that sound on the tv. Everything was so simple when he was 11. Everything seemed more complicated the older you got. Almost everything that was once considered black and white became shades of grey; everything depended on your own outlook, or on the outlook of the people around you, and it was possible to hold two conflicting outlooks at once, or more; and these could change depending on who you were surrounded by.

He looked again at his wife and felt a strong pang of remorse for having married her. He could convince himself that in one light the move wasn't entirely cynical and selfish. But as soon as the surface of that dream was pricked, it fell apart and became murky and writhing and although he'd known this at the time, he'd convinced himself that either this would change or that maybe she could save his skin and prevent what seemed inevitable. Of course, she couldn't. She hadn't really tried, because he'd simply lied and cheated and then lied more to cover up the cheating and the stealing and the behavior which on paper did not look good. She hadn't deserved this; she was a good person and his corruption was a disappointment to himself. He was ashamed that this would now be part of her story, that once the lid came off, things would not look good and there was no way to really change this. A premonition shot into focus, of a tall, seated ashen-looking serious man asking 'What exactly have you done to her?'

THE DIVORCE

Like a forest fire which starts from a single carelessly discarded match and which eventually devours several thousand acres, this is how my marriage ended. We'd been married for two years. I knew he wasn't really happy but I guess I thought that he was the type of person who would just deal with it. Most people of above average intelligence aren't exactly happy. I knew also that his unhappiness wasn't really to do with me. While I represented certain aspects of his own 'ego' and world-view, it would have been the same unhappiness with anyone. The irony was that my husband didn't know that I was cheating too, doing my best to end the marriage, or maybe just acting in self-defence, so when it all unravelled, that's what made it so sort of strange.

My husband had taken a therapist. He was keen for me to also get therapy. He was keen for us to get therapy together. As with anyone with reasonable intelligence, I did not tell my therapist the truth. Since we didn't share the same therapist this is largely irrelevant but it makes understanding the timeline confusing. I didn't tell my therapist that I was cheating on Rich. I didn't tell my therapist about my obscene fantasies and I certainly didn't tell my therapist that I'd been finding ways to explore these fantasies. My therapist did that thing of being largely uninterested in my 'mental health and wellbeing'. My therapist became very interested when I would invent some relatively tame fantasy, or some obviously symbolically heavy-handed dream or nightmare. I would make these up, and then feign shock at how adept my therapist was, with shocked deadpanned comments 'you think?', 'wow this is powerful stuff!'. I didn't really want a therapist and I didn't think I needed one. I would report progress at the appropriate times, or setbacks if I was feeling difficult. The very mention of the word 'sex' meant at least several words scribbled on the pad. A mention of my parents, or of my siblings, or an early attempt for validation, or a memory of something seemingly trivial from 30 years ago (which self-evidently is not trivial) was typically met with a gentle nod, a stifled yawn. From time to time I would pass my sessions by practicing controlling the dynamics of the situation, relating some sordid dream (ironically, often not a dream, but real life) and watching as my therapist scribbled away, then moving onto something more mundane like my mother, or an incident at work which left me 'fragile'.

So it was clear I wasn't going to achieve much more than handing over some cash to the therapist on a weekly basis. But my husband seemed to think it was good and would praise my progress, or express surprise when I would describe some pathetically blunt and unsophisticated realisation. We did have one session together but – having lied heavily to prevent any awkward questions from emerging – I was able to dodge out of future sessions by claiming that I needed to work alone on my own 'issues' but that at some point we could revisit things.

I first found out the truth from his friend, completely by accident. How it happened was simple enough; classic even; daytime tv soap opera stuff. His friend was round at our house and presumed I wasn't around. But I was around, and I overheard him say 'Are you sure she doesn't know?' and when I walked in the room his friend couldn't have made it more obvious, even though I was daydreaming at the time, some guy I'd seen in the supermarket car park; some guy at the school I work at; some guy on the TV. The truth was, he'd been having these weird webcam-only relationships; he'd been having these strange cyber-sex relationships with people off the internet. I mean, I thought it was a little pathetic if I'm honest but at the same time, I figured, who am I to judge? He'd always been a little removed from reality. I wondered if he told his therapist about it, decided probably not.

The truth was, I'd been cheating far worse and I had that smug feeling of knowing more than someone else who thinks they know everything. I got tired of my husband's weak and well-meaning character. After a few months, eventually the novelty of screwing a range of both men and women behind his back, began to wear thin, and keeping everything undercover was testing my patience. My husband was so distracted by his own 'arrangements' that he didn't notice, which also removed some of the pleasure from everything. Interested to see how things would pan out, I decided to confront him on the most inconvenient evening. I picked a Friday evening when he was due to 'catch up' with his parents on the weekend. I picked the evening he was due to prepare for a big presentation at work. I picked his birthday and I picked the most expensive restaurant I could find. I dressed up for the evening – I don't recall how

long it took to prepare but I think I looked pretty good and very put together. I didn't have a script in mind, but I had a rough idea of the sequencing of events.

We met at the restaurant, he'd had a late finishing 'work' meeting though I knew from checking his sent messages without him knowing that he'd arranged to be jacking off with someone – he was in touch with a 75 year old 'grandma' and a pre-op transsexual. When I had relayed a similar story to my therapist, prefacing the story with 'let me tell you about a dream I had recently' and taking out my 'dream journal', the therapist was convinced that this was 'significant' and 'worth exploring'. To get out of exploring, I'd made up an even more extreme and ludicrous dream and that had distracted the therapist for the rest of the session. The waiter showed us to the table for two. We sifted the menu, exchanged ideas for what we might order. I wanted to wait until the first course arrived before I said anything. It seemed rash to just jump straight in there. For a moment I savoured how happy he looked.

'You only turn 38 once!' he said quietly and conspiratorially, and I smiled warmly. I started with a work anecdote about an order for stationery which had gone wrong and had resulted in 350 boxes of paper being delivered. The correct order was for 35. At some point he had spilled a little wine on his tie. As I was telling the short story he lost focus twice, his eyes flicking away to see how the wine stain was. This was the exact point when I decided to make some changes. I wanted to warm things up rather than jump straight in. As a child, I enjoyed the way Tom the Cat would chase Jerry until Jerry really let Tom have it. I empathised heavily with both of these fictional cartoon characters. I never wanted to be one or the other, I wanted to be able to choose. The first course arrived.

'Honey' I said. I had decided that that would be the first word of how our marriage fell apart. 'Is there anything special I can do in the bedroom for you, for your birthday?'. He was calm, grinned at me sort of nervously and said 'Uh, what?'

'I know our sex life hasn't been great recently and I really feel like it's to do with me – I think this new birth control I'm on has really dampened my libido and I guess I wanted to say sorry'. He put down his fork, and reached his hand across the table to lay it on top of mine. 'Honestly, I'm totally ok with it' 'I'm just so sort of tired all the time... sometimes I feel like I'm 65 but sometimes I just want to try something totally new and exciting – perhaps we could try watching... you know, a video together'. He looked freaked out for a split second, his expression reflecting a wave of panic. He frowned. I said, to mitigate it, 'My therapist has been suggesting I should be more sort of adventurous'. He squeezed my hand gently, then removed it. I could sense him thinking that watching a video together was really not that adventurous but I could also sense his heavy hidden unease and I smiled to myself but held my expression totally still. I decided to push things a little further.

'Maybe we could... no, it's stupid'. He looks up and forgets to chew for a moment then carries on chewing. At this point he definitely suspects something is up, but he's presuming this is a genuine attempt to connect sexually, and he's blaming the therapist for this and I suppose hoping I don't carry on talking. 'You may as well just tell me!' and he's light-hearted and smiles sweetly in a way that says 'you can trust me'. I wonder to myself, what on earth made you so sure that you could lie and not be found out? What made you so dishonest? And at the same time I'm picturing myself nudging him into some oncoming traffic. And I push things further.

'No no – I'm being silly. What would you like to do, what's your wildest fantasy?' and I've never asked him this before and he sort of gasps slightly before regaining his composure. He blushes deeply. I push further. 'Maybe it's like, exhibitionism?' and he sort of laughs nervously, and I laugh but it's not nervous. They say the truest suspense is when the audience knows something the protagonist doesn't know, or isn't yet aware of. I'm moving my foot up and down his calf to gain his trust, sort of slowly, to gain his trust. 'Well maybe it is!' he says and he's lost for words as well as being incredibly nervous at this point. This isn't the sort of conversation we've ever had. 'Is your therapist behind this too?' he asks, and I don't smile and I don't say anything and no one says anything for a long time.

I clear my throat and he looks up, with his fork still in his mouth, like he has some kind of premonition for what's coming next, like some dumb character in some dumb cartoon or comic strip. 'What if... what if you find a couple of desperately frustrated random strangers online and then you start texting them behind my back and they send you pictures and you send them pictures and you jack off literally every chance you get from the shower to the split second I leave the house, and I start to fuck just about anyone who shows me an even passing interest, and then we get a divorce?'