



What I'm About To Do Now

Andrew Roe

My husband strays. I suppose that's a polite way of saying he fucks around on me. It's what my mother would say. In fact that's how she referred to my father's prolific career of fucking around on her: straying. Like he was a dog, a lost puppy trying to find his way home, and not a middle-aged claims adjuster following the compass of his cock.

After my father died, my mother sat me down for one of those mother-daughter talks we'd been failing at my entire life. We were in the house, the living room of my youth. Shag carpeting still prevailed. Framed family photos lined the fireplace mantel, continuing to attract dust, regret. The television was on because it's always on.

"Your father, he was a good man, you know that. But, well, he had a tendency, honey... a tendency to *stray* from time to time," she gently informed me during a commercial break, as if I didn't already know, as if I'd never been introduced to one too many Aunt Lolas and Lulus and Gingers. That was the variety of woman, or rather other woman, that my father gravitated toward—names that sounded like candy, bodies that jiggled and jumped out of their inadequate clothing. My mother's name is Miriam. She does not jiggle. She does not jump.

How do I know about my husband? Women always know. Even when you hear them say, afterward, I didn't know, I honestly didn't know, they know. They knew. They're just lying. And who can blame them? No one likes to look stupid. Especially women whose husbands stray.

There are cycles. And we're at the beginning of a new one. And I know what to expect by now. It's like a movie that you know the ending to but you sit and watch it anyway. Again.

Last week: his cell phone rang while we were eating a late dinner. He forgot to turn it off, one of the first things he does when he gets home. Walk in the door, turn off the cell phone. He says he doesn't want anyone from work calling once he's home.

But the electronic chiming revealed him, revealed the cusp that we were now upon. His face told me all I needed to know, in that instant flash of raw truth, betrayed by technology. He hadn't yet learned the proper mask despite his repeat offenses.

"You going to get that?" I asked after multiple rings, looking not at him but the pesto angel hair pasta arranged on my plate. It appeared so clear, so vivid, so painterly: the intricate color patterns of the green pesto, the pasta's wet gleam underneath the dim lighting in



the dining room. This was part of the cycles, the sudden and random intensification of my awareness of sight, sound, textures, objects.

“No,” he said. “Probably Steve. Steve or Devin. This damn contract we’re trying to iron out. I’ll talk to them tomorrow.”

The cell phone seemed to ring for longer than normal before voice mail finally rescued him. We remained quiet, eating our dinner like strangers in a restaurant, as somewhere a person listened to my husband’s voice, waited for the beep, and imparted information that he, my husband, would later hear and I would not.

I don’t understand. The sex, I mean. The drive, the consuming desire. It’s always been a mystery to me, on par with religion and action movies and Sting. It’s a hunger that I don’t have. Maybe it’s hormonal. Or perhaps genetic. I suspect my mother is the same way. We are not sexually driven creatures. We walk through life without the burdens and complications of lust.

“I don’t understand,” I told my husband. This was last night, in bed, either late at night or early in the morning, when he was sleeping soundly and I didn’t want him to be sleeping soundly.

“I don’t understand,” I repeated, louder this time. He rolled over on his side. The heat from his body poured off him, a wave of scent and history washing over me.

“You don’t understand.”

“That’s right,” I said. “Help me. Help me understand.”

“No. I’m asking. It’s a question. You don’t understand what? What time is it?”

“It’s late. I wasn’t sleeping.”

“I’m sorry. Are you okay? You feel all right? You think you’re sick again?”

But by then I had lost steam. Too many words, tangents. Too much beyond my control. The brief conversation had worn me out.

“It’s nothing. I’m fine. Go back to sleep.”

And he did, out as soon as he rolled back over. Not me, though; I was up, awake, electric with rumination. Seconds became minutes became hours. The house was quiet. The neighborhood was quiet. As if all sound and motion had been erased from the world.

Morning, then, this morning, today, now: The alarm goes off and I feign sleep and wait until he’s gone, off to work, before I even consider getting out of bed. Minimal contact. Gestures, attitudes. Mind games. I have my strategies.

Often I chant to myself, mantra-like: *I’m smarter than this, I’m stronger than this, I’m not a character in a country song.*

Yet I stay.

Up and around now, moving, the day advancing from theory to reality. Downstairs: freshly squeezed sunlight spills across the hardwood floor of the hallway that leads to the similarly sun-drenched kitchen. Proof of my husband’s presence from earlier this morning, while I was pretending to be asleep: a chair that was not pushed back far enough underneath the kitchen table, a plate with crumbs from his seventeen-grain bagel. I pick up the plate. Noting the flecks of imported lox-flavored cream cheese. I’m still groggy, dumb-limbed. Everything slow and draggy because it can be slow and draggy.

I grind coffee beans, pour filtered water into the catalog-bought coffeemaker. I watch it

drip, the entire pot, admiring the dark liquid and its protracted descent, such a wonder to behold every morning with NPR on in the background. Breakfast consists of fruit, a couple of spoonfuls of kiwi yogurt straight from the recyclable container. Then—no rush—it’s time to get dressed and venture out. Locate keys, purse, lists. Depart.

A few miles of easy stress-free driving and then roadwork ahead. Always roadwork on this particular stretch of freeway. A goddamn county ordinance or something. Three lanes merging into two, the inevitable backup and slamming of brakes and squadron of orange-vested men standing around the sole person working.

I run an errand. For which I have to go to the mall. Which has been recently renovated and renamed. So it’s no longer a mall, no longer “Echo Valley Mall”; it’s “The Shops at Echo Valley.” Besides the shops, and restaurants, and brand-new indoor rock-climbing facility, there is, naturally, a neon-happy multiplex with something like eighty-seven movie screens. Since I’m there, the errand completed, I take in a matinee—on a whim, because I can, why not. I miss the first five minutes but it doesn’t seem to matter.

The lights come on and turns out I’m the only one in the theater. It’s getting late, the afternoon hourglassing on. There’s another errand to run. I’ve written it down. It’s in my purse. Or pocket. Somewhere there’s a note that I will consult, soon. Outside the daylight drowns my eyes and it takes a while for me to remember where I parked my car, the lot as big as a continent, my mind still movie-fuzzed. The air smells of exhaust and espresso.

Back on the freeway, from which you can’t miss the emphatic sprawl of our subdivision, or actually, technically, sub-subdivision. You can see it from miles away, the rows and rows of Spanish-tiled roofs populating the hillside, filling the horizon with a rising swath of reddish-pink or pinkish-red. It’s called, believe it or not, White Gate. (The racial implications, I’m sure, are lost on more than a few of the residents.) It’s not where I envisioned myself living, true, back when I was reading Proust and listening to Leonard Cohen; yet there’s no denying the security, the womb-like sense of comfort and refuge. So no apologies about the vapidness of the suburbs from me.

As I approach the gate (the other errand forgotten, too late, tomorrow it’ll have to be) I wave at Anthony, the security guard who sits in his air-conditioned booth, smiling, resigned to the anonymity of the day. There is a code for the gate. There is a code for the garage door. There is a code for the door leading from the garage to the kitchen. There is a code for everything. Some codes you can choose, some you cannot. You often hear that it’s not a good idea to use your birthday as your code but that’s what I always use. This is perhaps the only area in my life where I live dangerously. I live dangerously when it comes to my code. That, and I have a husband who strays.

It’s true: I have become what I thought I’d never become—a housewife. This is now what goes on my tax forms. Despite my undergraduate and graduate degrees. Despite my well-received thesis and footnoted essays published in academic journals with more staff than subscribers.

The idea was that I’d teach, probably a community college named after one of the lesser-known founding fathers, somewhere in Rhode Island or Delaware. Tutor eighteen year olds in the delicate art of the subordinate clause. Rent a studio apartment near campus and take a Thai cooking class. But that didn’t happen. Instead, just as my post-grad-school life was humbly getting underway, I met my husband. In traffic school, of all places. Speeding for him, illegal U-turn for me.



We flirted, dated, nested. Then one day we woke up as one of those conjoined couples that don't go out with other couples any more or need an audience to infuse their relationship with meaning and purpose. The deep compatibility energized us, strengthened us as a force that, as the months accrued, gathered momentum and meant-to-be-ness. Eventually we honeymooned. I'd never been so tan, having always cultivated a ghostly/literary Virginia Woolf-ish complexion. Surprisingly, I liked the color, how my body responded to the sun's tropical determination. I liked Tahiti.

Also surprisingly, I discovered, once we returned from the trip and began our marital life, that I actually kind of liked it, being a housewife—the exercise classes, the multiple magazine subscriptions, the planting of perennials. Is that so wrong?

Anthony, just back from vacation, is part of an interchangeable trio of burly young security guards who rotate based on a shift schedule that I've never been able to figure out. They all sport the same general look: gridiron girth, closely cropped hair, bursting necks that are stumped squarely on their shoulders. The boys, as I call them, are extremely friendly, and no doubt they're told to be so or they'll get fired, but I try not to think of this. The waves are nice. The brief conversations too. Any interaction, no matter how peripheral and one-sided it may be, stands out these days. And so I bake them banana bread, tip them generously at Christmas.

Before I enter my code and pass through the gate, I pull up to the booth and stop. The car window lowers without sound. Anthony rolls down his window as well. Classic rock emerges.

"I heard Cabo San Lucas was amazing," I say, taking off my sunglasses.

"Oh yeah? Who told you that?"

"Lance. The other day. Well. Welcome back."

"Thanks."

"Back to the old grindstone, I guess."

"I guess," says Anthony, smiling again.

I roll up the window. Enter my code. Continue on. Left on Myrtlewood Lane. Right on Cottonwood Circle. Then home. Two more codes to go.

At night, after my husband goes to bed and it's late—when reading or watching TV or going online and rechecking the balances of our mutual funds will no longer suffice—I've taken to the habit of sitting in the backyard, which overlooks a golf course, beyond which there's another sub-subdivision identical to ours except that it's a little newer. The backyard has become a solace, a place of Buddhist retreat for me. It is there that I do my thinking. And my non-thinking. My just being. My stoic acceptance of life's limitations, of people's.

Leaning back in one of our patio chairs, I'll let my hair dangle behind me, let it breathe and live, the hair that I've always kept long, once labeled "oppressively feminine" by one of my grad school cohorts. Then I drape it over my shoulder, down my chest. Stroke it some. The night on my hair, my face, feels good. Like a balm. Stars stud the sky. It's clear. My body will melt into the chair, and it's hard to imagine standing up or exerting any type of energy whatsoever; the universe does not require anything of me.

This, then, is where I come to be even more alone than I already am: the backyard, outside, at night, a newly christened insomniac. My husband asleep. There will be a few house lights on even at this late hour, other restless souls perhaps—self-medicating themselves, no

more sad movies to watch on AMC.

I will sit and stare past the invisible fairway and concentrate on the house that's directly across from ours and it's like looking in a mirror. If I look long enough I can make out a reflection of myself over there. I am deciding something. I am in the process of making a decision. Sometimes I can tell by my face whether it's the one thing or the other. And sometimes I'm not making a decision at all. I am just standing there, staring back at myself. Nothing ever happens. Nothing changes. The ending never comes.

There's a message on the machine when I get home, the light blinking like a distress signal. It's from a telemarketer. A computerized Prozac-y voice tells me congratulations! That today's my lucky day! I'm eligible for a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to win a brand-new digital home entertainment system and here's my special claim code (another code!) so I'd better get a pen or pencil ready and write it down because...

Put away the purchases. Open the blinds. Run the dishwasher. Change clothes. The afternoon drifting, fading, I remind myself: I am in my house. I am home. This is where I live. Where we live. My husband and I. We're married, our names listed as one in the phone book, in computer databases, on mailing lists in distant states. There is a zip code. An area code. Trash on Tuesdays. Recycling on Thursdays. Homeowner dues every month. If we make any "aesthetically significant alterations" to our property we must submit a detailed request in writing, in triplicate, and receive permission to proceed from at least two different overseeing boards.

My husband will ask the name of the movie. I will forget. This will make him suspicious, just as I am suspicious, every bit of information and dialogue scrutinized for hidden meaning. I should come up with the title now, retrieve the ticket stub, have it ready. The question is: how convincing can I be? Or rather: how convincing do I want to be? Even if I happen to be telling the truth.

My cell rings, the first time in several days, the sound startling me.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Pause number one.

"Where are you?"

"The freeway. Driving. In transit."

"So you'll be home soon?"

"Negative, I'm afraid. I have to go to this thing that came up last minute."

"What thing?"

"This dinner thing for all the reps and associates. It's like if you don't go it's this big fuck you to Turner. And I can't tell Turner to fuck off. Not yet anyway."

Pause number two.

"I'll try not to be too late. But I don't know. It's out of my hands. And today—today was one of those nightmare days, where everything that can go wrong does go wrong. You still there?"

"Still here."

"So now, on top of all that, having to go to this thing tonight when I'm totally spent."

"There was a message on the machine when I got home."

"Oh yeah."

"But not like the ones we sometimes get where they just hang up and don't leave a mes-



sage. This was from a telemarketer. There was an actual message. Granted it wasn't from a person. It was just a computerized voice."

"What were they selling?"

"I don't know. I don't remember."

Pause number three.

"Hello?"

The doorbell. Strange. Because visitors are infrequent. Whenever the doorbell rings it's like a car backfiring or a firecracker popping. I jump. And I have to remind myself that for most this is not such a rare occurrence: people dropping by, neighbors bearing photocopies of recipes, delivery drivers in need of signatures. I make the long journey from the kitchen to the living room to the hallway to the entryway to the front door. The square footage is mind-boggling.

Through the peephole I spy a man with a cap, a uniform. Anthony.

I open the door. And he just stands there, smiles. The same smile from before, I realize, now that I think of it. And only now do I intuit (sometimes it takes a while) the latent carnal implications of this exclusively male curvature of the mouth, becoming less and less latent the longer he hovers in the doorway, attempting to emulate what I interpret as the jauntiness and carefree bravado of a tuxedo-clad cocktail-wielding Dean Martin. And speaking of cocktails: Anthony is holding a bottle of tequila by the neck.

"Here," he says, handing me a fifth of El Grande Gold Supremo. "I bought this in Mexico."

"Thanks. But you shouldn't have. Really."

"I don't have any limes though. You got limes?"

His hat is embroidered with gold lettering, all boxy caps: SECURITY. It seems like a statement he's making, a credo.

Did he say something about *limes*?

"I was thinking," Anthony forges ahead, eyes narrowing to a lounge singer slit, "we could maybe, you know, have a little. Have a little party."

Uh-oh. Now where did that come from?

But not to worry. Apparently he's able to decipher the surprise rippling across my face. The housewife shock. Because I don't have to say anything.

"Whoa. Whoa. Did I... Shit, I'm sorry. It's just that, earlier, I thought earlier, back when you drove up and rolled down the window, I thought we had ourselves a moment there. Like there was some, you know, voodoo going on back there."

"No. No voodoo I'm afraid."

"My bad," holding up his hands, which are large and lumbering, a gesture of official surrender. He must be twenty, twenty-two. He does not have a gun. Just a very big flashlight. When I asked him about this once he told me you have to go through extra training in order to carry a firearm. The company he worked for wouldn't pay for the training and he was practically broke, in total fucking credit card hell, and so: no gun.

"I thought there was a look, seriously, I honestly did," he says.

"If there was it wasn't intentional," I say. Then I add, "I have a husband."

"Right. I noticed that."

Had there been a look, unconscious perhaps?

"Do you want this back?" I ask, meaning the tequila.

“Naw. You keep it. It’s cheap down there. Cheaper anyway. I got a bunch.”

I contemplate the amber liquid, which looks so harmless in the bottle like that. The shriveled worm exiled at the bottom.

“Not to say I’m not flattered though, a little.”

“Sorry?”

“Flattered by the thought.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“Listen,” I say, unsure of what will follow, what I have to say that’s worth listening to.

“Yeah?”

“My husband, he—he’ll be home soon.”

“Oh.”

“Actually no. That’s a lie. I lied. He won’t be home until late. That’s what he said. Late. He’s working late these days.”

“Okay.”

Anthony wavering now, confused, questioning his choice of a potential partner for some Afternoon Delight.

“Working late—you know what that means, right, Anthony?”

“There’s a big project or something going on?”

“He strays, you know.”

“Strays?”

“Fucks around. Isn’t true. Has other women. There are cycles. He apparently can’t help himself. What do you think of that?”

Poor Anthony doesn’t answer. Instead he yanks his cap down further over his forehead, does his best to avoid any subsequent eye contact with Mrs. Mina Spires of Cottonwood Circle.

“You better go, Anthony, I think.”

“Yeah,” he says. “I better go.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry. I just hope—well I just hope you’re cool with this. That there won’t be any, like, repercussions.”

“No,” I assure him. “No repercussions. Don’t worry.”

“You’re cool?”

“I’m cool.”

What if I had cancer, some terrible disease that descended upon me and so he had no choice because who cheats on someone with cancer? Maybe then. Or what if I was in a car accident and it was touch and go for a while there but finally I pulled through and our lives were reinvigorated, redefined by this random brush with mortality, and he’s able to fully truly appreciate what he has and isn’t willing to risk losing it? Maybe. Or what if my mother died? Maybe, maybe. And the danger, too, of relying on one person so much, so thoroughly, of investing pretty much all you have in one single solitary other soul: I think I can begin to admit the tactical mistake now.

The positives, then: He dresses nicely. He’s handsome in an unconscious, boyish way. He works out but doesn’t have to. He knows the difference between fashion and taste. He likes to cook. His CD collection is highly respectable, genuinely eclectic and vast, from Richard Thompson and Joy Division to Charles Mingus and The Clash. He does not complain about



having to watch films with subtitles. Only rarely does he go out with the boys, and not once have I been forced to endure a pay-per-view sporting event. He expresses genuine concern that I don't have enough friends, enough emotional outlets. Other women inform me of how lucky I am. He's a jewel. He's a keeper. Where can I get one of him?

He is not unreasonable. He is not violent. He is blessed with a dudely down-to-earth mellowness even though he has a stressful "high-octane" job, as some of his hair-gelled co-workers put it. And yet, despite this impressive résumé, these stellar husbandly credentials (the proclivity to dip his wick elsewhere notwithstanding), he is not the man I would have imagined myself with: the job, the background, the income bracket.

But love is not what you think. You are never ever prepared. It's a mystery. So you hold on. But for how long? How long?

When embroiled in such marital situations and existential conundrums it's generally best not to get input from one's parents, especially one's mother. Sometimes, however, it's unavoidable. And sometimes the monthly phone call comes when you least want it.

"Again?" my mother sighs like only a mother can sigh. "Oh sweetie. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I know I'm not the kind of parent who says I told you so, but, darn it, I told you so. Way back when. Remember? I saw it coming."

My mother never remarried after my father's death. She's a foster parent for the S.P.C.A., among other diversions.

"You did not," I fire back. "You so did not tell me so. You said he was a prince. I'm quoting. Prince. Mr. Wonderful."

"All I'm saying is, is when you get down to it, when the chips fall wherever they're going to fall in this life, men are men, I'm afraid. It's inevitable. Your father, for example."

The eternal drone of the TV in the background, my mother's very own white noise. Always something panicky between us, an unsettling edge to our relationship, no way, apparently, to connect the dots we've scattered throughout our history as mother and daughter.

"Thank you mother. That's very helpful. Men are men. I wish I would have known that before."

"But I made a choice," she laments, bringing the subject back to herself, a familiar tactic. "No excuses. I stayed. I stayed when I could have gone. When I should have gone. Looking back on it now."

A pang of unexpected regret has lodged itself into my mother's voice, as if she's been suppressing this toxic thought in her head for years, decades, and now it's finally been verbalized, released to the world, a truth formally revealed at last.

"Well then," she transitions, the pang evaporating, having run its course, "what are you going to do? There are limits, aren't there?"

"Yes there are. There certainly are limits."

"So?"

"So what?"

"What are you going to do?"

It's 5:50. And completely dark. Over two weeks and I'm still not used to the daylight savings change. It feels like it should still be light.

"Honey?"

"I'm thinking," I say.

The strategies inevitably fail. I have tried them all. Getting in his face, giving him room. Confronting him, ignoring him. Thinking positively and thinking negatively. Searching the Internet, visiting message boards for advice and guidance. Renting John Cassavetes's movies. Re-reading *Madame Bovary*. I have even considered having affairs of my own. And yet the cycles continue. No matter what I do.

So I guess what I'm about to do now is a last-ditch effort, the desperate culmination of what has become, remarkably, years of frustration. And what I'm about to do now is this: cut off my hair. Cut it all off and wrap it up like a present. Give it to him as a final plea.

There is a precedent here. Family lore about a sepia-toned relative, a long-suffering aunt or great aunt of my mother's from Brooklyn or the Bronx, a woman I picture as squat and leathery, who butchered off all her hair in hope of changing her philandering husband's philandering ways. So I'm not the first, and I'm not even sure if it worked or not. But maybe it will for me. Maybe it's just drastic enough. Maybe it's dramatic enough. It will be the act of love that wakes my husband up from his fairy tale spell of having to fuck other women.

I do it in the upstairs bathroom. Grab the first pair of scissors I find. I don't even bother wetting my hair. I just start cutting, I am cutting. Listening to the raw gnash of metal fighting hair. Watching as the soft strands float to the floor like leaves. Working quickly. Did I mention that I've had long hair all my life? That it's the first thing my husband noticed about me? That it's the first thing that most people notice about me? Your hair, they say. Your lovely, beautiful hair.

But my hair is going, is gone. Not until I look in the mirror do I realize that I have been crying. And there I am: my face no longer framed, the context removed.

Beginnings, endings. Which will this be?

Or will it be neither?

I gather the evidence and put it in a Macy's box and wrap it as planned. I place it on the dining room table (next to the bottle of El Grande Gold Supremo, opened) so my husband will notice it right away when he arrives home. I will be waiting in the kitchen, running my fingers through my newly liberated scalp. He will call out: *What's this?* I'll tell him to open it, it's a present. I'll be waiting in the kitchen. Waiting. He'll enter with the box. He'll look at me. And he'll see what he's done.

"So you'll stop," I'll say, my dead hair in his hands.

And if this does not work, if the straying continues, then I will call my mother. It will be the middle of the night. I will make the long drive from my new suburb to her old suburb and be there by morning. Standing in that same time-capsule living room, site of bland TV tray meals and Bob Hope specials and mourning sessions for my father, both when he was alive and not alive. My hair will just be starting to grow back, my suitcases strewn on the floor like toppled statues. There is no other place to go, I will realize, standing there. I have no one else. I am alone. This, perhaps, will be an even more difficult realization than my marriage ending.

I will stay until I figure everything out. But it will be only temporary. I'll tell myself this over and over: it is only temporary. My mother will say, "Jeepers, honey. What the dickens did you go and do to your hair?"

And I'll let this comment slide, I'll let it go. Just as I am letting so much else go.

"First thing tomorrow," I'll say, if this is in fact what will happen, if I am in fact standing there in my mother's living room in the near future, "first thing in the morning I'm going



to go out and change my code. All the ones that have my birthday I'm going to change. You shouldn't use your birthday for your code."

"Everyone knows that," my mother will say. "That's something you should have done years ago."

The backyard is quiet and spooky like a cemetery. The night air chills instead of warms. He's late. Later than usual. There is no hair to let dangle and breathe and live. I should go inside, get a jacket, a blanket, something. But I don't. I continue to sit. I stay. Until, that is, I'm about to stand up and move. How many suitcases would I need? How much gas is left in the car? Am I really strong enough? It is time for an epiphany. I want to be ready when it comes.