

Nightingale

by Lindsay Marianna Walker

Louise is having an affair with a married man. She says it's an affair but what it is is nothing. Their office windows face each other across Market Street and sometimes they wave. I ask her how she knows he's married and she says she only falls for married men, therefore... That's not logical, I say, but she is not someone you can tell things to. This has been going on for months.

I love Louise but it is a vacillating love, which is to say there are several moments of the day where I feel nothing like love for her. Sometimes I can hate her, but then she laminates a jig saw puzzle we spent a whole Saturday putting together and hangs it in her bathroom. I think I love her more in memory than when she is around.

It was easier when Louise was married, for me it was easier I mean. Now she and Michael are divorced and she has more free time, more phone time, more doubts, she's become insecure and I hate it. Marjorie, her fifteen year old, lives with her during the school year. School starts next week and Louise is taking Marjorie out tonight.

Louise knows I love her, though I've never said, and she uses it to torture me. Or, she doesn't know. I'm not sure which is worse.

Anna, he's cheating on me, Louise says when I answer the phone.

She calls at odd hours. Not that the hour itself is odd, it's one pm here in St. Louis, but I have been trying to work all morning and just now, just right now, have managed to get a little something going. Hello, Louise, what's wrong?

There's a woman in his office, she says, her voice low.

Why are you whispering? I make it sound accusatory.

I'm not, she whispers, There's a woman—she's a tiny thing, Asian, probably Japanese, I can't get a good look at her.

I hear Louise fumbling and I know she's pulled her binoculars out. He's married, right? It's his wife, I say.

No, no, she says, *That's* not his wife. And I know I'll have to keep this going, ask how she knows and what she knows and why she knows, and I look at the receipts spread around me on the braided rug—the one Louise and I picked out three summers ago on our Lake of the Ozarks road spree—and a little voice behind the louder voice in my head says hang up, hang up. Get off while you can, tell her the pilot light's out, tell her the postman has come, tell her you don't care about the woman who is not the wife of the man she is not having an affair with.

How do you know it's not his wife? I say.

Well, she begins, and two hours later—long after the Japanese secretary has left his office, long after I've lost hope of getting off with her quickly, of getting back to work, long after Louise has lost the thread of why she called or what she wanted—we say good bye and I wipe my phone on the leg of my jeans and slip it back into my pocket. Feeling sad and spent, the way I always do after Louise calls, I shuffle through the stacks of receipts on the floor. I work at a clothing department store and Fridays are my day off, but every two weeks my cousin pays me to organize the bills of lading for his trucking company so he can figure out his drivers' payroll. I was supposed to have this batch done two days ago.

This isn't going to happen, I say to one of the plants next to my front window and toss the pages I've been holding onto the rug. I stand and stretch—it's too early for David, too early for dinner—but I want something. I grab my keys and let the screen door slam on my way out.

Timothy's Wine Cellar is the closest liquor store to my house but I'm in the mood for something different so I drive east on the Interstate. I cross the river and keep going. Ten miles outside the city I lose sight of the arch in my rear view mirror. The image of Louise dressed like a Geisha and servicing some faceless man in a suit at his desk keeps popping into my head and I press the accelerator.

I'm forty miles into Illinois and running out of gas so I stop at the Okawville exit to fill up and turn around, drive back to the city, but

when I walk out of the restroom into the foyer that divides the service station from its Burger King, I see John Malkovich sitting at a booth eating French fries. Is that John Malkovich? I grab a six pack of beer from one of the coolers in the station and take it to the register.

Is that John Malkovich? I ask the clerk.

Yeah, she says, bored.

I wonder what he's doing here, I say.

He lives around here, she says, Will this be all?

Gas on four, I say, Thirty dollars. I hand her two twenties and walk out to my car to start pumping. I can see his great silvery head inside the Burger King. I wish Louise was here, she'd walk right up to him and say something. It'd be clever and he'd laugh and then I would know John Malkovich. I overfill the tank and gasoline slops down the fender onto my shoe.

Shit, I've overpaid by almost five dollars and should go back into the station demanding my change. But the clerk might say, tough luck, and then what will I do? I'll tell her I need that money. And she'll say, That's too bad you should have paid with a credit card. But I don't have a credit card, I'll say. And she'll roll her eyes and hold up her hands.

John Malkovich is standing now, he's dumping his garbage into the waste basket, he's opening the door. The trajectory he's on will walk him right by my car. Say something. Say something to John Malkovich.

Excuse me, I say to John Malkovich, Do you know what time it is? Oh, you are a stupid woman I think even before he points to the watch on my wrist.

Sorry, I say, I just wanted to say hello, you're John Malkovich. And I am an idiot, I think but don't say.

Hello. Nice day, he says. Does he mean *have* a nice day? Or it *is* a nice day? He's so tall. He's wearing sneakers, I don't know why that surprises me.

Drive safe! I call to his back, sounding like a maniac. But he turns and gives a creepy little John Malkovich smile and waves. He gets

into a tan SUV and drives out towards the road to get back on the Interstate. He's heading east. I jump into my car, happy to have an excuse not to confront the clerk about overpaying, and pull out, careful to leave a reasonable amount of space between my car and John Malkovich.

I have to call Louise. Or should I wait until I'm done following him? Why am I following John Malkovich? I'll call her now, I have to call someone.

You'll never believe what just happened, I say.

Anna, can you call later? I'm trying to roll Marjorie's hair, she won't sit still.

I just met John Malkovich. I was a total idiot, but he was really nice—he's tall.

Marjorie, quit fucking around, Louise yells away from the phone. Oh, that's exciting, Anna, can I call you back?

Yeah, I say, Sure. She's not a selfish bitch, I tell myself as I drop the phone into the cup holder next to my beer, she's not. But I don't really believe it. I wish I would have waited to call her, maybe I'll die in a car crash. I can't remember the last time I drove this way and I've forgotten how flat Illinois is compared to the Missouri side of the river. Corn, corn, red rusty oil derrick, corn. There's a pig farm nearby and the stench of manure is so strong it almost smells nice.

Last month Louise took me to an Italian restaurant on The Hill for my birthday. Thirty is *nothing*, she said, Wait till you're my age. Louise is eight years older than I. She said, Wait till you really start to fall apart. I wanted to tell her I already have, but you can't ever say anything like that, especially not on your birthday, especially not to the woman who's just bought you spaghetti and wants you to be happy.

John Malkovich switches lanes and now there's a blue minivan between our vehicles. This is an adventure. You're crazy, I say to myself, you're impulsive, you're unpredictable. It's four thirty and I remember I've forgotten David. I grab my cell phone from the cup holder.

David? I ask, though I know it's him.

Hey, Anna.

Hey. I'm really sorry, something's come up, I can't come tonight.

Oh, he sounds sad but he's used to this.

I'm stalking John Malkovich, I say. I ran into him at the Okawville Plaza and I'm following him down I-64. Oh, wait, he's taking the exit for 57 South.

What were you doing in Okawville?

I needed gas.

Anna, that's crazy—he's probably got security or something.

No, it's just the one car. I'm not going to do anything. I just want to see where he goes, but I probably won't be back in time for our date. Can we do it tomorrow? I ask. I don't really want to reschedule, but he sounds disappointed and I don't like that.

Yeah, he sighs, Tomorrow's fine. We hang up and I shake my head at the tall, white obelisk in front of the Mount Vernon strip mall.

David is my boyfriend, sort of. I bring him home to Kansas for family Christmases and he takes me to Arizona for Thanksgiving but neither of us is very serious. It's nice to have someone to fill in the blanks though, when people ask. My mother doesn't like him and that helps, makes us seem legitimate. Are you going to marry him? You can't raise your kids Jewish, you can't convert, he better not..., etc. And we are legitimate, in a way, we're friends. Close friends. He's the only one I've told about Louise though he doesn't take me seriously, he says I don't know what I want.

I tried to tell my sister, Jaime, who lives in Chicago with her husband and two fat babies, but I called Louise "Lou" and changed all the pronouns. Anna, she said, don't be stupid. This Lou might never leave his wife and then where will you be?

I pass a prison on the left. There are several prisoners in the yard wearing light blue shirts and dark blue pants. On the other side of the highway is a community college. There are students with backpacks in the parking lot. This strikes me somehow, so I honk my horn and wave to both sides.

It's not dark yet but it's getting there. John Malkovich takes the exit to Benton. I'm taking the exit to Benton. What now? Are you really going to follow John Malkovich home? No, no, no. Don't be stupid.

He goes left at the light and I signal right. What now? I open my third beer and roll down the window. Good bye John Malkovich, I glance in the rear view mirror, Good bye Benton. The air is hot and I'm driving into the sun, away from John Malkovich. I flip the visor down and follow traffic west through corn. There's a tan pickup truck in front of me.

I only follow tan colored cars, I say aloud and like the sound of it. It's specific but lacks clarity; there's logic but no sense. I say, There's nothing left but corn in this world. No, that's melodramatic, I think, that's pushing it. We pass through a one stop-light town called Christopher. Of all the Chris's I've known the one that pops up is the one I had a problem with.

Nice glasses, he'd said, about my mom. She was our teacher and had just started wearing reading glasses—the half kind that perch on the tip of your nose and make you look like a cartoon librarian. We were in fourth grade and I too thought they were dumb, was embarrassed to have her wear them in front of my friends. Christopher was giggling and whispering to Sam. I walked over to where they were standing and kneed him in the crotch. Anna! Mom took me out into the hall and spanked me, but Christopher never said anything about her again.

Welcome to the DuQuoin State Fair!!! The pickup takes a right next to the blinking Pepsi sign and I follow it into the parking lot. It costs five dollars to park and I'm sorry again that I didn't ask for my refund at the pump. It makes me sick to my stomach to waste money and I won't think about it. Forget it, I say, and I park next to the tan pickup on the grassy lot. A teenage couple slams their doors on either side of the truck and the skinny driver slings his arm around a little blonde in a green halter top. His bare arm is touching her bare shoulders and I shiver a little and chug the rest of my beer.

I walk through row after row of cars toward the entrance gate. The roller coaster is clicking up its one big hill in the distance. The sun isn't down yet so the colored lights are washed and all the sounds are mixed so that what you hear is a steady sort of hum and it smells like barbeque and cut grass and gasoline and I feel better than I have in a long time.

I'd like a corndog, I say to the woman in the concession trailer, do you have lemon shake-ups? She shakes her head and points behind me. There's a little stand with a sign for Ice Col Lemon Shake-ups. I hand the woman my money and she gives me a corndog that has a cornmeal horn sprouting from the top.

That one has a horn, the woman says.

I like it, I say and pull a few napkins out of the silver dispenser on the metal shelf under the window.

How long does the fair run? I ask the lemon shake-up woman. She smiles and shakes her head.

You're speaking English, she says in an accent. I nod. She hands me the paper cup and I give her a thumbs up which is difficult with the corndog. She laughs and waves bye-bye and I wish I could stay and talk to her.

I find an empty picnic table under the beer tent next to the corndog trailer. A band is setting up on the stage but most of the tables are empty still. I straddle the bench and face out towards the Midway while I eat. There's an overweight redheaded woman in tight jeans and a rhinestone blouse carrying a tambourine towards the stage. She doesn't look anything like Louise, who is lean and black haired, but the tambourine is a lot like the one I held in New Orleans last spring when we went to Mardi Gras and sang dive-bar karaoke.

Come with me on stage, Louise said, You don't have to sing. And Louise is the best singer I've ever met so I stood behind her and danced and spanked my hip with the tambourine while she belted Joan Jett's "I Love Rock n'Roll" and I watched as the crowd fell a little bit in love with her and afterwards she made sure the men who bought her drinks bought for me too, then later as we left, she slung

her arm around my neck and kissed my cheek and said, They named this state after us. They did? I asked. Yes, she said, Their last great work.

I don't finish my corndog and the shake-up leaves a film of sugar in my mouth. I'm not really having a good time anymore. But you've only just arrived, I tell myself. So I buy a beer and start walking down the oil and chip paved Midway again.

Hey Mama—Get it done, the carnie at a drop-the-duck-in-the-bucket booth says to me in a low voice. I snap my head around and he nods, but he's not really asking for anything so I smile a little and wink and he gives me a whistle.

It's dark now and high school kids are gathered in little clusters around the spinning ride that's blaring hip hop. I don't see anyone else walking around alone and I imagine it sets me apart. I pull my shoulders up straight and keep my eyes forward. I pass another row of carnival games but no one else says anything to me.

How many tickets do you need to ride the Ferris wheel? I ask the man in the little white ticket booth.

Five, he growls, With an armband you get unlimited rides for the rest of the night. The man is sweaty though most of the heat has gone out of the day and there is an orange fan clipped to the edge of the counter in front of his face.

Ok, I'll take one of those, I say. I hand him a twenty and stick my arm through the window. He seals a blue paper bracelet around my wrist. His hands are rough and look like work boot leather next to the pale skin on the inside of my arm. Thanks, I say, but he is looking down at the twenty.

The Ferris wheel line is so long I buy another beer before going to stand in it. There is a young couple with a toddler ahead of me in line. The little boy looks at me over his dad's shoulder but he doesn't smile.

Can't take that on the ride, Honey, the blond boy working the wheel says in an Irish accent and points to my beer. He's just loaded the couple and the toddler into a cart and moves the lever to bring the next one down.

No problem, I say, and tip my head back. I swallow the rest then toss the paper cup into the garbage can.

Brilliant, the boy says. He leads me to my cart and offers his hand when I step up but I don't take it. No rocking, he says. No problem, I say as he pulls the lap bar down. He grabs the front of the metal bar and gives it a few violent tugs to make sure it's locked. He lets the back of his hand graze the side of my breast when he lets go. I say, I hope that means I get an extra turn. And I can't believe it's come out of my mouth but he doesn't seem fazed. Yeah, I'll give you an extra turn, he says and squeezes my knee.

Later, I'll find out his name is Owen, that his father is Irish and his mother's American, that he'll be going back to Ireland after Labor Day. He'll tell me he's twenty four, that he likes older women. And when he jumps down from the cab-over bunk to use the bathroom in the RV he shares with two other men the next morning, I'll find his wallet, find out he's really eighteen and that it doesn't matter. I'll grab my jeans from the foot of the bunk, pull out my last, crumpled five, switch it with five new, crisp feeling one dollar bills from his wallet, and be gone before he comes back.

But now I stare straight up as the cart rises and I can't believe how clear the sky is. The town spread around the fair is small and dark and even the bright lights below can't keep the stars from looking like a handful of crushed diamonds scattered across a bolt of velvet. The wheel turns and I see people watching other people ride, they don't make eye contact with me and I feel like all I need is a single red balloon tied around my wrist and I will officially be the loneliest looking person at the fair.

Owen raises his eyebrows when I get to the bottom. I hold up my index finger and loop it around a couple times. And if Louise were here I would tell her, We can't be friends anymore. Why? she'd ask. Because it's not fair to me. And she'd say, Well, it looks like a fair to *me*, and then I'd laugh and love her again and it's just hopeless. I can't even imagine it. No, no, there's a limit. I think of the married man in the office, of Marjorie and Michael, the others I've had to

share her with, the ones to come, and that gets me going, that makes me angry, or starts to, then my phone rings. I've put it on vibrate and it makes me jump. I'm almost to the top again and I know it's her and that for once I won't answer, but I can't say for certain whether it is wisdom or self-pity. The edges of everything go blurry and, for a split second, it looks like the world is on fire. Then I blink and it's fine. Everything's fine. Even Louise, who by now is wearing her peach colored robe; who by now has brushed her teeth and is getting ready to climb into bed. I see her robe falling in slow motion from her shoulders. She'll leave it on the floor till morning. She'll wonder why I haven't answered, why I haven't called her back. Where has Anna gone? She'll ask, tossing from one side of the bed to the other, punching a pillow and trying to sleep, Who is she with?

