

Stop.

by Pia Ehrhardt

Accept that your husband's heart always belonged to his first love. You should've noticed sooner because she works in your building and won't look you in the eye. She takes the stairs because you ride the elevator. Give him back to her. It's been sixteen years of marriage and there's so much that's hard—him asking why you have on that tight skirt when it's for him; you turning your face to the wall while he climbs in bed at 1 a.m. after office drinks; you forgetting to kiss him for days; him checking your cell phone bill for calls made late at night, finding none, but not putting the pages back in order. Check *his* cell phone bill and you might find her number fifteen times in a row, a perfect tower. Call her at her desk. Don't say a word and make her hang up first.

Count who loves you. Family members will come to mind first, but think back to old boyfriends, everyone you kissed hard, fucked. Start another relationship. Straddle your marriage and a love affair. This is insurance. There must be cages out there you can rattle, guys who told you they'd follow you anywhere. Say their names out loud. Bring them back to life. E-mail one of them, even if he's married with four kids and tells you early on that he's in a full and satisfying relationship. Take this as a challenge. Cheating is pure adrenaline and you'll feel for a while like you're running clean.

Call your father. Test if you have what you had at seventeen. See if he still wants you in his bed. Convince yourself it was your choice, not his. Kids are never to blame. Use *him* now. Tell your side of the story and let him trash your husband, then defend your husband so he gets jealous and says more than necessary. Get him to say again that he's the only man who can satisfy you because you're cut from the same bolt of cloth. When he tells you your life means more to

him than his own, say another call is coming in and you have to go.

Starve yourself and you'll be cheered by how insouciantly your clothes fit.

I've tried the other approach too: Buy foods your husband hates and on the drive home, eat four Fig Newtons, salt and vinegar potato chips by the handful, peel open a cheese stick and pull off fine strings with your teeth. The problem is this makes you fat, and that's another thing to feel bad about. We are trying to clean the shelves here, not load the pantry.

Fuck your husband like you're his girlfriend. Confuse him. Make him feel like you're fucking someone else too. You are. Fuck your lover like you're his world. He's become yours.

Listen to your teenage son's CDs. Get in his car and play the music loud. Learn the words to songs with "fuck" in every sentence. Sing "Give Me a Project Bitch." Surf the wave of someone else's rage. Yell your brains out. After you listen to these songs fifty times you'll be singing them in your kitchen.

If you have to leave messages on your lover's machine at work, do it when you know he's out of town so you know why he isn't calling back when it's been five days since you spoke.

Find those Loritabs from when your wisdom teeth were removed; drink a little wine all day; smoke a joint before bed so you can sleep

a few hours, but don't get hung over because you'll mix up that kind of feeling bad with the feeling bad you don't want to feel.

Don't cry. Think about people worse off than you. Parents with dead kids, bald women with breast cancer, drunk drivers knocking pregnant women fifty yards and into a ditch. Imagine these terrible events are small pools filled with ice cubes and jump in. Your skin will tingle and then go numb to conserve energy.

Care about stuff that doesn't mean anything. Listen to that orange-winged thrasher rummage through leaves outside your bedroom window. Spot an isolated thunderstorm and drive into it. Stop in front of a backlit mound of pampas grass more beautiful than you can bear and watch it like TV. Bright moments like these divert your attention from your broken heart, and remind you how pretty life is with men.

When your lover's wife calls you at work to say she knows all about it because he told her, and what a fucked-up poisonous spider you are, agree with her. She'll have their baby on her hip, babbling. Promise it's over, tell her *she's* the one he loves. Try that and she'll believe you, and you'll feel generous and relieved that she's back in her corner. Then call your lover and leave another message.

Don't be tricked into falling in love again. You will be tempted. Your husband will tell you he's made a terrible mistake and sound afraid. He will ask to work things out. Your lover won't. He will cry on the phone and say he can't leave his family, and that he will miss you. Stifle that instinct to dust off and start over like you're brand-new. You're not.

Try to forget that jumping-on-a-trampoline feeling, when love is the top of the bounce, and the view up there is scary and crazy and sweet. The two of you with your hair flying, his unbuttoned shirt caping behind him, and eight feet of air under your feet.

