

Copyrighted Material

I'm in love with my husband. Or maybe I should say:
I'm *still* in love with my husband.

I love my husband as much as the first day I met him. My love hasn't followed a natural progression: the passion from the early days of our relationship never mellowed into tender affection. I think of my husband all the time; I wish I could text him all day. I imagine telling him I love him every morning, and I dream of making love to him every night. But I restrain myself, because I'm too old to act lovesick. Passion is inappropriate with two kids at home, unseemly after so many years of shared life. I know that I have to control myself in order to love.

I don't know of any fictional heroine who can show me how to behave. There are plenty of despairing lovers who sing about loss or rejection. But I don't know of any

novel, any film, any poem that can serve as my example, show me how to love better, less intensely.

There is also nothing to appease my anguish, because my husband has already given me everything. I know that we will spend our lives together. I am the mother of his two children. I can't hope for anything more, I can't hope for anything better, and yet the void that I feel is immense, and I am always waiting for him to fill it. But what could possibly fill what is already full?

On Mondays, I never feel even an ounce of fatigue when I walk through the doors to the high school. I've been an English teacher for nearly fifteen years, and I still enjoy my classes. For an hour, I am the center of attention. I am in control; my voice fills the space. I'm also a French–English translator for a publishing house. Maybe this double life is what has kept my passion for teaching intact.

In the teachers' parking lot, I see the principal. We chat for a few minutes. Then comes the moment that I've been waiting for: he asks me how *my husband* is doing. I answer that *my husband* is doing well. Even after thirteen years of marriage, that phrase still has the same effect on me. I tremble with pride when I announce, "*my husband* works in finance," in the teachers' lounge; when I tell my daughter's teacher in front of the school gates, "*my husband* will

be picking up the children on Thursday"; when I shop for pastries at the bakery and announce, "*my husband* placed the order on Tuesday"; when I recount in a falsely nonchalant tone (when in reality I find it unbelievably romantic), "I met *my husband* by chance at a rock concert." My husband has no name; he is *my husband*, he belongs to me.

Monday has always been my favorite day of the week. Sometimes it wears a deep royal blue—navy blue, midnight blue, Egyptian blue, sapphire blue. But more often Monday takes on a practical blue, economical and inspirational: the color of Bic pens, my students' workbooks, and simple clothing that goes with everything. Monday is also the day of labels, resolutions, storage boxes. The day of smart choices and reasonable decisions. People have told me that loving Mondays is a brainiac thing—that only nerds are happy when the weekend is over. That might be true. But it comes back to my love of beginnings. I've always preferred the first chapters of a book, the first fifteen minutes of a film, the first act of a play. I like starting points. When everyone is in their rightful place in a world that makes sense.

Late in the morning, I read a text aloud to my students. Then I have them take turns reading. I write down vocab-

Copyrighted Material

MY HUSBAND

ulary on the board, supplying them with the words they need. This position of power is exhilarating. In the piece we're reading today, one of the characters has the same name as my husband. My heart skips a beat each time I see it or when one of my students says it aloud. Then we translate and discuss a couple's exchange of vows. My students are familiar with this Anglo-Saxon tradition, because it's often shown on American TV shows (and often interrupted by an ex-lover trying to win someone back). It's an opportunity to practice the use of the auxiliary verb, thanks to the much-wished-for answer of "I do."

As the last students leave the room, I open the windows to banish the end-of-class odor, a mix of sweat and whiteboard markers, of perfume that is overly sweet (on the girls) and overly musky (on the boys). Teenage hormones go wild for the super-concentrated fragrances they sell in drugstores. Maybe that's the kind of perfume I should buy. For months now I've been wearing a scent from a little-known perfumer that I'd hoped would be sensual but turned out to be hopelessly bland on my skin. How do you know which perfumes are trendy when you're sixteen? I could come up with an exercise on the topic of scents and ask my students to describe their perfume—instructive both for me (so I can pick out a new fragrance) and for them (to enrich their olfactory vocabulary).

Rosa came by while I was at school. I've arranged things so that we don't cross paths, because I never know what to say to her. I haven't lived a wealthy lifestyle for long enough to know how to speak to my cleaning lady—watching her clean my house has always seemed unnatural to me.

In the air is a mild odor of cleanliness; there are damp towels smelling strongly of detergent in the bathroom, and clean linen sheets that have softened over time on our beds. No trace of fingerprints on the large entryway mirror. The red tile floor in the kitchen sparkles.

The figurines on the mantelpiece, the wool blanket on the sofa, the embroidered cushions, the candles on the shelf, the books in the library, the art magazines piled on the coffee table, the framed photos hung in the stairwell: everything is in its place. Even the flowers from

MY HUSBAND

the market preside at the center of the dining table with greater poise than before. I'm sure Rosa has rearranged a few stems and leaves to better show off the bouquet.

Yesterday afternoon, my husband went grocery shopping. I'm touched by the abundance in our kitchen: brioche and jam on the counter, our fruit basket filled with apricots and peaches. I know it's silly, but the more my husband runs important errands, the more I feel he loves me. It's as though he's investing in our relationship. Like the green-grocer who weighs the small paper sachets one by one, I can quantify his love each Sunday upon his return from the market depending on the total printed on the receipt in the bottom of the shopping bag. For the fridge: vegetables and meat, tapenade from the olive seller, a salad with grapefruit and crab from the gourmet market, a sizable block of cheese. Seeing this kitchen ready to burst makes my heart skip a beat.

2:30 p.m. It's a bit early to check the mail, but there's no harm in going anyway. Grabbing the key that I keep hidden under the false bottom of my jewelry box, I cross the driveway and open the mailbox with a knot in my stomach. I am relieved to find three letters that have nothing concerning or unusual about them (no hand-

Copyrighted Material

written letter or envelope without a stamp). When I look up, I realize that a neighbor is watching me from a few meters away. Panicked, I greet him before rushing back inside.

It's in these moments that I'm most likely to make a mistake, so I take a minute to gather my composure. I put the key back in the false bottom of my jewelry box next to a ring that's still shiny, even though it has oxidized slightly over time. It's nearly twenty years old, but I keep it out of nostalgia, despite the risk: What if my husband found it one day? How would I explain to him why I have a solitaire diamond that's practically identical to the one he gave me the day he proposed?

But my life before doesn't concern him. I don't have to tell him everything: the couples that last are the ones that keep the mystery alive. For example, a few months after we met, I ended things with him. A two-week hiatus during which I ran back into the arms of a former lover, Adrien. We took the train and went to see the ocean. Then, one morning, I left a note on the pillow and I returned to the man who would become my husband. What happened during those two weeks of wavering is none of his business.

Like every Monday, my husband goes to the pool after work. And like every Monday, I cook more nervously than on other nights. I'm agitated, I'm impatient with the children, I cut myself preparing the meal, I overcook the meat.

When my husband is absent, the house resounds less, like a piano whose soft pedal is engaged: the sound comes out muted, domestic life loses variation and intensity. It's as though someone's placed an enormous lid over our roof.

I turn on the porch light, then the lights in the kitchen and the living room. From the street, our house looks like a gift shop glowing in the darkness. It's just the welcoming sight that I want my husband to find upon his return.

Once the children are in bed, I watch TV for a few minutes, but all I see is women who are waiting, just

like me. They are eating yogurt, driving a car, or spritzing themselves with perfume, but what sticks out to me is what's happening out of frame: they are all waiting for a man. They're smiling, they seem active and busy, but in reality they are just killing time. I wonder whether I'm the only one to notice the universal women's waiting room.

It's time. My husband will be home any minute. I go to the library looking for a novel to create a certain look. I don't want him to find me waiting in front of a screen. Marguerite Duras will be perfect for tonight.

I read *The Lover* for the first time when I was fifteen and a half. I remember only a few images: the humidity, the sweat, the fluids, the blinds, the Mekong, a girl my age I didn't identify with at all (too detached, too negative). Whether at fifteen or at forty, for me, sex without emotion has never been appealing. Even so, one phrase from the book has always stayed with me: "I've never done anything but wait outside the closed door." I had a funny feeling that I'd already read it somewhere. First I underlined it with a pencil. I had never written on the page of a book before, so this seemed like a very serious gesture. Then, since this still seemed insufficient, I copied the line down in a notebook. At eighteen, I thought about getting it tattooed on my shoulder blade.

MY HUSBAND

Years later, I realized that the phrase wasn't from my past, but from my future. It was not a reminiscence, but a premonition: "I've never done anything but wait outside the closed door."

Legs carelessly folded beneath me, a cup of hot tea within reach, and my book open at random as I am unable to actually read a single line, I await my husband. The living room light is too aggressive. I turn on a lamp, light two candles, and quickly resume my position. From my spot on the sofa, I can see the door reflected in the large entryway mirror. I keep watch for the moment the doorknob finally turns.

It's a common event, a husband returning from work. It happens so often that people stop noticing it. Their focus is on other things: increasingly late hours with each promotion, a meal they don't want to ruin, the children who need to be tucked in. They get used to it, and their attention drifts elsewhere. But I continue to prepare for it each night. I've never stopped noticing.

9:20 p.m. I check my pulse in the hollow of my wrist. Accelerating heart rate, rising blood pressure, state of alarm. A glance in the mirror: my pupils are dilated. I can almost feel the adrenaline spreading through my amygdala; I can almost feel it pulsing, that little almond

in my skull, pulsing and spreading its stress signals. I take several deep breaths to try to calm down.

9:25 p.m. I am ready, alert. I run my hand through my hair—my blowout is perfect. I feel the powder on my face, the subtle pink blush on my cheeks. Tonight, I am divine, and I know it: beautiful, but relaxed; beautiful, but seemingly effortless. Discreet but elegant makeup, tight dark jeans and a loose-fitting pale blue blouse. A blouse with buttons to entice my husband to unbutton it. To reveal my lace lingerie, run his hand over my chest, slide my jeans down my thighs, lie me down on the sofa. I want him to dote on me, to take his time, a long time, to spare no effort. Who wouldn't want to do such things to me? I wait, I hope, and my heart races.

9:30 p.m. My husband is on time. His car headlights illuminate sections of the house, announcing his arrival. The car door slams in the street (the first real sign of his return). The mailbox opens and closes with a metallic clang (second sign). Finally, the sound of the key in the lock (final sign, the third knock on the theater stage before the curtain rises). 3, 2, 1. My inner monologue quiets down. All that remains is the uncontrollable beating of my heart. The front door opens. Let the night begin.

Tuesday.

Copyrighted Material