

Later you'll convince yourself it was by degrees, but in the beginning you know that it happened all at once. The Married Man is older. The Married Man is smart. The Married Man laughs at all of your jokes loudly and raucously, even the subtle ones.

You email one another constantly. You communicate through Youtube videos. You laugh aloud at his emails and your boyfriend says things like, "Who is that? What are you reading?" The whole thing feels very adolescent and exciting, but also inescapable somehow in a way that makes you nervous. One day you can tell The Married Man is upset so you ask him what's wrong. He gets upset and says, "nothing's wrong, I'm just an asshole," but you can also tell he's excited you noticed he was agitated. The Married Man loves Steely Dan and when you guess this out of midair while drunk one night he gets nervous and doesn't know what to say.

The Married Man lets you know that he likes you by getting jealous when you talk about how you stood too close to another man to test if he liked you. One time the two of you meet at a coffee shop in a basement. The tables are too close together and it's insufferably hot with its autumn basement heat and there are college students at the table next to yours. They are basically sitting at your table. They may as well be in your lap. They have a lot to say about how much Sharon parties and how they would do things differently, how they already are doing things differently. It's too hot. Why is it so hot? It's suffocating and sweaty. You take your sweater off which makes The Married Man uncomfortable. You are trying to get him to admit something, say something directly, which he won't. The one college student wears her hair in a ponytail. Both of them have exceptionally shiny hair. The Married Man turns red and says he has to leave, needs to go get groceries. The shiny haired college students have large textbooks about organic chemistry or some other subject that only exists on television in your world. Later that night he emails you and writes, "that was interesting!" The exclamation point at the end seems joyous and excitable.

You go to a fancy party your boyfriend, The Married Man, and His Wife. The party is boring so you leave early and go to the bar. You tell His Wife she's good at talking to people, which you believe, though you can't understand why she's so interested in strangers. She is nice to you, interested in you, but you drink too much whisky and make jokes that she does not think are funny. She seems vaguely angry at you. You realize The Married Man might actually be serious about all of this, and in the next breath you realize that you might be too. You vomit from anxiety or whisky or both and ask to be taken home. Your boyfriend begins to seem insufferable so you leave him. He seems relieved. He is a nice man, everyone says so, but you are exhausting to be around and difficult to love, everyone says so. You and The Married Man text about the breakup; you text about everything. You talk about boredom and bad sex and Patti Smith and all that. He talks about cartoons and car metaphors and philosophy and all that. The Married Man is distraught about your breakup. He's worried something's going to happen. You are too. You are constantly distracted. You think about him all of the time and you stare at your phone like it's the ghosts from Mario who you can't turn away from for more than a half second or they'll come after you.

The Married Man texts you one night to see if you two should meet and talk about “things.” His Wife is out of town. You suggest meeting outside of the old video store that closed a few months before and it broke your heart and you went there the last night it was open and stood outside with all of your friends and the one manager said he felt sad but that if every person there acting so sad had just come in and paid their fines the video store would still be open and you wouldn’t have to be standing outside of its locked doors mourning the loss. It’s November cold and The Married Man is already there when you arrive. You walk to a park together and he tells you that he had an affair before, twelve years ago, when you were in high school. He tells you he thought all of “this” was out of his system. That this wasn’t him any more. He tells you that he’s confused and that this can’t happen, that he absolutely adores you. You don’t exactly understand what he’s getting at so you ask “what the hell are you saying?” and he says, “this can’t happen.” So you say, “okay.” You sit down on a bench together. You put your left hand in his right hooded sweatshirt pocket because you’re sad and tired and a little disappointed but also relieved because you know deep down you are not that kind of woman, the kind that becomes The Other Woman. He kisses you for the first time of what will become many times, millions of times, an infinite number of times. He keeps kissing you. He kisses you for hours. It gets colder and later and you are still certain that you are not that kind of woman. He tries to finger you in the park. You stop him. He asks you to come home with him. You say “no, not tonight, not yet, probably not ever.” He almost convinces you. He can be very convincing. He is very charming. You might throw up. Anxiety or excitement, you can’t tell which. You get in your car and drive to your house so you don’t accidentally go to his house. You wake up in the morning and realize that you’ve fucked it all up, that you had one shot and you blew it, that no one else will ever really understand you, but that you did the right thing anyway and at least you have that. It’s freezing cold in your house and you feel like something out of a country song. The phone rings, which it usually doesn’t. He’s calling you to ask if you’d like to go on a walk. You accept. You bundle up and walk out in the cold with him. He kisses you more on the walk. It steams up his glasses and you call him a nerd. He gets mildly offended—sensitive—out of character for him from what you know.

You go away for ten days. He says it will be good to get some space, some time apart. He says he needs to think and that the time will be good for you, too. He drives you to the airport and you make out in the parking lot before your flight. He leads you to believe that when you return he will have regained his senses, that “this” will all be over.

When you return 11 days later you have sex for the first time. It’s fun and sexy and a bit awkward. You thought he would understand your body better, more immediately, the way he had understood everything else without having to ask or be told. You decide it’s for the best because had he known it better you would have screamed and then you would’ve both gotten caught so for a first time it’s fine, after all. He drives you home after and doesn’t speak. He says he feels guilty. You tell him that’s fine, appropriate even, but that it feels bad to fuck someone and then have him not speak to you. He apologizes. He bites his nails.

On Thanksgiving you go to see your family and are distracted the entire time, the mental equivalent of staring out the window while someone is talking to you. On Wednesday

night he sends you an email telling you His Wife “lit into [him],” which is a phrase you’ve never heard before, but you’ve always been pretty good at what they call context clues so you figure out pretty immediately that she’s upset, that it has to do with you, that she’s figured something out, that the jig’s up, Scarlet. There are no bullets left in that gun. You write back and ask “is everything okay” and receive as a reply only a text message 16 hours later that says the oven’s caught on fire, that there are flames billowing out of it and that he’s putting out all kinds of fires over there. Then everything seems fine, you guess.

You have always had obsessive tendencies, but with him you take things to a new level because his mania surrounding you is just as strong. You comb through every aspect of him: fucking him, finding out what he likes and what he hates, you research him online, you are intimidated by his resume. You have too much energy all of the time. Your friends think it’s a manic episode. They might be right, but they also don’t know that you’re in the kind of deep, dark idiotic love that makes you behave pathologically adolescent. You go away and stay together at a hotel. You point out that it’s only been two weeks since you first slept together and you watch him he go white as all of the blood drains from his face.

Words like “affair” and “mistress” become commonplace in your vocabulary when you talk to him. They feel dirty and sexy to say. He gets angry when you call yourself his mistress. You do it sometimes to punish him and also because it gets you a little hot. You thought you would feel guilty, but you don’t really, just lonely most of the time. You are constantly on the tiptoe of anticipation. He tells you it has to stop. You agree. You stop for a week and then the whole thing resets and you start all over.

The Married Man goes away with His Wife to visit her family for Christmas. Before they leave he tells you that he woke up one morning and she was listening to the soundtrack of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and that he wanted to go downstairs and confess everything. He sends you a Christmas gift. It is the first time you’ve ever gotten a wrapped package sent to you in the mail. You go to therapy and try to calm down, but when you get out there’s a panicked voicemail from him. He says he thinks he’s getting a divorce, that somehow everything’s fallen apart. She either knows or doesn’t, you can’t really tell, but you do glean that she has most assuredly not discovered the dirty pictures you sent him 2 days ago. You are comforting and calm; crisis brings out the best in you. Maybe you had a fucked up childhood or something like that, or maybe it was actually exceptionally stable so you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, as they say. For whatever reason you are calm, cool, and collected as you tell him that everything will be fine, that he needs to smooth things over. This is the first time of what will become many times, millions of times, an infinite number of times that you counsel him about his relationship with His Wife. He tells you that she kept asking him, “do you have something you want to tell me?” It’s confusing and painful and rewarding and relieving from one second to the next. You don’t tell him you miss him even though you do because he has enough to think about, but you do, you really do and a very small part of you hopes they do get divorced after all because that would, quite frankly, solve a lot of your problems. You have dinner with an old, but close friend who’s in town because of the holidays, and she explains to you that it’s for the best that this whole affair is over now. You push your food around your plate and don’t bother to correct her.

Months later you'll tell the Married Man that you've always hated Steely Dan's music because it reminds you of a middle-aged man having an affair with his secretary.

He tells you again that it has to stop, not because of the Steely Dan thing, or maybe it is, you really can't tell. You don't agree this time and you sulk and sink into a depression. It lasts two weeks and then the whole thing resets and you start all over.

You're addicted to one another in the most boring way possible. You talk compulsively, but the more intimate you become the more mundane the content of your conversations is. You go to the dry cleaner together and it is thrilling. Everything's hilarious. You think nonstop about the phrase "more is never enough," which is something you saw in a movie trailer, but before that you saw it on a movie poster for a different, less successful movie 5 years before. It seems like too soon to rip off that kind of idea so you wonder if maybe that's a common phrase that you've just somehow encountered solely as a slogan that is of or related to cinematic advertising. You see your life stretching out ahead of you, different than you thought it would be.

You find out that an author you admire has a story called "How to Be an Other Woman." Reading it proves much less fruitful than you'd hoped. It's more like a description than a guide, which does not answer any questions other than the one you didn't even realize was a question for some people in your situation: do you tell your mother?

Even later you'll start loving Steely Dan's music, the mindless jazziness of it feeling light and distinctly unserious just like being with him. You'll wiggle your shoulders up and down and sing, "it's your favorite foreign movie!" He'll laugh at you, and then he will sing along.

You tell him that if he leaves her for you then you can't promise him anything. Every impulse you have tells you to promise him everything. Maybe it's the guilt that stops you. Or maybe you're testing him on some sick level. Years later you'll realize it was denying him that comfort that made him feel unsafe around you, made him feel like he couldn't rely on you. Years later you will realize that he's afraid all of the time, too, and that probably in this way most of all the two of you are alike, almost identical.

Your last surviving grandparent dies and you realize, as people do, that everyone just got bumped up in line. You have just started getting used to something resembling a routine when The Married Man tells you once again that it's over, and this time he Really Means it. That he can't keep going like this, not any more. The routine had been shaky at best, but you were convinced that at the very least you got the best of him, if not all of him. You visit your parents and lie next to your grief-striven mother in her bed and pass your own wreckage off as mourning. You are grateful to be somewhere you can cry freely constantly without any questions being asked. You write each other forlorn emails and cannot stay apart and the whole thing resets.

You are always waiting for him. Weekends are hardest of all because that's when people spend time with their families. It feels like you are in the middle of one long conversation that now spans years that is never over, but constantly being interrupted. In the middle of the summer he goes away with an old friend from childhood. He comes back and confesses everything (well, not everything) to His Wife. You wake up to an email from her that is what one might expect, with a few curveballs thrown in. She says she was kind to you, which you believe is a matter for dispute, but understand that's not the main point you're supposed to take away. She tells you in her email that he's all yours, that you can have him. You vomit from anxiety. He tells you he came back from his trip clearheaded for the first time. That he knew his heart and had made up his mind. He moves out of their shared house and in with a friend. It is not as simple as you thought it would be, when you dreamed about having a baby together for example. You get to see each other openly now, but he misses His Wife and she desperately wants him back.

He goes back to His Wife and cuts off all contact with you. It is devastating, like that one Futurama with the dog. You feel that you have lost something both valuable and necessary and there's absolutely nothing to be done. You beg him to see you, feeling crippling guilt the entire time, but hoping he will decide again that it's you, that it was you all along who he can't live without. But he doesn't. He tells you he has to try and then stops speaking to you again.

He is so exceptional that he is worth it.

His Wife writes you an email and asks you to meet for a drink. You agree to go without understanding why. Your roommate asks and you offer that maybe you feel like you owe it to her. On a profound level you think you deserve it for doing what you've done. It takes you a long time to pick out the perfect outfit to say, "I am remarkable enough to have stolen your husband and deserved him, but also I'm not some temptress so stop looking at me that way." Your roommate helps. When you get to the bar, His Wife is not there and you order a cranberry juice. She shows up exactly punctual, looking not worried at all and you immediately realize that this "meeting," as she called it, was a huge mistake. She orders a beer and asks what you're drinking. When you tell her it's juice the corners of her mouth turn up in a wry, judgmental smirk. Years later you'll realize that she probably wasn't being derisive, she probably just felt a bit awkward talking to her husband's former mistress. Years later you'll realize so many things that have nothing to do with him or with her, but that only have to do with how you were still young when the whole thing started and that the entire thing, if nothing else, had aged you considerably. She thinks she wants details, but she is wrong and when you start to give them to her you realize immediately why he lies to her so often. She says she's been reading a lot about infidelity. She says she thinks it's interesting that everyone involved is a feminist. You think, "well, that's one way of putting it." She asks for your address to send you a book about infidelity and feminism.

True to her word she promptly sends the book. You read the forward and then sob uncontrollably for 3 hours. You find a new therapist. He isn't taking on new patients, and then he talks to you and then he is. You feel stupidly self satisfied that your situation is big enough to win him over.

You start talking again but you behave. He says he has to try with her and you tell him you support that. At Christmas he buys you a gift. It's nothing remotely romantic, a magazine subscription, but His Wife finds out and loses it. She kicks him out or he leaves, you can't really tell and he moves back in with his friend. On Christmas Day you rush back from your parents' house after the gifts are opened and spend most of the day travelling to be able to see him on actual Christmas—the dream of all mistresses everywhere, a legitimate Christmas Day celebration. You get back to town and he tells you he had an emotional day with His Wife and doesn't feel much like celebrating, but that maybe you can get together tomorrow. This, for some reason, breaks you. This, for some reason, is too far and when you see him on December 26<sup>th</sup> you tell him he broke it. That there is no coming back from this.

He moves out of his friends' house and into a tiny house that's big enough only for dolls, but he can almost afford it while paying half the mortgage at the other house. He asks you to teach him to dance. You tell him you will if he teaches you to sing. You do it all together. You go on dates and fight like a couple and have sex and sleep in the same bed. It is everything you were hoping for. It is not simple, which suits you better, you decide.

You slip into a new routine with him. It starts to feel normal. You take him to your sister's house and introduce them. She feeds you steak and he charms her. There's something wrong with her fireplace so the smoke detector goes off every twenty minutes or so, but rather than getting used to it or simply not having a fire it sends her into a panic every time so she jumps out of her chair and runs to the door and uses it as a fan to get the smoke out. He sits and eats week old ice cream cake that she served him as the chaotic scene plays out around him. He is unfazed by the whole affair, which convinces you that you really are right for each other, but then on the way home he's silent and when you ask him if anything's wrong he doesn't seem to want to talk about it.

You start making a life together. You go to movies and dinner together and help an old lady at the grocery store who is, for some reason, buying four 2 liters, 3 cases, and twelve plastic bottles of Pepsi. He helps her while you buy the food for your dinner together.

When you are alone at your own apartment you do things like look up what the etiquette is for having a wedding when the groom has left his last wife for you. Emily Post and Miss Manners prove completely useless, which is frustrating to you because, come on, this is the first time this has ever happened?

He sleeps with His Wife. You don't feel immediately angry, just confused. You fight about it a lot. You don't want to have sex any more. He says it doesn't really count as cheating, given the circumstances. He says he is sorry. And he is. You believe him. But he is only sorry for so long until he stops being sorry and is angry that you haven't forgiven him. You tell him this is over and sleep with an ex-boyfriend. You confess this to The Married Man a week later and he immediately forgives you, saying, "I figured you might." You ask him to stop calling her "My Wife."

You try to start over with him. He goes to New York to a party of an old friend. His Wife is there and they have an emotional talk. He comes home confused and says he doesn't

know what to do. You ask to borrow his car and he tells you His Wife needs to use it. You ask him to stop calling her “My Wife.” Suddenly you find yourself in his little dollhouse naked and screaming “am I ever going to be enough?! Is it ever going to just you and me!?” and you are probably scaring the children outside, and you are certainly making it seem like he fits in in this terrible neighborhood that is the only place he can afford to live by screaming and screaming and you realize that maybe this is what you wanted all along, ever since you were a little girl.