

How to Wait

Prepare yourself haphazardly.

For example, get a dog. You may think you want a large dog who will growl at strangers, bark at robbers, chase down assailants, but what you really want is a small dog that will sit on the furniture, lie on your lap, sleep in your bed, that will love you endlessly, that will forget about all of the things you forget, like to take him for walks, fill his water bowl, feed him every day. Name him a thinly disguised version of your husband's name. For example, if your husband's name is Richard, name him Dick Tracey. If your husband's name is William, name him Billy the Kid.

Complete daily visualization exercises. Imagine the white desolation of a half empty bed. Imagine that he is so thoroughly gone that even the depression he leaves when he gets up to use the bathroom is gone, even his toothbrush is gone, stored away in the medicine cabinet, dry bristled, waiting, like you.

Make lists. You will need these later. For example, a to-do list: paint the bedrooms blue, paint the nightstand white, paint the family room cream, paint the kitchen eggshell, re-tile the bathroom grey, get new comforters to match the new walls, get a new shower curtain to match the new tiles, get new towels to match the new shower curtain.

When he comes home with the date, you will know. He will hang up his black raincoat. It will be raining and his raincoat will be black and inside of it he will be as white as a tissue. He will not quite look at you. You will kiss him on the cheek and he will turn his head, just slightly, and ask if you've moved the chair in the living room. When he is gone, you will probably move a lot of things. You will move everything. Everything will be moved. When he returns you will try to kiss him and he will turn his head and say, you moved everything.

Decide that you will not move everything. Decide that you will move nothing. Start a new to-do list: join the gym, join a book group, make the photo albums you have meant to make every year for the past five years, make a pie that doesn't run.

Call his mother for the recipe for strawberry rhubarb pie. It is the one thing she can make perfectly that you cannot seem to make at all. You will soon have the time to fix your mistakes.

Speaking of pies: besides them, what will you eat? Get a cookbook called *Cooking for One*. There are several things that might go wrong if you don't. You might eat only eggs and ramen noodles and runny pies for weeks on end. Or, you might prepare the usual amount of spaghetti, the usual amount of quiche, the usual amount of chicken parmesan. You might have to buy new Tupperware, which you might have to throw away when everything goes bad.

Know that what is coming could be even worse than what you know is coming, but do not attempt to know any further. Do not think: *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Saving Private Ryan*. Do not think: *All Quiet on the Western Front*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*, *The Red Badge of Courage*. Do not think: My Lai, the bombing of Dresden, bags full of ears.

Devour Buddhist poetry like fortune cookies: *Empty your mind of all thoughts. Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form.*

Do not listen to that goddamned song *Christmas in the Trenches*.

Let your stomach ache. Call this feeling a stomachache. Make up reasons why it has developed: you are sensitive to spicy food, you drink too much soda, there is a flu going around.

When you hear phrases like *high risk of death or capture* think instead of trite phrases about liberty, even if they come directly from pickup truck bumper stickers: *freedom isn't free, support our troops*. You will soon be a cliché yourself, condensed into symbols. You will wear an American flag on your collar and a yellow ribbon on your breast and one, also, on the back of your car. You will say the pledge of allegiance in the morning, even the part about God, and you will put your hand on your heart. You will mean it. You will mean all of it.

Memorize every part of him. Memorize the thick, toned bulk of his arms and legs, the muscular rises and falls of his abdomen, the territory you have known for years, have learned by heart but not, until now, by rote. Memorize the positions of his freckles, dots like soldiers staked out across the sand of a desert map. Memorize the curve of each fingernail, white splinters of nascent moons. Memorize the uncommon crinkle in the fleshy part of his ear, a perfect imperfection, a detail you have always believed your children would inherit.

Do not crave the expanding bud of a crinkle-eared baby in your aching stomach, a flower that will not wilt for at least eighteen years.

Confuse marital and martial. Go commando. Advance. Seize. Incite invasion.

When you hear him whimpering quietly in the night, turned away from you, put your arm over him and feel for the wet of his eyelashes, the dampness of his cheeks. He has comforted you this way many times. He has always done this for you.

In the dark blackness of rolling credits wait for him to tell you that he doesn't mind dying, he just doesn't want you to hate him for choosing to go. He'll say, over and over: If I die, it will be my own fault, and you'll hate me. He'll say: I just don't want you to hate me.

Tell him over and over that you could never hate him. Tell him so many times that you do not know what you're saying, the words dropping like blanks from your soft, civilian tongue.

He will get louder. He will wail like a dog, like a baby, like a ghost. He has cried only once before, at your wedding. He was crying because he loved you and when you walked down the aisle you were the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. There is no use being modest about this. He is crying for essentially the same reason now.

You have cried many times in your life. You cried when your parents were going to split up, and again when they got back together. You cried when your sister went to college and when your brother decided not to go. You have cried everywhere: in bathrooms, on rollercoasters, in traffic jams, in the seats of movie theaters playing romantic comedies that received mediocre reviews. But you do not cry now.

Get a second dog. Several things could happen to the first. For example, he could get run over by a car. For example, he could escape out the door when you're carrying in the groceries. For example, he could get sick, you could drop him on his head, he could be stolen by a jealous neighbor.

Do not read the news. Do not watch the news. Do not go to the *New York Times*, looking for statistics. Do not spend hours examining the faces of the dead.

Do not try to decide what war this is, whose war this is. This is not part of the equation you are working on.

Think about what he said in your first month together, his bare arms wrapped around you like vines. He said: I'm afraid I will wake and not know it's you. He said: I'm afraid I will snap your neck. Even then, fatigued and in love, he was ready for war.

Donate to, but do not look at, the man with one leg, staked out at a VA table set up like an ambush at the front of the grocery store.

Do not try to cherish every moment. This will only ruin every moment. Know that there are things you will miss, lose, wish for longingly in the night, but do not think about what these things are, do not think about the ways in which you will not know him anymore.

Go out together. Drink like a man, like a warrior, like a soldier on leave. You are strong, you are belligerent, you are tears, you are vomit, you are a rock, a rack, Iraq, a desert, dehydrated, desiccated, desolate. He will lead you home peacefully, wordlessly, as if you hadn't spilled sauce on your shirt, broken your wineglass, stolen a pork chop for the dogs. He will hold you steady in a way that you cannot possibly hold yourself.

When you go to bed that night, all tears and vomit and snot, he will wipe your face as if you could only produce pure water. He will soon do much more for people he loves much less. And at night, he will wake up alone, in not-quite the body you have memorized, changed now by sun and sand, in a bed so small there is no empty space where you should be.