



Source: Robin Wright, 'In the debate over Iran, more calls for a tougher U.S. stance', *Washington Post*, 09/08/07.

Tags: [disease](#), [disenchantment](#), [incarceration](#), [intimacy](#)

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This isn't my house, it isn't my café, it isn't even my neighbourhood. Picking up the phone seemed the best option. On the other end was a woman's voice. Business-like, serene, filled with acoustical confidence that everything has been anticipated. I couldn't startle her, couldn't budge her from her passive fuck-you-tone. Liar, I thought. I could tell she knew why I was here. This is how it starts. First, I jump from a window, for a reason, next I'm forever after anticipating nothing but lies, thinking of the ones I will tell as explanation. Damage done. Bravo! Finally the nurse responded to my calls, her cheeks and forehead, to my eyes, flush from laughing, and pressed in the syringe that would deliver me from pain.

The nightmares kept coming. Her aimlessly dragging her slippers back and forth from one end of the hallway to the other, from bedroom to bathroom. Ritualistically performing like an ancient rite of wandering. But to drive me mad. In my head I knew it wasn't real. I knew she couldn't see me, couldn't know I was crouched by the door, listening for telltale noises she was on her way out. The liberating metallic noise of her key in the lock. Closing the door behind her, the snap of the leash on her dog audible even as he jogged in place, thrilled for the chance to go outside.

I dashed to the window to confirm. Suspicious she was gauging my movements the same way I did hers. Nothing was harder than waiting for that moment. The truly remarkable thing was that it came at all. Wasn't she capable of hibernating for months at a time. She was. She had confided it to me. 'I know that I ruin people' she said. I agreed without realizing she was insulting me. My heart was racing but she was indifferent. I never knew how to respond, never knew that my palms up sign of reconciliation only made her hate me more.

She made a mess of everything, it was true. But on this particular day, at this particular moment, I was indubitably at fault. In order to make this point, but subtly, I went off on a tangent about early modern conceptions of property. But I was too distracted, trying to get the chronology just right in explaining how her actions were determined by all of history prior to this point. I resorted to simply stringing together a bunch of book titles that were on my to-read list. 'Who of us knows that the seeds of the year of decision during Franco's regime were planted in the story of American freedom and that there was nothing like it in the world...' and so on, till I began to add the titles of novels to my soliloquy and it lost all thread of coherence.

Finally, she intervened. She calmly picked up the iron sitting nearby and hit me over the head with all the force she could manage. By the time I came to, bleeding and groggy, she was back in her room. I wasn't angry, I knew that my discretion embarrassed her, that my sentences

annoyed her and that I wasn't sincere. Every conversation with her went this way; it began dignified, charming even, dishonest. It then went from whimsy to orations, mostly on my part. Frequently, I would resort to clichés about my youthful experiences to keep things personal and not so abstract. 'My father didn't listen so I slept outside till he got my point. School kids teased me because I was different.' I thought I was being seductive, planting little seeds for future moments when her sympathy was needed.

That night, alone in the bedroom, while she paced outside in the hallway, I realized I had to leave. Not eventually. Not in the morning. Now. And she couldn't know it. I couldn't turn the end into a cliché; if it was going to happen and if it was going to be permanent, it had to be silent. And she had to discover it, to realize that I was missing from the room, and come to terms with it on her own. I couldn't drag her down the path one more time only to be interrupted by another iron to the head or even worse an unanticipated buffeting of real feeling—like a commercial break in our gradual unravelling together.

I listened to the sound of her coming and going in periodic bursts from under the door. It was preposterous for me to wait; to hope she would finally fall asleep so I could sneak out undetected. I had long since given up on that possibility which left only the window. A few minutes later, the window open, the screen removed and quietly placed inside, I leaned out into the brisk night, three floors above the abandoned street, the rain intervening like some higher authority, cloaking my sounds, and I let myself go.

I was all right though now. Taking a break in the hospital cafeteria. Nothing could drag me back to the room where she was. In the chair, still whimpering. Delusional and judging me. Okay. But surrounded by all that sanitary equipment. By all those devices that made inhuman buzzing sounds. It was so much worse that way. Everything seemed arrested and pending, as if our lives together or apart would only resume through some transformative word, a new drumbeat. Clearly, something had to be said or else there was no chance for reconciliation.

Later on, some old men on welfare shuffled in, unknowingly trailing paper bags from their shoes. Other patients were doubled up in the hard-as-stone plastic booths. The whole place reeked of trapped urine, the janitors resigned to skirting the corners of the floor, leaving it to the agility of others to bypass the stink. Most seemed past caring, marching ahead, relishing the obscenity of ordering fast food surrounded by waste.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Michael Grosberg.*