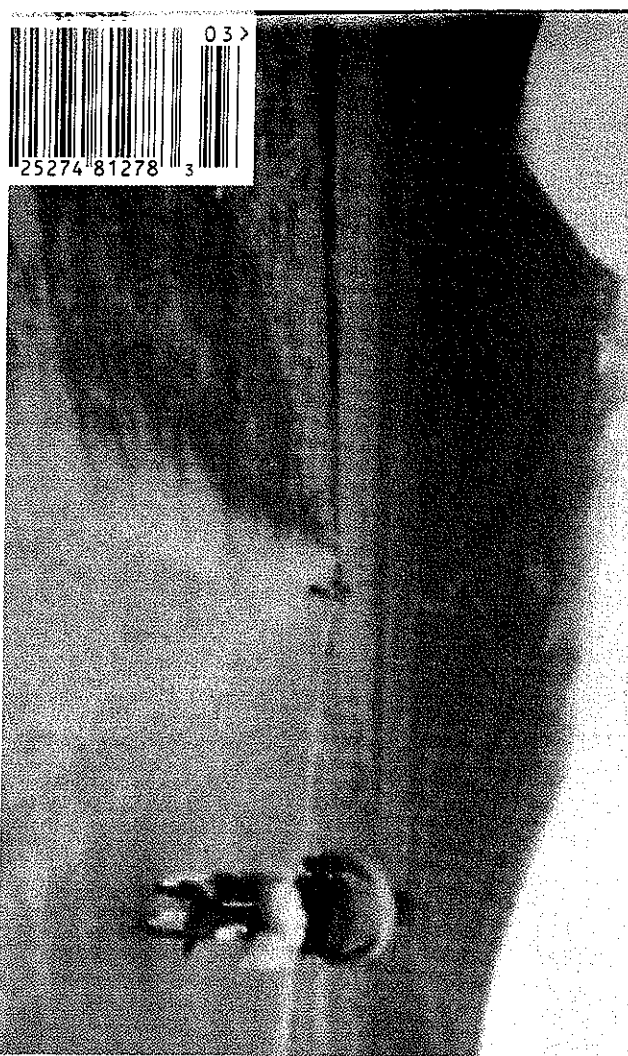


*The
Missouri
Review*

EXILES

ANTON CHEKHOV'S "INTENTIONAL DECEPTION"
RIDING WITH THE DEVIL: A CONVERSATION WITH DANIEL WOODRELL
THE MOST FAMOUS UNKNOWN: DJUNA BARNES AND EMILY HOLMES COLEMAN
PLUS LUCY FERRISS, ERIC PANKEY, LAURA KASISCHKE, CHARLES SIMIC—A N D M O R E



03 >



THE WOMAN WHO SAID NO/Lucy Ferriss

HE WAS PUTTING ON HIS SHOES when he told her. "Samantha wants a contract."

"A what?"

"Contract. Or something. She wants me to write something down."

"What kind of something down?"

"It should say that if I ever have sex with someone else again, our marriage is over."

They were both sitting on the edge of the hotel bed. "And you said?"

"I'd think about it."

Marian traced the print on the bedspread. It made a complicated geometric pattern, like Rubik's cube or a pair of those twisted nails that should come apart easily but don't. "How long do you have to think?"

"I don't know. She came up with the idea last week."

Marian ran her finger down Joe's back, lithe and muscled under the slippery cotton of his shirt. A quarter of an hour ago she had lain behind him, curled on the bed, and thought how similar one back looks to another—shoulder blades, trapezoids, the knotty rope of spine. That she was not Joe's first affair was part of his attractiveness for her: she needn't take him too seriously. "Well," she said, draping her arm over Joe's narrow shoulder like an old friend, "that's really between you and Samantha, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I suppose it is. I shouldn't bother you with it."

"But if you sign a contract and keep seeing me, you'll be in deep trouble," said Marian.

"I'm already in deep trouble."

"I think I'd want to break off if there was a contract on file." Marian drew away, was sitting cross-legged on the bed. "Then again, if you refuse to sign it she'll know you're up to something."

"That about sums up the possibilities."

Joe smiled, and Marian touched a lean dimple on his cheek. "So what are you going to do?"

"Stall. What would you do, counselor?"

Marian stood and began to dress. She was a tall, thin, freckled woman with gluteals far sexier than her slight breasts, and for that reason alone she kept her back to Joe as she slipped back into skirt, bra, blouse, hose. "She doesn't mean to catch you," she said, her eyes on the ray of December light that slipped between the heavy maroon curtains.

Joe had picked this hotel, a cheap, all-season place up a winding road at the New Hampshire border. "If she wants you to sign a contract like that, it means she's expecting you to be tempted, right?"

"She knows," said Joe, shaking out a sock, "that monogamy is not my strong suit."

"But she's also thinking you would tell her about it. Given the signed contract. And that by choosing to tell her, you'd be choosing to end your marriage. Which isn't at all, I think"—she turned around, her blouse half buttoned, and leaned over him to smell his curly hair—"what you're doing here. With me."

He didn't answer that one. He made her take her clothes back off, so that she was late and messy that day, getting back to work. And though she believed that what Joe wrote down for his wife was no business of hers, Marian Lewis was a lawyer and knew the ins and outs of contracts, the loopholes and the parsing of phrases, so the subject wouldn't quite move off her agenda.

She had met Joe at a party in Boston. No, not quite. First he had come up to Peterborough to report on the state senator's fabulous divorce. Then returned to check facts. Then in November Marian had driven her daughter Lisa, to Boston for sectional finals—girls' fourteen-and-under tennis—and stolen away from the match to a cocktail party, and there he had been, popping baby quiches into his mouth like a starving man.

There was always the chance she might have said no. The other times she had, in so many words, said no. Instead, under the ficus tree in the Boston loft, she had been the one to kiss Joe—on his neck, under his right ear. If she hadn't, he'd have kissed her. Or tried to. But she could have said no, and then he wouldn't have tried again. Sometimes, sitting in conference or driving through late-winter snow, Marian pictured herself saying no. Then suddenly it was as if she were living parallel lives, the life in which she'd said yes and the life in which she'd said no. And the lives were so much alike, even she had trouble telling them apart. Like those pairs of pictures in the puzzle books the children used to read, where you strain to find the ten differences between the pictures.

"Sometime you'll have to tell me," Joe had said, lying naked next to her on the hotel bed near the state border, "what you are doing here."

"I was hoping you'd tell me," she said, and blew on his chest, which had a thicker mat of hair than her husband Edward's and smelled like salted butter.

Throughout that winter Marian carried her affair inside her like a secret tant of blood. It came to her at odd moments, like when she'd dropped her son, Kurt, off for hockey and was on her way through wet snow to the mall. Turning the corner at the light, she'd think, I'm fucking a man not my husband, and a little rush would come between her legs.

Sometimes it would not come, and there were only the words, I'm fucking a man, so that Marian could consider them there in the slowly lightening days. I'm involved with someone outside my marriage, she tried sometimes, and she liked the way that sounded—as a line she might use on someone she was confessing to, if she were ever to confess—but she preferred to remind herself that what she was doing was fucking Joe.

The terrible thing ~~essentially she could find nothing wrong enough in her marriage to justify adultery~~ was that she was there out of frivolity; she could find nothing wrong enough in her marriage to justify adultery. She did it because she got away with it. Or worse, she did it in the hope that Joe would fall in love with her, would leave his pretty zoologist wife for her, would work to persuade her to leave Edward.

And of course she wasn't going to leave Edward, so this hope was mere vanity.

Marian was not a pretty woman. She had set her sights on Edward because of his beauty—his nose alone gave him the edge over Joe, who was snappy-looking at best—and because he sang. A lovely, dark-chocolate baritone. Songs from *Camelot* and *West Side Story*; he'd sung "Maria" to her on their first date, in law school, instead of the more obvious one about the librarian. Even now he told her all the time how beautiful she was. Her small, neat ass, her milky breasts, her slim hips and long waist. After fourteen years he remarked with wonder on what others might have called a stringy figure.

Joe never told her she was beautiful; he did not believe, she surmised, that she was. He only fucked her, and with such grace and urgency that she could not think of anything else while they were at it.

She had to be careful not to transfer Joe's style of lovemaking over to Edward. For instance, if she put the tips of her fingers into Edward's mouth for him to suck while she was straddling him, he'd have stopped what he was doing, torn her wrist away from his face, and stared a confession out of her. Or if she'd let him put a finger into her anus, the way he used to want to and she'd never let him. She let Joe do anything.

Joe was an investigative reporter. Generally he covered murders, also gruesome auto accidents and political scandals. He'd interviewed Marian in the first place because she had represented the senator in his

trial for divorce. They discussed the ethics of prenuptial agreements, the ethics of politics, the lawyer-client privilege, the ethics of marrying money. In retrospect, Marian thought, they'd both come off as remarkably ethical people.

"What if you wrote," she tried the next time she met Joe, at a ski resort where he was investigating a crime of passion committed by the cook, "that infidelity on your part would be grounds for divorce? There's a lot of wiggle room in 'grounds.'"

He tried to grin, but it didn't last. They were drinking Scotch, which he always brought along. Marian had been lining up their legs, which were almost exactly the same length, only Joe's were more muscled and dark with hair. "That's like Clinton dismissing oral sex," he said, swirling his drink. "It could squeak by in court but not in anyone's conscience."

"I haven't come up with much else."

He put his hand, the one with the ring, on her thigh, rubbed a damp spot with his thumb. "It's not your job to, counselor," he said.

There would be nothing legally binding about it, of course. Joe could write, *Evidence that I am having an affair with another woman will mean the end of our marriage*. He could write, *On learning that Joe is having sex with another woman, Samantha may choose to end the marriage*. Samantha would spot the slippery language in both those versions. Their condition was the affair's coming to light, not the affair itself, and the second one put the burden of proof on Samantha.

This marriage will continue only on the condition that neither partner has sex with anyone outside the marriage. The second his penis penetrated Marian, Joe's marriage would end. Would he then need to rush home and tell Samantha that their union had ruptured? Could the end of a marriage be one partner's secret?

Marian began to consider Samantha a very clever woman. She was relying on Joe's faithfulness, not to her but to the words he set down on the page.

Twice in January Marian saw Joe, and they didn't mention the contract. Meeting Joe could be tricky business. He drove up her way on short notice, following the news, whereas her days were tightly booked. Marian handled what she labeled "price-tag divorces." It wasn't the prettiest field of law, negotiating settlements between people worth seven figures each, but because these people enjoyed the privilege of contacting their attorney at home, she was likewise able to construct a flexible schedule for herself. Her assistant, Pearl, who had grown

children, was sensitive to Marian's need to keep tabs. If she started out of the office without mentioning where she was headed, Pearl was sure to pull out her notepad. "You'll be in range?" she'd say. "You won't forget your four o'clock? Sure you don't want me to have that material faxed?" The surprising thing, Marian sometimes thought, was not that she was morally willing to commit adultery but that she had the brain power left over to concoct the appropriate excuses.

After the second winter rendezvous, two months went by with nothing but e-mails. Joe was covering a murder trial on Cape Cod, a fisherman who'd strangled his boss with fishing twine and thrown him overboard in a net. It was bleak on the Cape. Joe's wife wanted him to drive home every night, ninety miles. *What about the contract?* Marian wrote. Meaning, did he have another lover on the Cape?

We're working on wording, Joe wrote. *If it weren't for you*, he wrote, *I'd have no problem with the thing*.

Meaning he had no other woman, at the moment. Marian found herself grinning as she drove Lisa to practice. "What's so funny, Mom?" Lisa asked. She was a muscular girl who resembled her father; when she lost a match, which she did often enough, she sucked in her lower lip for a long minute, then shrugged and flipped her racquet up.

"Nothing, honey. Just something someone at work said."

"What? Is it a joke?"

"Sort of. A grown-up joke."

"You can tell me," said Lisa. "Dad lets me watch *Seinfeld*."

"No." Marian worked hard to straighten her mouth. "It's not that funny, really."

Things are better at home, Joe wrote when the Cape Cod trial was over. He was looking for an assignment in New Hampshire. Maybe she had some legal business in Boston?

Did you ever sign that contract? she wrote.

In reply he wrote a very long, funny e-mail about a man who'd been caught slaughtering pigs on his balcony in South Boston and selling the meat. He tacked on a P.S. to say that he missed her hands on his ass and another P.S. to note that things were still pretty smooth at home.

Meaning that Samantha had decided to drop the whole contract idea. Well, it was a stupid idea. Judging from Marian's clients, if you had to resort to a legal document beyond a marriage license to keep your husband from straying, you might as well forget the whole thing.

Of course, Marian didn't know Samantha. She'd heard that Samantha worked with large cold-blooded animals at the Boston Zoo; she was competent and affectionate and came home stinking of snake. Which did not seem to be the source of Joe's compulsive infidelity, though

surely it didn't help. Marian pictured Samantha as all the things she wasn't: small, rounded, fair, faithful. Lying awake next to Edward, she thought of Joe's loose, almost hairless testicles resting against his wife's plump thigh.

Spring arrived early in New Hampshire. Mud season came and went in a week. The streams swelled. Crocuses gave way almost instantly to tulips and daffodils, and the trees leafed out dangerously. Edward's schedule—he was a tax attorney, mostly for small businesses—picked up, and Marian cut back to help more at home. By April, despite the e-mails and a couple of office phone calls, she had almost become the woman who had said no. Lisa persuaded her to pound balls together on the town courts as soon as the thermometer went above forty degrees. Kurt broke his arm falling from his bike in the muddy slush, and Edward spent his evenings helping his son write left-handed homework. When the kids were in bed, Marian and Edward spread out a map of the Canadian Rockies and started sketching a plan that involved summer backpacking and sightings of moose. "Younger than springtime are you," Edward sang when she won the state senator's case. "Gayer than laughter are you. Warm as the winds of June are the gentle lips you gave me."

Edward's face was a flawless oval, his ears small, his nose so sharp and firm it seemed to lack cartilage. Approaching to kiss her, he held his mouth slightly open, his tongue already at his lips, so that she thought of being licked by a dog. "Please," she giggled at the song.

"Please what? What can I do to please my brilliant wife? Would you like a nice slow backrub? My hands on your delectable thighs? Him?" As if it had happened to a close friend, Marian remembered making love with a man who never praised, never asked how he might please her, who created pleasure with the force of his desire. "Everything you do," she said to Edward, injecting a sultry tone. "makes me feel nice."

The next week her computer brought a note from Joe. He'd landed an assignment, he wrote, a utilities scandal up by Bristol. He would be leaving in the morning, a two-day trip.

Did that give her enough time?

She would think of something, she wrote back. And assigned that task to the woman who had said yes, while she went on with the day's work.

That night the rain started late and changed over to sleet in the small hours. The kids prepared to leave with Edward for school. Kurt holding his plastered arm close to his chest as if the sleet would dissolve it, Lisa tugging her racquet. "Be careful!" Marian said to them.

"This sucks," said Kurt.

"Be over in a day," said Marian.

"In Florida," said Lisa, "they're wearing halters by now."

"In Florida," said Edward, "tax lawyers are the earth's scum."

"So do divorce," said Lisa.

"And leave your lovely mother? Perish the thought," said Edward.

"Dad, I meant . . ." started Lisa, but then she saw him wink at Marian. "Jesus, let's go," she said.

Whistling "April, Come She Will," Edward fitted on his sunglasses, a perverse trick he always pulled when the weather turned gray, as if to fool himself into thinking that the shades were what made the day gloomy. Marian didn't remark. She didn't like to talk much when she was going to see Joe. Each phrase, each bit of daily business, made her aware of the deception. Breathing, she felt a bubble at the center of her chest.

Then her family was gone from the street, and she pulled together papers, snapped off the coffee machine, and took herself to work as if the only disturbance in the day were the stuff coming from the sky. From the office, she phoned Joe at the *Globe*. "Just making sure," she said.

"Weather's lousy, I hear," he said.

"An indoor day." She tried to make her voice sound suggestive, but instead was reminded of a playground aide planning recess.

"We can check in at that little hotel," he said, "at two o'clock."

"The one in the mountains? Is it open?"

"Eager for our business," he said. And then, dropping his voice,

"Samantha's on again. About the contract."

"Oh, dear." She sat at her desk. "I haven't come up with a good solution to that," she said. "Have you signed anything?"

"Not . . . well, not really. I've been fiddling with it."

"So bring what you've been fiddling with. I'm a lawyer. I do contracts. Maybe we can find something you can live with. I mean, not that I care. But it's important to you."

"Thanks," he said. He sounded edgy.

"So we're still on."

"Oh, yeah. Yeah. As close to two as I can make it."

They hung up. Marian's hands were sweating. She rose and went to the window of her office—six stories up, the highest building in Peterborough. Before, when she had arranged to meet Joe, the confirming phone call had resembled foreplay. She'd known precisely what her alibi was. She'd been living her day already as though the Marian who was not having an affair really *was* going to the law library

in Keene or the coffeehouse in Exeter. The Marian who spoke with Joe just before meeting him was usually the shadow Marian, the one who'd said *yes*. Today, though, the sleet had spoiled things. Today, the Marian who had said no had answered the phone, had made the arrangement as if it were an item on the schedule Pearl so carefully kept.

She spent the morning on the phone with an attorney in Portsmouth, hammering out details of a custody arrangement between an airline pilot and his pediatrician wife. She represented the husband, who wanted weekends, summers and holidays; the wife wanted Christmas. The children were two, four and five. She stayed in for lunch. Outside, it had begun to sleet again, the daffodils bending under the weight. Joe was driving north by now. Edward was tucked into his home office, humming through the numbers. At ten minutes past one Marian left a note on Pearl's desk: *Come shopping, back by four*. She would forget her cell phone. People did sometimes. They wandered off, they got distracted. Such was the stuff of which movies were made. Marian had always worried under the surface about the jobs and families and ordinary futures of the characters in movies, whose lives seemed to happen only when they slacked off.

But she could explain it all away for this one time.

Joe had crusted on the car. She stood toe-deep in slush in spring shoes and scraped. Around her in the parking lot, people hugged their thin coats, hoisted umbrellas. In the car she turned on both heat and defrost and waited until warm air was blasting her wet toes, then pulled out of the lot and headed east. She had expected, she realized as she paused at the first light, to be stopped—to run into a client, or Pearl asking what on earth she meant, shopping in this weather. *Why, Marian, you never shop!*

The sleet changed over to rain, then back to sleet. Cars were fishtailing in the fast lane. Marian had the windshield wipers going double time, like snake tails lashing. The defroster blew at top heat, the air in the car was like a desert. Here and there cars had pulled over, their drivers huddled inside or seeking shelter at one of the taverns along the way. Bushes in full bloom dragged on the ground like dresses tossed aside. At the Allenbury exit she turned onto Oxbow Road, which wound around a long hill toward the motel. This was what you did. You drove ridiculous distances in awful weather to fuck in a cheap motel and give flimsy excuses about it later. Oh, she loved it. Joe with his sharp chin, Joe with his hand making her damp before she could get her clothes off. The car climbed. The Marian who had said no dropped behind.

And yet. If Edward had asked her. If he had said—which he never would, because he would never know—but if he had said, "Write me a contract," she would have written it in five minutes. And called Joe. And said, "It is over." Who waited for such things? Who could sign such things and go on with the betrayal?

The motel smelled of coffee and carpet cleaner; the lobby was so poorly lit that at first she didn't see Joe, lounging by the hostess bar with a Styrofoam cup. "Hey, beautiful," he called in a low voice.

"Where's your car? Am I late?"

"Around back. No."

"I left my cell phone at the office."

"Clever girl."

She'd approached him and now they kissed, each of them tipping their faces exactly the same amount. Joe had put the cup down and slipped that warm hand under Marian's raincoat to her waist. He was wearing reporter's clothes, brown leather jacket and a loose-weave shirt. "So what's this case?" she asked him.

"Tell you later." He had her hips pulled to him; she could feel his erection. With his free hand he brought forth a slim plastic card. "Room 204," he said. "Same as before."

"Poet," she said. And tried not to be embarrassed by the oblique stare of the small, neatly coiffed woman behind the reception desk as they mounted the stairs at the back of the lobby.

They made love quickly the first time. Marian had worn clothes that were easy to remove, and their bodies coupled as though making sure they still fit. Joe brought out the Scotch and fetched plastic glasses from the bathroom. She liked to watch him move, from behind—the fine set of his hips, his small bare feet. She had come, but so quickly that it seemed an accident, and in her mind's eye she still saw the sleet battering her windshield, the tire marks of skidders on the road. "So tell," she said when they'd clicked cups, the plastic only whispering, "about the contract."

"There's not much to tell." He smiled his roguish smile.

"You didn't bring anything?"

"No."

"You said she was on about it."

"She's been anxious." He paused. "I'm gone so much. We talked about my changing over to editorial."

The Scotch burned down Marian's throat. Water, that's what she'd really like. "You signed it," she guessed. "Didn't you?"

"No!" He swallowed his Scotch, a little too quickly she thought. "Haven't even got the wording hammered out. That's not so important, anyway."

He put his plastic cup down on the pressed-board side table and moved lower on the bed. Taking her foot in his hands, he began to massage the ball and arch. As he bent his head, she could see a bald spot the size of a poker chip. Marian leaned back against the headboard.

"That trial on Cape Cod," he was saying, "was about the bottom of the barrel. I mean, the murderer was schizoid. He should have been in the mental health system a decade ago. And they were all dirt poor and alcoholic except the Hispanics, who aren't really fishermen. They're cocaine runners. I felt slimed, just covering the thing. Knocking out the sensationalist prose, getting it in under the word count." He moved his hands to her Achilles tendon, stretched her calf muscles. "I've got to change my life, Marian," he said.

She was only half listening. The foot felt delicious; the other one waited eagerly for its turn. But something wasn't right. "The contract," she said again. "I mean, are we really talking about a contract?"

He looked up at her dreamily. "Don't be a lawyer," he said.

She shut her eyes. He was doing her toes now. When he'd done both feet they would make love again, more slowly and with greater intent. If Joe was lying, if he had signed a contract, he might have done it yesterday or last week—or last fall even, before they began. He'd meant to break it to her slowly because he wasn't ready to give her up yet. For Joe, a contract with Samantha would imply—for no good and certainly no legal reason—a certain grace period. Before the conditions actually locked in. By the end of, say, May, when he was prepared to part from Marian, he would admit to having signed the thing.

On the other hand. He'd taken up the left foot now, thank God, his thumb on the arch. On the other hand, there may have been no contract at all. Neither requested nor proffered. He mentioned such things to women to give himself an escape hatch. When he was ready to end the affair, he counted on his co-conspirator's sense of decency. The minute he claimed he'd actually signed the contract, whatever woman he was with would feel obliged to break off.

"You can tell me you signed it," she said, her eyes shut. "I won't ask about wording."

"Jesus, Marian. Can you just stop about the contract?"

"It's not my contract."

"Exactly. I'm trying to tell you something else."

He was, too. Ever since the phone call yesterday, Joe had been trying to tell her something else. Only it was sleeping outside, bending the

newly leafed branches, and they might let school out early, and her husband would sing to her, and what was she doing here?

"I can't say yes," said Marian. Unexpectedly her eyes filled with tears.

"I haven't even asked yet," said Joe. He'd let go of her feet, was kissing her legs, moving upward. She reached for her Scotch, finished it.

"I need a drink of water," she said.

"In a minute." He was at her belly now, nipping the tender skin with his teeth.

"I'd rather," she said, letting him pull her flat on the bed, "that there be a contract."

"I'm going to ask you," he murmured against her skin, "to change your life with me."

"I told you. I can't say yes."

"I haven't asked yet."

He turned her over onto her belly. Against the warm sheets all the places he'd nipped her were buzzing. He moved down and licked between her buttocks. She looked at the wide, low window—they hadn't drawn the curtains, nothing but woods outside—where sleet still flung itself. Lisa, she thought. Kurt. Edward. As if they were out there somewhere, slogging through the cold muck, the downed branches. People she knew, who knew her, the other Marian. Then Joe's penis was between her buttocks, his hand on her breast.

"No," she said.

"It's new for me, too," he said. She heard for the first time the fear in his voice. His cock pushed forward a little. She clenched, then released, and the tip of his shaft entered her.

She was fucking Joe. Joe was fucking her. There either was a contract or there wasn't. She would let him do anything, those were the terms. It made no difference, no obvious difference, in the rest of her life. Marian repeated these phrases to herself while Joe kissed her between her shoulder blades. Then he pushed in further, and began moving.

She groaned. She didn't form any words. His hand moved down, between her legs, and one finger went inside her where his cock wasn't, while the others moved among the folds of her labia, her clitoris. He pushed his penis in further, moving, really fucking her there now, and a queer taste filled her mouth, and she wasn't even sure she was Marian any more, and with a shock she came. Only then, after a few more thrusts, did he pull out—he had gone deeper than she thought—and spilled warm across her lower back, with a catch in his throat as he let go, and his gamy fingers in her mouth where her lips held them.

They lay hot on the white sheets. After a minute, Joe rose and went again to the bathroom, and came back with a plastic cup filled with water. Marian drank, the strange taste still in her mouth. Then she lay on her back. On Joe's thigh, her hand barely trembled. He was not handsome, she thought. His face wore its lines hard. In late middle age he would take to combing hair over his bald spot, giving attention to his sloping forehead, his hook nose, the creases in his neck.

"I don't have an assignment in New Hampshire," he said. "I wrote a contract and then tore it up. I left Samantha."

Marian didn't say anything. Clumsily, propped on an elbow, she finished off the water. If "left" meant "was kicked out by" there was nothing in Joe's Scotch-roughened voice (he would never sing to her) that called his innocent, clever wife to account. Raising herself up, Marian put her arms around Joe. There was no difference between his smell and hers, both of them violated and rank and intimate.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked.

Against his shoulder Marian shook her head, but then had to say it. "No, Joe," she said.

"No what?"

He was a person now, to her. That was the awful part. "You didn't hurt me," she confessed. And felt with the intensity of a spring storm how she would drive back down the mountain, tires slipping, unable to resist the sleeted road that ran between no and yes.



Lucy Ferriss is the author of four novels, most recently *The Misconceiver*.