

Couch

My husband and his girlfriend, his then girlfriend, bought a blue couch. He tells me they had a fight about couches—he wanted a cheap, expendable one; she wanted one you could plant a garden around. I guess he won, for this couch isn't exactly the cat's pajamas when it comes to couches—though he used to nap on it while watching golf, and he proposed to me on it one Valentine's Day, too. So you could say, in a sense, that it has held up.

I was reading *On the Road* the day we moved into our new house, the first house I'd ever owned. I had become nervous the day we signed all the papers. I chatted away and it was only later I realized that my blouse had stained armpits, quite stained, and so while I thought I was exhibiting charm and ease, I was an example of fear and stress, then and now. Later, when talking about *On the Road* to a student who seemed to have some On the Road characteristics himself, I couldn't help myself from saying, "But I still can appreciate some of the qualities of the book, the concept..." I realized then that I was thirty-six years old, with a baby, a husband, a job, and a house, the vast and literal opposite of anything old Jack Kerouac considered worth adoring.

There was a man I knew a long time ago—I think I told you about this—who was cracked and loquacious and charismatic. A few months ago my husband and I were watching a rented movie and the baby was asleep and the phone rang. "Hello?" I said, and he—cracked, loquacious, charismatic—said something back to the effect of "What are you wearing, sweetheart?" or "I still think about you all the time, baby." I hung up. He hadn't identified himself, and though I thought I recognized the voice, I wasn't absolutely sure—actually I did know who it was, my body rang with certainty, but I wasn't absolutely sure he'd

call back if I hung up on him. I wasn't absolutely sure I had to follow through with this call. "Crank caller," I said. The phone rang a minute later, and my husband answered, and cracked, loquacious, charismatic asked for me.

I pretended to have hung up by accident, and I felt awkward and falsely nice. He was saying something—a scheme of some kind, what he was doing, still in Nantucket, lost all his belongings, a new philosophy maybe. I couldn't make heads or tails of it, which I enjoyed in a sense, but it also scared me a little. Even though I hadn't had sex with this man for a long time, talking to him on the phone made me feel like I was cheating on my husband, and there my husband was, sitting calmly and unperturbed on our new red chair, watching TV. Our child was upstairs. Then the man said he wanted to tell me something. He had been thinking about me. He remembered how beautiful and amazing I was twenty years ago, and he still loved me.

"Oh, well, thank you," I said.

The wood floors seemed shiny and long, like I could skate on them if I were wearing socks. This was a rented house, but I'd made a commitment. Probably the first commitment I'd ever really made to anyone—or, in any case, one that I had not broken.

In this new house, no one knows my number yet. No old boyfriends, hardly any friends, just my parents, and while my mother has probably already put the number on speed-dial, my father has probably lost it even though I've given it to him three times. When I visited my father last, I had to tell him that his mother had died. He was playing tennis. When we went to the wake, all the cousins had become the aunts and uncles, and the aunts and uncles had become grandparents. I get the sense that charming, loquacious is spinning around in a time warp, on the other side of the continent, but that is surely not the case at all. He must have changed in all this time. When I last saw him, my grandmother had her wits about her, and we still talked, sporadically, on the phone. When I last saw him, my father and I were still at slight odds, and my mother and I hadn't found our disagreement yet.

Now my husband and I are considering—well, more than considering—having a second child. If I use the urine test to monitor my hormone level, or if I put a pillow under my ass and lie still like a feverish waiting person afterward, or if I tell him we've got to make love today, tomorrow, and Thursday, do I change the course of fate?

Does this potential new child live differently than if things were catch-as-catch-can, off the cuff?

We have two couches now, my husband and I, but we also have lizards, little golden and black lizards that leap and slither in the corners of our walls and around our houseplants. Last night, making love, he smelled different than he'd ever smelled before.