

Evelyn Lau / IF WISHES WERE HORSES

She does not know her lover's home phone number, and when she calls his office Alice uses another name. "This is Iris Clear," she says in a detached, business-like voice. "Yes, he'll know what it's regarding." Sometimes the secretary puts her through as soon as she gives this name which is not her own, so that suddenly David is no longer in a meeting or away from the building, but just as often she is added to his list of messages. The walls which keep out his business enemies have the added effect of excluding the woman with whom he says he feels completely vulnerable.

Alice thinks she will put up with any conditions just to be near David, the first man for whom she has felt this confusion of desire. To kneel in front of him, to take him in her mouth and glimpse between her lowered lashes his head flung back against the back of the couch in her apartment, his face and throat silver in the glow of the streetlight through the window, his expression concentrated inward upon pleasure.

"Why am I doing this?" she had said at first, her cheek against his thigh.

"Don't do it then, if you don't know," he said softly, motionless, and she shook her head and continued, because it was what she wanted to do.

Now she seeks his body as though it is a source of sustenance. His skin is as white as marble yet warm and full of scent. When she drowns with her arms clasped around him and her hair tumbled across his stomach, she matches the rhythm of her breathing to his until she feels there is no longer anything separating them.

They have been seeing each other for half a year; in the seventh month David goes on holiday with his wife to celebrate their fifteenth wedding anniversary. "I'll think of you," he says; she does not ask him to say anything more. But it is during this time that Alice starts waking at four in the morning, always after the dream where David is standing

at the end of a corridor that slopes downwards; behind him is the opening that leads into the belly of an airplane. She is running towards him from the other end of the corridor, shouting his name and some words too — it seems he has forgotten to give her something important. Upon hearing her he turns and opens his hands without lifting them; he raises the palms to show that they are empty. Already the wind outside the terminal is tugging at his hair, lifting it in lustrous waves so that it blows like a flag. He is wearing colours she has never seen on him before, not his usual black suits and gray cashmere sweaters, but browns and greens, the colours of the earth. A stewardess appears behind him to guide him into the plane. When Alice wakes, always at the same instant, always just before he turns and walks on board — she can see him starting to turn, the twist in his shoulders, there is never any question he is going to leave — it is with the feeling that everything alive in the world is leaving with him.

She grows used to the way the city sounds at four in the morning — the settling of the leaves in the trees in the neighbourhood, a breeze like an exhalation, nearby the thin, scratchy singing of a solitary bird. She lies in bed until this is no longer bearable, then she paces the moonlit living room floor. She feels as if her body is on fire, as if she is burning up without him. Four a.m. is a suspended hour, full of darkness yet with a detectable glow that lies waiting inside it, ready to bloom the way electric lights soon will in bedrooms and kitchens while husbands and wives wake and prepare for the day's work. It takes a while for the sky to lighten, and Alice is exhausted by the time it does.

She does not know how other people have affairs and manage simultaneously to go on with their lives. Often by mid-morning she feels as if she has already completed her work in the battleground of sleep and the effort of rising. From the office she goes directly to the gym where, with her hair tied back and sweat spreading between her breasts, she races on stationary bikes and climbs digital hills on Lifecycles. The beat of the music is obsessive, and around her women's limbs pump through one set of exercises after another. "Four! Three! Two! One!" the aerobics instructor shouts between clenched teeth, lips stretched in perpetual grin. There Alice thinks about David and recalls how he smiles at her, slightly more with one corner of his

mouth than the other, and how it feels when he holds her hand and laces their fingers together as if they are teenagers and in love. She also thinks of the one time he cried when he was with her, the tight sobs forced up past his throat like water travelling a long way up through a crack in layers of stone.

"I can't," he said in the darkness that had entered her apartment. His face was chalky, his agitated fingers stroked her own damp cheeks. "Do you think I haven't thought about it? I think about it everyday. Every day. But I love her. I could never hurt her like that. I made her a promise a long time ago: till death do us part."

Till death do us part. In the evenings Alice sits in her study, bags of junk food and photographs of his wife Helen spread out on the desk in front of her. She clips the photos out of business magazines and newspapers where profiles of David appear; most are publicity shots, but some were taken at receptions and dinners where Helen was at her husband's side. One after another, Alice tears open packages of cream-filled cookies and sugared donuts, conveying the contents almost robotically to her mouth; she studies the photos until her neck tightens and a throbbing starts in her temples.

She thinks she knows what it is like to live inside Helen's body, wearing her clothes, that designer sweater with the gold buttons, that white suit. She can feel against her own skin the barbed caress of the cashmere sweater, the cooler liquid sensation of the suit. There is no doubt that her lover's wife, approaching middle age, is still an attractive woman. She wears plum lipstick and has straight light brown hair that frames her heart-shaped face. Her eyes are slightly downcast in the outer corners, lending her an air of sadness and introspection.

Alice lingers longest over a recent photograph in which David and Helen are standing at the head table in a hotel ballroom, either about to sit down or to applaud the evening's speaker. Their faces are tilted back a little, suggesting to Alice that they are looking up at someone at a podium. This photograph was taken only hours after David had come to see Alice in her apartment. Yet there is nothing about his face or the way he stands that indicates he has recently been intimate with anyone other than his wife. They stand easily beside each other, and Alice thinks she sees between them a comfort and a love that will last.

There is nothing awkward about their pairing, nothing staged. She recognizes in their faces and bodies the looks of two people who will remain attractive into their retirement, who will grow to resemble the couples in life insurance commercials, with crisp silver hair and laugh lines radiating from their eyes.

Alice stares at this photograph until it dissolves into black and white particles, the grain of the newsprint exposed. Nausea rises in a sour wave inside her as she searches David's face for some evidence of their affair, not knowing exactly what she is looking for but expecting it to be there — a small bruise, a wisp of lipstick, the crescent shapes of her fingernails on the backs of his hands. But his body betrays nothing; he is smiling quite cheerfully, and his wife is smiling too, her burgundy lips parted over her teeth. Yet hours before Alice had bit his mouth while they were kissing, her shoulder blades pushed back against the bedroom wall and his hands on her upper arms, bit him hard enough that he released her and leapt back, exclaiming. She laughed and drew her finger gently along his hurt lip; he approached her again, cautiously, and she kissed him softly then, holding his lower lip between hers as if it might burst if she exerted more pressure.

"Sometimes you hurt me," he told her once, gravely. What he does not know is that any pain she gives him is not out of her rising excitement, but because she is trying to leave a mark upon him. That is why she bites his mouth as if to draw blood, to break the skin's elastic surface and taste his opened flesh. That is why she buries her face, her breasts in his hair, leaving it scented and unruly. She wants only to leave some mark of her passing on his body, so she can point to it later in a photograph and say, I did that, I was a part of this man's life. Because David has been careful from the beginning, leaving her not so much as a handwritten note in the time they have been together; she has nothing to prove he loves anyone other than the woman at his side, whose smooth hair and gold jewelry reflect the light.

Alice can no longer trust anything in the media, not even the photographs, not when David can smile out from the pages of a newspaper without even a shadow across his face. It makes her dizzy to think of all the private lives teeming behind those who are in the public eye — the real lives of the men with their wives, their families,

their mistresses, and also their interior lives that not even someone close to them can fathom.

When the dizziness and the nausea overwhelm her, she goes to the bathroom and kneels in front of the toilet, bringing up in sweet, doughy lumps the forbidden foods she has consumed. Her head swims when she straightens, but as she splashes water on her face and brushes her teeth she feels cleansed, some of the pressure inside her released. She feels ready to return to the photographs and, her stomach empty again, what remains of the food.

Back in the study Alice touches the image of David's face with her fingertip, traces the line of his tuxedo. He looks perfectly in the moment, as if he has already forgotten the afternoon, as if he is only listening to the words issuing from the podium, the clatter of glasses, and feeling his wife's presence at his side. Alice wishes she had bit him so hard his lip had split and blood had trickled spongily into her own mouth. She wishes that in the photograph he winces as he smiles, a gash in his lower lip attracting the reader's eye — is it just a smudge on the newspaper, a spill of ink? — and that his wife stands stiffly and is also finding it hard to smile. She wants them to look pained, valiant, disrupted like people desperately straightening themselves out to face the public after a private battle. But to look at them as they are in the papers makes Alice feel as if she does not exist; in the public's perception of what is real, she does not.

On weekends when Alice goes running she passes couples on the street going about their Saturday afternoon business. Sometimes the husbands remind her of David — their hair rumpled the way his becomes when she runs her fingers through it, or their strong cheekbones which stand out almost painfully in their faces. Some of them have an air of vulnerability that shows they might yet be blown off course, seduced by another woman. They look as if some time in their lives they will lie awake in bed staring at the ceiling, torn apart by different impulses, and for this weakness Alice feels a rush of empathy for these strangers.

Once she saw a woman across the street who looked like Helen. The woman was standing on the porch of a newly renovated house, fumbling in her purse for sunglasses; she wore a white blazer over silk

trousers, and her straight, shoulder-length hair separated where it brushed her collarbone. It was a very light brown, like Helen's hair. Alice stopped and stood for a while, panting, rotating her ankles, watching her from behind a parked car. She waited while the woman crossed the lawn to the sidewalk, her heels tapping neatly, and slid into the passenger seat of a waiting Jaguar. Alice knelt when the driver glanced in her direction; she pretended to re-tie her shoelaces while he started the car.

She thinks that at any given moment, somewhere in the world, an affair is beginning or ending. Yet she cannot see beyond her situation with David and Helen. She has fantasized a hundred times about phoning Helen at her office, making her cry out with a few words about her husband's soft kisses on Alice's face and hands and belly, how he bites her nipples until they are red and sore. She realizes she is obsessed with Helen, who has David's commitment while she does not; she knows he will always return to his wife in the end, no matter who he meets or where he goes. She wishes all the complexity of this devotion could be solidified into a tangible object she could squeeze out of his wife. She wishes this in the hours she spends at the gym, seated on a bench in front of the rack of free weights, watching her biceps curve in hard tanned ridges in the mirror. She thinks of her strong hands around Helen's fine, wifely neck not yet ruined by lines and wrinkles, choking her until she moans and spits up David's love. Then at last she can relinquish, let her head snap back, her body limp as a doll's that has been played with plenty and can now be retired, passed on to some less fortunate child, thrown out.

A year after the beginning of the affair, Alice shows up at a black-tie dinner to which her lover and his wife have been invited. Alice has chosen for the occasion a simple white dress with a round collar and lacy cap sleeves. In the shop that afternoon the saleslady said it made her look like a teenager, with her long hair and her slight, wiry figure.

She has thrown up ten times today and Alice feels almost ethereal as she makes her way towards her lover's table near the front of the ballroom.

"Hello David," she says, extending her hand.

The muscles in his face stiffen in shock. He begins to blink rapidly, as though trying to rid his vision of a speck of dust or a loose eyelash.

He touches her hand and releases it so quickly she closes her fingers upon the air.

Helen turns towards her with a polite smile, waiting to be introduced. For Alice, knowing what the next moment holds makes this one all the more poignant, so that she wants to take a picture of his wife this way — her carefully made-up eyes shining, her body expensively dressed and perfumed. Up close she can see the soft sagging skin under her eyes, the faint lines and enlarged pores that no amount of foundation can conceal. She feels a genuine sorrow for Helen, the Helen that is at this moment and can never be duplicated again, the Helen whose world is stable and whose husband trustworthy. This will not be the Helen in a little while, and Alice wants to embrace her there in the sea of tables, among the discreet caterers, in the purity of the moment before she is lost.

The future that is about to open between them makes Helen's face dazzling in its present painlessness. Alice takes a deep breath of the air that seems to be visibly flowing and weaving around her. When she opens her mouth she finds she has nothing to say, no words to illustrate the past year of her life. Instead she reaches out, trembling slightly, and strokes the other woman's hair with her fingertips.

Helen pulls away in alarm, staggering back against her chair as if she has been struck by this stranger whose hand remains suspended in the air. Both women turn then towards the man they love, each expecting him to do something to make things right.