

NICOLA WINSTANLEY

KEYS

AMANDA SITS ACROSS FROM HER THERAPIST every Tuesday and Thursday at 2pm. The therapist looks at Amanda directly and asks questions; Amanda answers them, and her game is not to lie, exactly, but not to tell the truth. She leaves things out. Important things. For instance, she never tells the therapist about the man she is seeing—the men she is seeing—although she knows she probably should. She never mentions the fashion photographer she met online a month after she and Mark had sold the house and moved into separate apartments—how on their first and only date, she had posed for him in his studio loft where he usually took pictures of aspiring lingerie models. He Photoshopped the best picture right there and then. In the edited version, Amanda hardly recognized herself. She looked ten years younger, at least, twenty years younger than him. “See?” he had said. “If you’d put this on your profile, I would have messaged you sooner.” Nor does she tell the therapist about the lawyer, the most recent lawyer, who had showed up two hours later than their arranged meeting time at The Rex. Drunk, his hair a mess, the front of his shirt stained and crookedly buttoned, he laughed contemptuously at Amanda because she had waited for him, alone, listening to the worst kind of jazz. Less than fifteen minutes after he had arrived, he leaned into her and slurred on sour breath, “You’re so tiny, I could pick you up with one hand and throw you.” Despite her long and hopeful waiting, Amanda decided this was a good time to leave. The lawyer offered to share a cab, back to his place first? She said yes, then snuck out when he was in the bathroom and jumped on the first streetcar; as far as Amanda was concerned, she had confronted something by leaving, by not just going home with him after all. This was progress. So why bother talking to the therapist about it? There was already enough to talk about.

“What about Mark?” Amanda asks sometimes. “Let’s talk about him.” But the therapist wants to talk about Amanda, nearly forty and a newly single mother of an eighteen-month-old and a six-year-old. She freelances

part-time, haphazardly and for not enough money, finding photographs for textbooks. She can't seem to find equilibrium since her separation, or if she is honest, before that too. She cries a lot and loses her temper, yells at the children and makes them toast for dinner. Because she doesn't know how to make Sam behave or get either child to bed at a reasonable time, they all end up sleeping in her double bed almost every night after falling down exhausted. Sam kicks and tosses and makes it impossible for Amanda to sleep, and she eventually crawls out from under the covers and lies curled around herself at the foot of the bed, on top of the duvet, like a dog. Most days, she oscillates between rage and misery but is so sleep deprived she can't tell the difference. Mothering, she has discovered, is much harder than she thought it would be. When the therapist asks Amanda to talk about it, she says, "Why didn't anybody warn me?"

Each week, the therapist asks Amanda to take responsibility for herself, to acknowledge her own part in the making of her messy life: "Who made that decision? Whose fault was that?" the therapist asks when Amanda tells her about her latest failure with the children or her work. She asks gently, then leans back in her chair, fingers laced across her belly, and sighs as though she had just enjoyed a good meal. Amanda won't respond. They both know that these aren't really questions because they both already know the answers.

Sometimes Amanda says, "I would rather talk about my dreams. I thought therapy was supposed to be poetic." Then, for a while, they will talk about Amanda's dreams, even though Amanda makes them all up. She can't remember any of her dreams and wouldn't tell the therapist what was in them if she could. The dreams she describes are not lies, though. Amanda makes up her dream stories from her own imagination after all, from what's inside her own head.

"Last night I dreamed I was driving, but I had no control of the steering," Amanda tells the therapist after a fraught week, the specifics of which Amanda is not willing to discuss. "Then I was on a bridge, but it arched so high in the sky, I couldn't see the other side. I thought the bridge was going to finish in midair, and as soon as I reached the crest, I would plunge into the sea. Then I woke myself up before I fell."

The therapist picks a thread off her pant leg, doesn't make eye contact, tips her head to the side. "What do you think that means?"

"Well, I'm anxious, obviously, and I have no control. Over my life." It's a good interpretation.

The therapist keeps picking at the thread. “Really?” She looks up at last and smiles brightly, as if Amanda had told her something else entirely. “What will you do this weekend, when the children are with Mark?” Then she waits for a very long time for Amanda to answer.

After nearly five straight minutes, Amanda shrugs and says, “I just remembered another dream, if you want to hear it.” She tells the therapist a dream about not remembering her lines for a play. A common dream, apparently; she had read about it online.

Amanda keeps coming to therapy because every time she tells the therapist she’s had enough and wants to stop the therapist says, “Clearly you’re not ready to stop. It’s just avoidance. If you really wanted to stop, you’d just stop. Why do you think we keep talking about it, but nothing changes?”

Amanda theatrically pulls at her hair when the therapist says that, but she never gets up and walks out. Though she’s never tried the handle, Amanda is certain the door is locked, and she doesn’t want to have to ask the therapist to let her out. She’s not entirely sure the therapist will. And what then?

Twice a week for months, the therapist asks about all manner of things that went wrong in Amanda’s marriage and all manner of things she is doing wrong now—unable to get the children to bed, unable to say no, unable to find better work, unable to stop spending money she doesn’t have on things she doesn’t need.

Sometimes Amanda grins and says, “I don’t know. It must be my childhood.”

Then the therapist slaps the arm of her chair as though she’s having a really good time and says earnestly, “Well, tell me about that.”

But Amanda doesn’t want to tell that story. She doesn’t feel connected to her childhood. “I’ve abandoned that,” Amanda says. “It’s long gone.”

“Abandoned? That’s an interesting way to put it, don’t you think, considering?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Amanda insists. She’s someone else now. Someone completely different. Not a child.

“I can help you, if you’ll let me.”

“What do you think I’m doing here?”

“It’s not about what I think.” The therapist frowns slightly, leans forward. “Why are you here, Amanda?”

“Because Mark cheated on me and destroyed our marriage!”

The therapist swings her head slowly. “That’s not it.”

Amanda had read Mark’s journal while he watched TV with the children on a Saturday morning. She told him that she needed to sleep, but as soon as he shut the bedroom door, she rifled through his backpack for the Moleskin he wrote in every day. Recently he had become even more reserved than usual. It didn’t matter if the topic was what to have for dinner or the difficulty she had with Sam at playgroup or her impossible wish they had family close-by to help—when Amanda spoke, Mark focused on a spot on the wall behind Amanda and responded with a low hum. He was already sleeping in the spare room. He couldn’t sleep, he said, with Sam in the bed, Lucy waking up three times a night still. He needed his own space.

Then he stayed late at work more often, went away to conferences. There were charges on the Visa bill for restaurants they had not been to together.

She knew it would be there, the evidence in the pages. Mark wouldn’t be able to help himself from writing it all down, so he could read about himself later. But Amanda had been shocked all the same when she found it. There he was, knocking on the woman’s hotel room door at a conference, kissing her in the elevator at work. What a cliché.

Amanda launched herself out of bed and down the hallway with the journal in her hand and threw it at Mark. It glanced off his shoulder. He said nothing.

Amanda went into the bathroom, ripped off her t-shirt, and got under the shower, turning the hot tap high enough to be painful and turn her skin red. She screamed under the thump of the water so the kids wouldn’t hear her.

When she got out, Sam and Lucy were plonked in front of the television, and Mark sat calmly on a chair in the corner of their bedroom with his arms folded. “It was only once.” Then louder, but measured still, “I can’t believe you read my journal. I can’t believe you would do that.”

“What about ‘sorry’? What about ‘I love you’?” Amanda wailed, infuriated further by his self-control.

Mark only frowned at her, as if he were the one who got to be angry.

“We have to get therapy then,” Amanda said. “You have to come with me, or I’m leaving.”

He wouldn’t go. And while he wouldn’t sleep in the same bed as her or talk to her about their marriage, or anything much at all, he wouldn’t leave

her, either. Amanda had gone to therapy on her own and complained about her impossible situation.

“Then it’s up to you,” the therapist said in their very first session. “It’s your life. You get to decide what happens next.”

Amanda never tells the therapist that on the weekends, when the kids stay overnight with Mark, she puts on makeup, tight jeans, and high heels and goes dancing. She makes herself into the kind of woman she wanted to be when she was younger. Thin, sharp. The kind of woman that men like. Amanda wears this person like a costume, or maybe armour.

Still, if she peers closely into the bathroom mirror, Amanda can spot the subtle droop of her eyelids, the tiny fissures running upwards from her top lip. There are stretch marks on her breasts and hidden beneath the fly of her low-rise jeans, all over her stomach—tears on the surface of her skin, as though the course of her life is ripping her to pieces in ultra-slow motion. The children had grown there. Now her skin folds and sags between her hips. At night, she lies flat on her back in bed and runs her hand over the dip between her protruding hip bones and wonders where it all went.

At El Convento Rico, Amanda drinks five shots of tequila then dances by herself, bumping up against anyone close as though they are dancing together.

From the edge of the dancefloor, a man follows her with his gaze as she spins across the room. Whenever she looks up, she catches him watching her, and when the club closes, he’s waiting for her outside. He is younger than her and good looking. Confident. He leans against a lamp post, a brown European cigarette in the corner of his mouth. As she walks past him, he catches her elbow to steer her the way he wants her to go and says close to her ear, “I like you. Come and have coffee with me.”

They sit in Coffee Time under bright fluorescents and drink burnt coffee out of Styrofoam cups. Casually, the man tells her he is rich and asks her to come home with him, so she can see the restaurant he owns.

Amanda holds her scalding coffee and sips it gingerly, tries to decide what to do. Under the bright lights, it’s easy to see the beginnings of wrinkles on the backs of her hands.

Sam and Lucy would be fast asleep at Mark’s, adorably curled up together because, although Mark won’t let the children spend the night in his

bed, they can't bear to sleep alone. At least three times, Lucy will get up and cry at Mark's door, and he will tell her to go back to bed, go back to sleep. Sam won't wake up, not even a little bit. Maybe Lucy is up now, crying. "She mostly asks for you," Mark tells her. "Where's Mama? Forgets, I guess."

"I can't," Amanda says at last to the young man.

"Why not?"

"I mean, no. I don't want to." She has practiced saying "no" with the therapist, but as soon as she says it, she's worried about what comes next.

The man lifts his arms and looks down at his young body and expensive clothes in mock surprise. "You've got to be kidding."

"I just want to sleep."

"Sleep?" he says, his languor gone. He stands up, points a finger in her face. "A whore like you?"

Amanda stares unwaveringly at the table top as he leaves, pretends he was never there in the first place.

She stays and finishes her coffee alone. It tastes like cigarette ash, acrid and hot, but she gulps it down, burning her tongue and throat, bringing tears to her eyes.

"Hey!" The only other customer, an old man at a table in the back, curls around his coffee cup and donut, protecting them from some imaginary onslaught. Beside him, a wire cart spills plastic shopping bags and odds and ends. "I told you so." He cackles gleefully and tears at his donut. "Told you."

By the time Amanda gets up and walks shakily outside, the streets are nearly empty. A few lost souls drag their belongings, and the odd taxi prowls. Amanda decides to splurge and flags one down. She is deeply tired and can barely sit upright in her seat, and when the driver breaks too hard at the lights she lurches forward and has to hold the seat in front to steady herself.

"Don't get sick in my cab." The driver tuts and shakes his head. "At your age."

As soon as she gets home, she goes to bed in her clothes with all the lights on but doesn't fall asleep until sunrise.

Six months after Amanda's separation, the therapist asks, "How much are you drinking?" because Amanda has let it slip that she doesn't feel so great and that maybe she drank a little bit more than she should have the

day before.

“Am I drinking?” The question has caught her off guard. She has said too much. “Not much. Not compared to some people I know.”

“Which people?” The therapist asks casually. She raises her eyebrows.

Amanda looks out the few inches of window between the not-quite-pulled curtains and glimpses the laneway. It’s piled with the garbage containers of all the residents who live in the apartments above the therapist’s office. Broken furniture, bikes. A stained mattress is propped against the wall.

“Why won’t you look at me?”

Amanda’s eyes slide around the room, resting for a moment on the bookcase directly behind the therapist, then the flowered wallpaper. A brass lamp. A small table with a glass of water. The door is old, solid oak. Before their session begins, the therapist closes it behind her and stands against it for a few minutes while Amanda settles herself. The door has a Victorian glass handle and a key hole that sometimes has a key in it. Not today. The therapist keeps one hand in her pocket—perhaps the key is in her hand.

“How much is not much?” The therapist presses, but softly, as though the answer doesn’t really matter.

Amanda is used to these traps. If Amanda tells her the truth, then the therapist will know it’s too much. But if Amanda says, “I don’t want to tell you how much,” then the therapist will know it’s too much. So, Amanda outright lies for once and tries to give a reasonable amount, an amount the therapist will believe. “Two. Not every day. Every couple? Sometimes one, sometimes three.” It doesn’t sound quite right. Is three drinks every couple of days a lot? “More on the weekend, I suppose. Only if Mark has the kids. When I go out. I don’t drink when the kids are home.”

“You go out.” The therapist nods her head slowly, as if she is beginning to understand, at last. “What do you do when you go out?” They could be friends, having coffee.

Amanda concentrates on a small tear in a tiny rose on the wallpaper. “I have girlfriends! We have dinner Saturday night—but never Sunday. That’s when the kids come home from Mark’s.”

“Three drinks a day?” The therapist sighs, smiles.

“You think I’m an alcoholic.”

“Are you?”

“No.” Amanda says. “I’m no worse than anybody else I know. There’s

nothing wrong with me. I don't even know what I'm doing here."

"Then why don't you just leave right now?"

"I am very afraid of making people angry, and you've made it clear that if I leave you will be very, very angry."

"Have I?" the therapist says. "I think you're projecting. What could be the harm in going to a meeting?"

On Wednesday nights, Mark comes over to Amanda's apartment, a broken-down two-bedroom on the ground floor of a Victorian house—the only thing she could afford in the neighbourhood after they sold their home. Amanda goes out to give Mark some more time with Lucy and Sam. They have decided the children are too young to go back and forth during the week. Mark has decided it; Amanda has agreed. He bikes over straight after work and rings their doorbell at 5:30.

Mark doesn't bother with hello, barely looks at Amanda as he hangs his helmet and jacket.

Lucy watches from the living room doorway as Amanda puts on her cardigan and zips up her bag. "When will you be home Mama?"

"You'll be in bed."

"I've got to get up at six, remember." Mark taps Lucy lightly on the head, but she ducks and shrugs him off. "I mean it. Don't be late again."

"You have no idea what it's like. I'm on my own."

"Whose fault is that?"

"What! You're the one who had the affair!"

"Don't!" Lucy wails. "Don't." She puts her hands over her ears and crouches low.

"Just go." Mark holds the door open.

On the way out, Amanda slips on the top step and her feet come out from underneath her. She catches herself just in time by grabbing the banister but bashes her knee.

She is still shaking by the time she reaches the end of her block, and once she's at the corner, Amanda realizes she doesn't know where to go. Usually, she would have a date, or would have arranged to meet some friends for drinks, but she has resolved not to drink this week. She doesn't have to drink, but she doesn't know how to do dating without drinking, and her friends are busy, and they are drinking friends anyway, so what else would they do?

She tries to ignore the deep throbbing in her knee and walks purposefully along College Street, toward Kensington Market. Although it's mid-week and early and getting colder, the patios are full and no one is alone except her. She thinks that in the market there might be music, or someone reading poetry, but as soon as she's there she's not sure she can sit in a bar and not drink, so she wanders up and down Augusta and looks into the store windows. All the market's brightness has been put away. It's just dirty and grey now, with piles of garbage on the curb. It makes Amanda disproportionately sad. This is a particular problem of hers, her therapist has told her more than once, the disproportionate nature of her feelings. She has suggested to Amanda that it might be an illness, something chemical, but Amanda won't have that conversation and changes the subject when the therapist brings it up.

Amanda stares for a long time through the fish shop window at two large rats who swirl around each other in the otherwise empty display case. She is not sure if she is filled with horror or anger or something else altogether.

There's nothing to do but walk back home then. She buys a slice of pizza on the way and sits outside the library on a bench but can't bring herself to eat because she keeps thinking about the rats.

She's home by eight and Mark is pleased. The children too. They go to bed in their own beds for once, and Lucy wraps her arms around Amanda's neck and kisses her sweetly on the cheek before turning over and closing her eyes.

As soon as the children are asleep, Amanda opens the bottle of wine she bought on the way home and drinks it all before falling into bed.

The next week, Amanda goes to AA. She tells the therapist it will give her something to do when Mark has the children.

The nearest meeting on Wednesday nights is in a church basement just around the corner from her apartment. By the time Amanda gets there, there are already fifteen or twenty people milling around outside the church. A few denim tuxedos, but also khakis and one knee-length pencil skirt with expensive pumps. It was probably a bad idea to come to a meeting so close to home, but apparently no one else is that reckless because Amanda doesn't recognize anyone as one of her neighbours.

A woman comes up to her straight away, singles her out. She is older

than Amanda, maybe sixty, but she looks good for her age. Her hair is a well-executed golden blonde, and her skin glows, even though she wears a lot of perfectly applied makeup. Lip liner, even. She extends her hand, palm down, as if to be kissed. Amanda takes it, and the woman squeezes. “Welcome. I’m Barbara. I’m an alcoholic.”

Amanda doesn’t trust people who say “welcome,” and she thinks she will laugh out loud because it’s just like she found herself in the middle of a TV cop drama and because she is nervous.

“There are all kinds of people who come here.” Barbara takes Amanda’s elbow and directs her down the stairs and through the doors. “People just like you.” Amanda swivels her head to take in the crowd, probably nearly thirty people, who circle one another and get ready for the meeting. It’s like a terrible party, where Amanda doesn’t know anyone, except worse, because there’s nothing to drink.

She lets Barbara introduce her to a thin trickle of shuffling ghosts who stuff themselves with broken Voortmans windmill cookies and swig Coke out of two-litre bottles. “This is Amanda,” Barbara says. “She’s new to us.”

The ghosts say welcome too, and worse, “Congratulations,” as if Amanda just won a prize.

When it’s time to start, about half the group settle on seats in the main hall, and the other half, Amanda and Barbara among them, file into a small back room and squish so closely together on chairs that they nearly touch the people on either side at the ankles and knees: Amanda, Barbara, and thirteen men—none of them older than thirty, all of them on court-ordered rehab. There is no one just like Amanda.

In the corner of the room, there’s a sink and a white boiler to boil the water for huge teapots of tea, and above it one grey, grimy window where dirty feet walk by, their owners oblivious to the people beneath them. A small blade fan propped up on the counter moves the stale air around. When she shifts in her seat, the broken edge of the wooden chair catches Amanda’s thigh, embedding a splinter above the back of her bruised knee. When it’s her turn to introduce herself, Amanda passes. Barbara glares at her.

“So?” the therapist asks at their next session. “How was the meeting?”

“It’s exactly like you would imagine it would be, if you weren’t under the mistaken notion it would be better.”

“It’s really something to be so smart, isn’t it?” Amanda knows she’s not

projecting now; the therapist is angry. “We won’t get anywhere if you’re not honest with me.”

Amanda sighs and decides to say nothing for the rest of the session, and they sit silently for an hour while Amanda stares out the window at the cluttered laneway. Finally, the therapist opens the door. She pats Amanda gently on the shoulder on the way out. “It’s hard some days. This is what we’re here for. See you on Thursday.”

Amanda has been chatting online for two weeks with Alex. He brags about being an architect and says that he can afford the best drugs, ordered through the deep web and shipped by FedEx from Vancouver. When she meets him at last, Amanda isn’t surprised that she doesn’t like him at all. He’s at least fifteen years older than he said he was, he’s not her type, and they have nothing in common. Still, ten minutes after she arrives, they smoke hash from hot knives while leaning on the granite kitchen countertops in his Rosedale home, and then it doesn’t really matter if she likes him or not. Amanda has sex with him because she’s high and because she has found that it’s expected and she doesn’t want to disappoint anyone.

At midnight, Alex tells her that she has to go, his teenage children are coming early in the morning. She gets dressed quickly, with her back to him, leaving her four-inch heels off to walk down the driveway in the dark to the taxi. She is still unsteady and disoriented from the drugs, or something else, she can’t tell. As she gets into the back seat, Alex presses three fifty-dollar bills into her hand for the thirty-dollar cab ride.

Amanda cries all the way home and all day on Sunday until Mark drops the kids off. After that she makes soup and toast, and Lucy and Sam eat it kneeling by the coffee table while they watch videos before bed. Amanda has half a bottle of wine and eats nothing but the crusts she’s cut from the edges of the toast. She’s not hungry, and anyway, there’s nothing else because she’s behind on her groceries.

When the children are asleep, she prods at the sharp angles of her collar bone, runs her palms down her protruding ribs. Her unfamiliar thinness makes her disproportionately happy and miserable at once.

“What did you do on the weekend?”

“Why do you always ask me what I do? I thought we were supposed to be talking about how I feel?”

“How are you feeling?”

“For fuck’s sake! I went out.”

“Where did you go?”

“To a friend’s house.”

“Oh. That’s nice. Whose house?”

“Someone I met.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“Why do you assume it’s a him?”

“I’m sorry. What’s her name? How did you meet her?”

“I met him online.”

“This could take a while, don’t you think?”

Amanda puts her fingers in her ears. “Can we just change the subject now?”

“Do you manipulate men too?” The therapist snickers when Amanda rolls her eyes like an irritated teenager.

Amanda goes to AA again. When it’s her turn to speak, she says, “Hi, my name is Amanda, and I’m an alcoholic,” just to try it out. Everyone groans, “Hi Amanda,” just like they do on TV, except that in real life the people in the room sound even less interested. After that, she has nothing else to say. Next, she listens as a man with inch-thick glasses tells them that he cries every day but hasn’t had a drink in twenty-three years. Amanda thinks a beer would cheer him up. Feet at the window kick up dry dust.

After the meeting, Barbara gives Amanda her phone number and tells her to call if she ever needs to. “You need a sponsor. I only saw you once last week!” Barbara digs one of her perfectly manicured nails into Amanda’s arm. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“I’ve got my kids. I can’t come tomorrow.”

“Kids? What’s more important? You should be here every single day.” She gives Amanda a copy of *The Blue Book* and assures her that though there is a lot of talk in it about God, it’s not actually about God.

“I don’t believe in God.”

“You have to realize you have no real control, and you have to give up trying to control your life. You need to leave it to a higher power.”

Amanda thought she was here because she was out of control already. “Higher power sounds a lot like God.”

Barbara frowns and leans in close. “I think I know your problem. The

trouble with you is that you are arrogant.”

“Something has happened!” Amanda has run from the car to the office foyer. She’s out of shape and has to catch her breath.

“What is it?” The therapist speaks slowly but looks alarmed. Amanda wonders what she thinks it could be.

“It’s just, when I parked, I locked my keys in my car. Stupid, I’m so stupid.”

“Okay,” the therapist says. “Okay.” She gestures to Amanda to enter the room.

“No! We can’t just—I don’t know what to do now. I have to pick up the kids after this. This has never happened to me before. How am I going to get home?”

The therapist walks into her office, and Amanda follows as if she’s drawn by an invisible thread. She paces by the window. The therapist closes the door and waits. When the therapist finally sits, she tells Amanda to sit too, as though she is about to begin, but Amanda paces still. The therapist says calmly, “Now, tell me, why did you lock your keys in your car?”

“What?” Amanda stares at the garbage in the laneway. There is so much of it. It’s piled up. Spilling everywhere. She can smell it rotting. The smell coats her mouth. “Where does it all come from?”

“Amanda, sit down.”

Amanda stops pacing but won’t sit.

“Listen to me,” the therapist tries again patiently. “Why did you lock your keys in the car?”

“Really? Really?” Amanda says. “I don’t know how to get my keys. I don’t know who to call. I can’t think straight! I want it to stop. I just want you to help me! Can’t you do that? Just help me!”

The therapist answers her as though she is talking to a small child. “I could, if you could understand why you locked them in there in the first place. Why don’t you sit down?”

“I don’t—” Amanda yells. “I don’t understand why you can’t just help me!” The room shrinks around her, and she thinks she won’t be able to take another breath.

The therapist leans forward, shoves her fist into the pocket of her skirt.

Amanda falls into the chair. She stares at the door handle, then turns to the therapist. “I want to go home.”

The therapist nods. “So, are you ready to begin?”