

MRS. ASHER'S (WIFE OF THE HONORABLE MARTIN ASHER, D-OH) LITTLE TIPS
FOR NEW CONGRESSIONAL SPOUSES

Welcome to Congress! I know, it's hard to believe you're here. You will be drinking from a fire hose these first few months, but I do want to get some items on your calendar. The very best events of the year are the Congressional Dialogues hosted by the Library of Congress. Any chance to get dressed up and be in the Jefferson Building is a recipe for success. Wear a special dress. Each member is allowed one guest, although senior members sometimes get extra seats. Go early and reserve seats for you and your hubby because the dinners are fabulous. Don't trust staff to do it for you, or you'll be in the very back of the room. Don't forget to wear your spouse pin!

Jody

Congressional Dialogues

Library of Congress

Behind every successful man is a ruthless wife who made it all happen, or so they say.

My husband, Martin, seems to have forgotten that little truism. I may as well be a widow, what with the lack of attention he pays me these days. Sure, he's busy. He's always been busy. But this time it's different—this ignoring, this distractedness. It is something else entirely, and it's time it stops.

Fortunately, I've still got my looks, even if Martin doesn't notice anymore and hasn't bothered to look for me tonight here in the gilded halls of the Library of Congress. I smile as I check my reflection in the gold-framed mirror. Yes, I do look good. And he is decidedly not here waiting for me. We agreed to meet here at the first-floor entrance—him coming from his office in Rayburn and me from our townhome. In days past, he would've been here. But now, things are different. A strange tension has moved into the space between us, and it is pushing us apart.

I watch from my vantage point in the first-floor lobby as more members and their guests slip in through the side entrance under the stairs, a special entrance just for those of us with congressional pins. I touch my neck, the pearls holding the large gold-and-diamond pendant designating me as a spouse.

It's not the official pin issued to us at the beginning of every two-year term by the sergeant at arms. I have a collection of those—fifteen, to be exact—hanging from a bracelet on my wrist. The sixteenth pin, from this cycle, is in my jewelry box, ready to go when daytime events dictate.

The pin I wear tonight is by the famous jewelry designer Ann Hand. This one makes me look special, important. The other one—the official pin, with its small coin-like size and cheap metal backing—gives me rashes. I try to always wear the Ann Hand pin. My little way of standing out.

“Hello!” Mimi appears beside me in the mirror's reflection and squeezes my shoulders. Her shiny black hair, bangs and a bob, frames her face. She looks the same as when we met in law school more than two decades ago. “You look gorgeous tonight,” she says.

Mimi is the one who looks gorgeous, bright-pink dress clinging to her thin frame, oversize breasts (implants, of course) straining the silky material.

She always has been the attention-getter in every room we share. Her Asian heritage made her exotic back in our law school days; her success since has made her even more stunning. But I have one advantage: she doesn't have a congressional-spouse pin. I smile and give her a peck on the cheek.

“I just love these events. Who are you with?” I ask. Mimi is a political animal, more connected than even we are, and that's saying a lot, since Martin has been in Congress for almost thirty years. Mimi and her husband, Spencer, run the Smith Institute, a well-regarded think tank.

“Congressman Labrond,” Mimi says with a sigh. “It's hard to turn him down, even though he's a complete bore.”

I smile and shake my head. “And because he's the chair of the Oversight Committee.”

Mimi chuckles. “Oh, I hadn't even realized that.”

She's lying. We both know it.

“Is Spencer here?” I ask, although historically speaking, her husband never attends social events, preferring books over people, research over reality.

“Of course not,” Mimi says. “Where’s Martin?”

“He was supposed to meet me here, at the entrance. Maybe he’s running late?” I say. “Let’s go on in.”

We both turn and start up the worn stone steps that lead upstairs to the ornate Great Hall of the Jefferson Building, the sounds of a party—polite laughter and clinking glasses—drawing us closer. I glance at the mosaic of Minerva, the Roman goddess of wisdom, and hope for some. Beyond the Great Hall, down an elegant corridor, the open bar in the Members Room ensures the members of Congress are on time.

“Do you want to text Martin? Find out where he is?” Mimi asks.

“Likely holding court, charming staffers and guests with one of his old stories, if I had to guess,” I tell her. Martin’s endearing personality is larger than life. People are drawn to him, and he uses that magnetism to his advantage. I admire him for his relaxed acceptance of his place in the world, his innate look of power. He’s risen through the ranks and is now chair of the House Foreign Relations Committee. Martin is undeniably handsome, with his midwestern square jaw, tall stature, and broad-shouldered physique, which looks good in a suit. Even at fifty-five, he still can command a room, especially around people who don’t know him well and haven’t heard all his stories.

We reach the main floor and the entrance to the members-only room. I nod to the library staffers monitoring the crowd. By now, I’m as familiar to them as my husband—one thing longevity in this town is good for.

“Welcome, Mrs. Asher!” says one of the young women who works for the library. Her name escapes me. “So glad you could join us!”

“Thank you,” I say and paste on my campaign-wife smile. “I love these events. Wouldn’t miss one.”

I know better than to take a copy of the autographed hardcover sitting in a stack next to her. The books are for members only. Not spouses or guests. It’s that way with a lot of things around here. My face hurts from the fake smile, so I allow it to slip away.

“Be sure to take a look at the artifacts in the Members Room before dinner,” the helpful library worker adds. “They really bring the story to life.”

Mimi thanks her and we make our way through the Great Hall of the most beautiful library in America to the Members Room, a stunning space with a view of the Capitol. It’s a rectangular room, with eleven-foot walls of oak paneling, wood-carved arches over the doors, a beamed ceiling with paintings in the ceiling panels, and fireplaces at both ends. I remember my first time visiting this place, as a young wife after Martin’s first congressional race. I was dazed and thrilled and overwhelmed. I expect to see a similar expression on a number of faces tonight.

Every cycle, the new spouses are invited to a luncheon in this very room, a place the general public cannot tour. Seasoned spouses welcome the new ones, tell them what to expect as best as we can. We advise them to protect their calendar and their couples’ time.

We try to warn them about what it’s really like, but of course, nobody can. My shoulders tense as I think of all I’ve been through, all I’ve swallowed to keep Martin in his seat. I remember how naive I was back then, in the beginning, when he was first elected to Congress. That was a long time ago now.

“I see Martin,” Mimi says, pointing toward a corner.

Yes, I see him too. He didn't wait for me. He's been here at the party. How dare he.

"He probably forgot your meeting spot. Let's get a drink before it gets impossible to reach the bar," Mimi suggests, pulling me through the crowd of loud-talking, mostly male politicians, who likely have their second or third rounds in hand.

When we finally reach the front of the line, Mimi orders us each a glass of champagne.

"Thank you." I take the champagne flute before returning my attention to the back of Martin's head. I'm simmering with rage.

"I can't wait for the wedding this weekend. Charlotte will be a beautiful bride," Mimi says.

I take a deep breath. Yes, my daughter's wedding will be fabulous. It better be. It's cost us an arm and a leg, as they say.

Actually, it has cost much more than that.

"Charlotte is very excited," I say as we clink our champagne glasses together.

"That's what's important," Mimi replies.

I don't agree. What's important was for her to make an appropriate choice. At least someone from her own political persuasion. I urged her to take her time. But she's in love. I smile. I guess I can't fault her too much.

After all, I made the exact same mistake.

"Yes, there's nothing like young love." I meet Mimi's eyes.

"Like you and Martin back at Georgetown." Mimi winks, her dark eyes glistening in the golden light of the Members Room.

I smile at the memory. Law school classmates. I thought Martin Asher Jr. had come from a wealthy family. He thought a woman named Jody Prescott from Palm Beach had too. We were both wrong. You know what they say about assumptions.

“I guess we were just meant to be,” I say and smooth my cocktail dress. The balls of my feet throb in my high heels. I knew better than to wear them, but sometimes fashion wins. I must admit, I struggle to keep up with the young spouses who appear like shiny new objects every two years. I also struggle to compete with the throng of newly minted graduates who are drawn to jobs on the Hill, swarming in every spring, as idealistic as the days are long.

And so young.

Mimi and I turn together and stare at my husband, whose head is bent toward the beautiful young woman standing in front of him. They’re below a painting of the goddess of enlightenment. The woman touches my husband’s arm as he turns away.

I know that woman.

The lights in the room blink off and back on. It’s time for dinner. Martin looks my way, holds his hand up in a salute sort-of wave.

Beside me, Mimi says, “Nice of him to notice you. I don’t like the optics of him with that young woman. She’s one of his staffers. They’re standing too close. That’s dangerous. And inappropriate.”

“I don’t know who she is,” I say. I’m lying.

“Of course you don’t. She’s new. These politicians. They come in contact with so many people every day. And their young staffers—well, it’s a revolving door,” Mimi says. I happen to know she helps Martin fill those spots on occasion.

“Martin’s harmless, you know that,” I say.

“Right,” Mimi says. She takes a sip of champagne. “Well, anyway, I don’t know how these politicians keep anybody straight. Remembering all those names? Forget it.” She shakes her head.

“Martin loves it. Always has. He has all kinds of tricks for recalling names. It’s Martin’s brand. It works, for him,” I say.

“Hello, ladies,” Martin says. “Don’t you look lovely tonight, Mimi.”

“Oh, Martin, instead of flattering me, you should watch yourself, your behavior. You kept your wife waiting at the entrance,” Mimi says, shaking her head. Then she smiles at me. “See you both this weekend.” She disappears into the crowd to find the boring congressman she’ll share dinner with.

“What’s wrong with her?” Martin asks.

I can’t find the right words, so I shrug. A dark voice in the back of my thoughts reminds me to hold on tight to him, no matter what. *He’s the best you can get.* Thanks, Mom.

“Love the dress. Shall we?” Martin offers his arm to me.

And you thought chivalry was dead? It is—this is simply the pretense of caring. The actions of a man accustomed to the spotlight, playing his role, pretending his wife wasn’t watching him looking cozy with a young staffer: a staffer who works in his office. Yes, I know exactly who she is. Sarah. Intern. New. Gorgeous. And apparently a big flirt. Just what we don’t need.

I slip my arm through his and paste on my smile as we make our way out of the Members Room and into the beautiful corridor, Martin glad-handing and saying hi continuously. The flow of suits, and bipartisan goodwill of sorts, makes these evenings unique, no matter the featured author. The decor always matches the theme of the book, down to the era. Tonight, the ballroom is awash in suffragist banners, white table linens, and, as always, crystal and china to suit the theme. In this case, circa-1920s elegance.

“I’m assuming we’re toward the front, if I know you,” Martin says, squeezing my hand. I notice, just now, he looks gray, ashen. Despite his wide grin, he isn’t feeling well.

“We’re at the best table, right up front,” I say. “Got here a little before the official time, but they all know me, so they let me in. Are you feeling OK? You don’t look good. Do you need to tell me anything?”

Martin ignores my question as we arrive at our table. Because I could reserve only our two seats, it’s anybody’s guess who we’ll be seated with. That’s the point, the library staff tells us. Mix it up, make new friends. But we all know bipartisan friendship is a quaint notion from long ago.

I see our table is filled with representatives from our own political party. I take a deep breath, and as the other men stand, I slip into the seat Martin has pulled out for me. I say my hellos all around. Most of these men have been in Congress as long as Martin. The only exception is the couple across the table, who have the most unfortunate placement. Their backs will be to the program the entire night. They’re young. They’ll choose better next time.

I smile at the young spouse. Her eyes look glazed, from either too much wine during the cocktail hour or general anxiety at where she finds herself. Literally, the spotlight of the stage spills across her shoulders. Poor dear. In the headlight, so to speak.

I can’t remember her name. I do remember a problem with appropriate attire, skirts too short, and a small-town accent. Oh well. She’ll adapt or she won’t last. I wish I could feel sorry for her, but I don’t. She’ll learn. Modesty and blending in work best here in DC—for the spouses, that is. There are no such rules for the members.

A waiter appears and pours red wine into the largest of the three crystal goblets in front of me. The other two are already poured, a white and what I believe is a rosé. I pick up the white, take a big sip, and try to forget about the young woman across the table. At least her husband seems solicitous, his arm wrapped around her shoulder as he tells some boring campaign-trail story.

“This will be another great night,” Martin says loudly to the whole table, grabbing his glass of red. To me, he whispers, “We’ll need to leave early, if that’s OK. You’re right. I don’t feel well. And with the wedding coming up, I should take it easy.”

“Sure,” I answer, pushing away the anger. This is my favorite event. There is hardly anything fun left for us spouses these days. But that’s OK. I will enjoy this lavish weekend—our only daughter’s wedding—and all the festivities surrounding it.

“Thanks,” Martin says. As the appetizers are served, he falls into a deep conversation with one of the representatives from Illinois. The man next to me is a bore, even worse than the congressman Mimi is stuck with. Talking to him would hardly be productive. Instead, I will pass the time waiting for the program to begin by remembering how far I’ve come, how much I’ve learned. On my own. Lesson number one as a political spouse: Don’t expect anything. Not his time, not the team’s thanks, and especially not a reliable calendar. Lesson number two: Nothing is a guarantee in this political life. Nothing.

I suppose I learned that lesson early. I couldn’t count on my mom, and she was all I had. So I taught myself just about everything as a kid, without a lot of praise. I guess I was in training for this spouse role from a young age. I even taught myself to love, because my mom was incapable of it. And, for the most part, I’ve resisted my worst urges. I bet not many of the members of Congress seated at this table could say that.

I glance across the table at the young spouse. She’s struggling over which utensil to use from the array at her disposal. I can’t help myself as the stress of the past few years, the past few days, bursts from me in the form of an unseemly chuckle. I cover my mouth with my hand and decide I’d better excuse myself, get my wits about me, as they say. I push away from the table, laughter and tears mingling as I hurry toward the side exit.

Martin, wrapped up in his own conversation, doesn't seem to notice I'm gone. By the time I return to the table, the program has begun, conversation has stopped, all eyes and attention on the interviewer and the author onstage. Before dessert is served, Martin leans over and tells me it's time to go.

His driver waits for us on the street, idling between the Jefferson Building and the Capitol. There's nothing like the glow of these national treasures at night; it's enough to make you gasp in awe each time you see them, even after all these years. Martin pulls the door open for me and I slide in.

We ride the five short blocks home in silence. Perhaps neither of us trusts the words that might spill out. I turn and study my husband, the father of my daughter—the daughter who is getting married this weekend to a guy much like her dad.

Martin winces and turns toward the window. I know I should make him go to the doctor, but I won't. I know what is ailing him. Despite the fact the house physician is on call 24-7 for members—but not their spouse—Martin hardly uses his services.

I should care about his health. But right now, all I can see is Martin talking to that girl. Sarah. The girl slightly older than his daughter. A shudder runs down my spine. He needs to learn that this is forbidden. This is a serious threat. He needs to stay away from her, or he is going to ruin everything we've built. And all I know is I cannot let that happen. I won't. If he doesn't stop, his health will continue to suffer the consequences.

Our car rolls to a stop in front of our townhome, an elegant 1900s building we've fully restored with love and too much money. It's white with black shutters. It's the only thing black and white in our relationship these days. Most things between us are as gray as Martin's face.

I push open the car door because Martin doesn't appear to be moving, and I step outside.

“I’ll be home in a little bit,” he says.

“What? It’s late. Come inside. You aren’t feeling well,” I say.

“I’ll be home in a little while, Jody,” he says. He leans across the back seat and pulls the door closed. They drive away, leaving me standing on the street alone.

How dare he? I stomp up the black metal steps to the front door and let myself in. I flick on the lights and pull out my cell phone. He’s such an idiot, he really is. I watch as the dot representing Martin moves across Capitol Hill, stopping, as I knew it would, on H Street NW.

I walk over to our bar cart, pour myself a bourbon and one for Martin, too. I drop onto the couch and kick off my heels. I will wait up for as long as it takes for him to come home. I will wait up no matter what he has done. No matter. I scroll through the endless TV stations, but I can’t focus on anything. Finally, I turn to the local news. As the sportscaster begins his segment, Martin walks through the door. Game on.

“Come have a nightcap, Marty,” I say, not looking his direction. I slip the Visine bottle into my pocket. I should have added more drops to his drink. I only added two. Four could kill him, and at this moment, I wish I *had* added four. I am beyond furious. His behavior is unacceptable.

“No, I’m going to bed,” he says.

“It’s not a request. You do remember everything we’ve worked for, don’t you?” I ask, staring at the television.

I hear a sigh behind me. He takes the drink from my hand and finishes it in one gulp.

“You know, I’m certain you’d feel better if you stopped messing around with that young woman,” I say. That’s true. I’ll stop if he does.

“Look, I can’t take any more tonight, OK? The wedding has been enough. I’ll talk to you tomorrow,” he says. I hear the squeak of the third step as he makes his way upstairs.

I think of my mom, of all the times she walked away from me. I never do that to anyone, especially not someone I love. I've learned that much. I've always been there for Charlotte, for Martin. Always. I don't walk away from people, and no one should walk away from me.

Martin knows better, he really does. He knows what happens when he makes me mad.