

# Five Broken Watches



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"I want to feel pretty again."

Iris squinted at the mirror, struggling to apply makeup again after 14 years. We met during the summer, when I walked into her booth at an art festival. "But," I began. What do you say?



"I'm not fishing for compliments, but it's been so long since I felt like making the effort. I'm surprised I still care. It's nice. Look over there," she pointed a makeup wand towards a pile of [jewelry](#) on a side table.

"What are those?"

"Five broken watches. The last one stopped a few days ago, and to save money I decided to hunt through my old jewelry. Surely I have something that works."

Being fond of silver, I instinctively reached for one resembling a [Mobius strip](#).

"My first-ex gave me that for a skydiving graduation present. It doesn't have any numbers, so whenever I was accused of being late I'd just point. The watchband clips together. Just like Cinderella's slipper, it either fits or it doesn't."

Dabbing and smearing foundation, she continued. "I got married in the early 70's, right after high school. Wasn't pregnant; just dumb. My Mom, in her attempt to keep me chaste until wedlock, inadvertently drove me into the arms of the first sweet talker who promised, *'It won't hurt.'*"

"Will was an Army Private, just a few years older than me. Both of us were quick-tempered and our seven year marriage was wracked with explosions, but 40 years later I can pick and choose my memories. We didn't want children; we traveled, went to rock concerts and bought whatever we wanted. Totally selfish. I reached for that watch first, too, although I'm not sure if it's for Auld Lang Syne or because it's a windup. Doesn't matter, turns out it's gone unused for too long."

Iris was swiping bronzer over her face, ears and throat. "The small gold watch was a gift from Husband Number Two, after our divorce, which I wound up paying for."

"Wait, which...the watch or the divorce? "

"Both." Iris turned an orange face towards me. "I can remember it as if it were yesterday. Booze and gambling were involved in that mess, but even after I finally threw in the towel, we still liked one another.

"Frank was being transferred, so we went out to dinner and wandered around a local mall. Inside a jewelry store I spotted that watch and he encouraged me, '*Go ahead, you can use another watch. My treat.*' It was the 80's, we both had incomes, and I'd worn my first marriage around my wrist long enough.

"I looked a bit more but finally pointed to my first choice. The smiling salesman rang it up while I stalled, waiting for my suddenly invisible-ex to reappear. Too embarrassed not to, I pulled out my credit card and figured we'd work it out later.

"When I finally caught up with him, Frank never mentioned a word other than to compliment me on my choice. I wasn't surprised. It didn't break the bank, so I chalked it up to experience, except now I had a different reminder on my left wrist. Which eye shadow colors are popular now?"

"What? "

"Doesn't matter. All I have are some boring browns and a combo pack called Smokey. Old styles are coming back. I'll just make up my eyes like I did in the Big Hair 80's."

"I'm not so sure about your decade." I looked back at the pile. "Which came next?" Married to the same man since college, I listened in fascination. Maybe I could use something for my Creative Writing class.

Iris stopped squinting. "The sporty looking one with the braided band came from someone I try to forget. I dated Rick on and off for 5 years. I was trying to build my career, so I was happy not to set up house just yet, but as time went along he kept pressing, and I don't like being pushed.

"So when my company asked if I'd consider a position in their Belgium office, I didn't hesitate. I never thought Rick would take it so hard when I told him I was going. He didn't exactly become a stalker, but I was glad when I went through the gate at JFK." Iris was staring at some distant point in the mirror.

I was sure there was more to that story, but it wasn't my business. I gave her a moment, then pulled her back. "So why keep the watch?"

Iris refocused. "The numbers are big, and my eyesight's getting worse. I must be insane, trying to put on mascara."

"This one looks pretty well worn."

"Which one?" I held up a large black watch with half a watchband. "Oh, that poor thing." She reached out her hand. "Husband Number Three. Maarten was always giving me little things: fresh flowers for no reason, a souvenir pin with my name on it. That watch. He sensed, if not understood, my idiosyncrasies and could keep me grounded simply by whispering my name."

"Sounds like a good one."

"He was. It was 1992, when they transferred me to Antwerp. Maarten was a graphic designer who worked for the same company. He was ten years older than me, and I couldn't believe my luck. There I was, working in the middle of Europe, with a man I adored who'd whisk me off to Paris for the weekend. "

"Wow."

"Yeah, it was fabulous. When it was time to come back to the States, Maarten came, too. We decided to take some time off to explore the U.S., look for a place to live, and hit as many National Parks and *World's Largest* as we could. We even saw Wall Drug."

Iris put the watch back down. "What do you think so far?"

"I think you've led an interesting life."

"No-o" she sing-sang, pointing at her new mask.

"Um, you might want to consider toning down the intensity a bit. It's very dramatic, unless that's what you're looking for."

"Drama, hmmm? No, I'll grab some cotton and blend."

Like many creative spirits, Iris had a tendency to bounce back and forth between subjects and moods. It took some time for her to become comfortable in our friendship, but she'd never opened up like this before. "Why this sudden desire to wear full makeup? What's going on... a new man?"

Iris's gutsy laugh brought in her collie, *Beezy*.

"I guess not. I thought you were just going to wipe some off."

"Changed my mind." Iris went back to her dressing table, fresh faced. She's the only woman I know who actually owns a dressing table.

"Oregon looked like heaven to Maarten and me, so we packed our things and headed west, just like the Pioneers. We got married and started our own graphic design business. Then I came home one day to find Maarten dead on the floor."

"OH!"

"Massive heart attack. Enlarged heart and too much cholesterol, but I knew better. It was my fault; I'm a jinx. It took a suicide attempt, therapy and [karaoke](#) to yank me out of shock."

Was she making this up? "How old were you?"

"Almost forty. Everything changed after that, you can imagine. So several years later, when Kevin said, *Let's go!* I jumped, and we landed on *Down and Out*, but you know the rest."

"Still, I can't imagine taking a boat to Venezuela and back."

"Got a three-inch dent in my como-se-llama to prove it, not to mention the psychological bruises. Jeez, I still can't believe we did that."

"I brought all my watches on that boat, but as I slid from working woman to island girl, one by one they quit. Kevin surprised me with that two-toned stainless, which turned my wrist black now and then. For years I accused him of giving me a knock-off until the manufacturer replaced it, no questions asked. Apparently I react to certain metals."

"Took me a dozen years to underestimate Kevin right out of my life. He and the watch lasted the longest. Owning my own boat, painting up and down the Caribbean? I'm the only person I know who can complain, living in Paradise. There. Better?"

Iris surprised me again. Pancake makeup no longer covered every imperfection, yet she managed to give her skin a nice, healthy tone. Was she wearing any eye makeup? I couldn't tell. Yes, a bit of mascara, but we can all use some of that.

"You look terrific," and I meant it.

"Finding all these watches made me take a hard look at myself. People tend to envy choices they can only imagine without considering the tradeoffs: no real home; no grandchildren bouncing on knees; no long-term partner. Luckily, I've finally learned to accept and even embrace my own consequences. I may not be crazy about them, but corny as it sounds, it's who I am."

"If it's true that the more you complain, the longer God makes you live, can you imagine how many watches I'll own by the time I'm 100? It's horrifying."

"No, I think I'll smarten up in my second act, concentrate on others for a change, and make up my face just for me. At least for awhile. Beezy's good company, and if I need to know the time, I'll just look at my phone."