

The Marriott Hotel, Downtown Brooklyn

by Paula Bomer

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After months and months of threatening to do so, on a Thursday evening after her husband arrived home from work, Caroline left their four bedroom apartment in a beautiful pre-war building in the affluent neighborhood of Brooklyn Heights and walked to the Marriott, a large, utilitarian structure, ten minutes away by foot in downtown Brooklyn. Her vision blurred, her ears rang--that happened to her when she got nervous-- as she rode the escalator up to the reception desk.

She had done this once before, but had only inquired about rooms and rates, and then guiltily crept back to her apartment. On that occasion, Fred, her husband, upon her return, was semi-reclined on the couch, his serious, scrunched-up face buried in the New York Times. The children, two girls ages one and four, were asleep in their respective bedrooms. Fred had put them to bed while she'd been at the Marriott. He never put them to bed. She always put them to bed. Fred looked up at her when she returned and said, "You're back?" She ignored him, taking off her coat in the hall, her head bowed in disgrace.

"Oh, honey, " he continued, "You could've stayed. We would've been OK."

"I just can't do it," she gasped, and sat down on the couch to untie her sneakers.

"I think you should." Fred then folded the paper carefully and put it on the end table. The paper would remain on the end table, until she threw it away. Caroline stared at the newspaper, her eyes red and wet, and then forced herself to look at her kind and mild husband. She hated him. If she were to ask him to throw away

the paper, he would get up and throw it away. If she were to ask him, as she had many times before, he wouldn't be annoyed with her for asking. He'd say, "sure, honey," and wearing the serious, scrunched up face, meaningfully take the paper and throw it out. But the next day, there it would be again, sitting on the end table. She could ask him to do it every day; every day she could say, "Fred, can you throw out the paper instead of leaving it on the end table?", and he would, he may even throw it out two days in a row, relieving her of one day of asking. But then, on the third day, there it would be, on the end table. And so, she threw out the paper herself, rather than go through the asking every day.

Prompted by their marriage counselor a few years ago, they had once had conversations about these sorts of things that troubled Caroline. They went something like this: "Fred, when you don't hang your towel up in the bathroom, and you leave it on the bed after you shower, it makes me feel like your maid. It makes me feel disrespected and unloved and like, like... that you don't care about me." Fred, with the prompting of their therapist, would repeat this phrase, more or less. Fred, sensitive and caring Fred, would say, "It hurts your feelings that I don't put my towel away?" And Caroline, blowing her nose into the ten millionth tissue, would nod her head, yes, ashamed for feeling so strongly about something so trivial.

Things improved for awhile. Fred spent a few weeks putting his coffee cup in the sink and then filling it with a little water, putting dirty socks and underwear in the laundry basket, putting his briefcase in the hall closet, etc..But after a few weeks, everything went back to the way it had been originally. Caroline found his coffee cup on a bookshelf somewhere, or on the hall table. His socks and underwear lay on the floor in the bathroom, or on the floor of their bedroom. And Caroline was, after all, a housewife. None of her friends complained about picking up after their husbands. When she complained to her friends, they all said, "He's a man, what do expect?" and looked at her like she was crazy. Even the therapist, a vibrant, pretty woman with a huge diamond ring and

an obviously great career--she wrote some book about marriage, she came very recommended and she charged them exorbitantly--seemed exasperated with Caroline. Caroline could tell that the therapist was exasperated, so they quit seeing her. Fred went along with quitting, just like he went along with going.

"Sure, honey, if you don't want to go anymore that's OK with me," he said, rubbing her back passively with his fingertips. Caroline looked at him, at his wavy brown hair and sweet eyes, and the hard little ball of hatred welled up in her. His weak little finger rubs, his bland expression, his medium-sized nose, medium-sized prick, his average appetite. God, how she loathed every detail of his very being.

There was a time when she could quell the loathing that Fred inspired in her. She could force it down. Back then, for instance, when they'd been in counseling, the ball of hatred had only been a little, overripe orange - squishy and occasionally mashed back so far as to be unnoticeable. As the years passed, it had grown in size and strength and had become a normal part of her life. She had gone from imagining it as a squishy orange, to a grapefruit, firm and not quite ripe, to finally, about a year ago, to thinking of it as a bowling ball, heavy as stone and filling up her entire gut. She stopped eating for the most part, because of it. When she first stopped eating, she lost a lot of weight. This had been fun, because she felt obligated to buy all new clothes. After she racked up a ten thousand dollar Visa bill, she kind of stopped losing weight even though she hadn't really resumed eating. She ate the crusts from the peanut-butter sandwiches she made for her children's lunch, and picked stray noodles from the pot after making the kids' dinner. Oddly, this seemed enough to sustain her now. Her body had adjusted to the bowling ball of hatred and this--along with the scraps of sandwiches and noodles--sustained her at a neat 115 pounds.

At first, Fred noticed that she'd lost weight. This was an exciting moment in their marriage. Fred came home from work, and beyond being absorbed in his boisterous daughters, his own bodily needs for beer, dinner and tuning out in front of the Times or the TV,

he noticed her. He noticed her! He actually looked at Caroline's body and if she managed, by accidental good timing, to glance at him while he was looking at her, she could watch his eyes on her. Fred, after checking her out, would say, his voice strangely deeper and surely less mild than usual, "You've lost weight." The thrill of it was worth the headaches, dizziness and irritation she felt due to not eating. He actually looked at her.

Of course, that was so long ago. A year ago felt like forever ago. A year ago, to Caroline, was the same as high school, the same as last week. Time had warped since the birth of their first daughter, and now meant nothing to her, or everything, depending on how you looked at it. Now she was just his skinny wife, and illicit no comments. She thought maybe that he'd worry about her, about her being so thin, about how she never cooked dinner for the two of them, like she had for years, nor did she order takeout with him. When she first stopped cooking, Fred appeared a little disappointed, but only *mildly* so, and then he quickly and contentedly got into the habit of ordering out. Good old Fred. Flexible as always. He didn't seem worried. At least, he never said anything about it.

Ironically, his quiet, mild nature was what had attracted her to him when they were dating in college. She understood his mildness as thoughtfulness and his kindness as a man who had great impulse control. Having grown up with an overbearing father who often yelled and threatened, Fred had felt like the perfect man to Caroline. Yet sometime after their marriage began, after the distractions of college life were over, and the wedding plans planned, and the apartment found and the jobs secured, after all that and they were settled, truly settled, and Caroline was home with the baby, she realized that his quietness wasn't thoughtfulness, but really a lack of it; the man had nothing to say because he didn't really think about anything. And his kindness? Well, OK, he was kind. Caroline would say the word over and over to herself. Kind, kind, kind. It had lost its meaning. It was just a word. An ugly word even, if you said it in your head to yourself, over and over again.

Kind, kind, kind. She knew he wasn't an idiot--he'd gone to Harvard Law School, he was a partner at his firm--but what was he then?

Caroline stood under the fluorescent lights of the lobby at the Marriott. This was to be just one night. One night of peace, one night of being away from her family. Their younger daughter woke up every night and needed to be comforted back to sleep. Caroline could never fall back asleep after this; she'd lay awake for an hour or two, sometimes until the light in their room turned grey with dawn. While awake in her dark room, she listened to Fred breathe, resenting his easy sleep, and she obsessed over the details of the forthcoming day, what to pack her older daughter for lunch at preschool, what playground to take the baby to, what variation of shopping to do--grocery, clothes, or something else? And the entire time she thought about the impending day, she thought, why am I thinking about this now? Why don't I sleep and worry about it in the morning? But, disturbingly, she couldn't control her thoughts. She'd wake exhausted, ruined really, and her body ached as she barely made it through her day. She just wanted one night of sleep, that was all. And here she was, at the Marriott Hotel, finally, coming to get it.

A young Hispanic man took her credit card. He had a thin, well trimmed mustache and he was polite and well spoken. Caroline guessed he was in his early twenties. His skin, a honey color, glistened under the lighting, and he seemed poreless. He handed her a shiny plastic card with the number 1082 on it. "Take the elevators to your left up to the tenth floor," he said, professionally, "and enjoy your stay at the Marriott." This broke her heart for some reason, this earnest addition to his directions, especially the "at the Marriott", straight from his training and she stood there, in awe of his youth and determination, of his lack of cynicism. He did not seem tired, like she was. Like everyone she knew was. He did not seem bored even, and he worked at a hotel. He wore the brown uniform of the Marriott hotels, his name tag said "Eric", and he was trying so damn hard to do a good job.

Caroline stood motionless for a minute, feeling wrinkled and thirsty. Eric was busy with his back turned to her and she watched his broad back for another moment, feeling that it's strength somehow belittled her. She took the elevator up to her room, opening the door by slipping the plastic card into a slot. The room smelled like cleaning fluids and the furnishings were all gray. After putting down her overnight bag, a surge of energy coarsed through her body. She wanted to jump on the bed! She wanted to eat a pint of ice cream! Then she thought, I must call Fred and ask about the kids. He knew where she was, of course, but she felt she should call anyway. Had she said, before leaving, "I'll call when I get there"? Yes, she had. Now, she regretted that promise. She felt calling her home would ruin this moment, this tiny free moment of her life. The windows were large and because she was relatively high up, she had a view of Brooklyn Heights, and beyond that, downtown Manhattan. She spotted her apartment building, but couldn't make out which ones were her windows. It was just as well. Something about spotting her apartment building made her ears ring again. She tried to look beyond it, and as it was just getting dark, the tall buildings of Wall Street with their many, tiny windows began to light up the sky. Caroline focused on them. She fiddled with the curtains, making sure they'd close, as she feared all those lights would keep her up at night.

She had imagined this night here, at the Marriott, many times. She was going to order room service and eat crab cakes and chocolate cake for dessert. Now that she was here, the thought of all that rich food made her stomach hurt. She was going to take a bath with bubbles and sit in it for a long time, browsing through clothing catalogues that she'd brought from home. The hollowness of her wish was clear to her, but she still wished for this night that she now had. Seating herself at the little table in front of the windows that flickered New York brightly into her room, she picked up the phone and dialed room service. After ordering the food, her voice quavering as she did, she quickly undressed and got into the empty, king sized bed. The sheets felt like ice--they were so clean! cleaner

than anything in her house--and her nipples immediately hardened. Caroline put her hands on them, and then moved her hands down to cup her breasts. They felt empty, they were empty, and as lifeless as the rest of her body. After nursing two children, her once beautiful breasts had turned into loose sacks of stretch-marked skin.

Once her breasts had been the focal point of her life. As a teenager, she had had a perfect rack, the most enviable rack at her boarding school. A 36 C, shaped to perfection, like large, overflowing martini glasses. Her nipples were smallish and as pink as a little girl's vagina. Every boy at St. Paul's lusted after her breasts and frankly, she hadn't been able to stop thinking about them either. She'd worn silk bras and tight Tshirts, her back held as straight as possible. Back then, her nipples were hard against her shirts almost always; they were, essentially, constantly in a state of arousal. Math class, english class, (her teachers wanted to touch them, too, she knew it, without a doubt), all those hormonally challenged young boys, well-bred, white as could be, all of them wanted to put their hands on her breasts. She sat at the front of the class, because she found that if she sat at the back, half the class spent the entire hour turning back toward her, back to where the math teacher--the english teacher, the history teacher-- directed his gaze. She'd almost been afraid of touching them herself, because it was just so exciting, and the only time she allowed herself to was in the shower stalls. She'd close her eyes and soap them gently, her hands trembling, her mind boggled at the roundness, the warm fleshiness, the smooth softness of her skin. Then she'd turn toward the spray of water, the rinsing of them causing her to orgasm right there, in the shower, quietly, biting her lip and shaking under the stream, because invariably some girl would be showering in the stall next to her.

Oddly, Fred never cared about her breasts. Or, really, not so oddly. When they dated in college, indeed, when they first married, before the childbearing, Caroline's breasts were still knockout. At first Caroline assumed Fred didn't focus on her breasts much because he loved her for herself, for her *personality*. She

thought he was more *mature* than all those perverts in high school who'd prematurely ejaculate in their boxers as they squeezed her too hard, who double-fisted her like she was pie dough. Fred's idea of foreplay where her breasts were concerned was to rub a hand over one, and then rub a hand over the other. Gently. *Kindly*.

A sharp knock on the door startled Caroline. "Room service", someone yelled. That was quick. She kicked off the sheets, grabbing her clothes. What should she do? "Can you leave it outside the door?," she yelled back, walking toward the door, with her clothes held anxiously to her middle. " I need you to sign, Ma'am, " he said again. Was that Eric, the man from the desk? Stumbling, she began to get dressed.

"OK, just a minute," she said, and as soon as she had her pants buttoned, her undershirt pulled on, she opened the door. It was Eric.

"Hi." Caroline gasped, from her frenzy of dressing. " Come on in. Just put it on the table over there." Now that he wasn't behind the huge reception desk, Caroline could see how big he was. He was at least 6'2, and built like a boxer, with a thick chest and back, and pumped up arms. He definitely worked out in his spare time. She looked at his ass, peeking out from under his Marriott coat. It was a rounded, solid mass.

He put the tray on the table. "I just need you to sign here."

"Yes, of course."

With the shades open, Manhattan glittered upon them. Eric looked out the enormous windows, at the vista of downtown Manhattan. Caroline watched him look. She wondered, did he feel he owned the city, splendid before him? Did he want to own it? Was he planning, plotting? Or was he hating it, resenting all that money and power, glistening in front of him? He didn't seem the resentful type, but you could never tell.

"It's a gorgeous view," Caroline offered, while handing him the black, miniature folder, left open, with the signed receipt on it. She'd given him a huge tip, over twenty percent, more like forty

percent. Eric didn't look at the bill. He snapped the black folder shut.

"Yes, it's gorgeous," He smiled. His chin was square, his skin *was* poreless; he was very, very young. Maybe young enough to do something stupid. His smile stuck there, fake as could be. Did he hate her? Did he secretly hate all of his customers, or just the ones that dripped of money, like herself? Because Caroline knew, even with her tussled hair and dirty fingernails, even in a tank shirt, which she realized was turned inside out, she looked like privilege. Privilege oozed from her, no matter what. She'd had it for so long, her whole life really, that there was no escaping it. And why would she want to? Because she did want to, for some weird reason, from time to time. Because it felt like a trap, even if it wasn't. Eric started to walk toward the door.

"You work at both the desk and for room service?, "

Caroline said, following him to the door.

"On slow nights like tonight, yes Ma'am, I do," he answered her. He ma'am'd her. She hated that, it made her feel old, but she knew it was because he was doing his job, and he was determined to do a good job, no matter what.

"Normally you just work at the front desk?," she ventured, and now he turned to look at her. He noticed her now, she felt, noticed what a mess she was, that her eyes were dark with sleep deprivation, that her shirt was inside out.

"I beg your pardon?" his accent was there, now that he was a little irritated. Just the tiniest lilt to his words, a slight, ever so slight rolling of the word *your*.

"I just, I guess you normally just work at the front desk," Caroline stammered. What was she doing?

"No," he said, his voice cool, "normally I just work for room service."

She hated herself for having asked. "Oh, of course, well, I see. You must be very young. You must still be in school. Right?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm still in school."

"Hotel management?"

Now he smiled, really smiled. He was enjoying this; he'd found a way to enjoy her behaving like an idiot. Good for him, thought Caroline. "No ma'am," he said, almost laughing openly at her assumptions, his smile having broadened to reveal a set of teeth worth writing home about. "I study literature at Long Island University here in Brooklyn, on Flatbush, just a few blocks from here."

He was leaving her now. Walking slowly down the wide hallway toward the elevator, walking backward so as to still face her. Soon he would turn around.

"Well good luck to you then," Caroline said, and she could hear the condescension in her own voice--where did it come from?--"Take care."

"Thank you. You have a good night." Eric turned his back to her now and walked down the hall fast quickly and she watched him walk and watched him stop at the elevator. It was as if she couldn't move, couldn't face the empty room with all that food in it. She watched him stare directly in front of himself, at the closed elevator doors, even though he knew she was still standing there. She wanted him to look at her again, just once, before he disappeared into the elevator. She heard the ting of the elevators, the swoosh of the doors opening, and he stepped inside, without moving his head one inch.

Caroline turned back into her room. She sat at the table in front of a tray of food she had no plans of eating. New York twinkled at her, mocking her for all she had, showing her what she knew already; that her life was a little, whiney blip on the radar of the world, regardless of how big her apartment was. That many could envy her, or resent her, but for what? For her dull marriage, for her ability to shop at fancy places? For two beautiful girls who already were as spoiled as she? The elder already was aware of whose dresses at pre-school were the finest, and the baby, the baby would soon know. Her mouth felt dry.

Was it that she was ungrateful? Is boredom being ungrateful? What she wanted was for this Eric to fuck her so hard,

against her will, that she could feel alive for the first time in her life. She wanted him to take her and pummel her in a way that she'd always imagined, but never experienced. Clearly, that's not what Eric wanted to do to her. Maybe he wanted to spit on her face. Maybe that's what she really needed, that sort of degradation.

Once, when she'd been a little girl, not much older than her very own oldest girl, she'd been dancing and singing and holding up the skirt of her dress in the bright light of her living room. She *knew* she was unbelievably, irresistibly made for adoration. She knew what people thought of the little blue-eyed, blond haired girl with the button nose that was her very own self. She danced and twirled and flounced the fabric of her dress and her mother, sitting on the couch, reading the paper, folded the newsprint and thwacked her on the legs with the paper. "Just go," she'd said, looking meanly at her daughter. "Go! You vain brat."

Could it be true? Her mother? Her mother had been a good, patient mother. Caroline looked toward her mother for everything; how to dress, how to speak, how to function in the world. She had only ever wanted to be as composed as her mother. Caroline harbored no bitterness toward her and mostly remembered the happy everyday that was their existence together, mother and daughter. But perhaps, once in awhile, the angry truth forced itself out.

The contrast of light against dark blurred in Caroline's eyes. Gray edges, the buildings, the night and heavens above, the endless universe. She had asked for so little from life and that was what she got. So little. And yet, what more could she ask for? What more than pleasantness, than affluence? Was smug going to be the closest she felt to happiness? Shame flooded her as she picked up the phone. She would call home to make sure the girls had fallen asleep. And then what? She would sit here staring out at the world, her family and home out there with it, and hope that sleep would come to her, that just one night of deep, undisturbed sleep would renew her faith in it all.

