

Hotels

by Amy Holwerda

In our room, the room that was ours until noon, you rolled my stockings down my pale legs. On your knees, you looked up at me and sighed, *My god, this is nice*. And your hands slid up. Gently. Slowly. And you watched your palms graze the backs of my thighs, my buttocks, the soft curve where they meet the small of my back. Your hands lingered there, in the concave, before you pulled me near to you and your lips pressed against me. Your breath was heavy. So was mine.

In the morning we laid on our sides next to each other. Your fingers traced the silhouette of my turned-up hip, the indent of my waist, over each rib - as though you were tracing the outline of a child's cartooned cloud. You followed the path up the length of my arm, down into the dip of my collarbone. *Come closer, I can't feel you*, you murmured. You wrapped your arm around me and drew me close to you. You ran your thumb along my jaw, nestled my head into your broad chest. You let your fingers tangle themselves in my hair as you stroked it.

We were in and out of sleep and in and out of laughter. We slept and we laughed. Then we laughed and we slept. I was awake while you snored in your sleep. I laughed silently, with my fingers over my smile and pushed the hair out of your eyes. I kissed their lids which fluttered with dream beneath my moistened lips. You did not know that I kissed you. You were asleep. I kissed the bridge of your nose. I kissed the hard ridge of your cheekbones and the softened flesh below

them. I kissed your bottom lip which hung loose, slack as you snored. I kissed you down your neck and buried my face in the scent of your chest. My hands formed fists, grasping the sheets around us. You stirred.

“I’m going to get coffee,” I said.

You always need coffee, you replied. Your voice was groggy. You yawned and smiled and crow’s feet formed wrinkles in the corners of your drowsy eyes. *Stay with me*, you said. *Try to sleep*. We both knew that I couldn’t.

I sat on the dark mahogany chair; the one with the overstuffed crimson cushion; the one next to the matching mahogany vanity dresser. I could see your reflection in the mirror as I dressed. You laid on your side and rested your head on the flattened palm of your crooked arm and your fingers furrowed into your hair. You were smiling as you watched me dress. I took my time with my stockings. I knew how you liked to watch me point my toe and stretch out my legs as my hands traveled the length of them, one by one, as I rolled those black stockings back over my white skin.

In the hallway, a maid was exiting a room. A “Do Not Disturb” sign swung from side to side as the door closed behind her. She was dressed in pink scrubs; a matching top and bottoms. Her name tag hung crooked, loose, illegible off her sagging breast. Behind her she pulled a long cart full of neatly folded white towels, toothbrushes with crisp cellophane wrappers around the bristles, and stacks of soap with names that suggested their scents: rosehip rain, cinnamon serenity, lavender lace. The things people used, the things people needed when they were out of town, the disposable things. Her hair was beginning to gray around the temples and was pulled into a low bun with dark, sweaty tendrils hanging around her prematurely aged face. She wore sensible white sneakers.

“You finish with your room now, miss?” she questioned. Her accent was heavy, obvious.

“No, my boyfriend is still sleeping,” I said with a smile creeping over my face. I only used that name when you weren’t around. We never used those terms. We never liked definition. You never like definition.

Once in a cab, on the night you flew into town, we kissed in the backseat. I got tangled in the seatbelt as you pulled me onto your lap. When the driver yelled that there was “No kissing in the cab!” I slid off your lap and sat next to you with guilt washing over my face. You tapped your fingers on your thighs. You sighed heavily and rolled your head back, resting your neck on the cold leather of the seatback. You whistled the bird songs you told me your grandfather had taught you while peeking mischievously around at my face. When you tried to kiss me I would shake my head and hiss things like, “He’s watching. We’ll get in trouble.” But soon you won and your lips were melted into mine and the cab driver was banging his fist against the plastic partition and we were still kissing when the car screeched and slammed into the curb. We were still kissing when the driver opened your door and demanded that we get out, said that where he came from, young people had respect. He grabbed my arm and pulled me from the car. “Get out, get out!” he screamed. It was then that you snatched his hand off mine, threw him against the side of his car and thrust your finger into his face. *Don’t you ever raise your voice to my wife*, you said. The driver’s eyes were wide, like a cornered animal’s and his mouth trembled, inaudibly forming words as his hands shot up. You wrapped your arm around my waist and kissed the top of my head.

“I’m not your wife, you know,” I said. *No*, you whispered. *But someday you might be*. Even then I knew it wasn’t true, but I wanted to believe your lies. You were still whistling as we walked away. Your arm was tight around my middle.

On the day that I met you, you had smiled from across the bar. You had said that you liked my costume. We were both there, with all of our friends in costumes for the masquerade. You said that you didn’t celebrate this, didn’t celebrate Hallow-

een and I had laughed and asked why. You told me that you lived far away, an ocean away, while I admired your accent. And you said that this was fun, that this was really vacation and that you dreaded going back. When I asked you how long you were going to be in town you smiled with one side of your mouth and cocked your head and said *Two days*. You said that you were here on business and when I asked what kind, you said *The boring kind*. And you said we should get out of here and I agreed and you took my hand and laced it through your arm and said *We should be anywhere but in there*.

Over bourbon manhattans we spoke of our mothers and our childhoods and our absentee fathers and when I told you of mine your eyes pitied me and when you told me of yours my eyes pitied you. And you told me of how your mother had lost you once at the department store and had searched for you and called your name and found you, hiding under a mannequin's dress and that you were crying, drying your eyes on the fabric and we laughed and laughed until the waiter said, "Please, won't you keep it down?" And we laughed harder and harder and you pounded the table with your fist and clutched your stomach and gasped and gasped until moisture gathered in your eyes and dripped to stain the crimson tablecloth below. And when you caught your breath and wiped your cheeks you looked at me and whispered *My god this is nice*. And your eyes stared at me and my eyes stared at you and that was all that we could say.

That night we ate strawberries in your hotel room and drank champagne from glass flutes and I said, "This is so cliché." And you smiled and nodded pushed the hair away from my face and said *Let's do this every night*. And you bit into your strawberry and the juice dripped down your chin and you wiped it away with the back of your hand and tossed the other half of the bitten fruit into the trash and when I said, "There was still fruit on that," you furrowed your brow and said *It's okay. I'll just have another one*. And you did this without noticing the can filling up

with half eaten strawberries. “They’ll attract ants,” I said in a voice that I didn’t recognize. A cold flat voice. A winter stone voice. “We should throw them outside,” I said. And you laughed and said *Let them come. I’ll be gone by the time they get here.*

Once we had met in Chicago, when your business brought you there and you called to see if I was free. You said *I want to buy a ticket for you, I want to see you.* You said that you needed me to be there and you asked how I spell my last name.

When I flew in, you picked me up at the airport and said that you were sorry, but you had to make a quick stop, had to meet up with somebody. They were there, the two business men and they saw me on the other side of the glass door and motioned to me and asked who I was. You looked at me and quickly away and shrugged your shoulders and said *Just a friend, she’s gonna show me around town.* And you changed the subject and didn’t look back and didn’t think that I heard you, didn’t notice that the door was still ajar.

That night you made me tea and asked me what was wrong. You said that I sounded sad and I told you that I heard you, told you about the glass door. And you smiled and kissed my hands and said *I don’t like to talk about my personal life at work and don’t like to talk about work in my personal life.* And you asked if I understood and I said that I did. And you told me to drink my tea and come to bed, that it was missing me. And I told you that it was a hotel room bed, of course it didn’t miss me and you said *You’re right, the bed doesn’t miss you, I do.*

On the street, on the corner of West 47th and Broadway, I skipped through the tourists. I smiled and said good morning as they fumbled to balance their hands full of Kodak cameras and cinnamon flavored almonds. I sang *New York New York* as they clutched overpriced caricatures of themselves grinning in front of a cartooned Empire State Building, fake Louis Vuitton handbags and I love New York t-shirts. They bustled around as I swayed through them in my party dress. The dress I wore last night. The dress I wore for you. You had winked when you saw me. You pulled

me next to you and smiled while the cameras flashed. And even then, you were careful never to embrace me, never to bring your lips near mine. I clamored to stand closer, to feel your skin against mine, but you didn't notice. You never did. And yet I swayed, I skipped, I hummed. I tried to whistle, but my songs were broken by unexpected smiles and laughter at nothing in particular.

In the coffee shop bathroom mirror I smoothed my hair, rubbed the dark streaks from under my eyes and chewed mint flavored gum before walking back to meet you.

The doorman at the hotel welcomed me back and said, "Is it your first time in the New York?" And I smiled and said, "No, I live here." And he smiled back at me and said that he was sorry, said that my husband sounded foreign. I said that you were, and I didn't correct him.

You answered the hotel door with your hair in a wavy mess and you were scratching it where it met your neck. Your suitcase was open. Your clothes were folded. I stopped. It had come already. You turned. *My flight leaves at noon*, you said. I nodded. *I'll be back soon enough*, you said. *Come here, come here. Don't be sad*. I said I wasn't sad. I told you that I was tired and I yawned for effect. *You're angry with me*, you said while I shook my head. But I folded and told you that I didn't want you to leave. I told you that I wanted you to stay. That I wanted you to stay with me. You're eyes softened. The crow's feet were gone and you weren't humming songs and your lips weren't pursed in laughter. They lay straight in a line, a flat line, a heart monitor without a pulse. *Don't say those things*, you said. *You know that I have to leave*.

You know that I can't be with you.

Of course I knew.

We had a lovely weekend, didn't we?

Of course we did.