The Overlooked Motel

Caitlin Wolper

The sun wouldn’t stand up behind you, Karen, and it was aching with that yellow weight. I swore you could’ve been an angel with the way you fell from bed every morning, how your single curved hand sunk among the silvery sheets. How the sky, pumped and thinned through the crooked window slats, disgraced your silhouette for all three months.

But you didn’t care. Couldn’t remember for more than a few days at a time.

I wish I could’ve just fucked you and been done. Fucked Rob over like the way he’d fucked me over when he took my money and ran. I can’t believe I let it get further than that. I can’t believe I let myself forget what I wanted, even for a minute.

“You know what I’d like?” I asked, voice still slurred from the night before. You were submerged up to your elbows in a drawer, your thin arms dissolved into pastel sheer knots of fabric that roped ladder-like over the drawer’s edges. The pale wooden drawers had decorative metal pulls curled into claws, the fake silver of them peeling in spots to a plastic silver, but you ignored the handles and wrenched the drawers open at their sides, your hands cupped like you were moving and dropping heavy stones.

You were twisted in thin shirts, wrinkled. Bobby pins were scattered in the creases of your balled clothing like buoys bobbing on pale wave crests, a quiet metallic motion. I wanted to kiss your long neck to make you stop. I wanted to kiss your neck. That’s all I wanted. That scared me.

Underneath the refuse, I saw you wrench out the complimentary blue-bound gold-lettered Bible and drop it on the floor. It made a heavy black thud, muffled by old-newspaper-colored carpet. Mildew. It made a soft sound, like religion isn’t. I’m Jewish anyway, so I didn’t care much that you threw it. I don’t know what religion you were. Probably Buddhist or Bokonomist or some crazy new-wave shit, Rob was always into girls like that, who were never really standing on the ground. Maybe it made his life easier when he had to run away.

“What?” You always had that distance, your head bent away and full of air, busy in another space. Buried under something, voice underwater.

I didn’t always want to trick you, but I always had to. I liked to, in a way. I liked to remind you you were with me. You kept rummaging through the drawers, and I needed to make sure you found the right answers in them.

“What, lose your virginity somewhere in there?”

“Ha ha.”

“What the hell are you looking for anyway?”

“I dunno. Something interesting.”

You parted the clothes to show different cracks of pale wood beneath, the broken beads of your false pearls rattling through the maze of fabric like archaic pinball, like untied cargo stumbling on a tilted ship.

You never knew what you were looking for; I never knew what to leave for you to find. What might jog your memory. What might help you remember me that time. What might help you remember that you had to have always been in love with me, not him, what might make you unchangeably sure. Every few mornings,  you rummaged.

“Am I boring you?” I asked.  
 “Only always.”

Silence for a while, until I couldn’t stand it. All that wood slamming. My shoulders didn’t feel quite right but my face was square and silent.

You looked up suddenly. I knew. I knew it had come again, I’d seen it a thousand times. Your face was clean, dirty, clean and dirty because your eyes were empty in depth but watered darkly like hurt and confusion and uncertainty. You stood up slowly and brushed your knees even though there wasn’t any dirt on them, just the wrinkles of fabric, puckered blue denim. I noticed then that you’d showered sometime while I’d been sleeping. There was water on your shirt, a crest above your breasts where the ends of your hair had rested.

Your face rippled and broke. You couldn’t remember me. You’d been searching to remember last week, and now you couldn’t remember the last minute. Maybe I had looked familiar when you woke, we’d bantered like we had the night before, but now you were clear and swaying and empty.

When you asked my name, your lips thinned by worry but gaping with fast breath, I wondered who I should be.

For you, I would introduce myself anew; I had a different moniker every week. It was always the same. Each time we met, you only knew me for so long, but for the week you knew me you’d appraise me like a car, try to pull me apart, sell my parts for loose change and buttons; the kind of coins you would pretend to toss into the fountain but you were really throwing at pigeons. You were calculating. Thinking. A druggie’s girlfriend in every respect. That’s why it’s so damn funny you couldn’t remember for shit. You always thought you knew everything about everyone.

I knew you, Karen.

You counted your beauty marks when you thought I wasn’t not looking. You spread out your long legs, your face riddled with some sort of longing, a sailor sent home from sea. I never knew what it was you wanted to find.

So I tried everything. I’d remind you of everything I wanted you to remember.

Last month it was the necklace, the one I’d clasped around your neck while we sat at dinner, like they do on TV. When you woke up one morning, the necklace still around your neck, your face was a dryer sheet, fresh and scented and unassuming, and you grabbed at your throat like you were choking.

“What- what are these? Who...are you?” I’d heard it all before. Seen it all before. You’d spring up. Scurry out. Maybe you’d cry a little, depending on how you were feeling. Sometimes you’d accuse me of drugging you. Assaulting you. Taking advantage. You were always the victim, and I never knew what to say.

Because you weren’t just playing the victim. You were one.

And those who-are-you exits were always so theatrical it made me want to die. I’d try to remind you that I’ve given you the pearls the day before. That I’d seen you last night and you’d kissed me first. I hadn’t done anything wrong. Not really. I’d think, ‘You called me beautiful three times last week and when I woke up and saw the curve of your back, was that beautiful too? Or was it just sad? It was too hot under those blankets and your arm with your legs twisted into mine, prying them apart.’

I’d remind you of everything I wanted you to remember.

After an hour or so of dramatics, blankets on the floor, rum soaked into the carpet, sharper than its glass, you’d leave me, the door open suddenly, spitting a rectangle of light that spread clean and even onto the floor. Like a black and white photograph. Like the inside of your head. I didn’t see it in colors; I saw it all in shades.

But you always came back soon enough. You needed a fix; your fingers shook and you asked around for how to make it stop, and without Rob around I was the only one left to take your order. That’s how we always met, you and I. On our ‘date’ at Denny’s I’d slip it to you under your gritty cloth napkin and you’d laugh, your lips painted that whorish ugly red, but clumsily, like you’d applied it while examining your reflection in a car door or a saucepan. Stretched out in the wrong places, lipstick on your teeth, like maybe you’d wanted to look pretty but hadn’t been taught how. I loved how it looked.

George would judge us, his hair slicked back like his smile. He judged how every one of our dates looked like our first. He judged my wifebeater and your lipstick. He judged us at a fucking Denny’s, smiled unconvincingly at me when he handed over the red-rimmed vinyl menu, his eyes sideways at you like he couldn’t decide if you were my lover or my prostitute or both.

But under the flickering white lights, we laughed like we knew each other. After a while of knowing you, I knew exactly what to say to make you love me too.

With the thin plastic baggie caught between your long chipped nails, you’d have to stay for the whole meal, and I’d charm you, and you’d end up at The Overlook with me. When I told you the rate had gone up and you said you didn’t have any more money to pay me, I’d just smile. You’d smile like a scared animal. Like somewhere in you was memory, but it was soft and thin and wispy as a baby’s hair. We’d have some drinks. Shoot up. Drop. Fuck. Whatever you were feeling, we’d do. It was the least I could do for someone I didn’t want to love.

And each time, I’d have you for a week. Rob wouldn’t have you for a week. Friends told me he’d call your empty house, the queen bed quiet with its silent sheets, caution tape circled around the dresser drawers. I’d have Rob gone from you for a week.

Three weeks ago, it was a Denny’s menu that I hid. Dumb as hell, I know, but I thought it might work. You might remember me making fun of your shitty America pancakes. You might remember even one of the times it felt like you fell in love with my drugs or with me.

I was trying to trick you. I know it was shitty. But it wasn’t about you, the bad parts. It was only about you when I was caring. So I tricked you. But you never took the fucking bait for more than a week at a time.

You’d asked who I was and where Rob was and my hands were strange outside of my pockets, you rarely remembered Rob so when you did it scared me, when I insisted that I was Jake, the guy you loved, had always loved, you got frantic. Your hands shook and your eyes were owls’ eyes rimmed red and bloodshot and your cheeks were so pale your face looked flat. Your arms plunged into that drawer again but instead of rumbling its contents they started flying, a flurry of colors, Gap shirts soaring in a sick laugh at the money I’d spent on keeping you close, in the mockery of an Overlook Motel home.

Sometimes when you woke up, you did remember some, but not me, you remembered Rob and his hands on your hands and you’d seize up and I’d want to kill you.

Hands in a drawer, you stopped suddenly. The colors stopped, the rainbow of shirts stopped.

“Karen?”

Nothing.

Your back seemed small, the skin of your shoulders pointed forward, your body angled into the second drawer. Your hair, mousy and falling from your ponytail in strips, seemed limp and gray in the thin sunlight slatted through the blings. All that moved was your right arm, still deep in the drawer. It moved slowly, hypnotically. I stepped forward. You were nearly the same color as the wood, Karen. I could see your grains moving away from me. And you seemed so far, like a girl on a TV, so when I walked forward I didn’t expect to get any closer to you, but this was nothing new, I always felt this distance with you, like I was the sun and you were a silhouette, like you were wood and I was water. And I wanted to be a boat and sail your seas.

“Rob.”

I stopped.

“No. I’m Jake.”

“Rob.”

“Karen…,”

“Rob.” You said it again, quietly, more mantra than name. “Rob. Rob.”

“I don’t know who that is.”

“I’m in love with him.”

And here we were in this shit motel, just like every shit motel I’d moved through with you, and with your hands inside the drawer and your eyes up high on the wall you were saying his name, and I didn’t know what to do, so I did what I wanted.

My legs were not a part of me. I did not run or walk to the bureau but suddenly I had closed the distance between us and I tore the bureau from the wall and it fell and you screamed and I loved you but I also loved the sound.

You could not still be in love with him.

My hands hurt after. That’s all I remember. I was like you, Karen; I forgot it all in the passion. Our crimes were in our passion. My hands were red and black and blue and hurt and your eyes were closed like when we slept. The bureau had toppled onto you, onto lovely you, and you were lying quietly among your clothes, your stomach hidden by the pale wood that looked so much like your skin.

My hands did not shake. Not when I took your Polaroid camera from the dresser. Spilled around it were sticky stacks of photos of us that I’d forced you to smile in, just because I knew it would make Rob hurt. Some of the smiles were more genuine than others.

In one photo, we were beneath the gray blanket, and your head was on my neck, your eyes closed, your hair spread thinly on the pillow and out of frame. I had no smile, but my eyes were so calm. I slipped the Polaroid into my shirt pocket, felt it crackle against my chest. The air was so still. Your arms beneath the bureau so slender.

Holding your camera, angling it to the floor, I charged the flash. Its whine was loud, high, screeching. I shivered. I took a photo and the flash filled the room, flattened your features. It printed with a loud scuff. I took it from the camera and picked up three more photos from the bedside table and fumbled with them, shoved them into the crumpled envelope I used for my baggies, addressed it to Rob down in Mexico.

I swung open the door like a coffin, light spread over your body and then the darkness as I walked into the dim sunlight, eyes squinted because it was brighter out than I’d thought.

Walking down the blue stairs of the motel from room 234, nobody looked at me even though I smelled like death. The metal steps were each so far a drop from the previous, so I loped more than descended. At the foot of the stairs and the mouth of the road, I slipped the letter into a blue post box, opened the box a second time to make sure it had fallen into the box’s belly. Rob may have gotten away and left his girl behind, but I wouldn’t hide from this. And if he got word, it would be word of me.

I did not remember walking back up the stairs, only hearing the sirens go and feeling nothing at all. Nothing but a strange sense of dizziness, my fingers tingling, an uncertain sense of buzzing movement. I knew I had not been quiet enough, discreet enough. I wanted to run my hands through your hair. I wanted to slap your dead silent forgetful face.

There were sirens echoing through the San Fernando Valley only minutes after I walked back from the post box, and when they kicked in the door, I was staring at you, standing over you, and I was smiling. I was smiling and I was a little bit sad because I wanted to stand with you forever but the police were taking me away. They knocked me to my knees in front of the dresser.

On my knees, I saw into that drawer. You’d scratched ROB into the cheap wood innards nearly one hundred times; just his name sprawled out like a swarm of ants erupting from a colony. You’d been running your fingers into the creases of his name.

Rob would hear that you were dead, so I’d won. But really I felt lost.