

THE HOTEL STAY

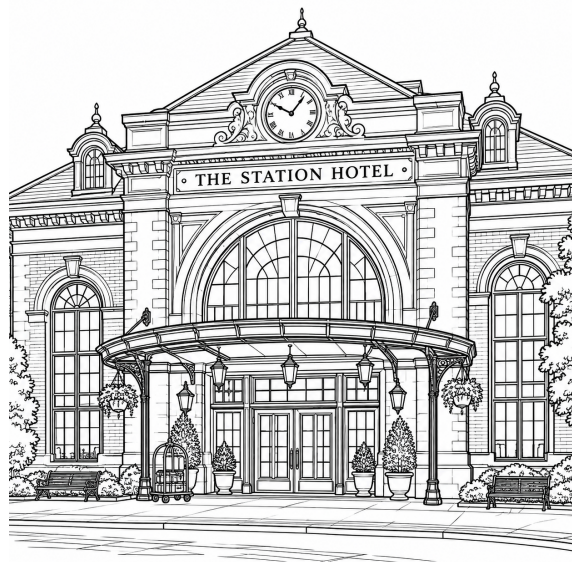
A Scene from the Cutting Room Floor

The narrator is not available right now, so let me, Daniel, take you through the following experience. What I'm about to share with you occurred early in my relationship with Mara and it was amazing. It took place a few weeks following our rendezvous at the state park, and well before I had discovered the disorder.

She called it a surprise, which by that point in our relationship was a word I had learned to receive with a mixture of delight and intense excitement, the way you find yourself pinching yourself to ensure that you're not dreaming.

She gave me an address, a room number — #823 — and a time to arrive, which was pretty much immediately after my work day ended at the university. Her instructions were NOT to go back to my condo and that she had all details taken care of. Just bring myself. I was happy that I remembered to fill up Bella's food and water dishes before I left for the office that morning.

I left the office and plugged the address into my cell phone GPS app. It brought me to the Harrington — the old downtown hotel that served as a railroad terminal during World War II and began falling apart in the 1960s. In the 1980s, restoration of this classic landmark began and by the early 1990s it had become a luxury hotel with 125 rooms and 12 suites.



The builder's specific ambition was to make it the kind of place people chose for occasions rather than convenience. Marble in the lobby. A bar with actual bartenders who knew what they were doing. A restaurant on the second floor with a view of the river that the city had been slowly convincing people to care about again. They had completed the construction of an actual riverfront park with an entertainment stage and open lot for food truck events.

I didn't know it yet, but Mara had packed for both of us. This was the detail that got me — not the hotel itself, not the reservation, but the fact that she'd gone to my closet while I was at the office and selected what I'd wear, folded it, put it in a bag, and had the bag with her when she arrived at the hotel.

She had strong opinions about my clothes that she'd never previously disclosed and she disclosed them during our stay at the hotel, with the casual authority of someone who has been dressing a man in her mind for some time and is finally getting to implement the plan.

"You have good taste," she would later say, "but you default to safe. Tonight we're not defaulting."

I followed her instructions to room #823, which was on the eighth floor with the river view she'd specifically requested. I exited the elevator and approached the room. The door was slightly ajar, a sight that brought instant concern that perhaps someone other than her had gotten in.



As I pushed the door open, the room was dark. It was a long room with drapes closed at the far end. I stepped in and called her name — no response. With help from the light emanating from the hallway, I could see a narrow path of rose petals on the carpet. As I moved further into the room, the only light came from candles lit on both nightstands, one on each side of the bed.

Mara was lying on the bed, propped up slightly on the pillows, wearing a white bath robe. She wore a huge smile on her face and she was holding a long stem rose in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. Even in the dim light, I could make out her soft thatch exposed by one bottom corner of the robe folded to the side. The bedspread and blankets were pulled down and placed neatly at the bottom of the bed, and rose petals were sprinkled all around her.

She set the rose down on her chest and used her pointer finger to tell me to come hither. As I approached the side of the bed, she placed the glass down on the nightstand and pulled me into the bed on top of her.

What happened next was everything the candlelight and the rose petals and the come-hither finger had been promising since I pushed open that door. I won't lay it out in detail here — some rooms don't need a tour guide — but I will say that Mara approached the next hour the way she approached everything she decided to do: with complete intention, considerable expertise, and the particular generosity of someone who finds as much pleasure in giving it as receiving it. By the time it was over I had a working theory that she had been planning this evening for considerably longer than she'd let on, and that the clothes she'd selected from my closet were only the beginning of a blueprint I hadn't been consulted on and didn't need to be.

Following our intimacy, Mara looked over at the alarm clock and suddenly jumped out of bed. She announced that we had dinner plans and we had to get dressed quickly.

We had dinner in the hotel restaurant. She'd made a reservation — of course she had — and the table was located in a private corner by the window and the river was reflecting the glow of the street lights around it. She ordered for both of us from the menu, which should have annoyed me and didn't, because she was right about everything she ordered and I told her so and she received the compliment with the smile of someone who already knew.



She talked about her girls over dinner. Not with the guilt of a woman who has left her children with their father for a night — the guilt was conspicuously absent, which I noticed and filed — but with the warmth of a mother describing people she loves to someone she wants to know them. The four-year-old's current obsession with a particular cartoon. The two-year-old's developing opinion about shoes, which apparently was strong and specific. I listened and asked questions and meant them.

At some point she reached across the table and put her hand over mine and looked at me with the expression she had sometimes that I had never found the right name for — not love exactly, though it contained love, more like recognition, the specific look of someone who has found what they were looking for and is still slightly surprised that the looking worked.

"I want this to be our life," she said. "I want Tuesday nights and hotel rooms and dinner by the river and knowing what you're going to order before you do."

"It can be," I said.

She smiled at something behind my words that I couldn't see. "Not yet," she said. "But soon."

The bar afterward was the hotel's own — low lighting, a piano that someone was playing well enough that you noticed it without it demanding attention. We stayed until the piano stopped. I don't remember what we talked about. I remember the quality of the evening, which was the quality of something unhurried, something that didn't need to justify its own existence by getting anywhere.

Back in the room, I stood at the window while she unpacked — both of us, she unpacked for both of us, which was the kind of domestic intimacy that lands differently than the obvious kinds — and looked at the city doing its evening things below us and felt something I didn't immediately have a word for.

Seen, I think. That was the word. The specific feeling of being with someone who has been paying attention.

She fell asleep first, the way she always did — suddenly and completely, no gradual transition, just present and then not, her breathing evening out before I'd finished whatever thought I was in the middle of. I lay in the dark of a hotel room with the river somewhere below us and the city doing its overnight business outside the window, and I looked at the ceiling and thought about what she'd said at dinner.



I want this to be our life.

I knew, in the specific way you know things you're not ready to say out loud, that something in the sentence was off. Not the wanting — the wanting was real, I could feel the truth of it the way you feel things that aren't performed. But the *yet*. The small, specific *not yet* that had followed it, with the smile that knew something I didn't.

"Could all of this be true? Can she be real?" I said to myself. I didn't want to question it because I feared it would all disappear and not be. I fell asleep eventually. The city went on outside.

In the morning she was warm and luminous and ordered room service with the comfortable authority of someone who knows exactly what she wants and is accustomed to getting it, and we ate in bed with the river visible through the gap in the curtains she'd left specifically for that purpose, and she told me she was happy, and she meant it, and I believed her completely.



We checked out at eleven. She held my hand in the elevator. The next day life resumed. I was back in my office finding it difficult to concentrate on my projects.

I've thought about that hotel room a lot since then — about the dinner and the river and the piano and her hand over mine and the specific, unhurried quality of an evening that didn't need to justify itself. I've thought about what she said she wanted.

Not yet. But soon.

The *yet* was the tell. I know that now. She already knew something I didn't — that the version of our life she was describing had an expiration built into it before she'd finished the sentence, the same expiration that everything between us had, scheduled and inevitable, running on a clock neither of us had agreed to set.

She wanted it to be our life.

She wasn't wrong about the wanting.

She just couldn't tell me about the clock.