

Cabana

by Andy Plattner

Walter and Adriana sat at the Beau Rivage Hotel's glassed-in patio bar and watched the vivid afternoon storm blow in from the ocean. They drank steadily and Walter liked the look and sound of the rain as it arrived. It gave him the distinct feeling that while the world was meant for him, he really did not have a say in anything and in this way he was doing all that he could. Adriana, who had started off the day in a straw hat, bikini top and wraparound skirt, seemed to be affected by the weather. She had traveled down here with him to escape the lousy West Virginia winter, but for the moment there was nothing else to do but sit and drink. Walter had stopped trying to make conversation with her a half hour ago. The bartender, Murph, also seemed to be just barely alive.

Walter considered the splashing dimples in the hotel pool brought on by the rain and he wondered if it would be nice to live underwater and what he would miss most if he did. Then, from the corner of his eye, he spotted Kirby Hawkins, the six and a half foot tall lifeguard in his uniform of pith helmet, white polo shirt, white shorts and sneakers, darting into the rain from the row of cabanas near the shallow end of the swimming pool. Kirby trotted gingerly alongside the pool for the row of cabanas beyond the deep end. The cabanas there did have awnings, so he was able to stay dry as he unlocked one door and began to set out furniture. Two chairs, a small table, a chaise lounge. These pieces had to be set tightly together so that they each could stay dry under the awning. It did not seem to be the right type of day for an open cabana and Walter couldn't help but wonder about it.

After a minute, Kirby jogged up to the bar where Adriana and Walter were sitting. He pulled off his pith helmet, held it away so the water would run off. He was dry otherwise, which seemed

impossible and without a word, Murph put together a cranberry juice over ice for him. Kirby was in his sixties, had thick white hair combed neatly to one side. His face was deeply tanned and heavily lined face and his eyes were dewey. There were people who vacationed regularly here and Kirby kept up with the general details of their lives. It seemed to be part of the job. Yesterday, upon greeting Walter, Kirby had said, "So, how're things in Charleston?"

Now, Kirby was smiling faintly at Walter, like they both understood something. Walter swallowed and said, "Who'd want a cabana for a day like this one?"

Kirby said, "Why Carla."

Carla was Walter's ex wife and they had vacationed in Miami every year that they were married. Walter placed his hand on the side of his face, rested his elbow on a cocktail napkin. "Carla?" he said. "My Carla?"

Kirby's eyes went to Adriana, who he had met before for the first time yesterday. Adriana was in her mid-20s and she worked with Walter in an office back in Charleston. Very pretty, oval face. Almond shaped, blue-green eyes; thick, shoulder-length, black hair. Walter was in his early 40s and had been divorced from Carla for years. Adriana was the only person he was seeing these days. She was companionship for him, plus sex. For her, he was the guy with the apartment right on Collins Avenue in Miami Beach. Winters in West Virginia were cold, empty and difficult. Walter and Adriana might have meant more to each other, but they meant these things at least.

"Carla called," Kirby said. "She said she was going to be staying across the street, at the condo." He motioned vaguely in that direction. "Asked that a cabana be ready for her this afternoon. I told her it was going to rain, but she insisted. "

"Oh, yeah," Walter said, after a second. "Well, that's Carla. We take turns." He shrugged. "Looks like somebody got their dates mixed up. I'll go see about it." He reached into the pocket of his shorts to pay the tab. Adriana and Walter had been sitting at the bar for two hours at least, and after they nodded their good-byes to

Kirby and Murph, he walked quickly through the hotel lobby. When the glass doors at the hotel entrance, slid open Walter had to wait for Adriana. When she arrived, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the rain.

"Uh!" Adriana said as they trotted down the curving asphalt driveway towards Collins Avenue. By the time they reached the sidewalk the both of them were soaked. They had to wait for traffic to clear, and when a city bus sent an ocean wave of water at them, Walter jumped back. Adriana stayed put and laughed as the huge fan of water swept over her. Then she turned to him, with her arms held out to her sides, the water dripping like shredded wings. This alarmed him. He lunged forward, took her hand and they trotted onto the glassy road. Adriana pulled away as they crossed the yellow line and she stayed more than an arm's length away. They made it to the apartment, and Adriana went directly for the back bedroom, where she'd done some unpacking the day before. Walter used the bathroom adjacent to the main bedroom, which they had shared last night.

This apartment was not Walter's to use and Adriana already suspected as much. Walter had told Adriana that he time-shared it with his ex, but after they arrived yesterday morning and Adriana had done a quick tour of the place, the first thing she said was, "This doesn't seem like you at all."

To which Walter had said, "She likes pastels. It's not worth fighting over."

"She's really pretty," Adriana said. "Is this her, in all these pictures?" She motioned to a wall in the main bedroom. "You ought to put up something of yourself. I mean, if the place is half yours." Walter had just shrugged at this. Adriana watched him a moment longer. They went to bed together that night, made love for the first time together in the dark, which she said she preferred. He had offered no objection. In the morning, when he awakened, he saw there was a space between them, room for another person at least.

Carla was everywhere in this apartment because it was her apartment. Carla's family was wealthy and she had all the stuff. The

divorce judge said the apartment would remain all hers, but Walter had kept his key. Carla wrote him about it a few months later, asked that he return the key, but he didn't and didn't hear anything else about it. The first time he ventured down to Miami alone, he supposed she might have just changed the locks. But she hadn't. When his key was able to open the front door, it almost seemed to mean that something was still alive in their marriage.

Walter made use of the apartment at least once every year since their divorce. Carla had moved to Richmond, to run one of the family companies there. She could set her own hours, her own vacation times. Walter had to be careful. He always visited Miami during the off-season, during the late spring and summer. This winter, however, Walter had found out that Carla was taking a trip to Paris. She had told him this during their annual holiday phone conversation where they wished one another a happy new year and good luck.

Paris in winter? He tried to picture Carla walking along the Champs Elysee. He pictured her in an ankle-length dark topcoat, a cherry red beret. He could hear her blocks clocking softly over the sidewalk. Walter had a sinking feeling then. He was to never get over Carla. Even if he was positive that she had long gotten over him.

Now, he showered fast, dried off, dressed in different clothes, and combed his hair. He went to the spare bedroom, tapped on the door and there was Adriana, in dry underwear, loose wet hair, laying out on top of the bed covers, reading a magazine. She began snapping pages. Finally, Adriana said, "What, you are afraid of your ex-wife? You're a grown man, for heaven's sake."

He said, "Not at all."

"You tried to hustle me through in the rain," she said, sounding even younger than she was. "I saw your face." He wondered if he should tell her the truth, if somehow being able to tell the truth would make him seem like a man with greater possibilities. She said, "You are divorced, right? I mean, goddamnit, if I'm the other woman . . ."

"I'm divorced," he said. "Jesus. We share this place, okay? She has the dates mixed up. It's okay." He thought about things for a time, about how he could best put them. "Adriana," he said and he didn't say anything else, not until she looked at him. "Have you ever been married?" She did not answer. "There's a lot of history between two married people."

"Don't talk to me like I am a child," she said. "I'm already sick of this. This boy toy thing . . . honestly, I'm already tired of the way you look at me."

"How do I look at you?"

She stared at him and while staring at him, she waved her hand in front of her chest and then her panties.

Walter bowed his head at this. "Maybe you should put on more clothes."

"And then what?" her voice said. "Who is going to invite me to Miami then?"

He said, "Look, I can put us up at a hotel down the beach, two rooms, you can have your own."

"Why do we have to leave?" she said. "We got here first."

She does know, he thought. She knows whose place this is.

Walter wondered what it would be like with Adriana when they got back to Charleston. Everyone in the office knew they were vacationing together. Everyone knew that Adriana was an unhappy woman. Now, to them, Walter would be a man who had taken advantage of that. Before he left he could have cared less what his officemates thought. But now it felt like what they thought was all the world was going to know about him.

"What would you say to having your own room at the Casablanca Inn?" he said.

"Where would that be?" she said. "Up the beach, where the old people are?"

He bowed his head again, felt himself nod once, then walked over to the bed. Rain swept against the windows, though he could not see what was outside with the blinds closed. Walter sat on the edge of the bed. "I am very sorry I brought you here," he said. "I

took advantage of you, Adriana." His listened to the rainstorm for a moment and then he said, "Let me salvage this, please. Let me save this much."

"Relax," she said. "Jesus Christ."

His eyes turned on her. "What's wrong with you?" he said. "Why won't you let me do the right thing?" His hands rose slightly, and his palms were up, facing the ceiling.

"If you'd invited me to Virginia or Kentucky or someplace like that, I wouldn't have gone with you," she said. "You don't need to apologize . . . okay? Just fuck it. I already know you're not in love with me. When I saw your face when that guy said your wife's . . . look, paradise week is over. Nobody owes me an explanation. What I'm doing now is just thinking I have to start making better trades. It's nothing personal, but you're a history guy. I didn't realize it until now. But I should have know sooner." Her voice trailed off. "I just wanted to get down here, see what it's like. The big time, you know?"

"What are you learning?" he said, his voice empty.

"I have a sense today that I should be expecting more," she said.

"That's good," he said, his voice quiet. Walter was about to reach over and wiggle her foot, but the way she was looking at him suggested that he should not. He thought it would be nice if it looked like they were getting along when Carla arrived. But when Walter studied Adriana's face for a moment longer, he supposed that it didn't matter. She was young and that was all Carla was going to see. "You are smart, Adriana," he said. "I 'm grateful for that now. I'll feel less worse about this."

Adriana folded the magazine and dropped it over the side of the bed. She lay on her stomach and he studied the back of her. He felt like placing his hands flat on her shoulder blades and holding them there in a gentle way. "I'm not here to make you feel bad," she said. This did not interrupt his thoughts. "You know what I did this morning? Hey," she said.

"What?" he said.

"I took a walk down to Neiman Marcus and I asked them if they were hiring, if there was an application people fill out. Isn't that crazy? I've been here for just two days. But I so felt alive in that store last evening . . . Why do people stay in West Virginia?" she said.

"I really don't know the answer to that," he said, responding right away.

"I just wish I was eighteen again," she said. "You know?" Walter didn't answer this. This wasn't a conversation between two people. "Tell me something wonderful about myself . . . please?"

Walter had to think, but he didn't want to think for too long. "You belong at a place like Neiman Marcus," he said. "With colorful, wonderful things." She turned her head quickly to get a look at him, his expression. His eyebrows went up. "You need to be around people who are used to being around good things," he said.

"That's lovely," she said, in a quiet way, a moment later.

He didn't say anything, just gave a nod, supposed it was a good time to step out.

"What do you want to do right now?" she said.

"I'd like to lie down for a few minutes," he said. Then, he turned his eyes to her. "I think I'd like to lie down and go to sleep with you. Sleep," he said. "Drying off has made me tired."

"I'll lay with you until you fall asleep," she said.

In a minute, he was curled up alongside Adriana. He wrapped his arms loosely around her and she did not object. He wondered about Carla, if the weather had delayed her travel. He wondered if he really wanted to see her. Adriana felt so young to him now. He could feel her heart beating under his forearm.

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Adriana and Walter were in that bed sleeping, when he heard someone else in the apartment. The voice out there was loud. "Hello, who is it? Who's there? Who is here with me?" Adriana was already sitting up, her eyes large and Walter pushed himself up at the exact

moment when Carla opened the door. Carla's mouth was open and after a moment, she swayed to one side, used the sill of the door to balance herself. "You have got to be kidding me," she said, her voice heavy. She drew a long breath, closed her eyes. Then, she closed the door again behind her.

Following this, Adriana and Walter stayed in bed together. Now, his heart was racing. Neither of them said anything. He laid on his back and she watched his profile for a time. "That really wasn't so bad," he said.

"You wanted her to see us like this, didn't you?" she whispered.

"No," he said. "I don't know. Maybe."

"You did," she said, in a quiet way. "*You* are weird."

"I'm going out there in a minute," he said. But he stayed with Adriana longer than that. "Maybe there is something to you and me," he said.

She watched him. "Don't get confused, Walter," her voice said.

When he stood in the doorway, he turned to Adriana and she fluttered her fingers in a wave good-bye. "See ya," she said.

Carla was not out in the living room, so Walter went to the main bedroom, tapped on the door and when he received no answer, he opened it a crack. She was laid out on the middle of the king-sized bed, shoeless, in black Capri pants and a sleeveless black blouse. Two huge, soft-looking pillows were placed under her head. She was a tall woman, slender, with small round shoulders, triangular face, light-brown beauty parlor hair and blue eyes. Very fair skin. She laid there with her hands folded over her stomach, kept her eyes closed. He couldn't tell what, if anything, she was doing on purpose. She did like black, anyway. She usually looked good in it. He closed the door behind him.

"Carla?" he said.

"Yes?" she said.

He waited, then said, "How are you?"

"I'm fine, sweetheart, how are you?" Her eyes remained shut.

"Why are you here?"

"Why, I was about to ask you the same thing." She slithered her shoulders a bit, shifted her weight in this way. "Who is that? That is my bedroom, you know. My father used to read me bedtime stories in there."

"Adriana Corbett."

"Adriana Corbett. Well, how about that?"

"We were just trying to get out of the cold weather."

"Have you been here for a while?"

"No," he said. He stepped in the direction of the bed, then sat on a corner of it. One of her eyes opened at this and then closed again. "We were going nuts, I guess," he said. "I found the key to this place in my desk drawer and I thought what the heck."

"Liar," she said. "Try again, please."

"I've had the key for years," he said. "All right, okay, you've got me." He laughed at that, wanted her to smile at least. Which she did not. "This is the first time I've brought someone with me."

Carla wiggled slightly. "Walter, you can't bring other women to this apartment. I know you have been here since the divorce."

"How?"

"How he asks," she said, after a silence. "How wouldn't I? Any time I plan on visiting there, I call the condo manager. You know this, Walter. I ask Homero to walk through the apartment, check . . . when I don't call and he sees a light on in this place, he watches. He calls me. The first time it happened, he said, 'I think it's Mister Walt.' I told him to just leave you alone. Maybe you weren't there to trash the place." Carla's eyes opened at this and she turned them right on him. "But you are turning that key now, pally. Another woman . . . and so . . . youthful. Why, you are practically a card-carrying monkey."

He said, "You knew I was here, huh?"

"Not this time, I didn't. I was in Paris. I just had a number for emergencies. That was the point of going to Paris."

"In the winter?"

"I wanted to see the snow on the ground there. I wanted to see young French girls walking up the snowy sidewalks to the Gare St. Lazare, see their pink cheeks, watch them laugh."

"Really?"

"You know exactly what I mean, Walter. I did see something like that and when I did I understood that was what I'd gone there to see."

"Girls don't laugh in Richmond?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "Are you questioning me? Are you suggesting that I shouldn't go to Paris whenever I damn well please?"

"No."

Her eyes watched the ceiling for a moment, then turned them on him. "You don't know anything about paradise, sweetheart," she said.

"You seeing anyone in Richmond?" he said.

"Yes, I am. He might fly down here to stay with me for a few days. He didn't want any part of the snow in Paris project. He also is confused about beautiful weather. No man can keep up with me. What's her name again . . . in the other room?"

"Adriana."

"I think I might get up and warn her about all this."

"My guess is that she already knows," Walter said. Her eyes went to him. "Or she suspects at least." Carla blinked once, then smiled and blinked again. She nodded. "We have a mess here, Walter. Your mess, yours to clean." She smiled more brightly, turned her head towards the ceiling and closed her eyes. It stayed quiet for a while.

"Well, I guess we'll just pack up and go over to the Beau Rivage. Or probably something further up the beach."

"I'm thinking about the penthouse of the Eden Roc," she said. "Down there on 19th Street. I went to a party there once while I was still in college. I think I might just go there for a few days. You can pay for it, of course."

"I'm afraid I don't have that kind of money," he said.

"Hmm," she said.

He began to speak and she held up her hand. Her eyes were still closed. Carla said, "I think I'll just stay at the Beau Rivage for a day or two. The top floors there are nice. I don't need all these memories today. . . It'll be nice, I'll get a better rate on the cabana. I do like the cabana life so. There's so little to tend to . . . Besides, I don't want anyone to say I'm meddling in the affairs of my ex, preventing him from finding true happiness . . . Sometimes I like the Beau Rivage. I slightly enjoy their silly piano bar at night. I do have a heart, you know . . . I'll send you the bill, all right?" Walter didn't say anything, so she wound up looking at him again. "What's wrong with you? You can stay here. What is it?" She continued watching him.

"The key," he said.

"Yes?"

"I'd like to hang onto that."

Her mouth opened and then it closed again as she watched him. "Honestly . . ."

"If it's okay."

"Walter. Look at me."

"I am looking at you."

"You can keep the key," she said, her voice quiet. "But I'm telling Homero to change the locks next week . . . Walter," she said.

After a second, he said, "I know."

"I can turn you into ashes over this." For the first time, she did reach in his direction. It was simply a gesture. He was sitting too far away and did not move. "Buck up, kid," she said.

"I will," he said. "But, it's hard."

"You're better than this," she said. "We both know that."

"I'm panicking more now. I'm getting older." She didn't respond and when he looked her way again, Carla's expression seemed to have lost its sharpness. "Paris, huh?" he said. "I bet you looked beautiful in the snow."

"I'm sure I did," she said, her voice dry.

He didn't say anything else. He sat quietly with his hands folded, hanging there beyond his knees.

She puffed her cheeks, exhaled a long, slow breath. "Okay," she said. She drew in another breath, after facing the ceiling again. "We'll go over there after it stops raining. You can tend to my suitcases if you'd like."

"Of course."

"All right," she said.

He said, "I'll miss you, Carla."

"It's going to be raining for a while," she said.

"I'll be all right," he said.

Walter thought that he might have heard soft footsteps moving away from outside the door after he stood to leave. He was in no hurry to get to the door and, after he'd opened it, there was no one there. The door to the other bedroom was closing.

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Carla did not actually appear from the bedroom for another two hours. When she did, she had a small rolling suitcase behind her, and a purse over her forearm. Adriana and Walter sat in chairs near the living room windows that looked out onto the street. They had the curtains pulled back. For whatever reason, it seemed as though Adriana wanted to make a good impression on Carla; Adriana had changed into a khaki skirt and a sleeveless royal blue blouse, even put on her choker of faux pearls.

Across Collins Avenue, the powder blue Beau Rivage neon on the roof of the hotel was illuminated. For a time, the sky beyond it had kept changing colors. But it was a very dark sky currently and everything seemed to be shimmering after the rain had stopped. Adriana and Walter had not talked much, but when they had, they'd kept their voices low. Now, she and Walter both stood and once Carla had made it to the middle of the big room, she stopped and nodded to them. "Hello, Adriana," she said.

"Hello . . . "

“Carla, darling. Just call me Carla.”

“Thank you.”

“Well,” Carla said. She considered them a moment longer.

“Let's go.” Her larger suitcases, surely carried in by her cab driver, were still right by the door. Each case had rollers, so Walter could handle two of them by himself. Adriana grabbed the handle of the remaining one. When the three of them stepped outside, the was blowing and a car alarm had gone off. They moved in a small parade up the sidewalk with Carla and her small case leading the way. Adriana was ahead of Walter, seemingly trying to keep up with Carla. The droplets of water that jumped from the suitcase rollers seemed like tiny diamonds. Walter had to keep the two cases he was pulling right together, side by side, so their rollers could stay on the sidewalk. As a result, he was the slowest of them all. He tried to keep the cases together. The women continued to get further away.

