

# Bad Marie (An Excerpt)

*by* Marcy Dermansky

Sometimes, Marie got a little drunk at work.

She took care of Caitlin, the precocious two-and-a-half-year-old daughter of her friend Ellen Kendall. It was a full time job; Marie got paid in cash and was given a room in the basement.

She never drank in the daytime. Only at night. Marie didn't see the harm: a little whiskey, a little chocolate. Marie liked to watch bad movies on TV while Caitlin slept. She liked wandering over to the fully stocked refrigerator and helping herself to whatever she wanted to eat. Marie constantly marveled over the food: French cheeses, left-over steak, fresh squeezed orange juice, raspberries imported from Portugal. It had only been three weeks since Marie's thirtieth birthday, the day that she had gotten out of jail.

The situation would have been humiliating had Marie any ambition in life. Fortunately, Marie was not in any way ambitious. Changing diapers and making lunch, taking Caitlin out for walks to the neighborhood park - these were things that Marie could do. Marie liked living in Manhattan. She liked listening to the lilted banter of the other nannies from the neighborhood, mainly black women from the West Indies. Marie even liked the educational TV she watched with Caitlin. Sesame Street was just Marie's speed. She often napped during Caitlin's afternoon naptimes.

Marie, who hadn't felt much of any emotion since her boyfriend had killed himself in prison nearly six years ago, found herself crazy in love with a two-and-a-half year old girl. It unnerved Marie, how strongly she felt. Smitten. They both loved chocolate pudding and macaroni and cheese from the box above all other foods. They could not take enough baths. Caitlin was bossy but that suited Marie fine. Marie often felt herself in need of a leader.

Marie was pleasantly drunk the night Ellen and her French husband came home from the theater and found Marie passed out in the bath tub. She had put Caitlin to sleep and was watching bad television, a movie about a sexy teenaged babysitter. First the

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Available online at *«<http://fictionaut.com/stories/marcy-dermansky/bad-marie-an-excerpt>»*

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babysitter drugged the mother, then she seduced the father, and at the moment when Caitlin started to scream, she was chasing the daughter through the house, wielding a kitchen knife.

"Marie. Marie Marie Marie."

Marie ran as fast as she could to Caitlin's room, crashing into an end table on the way, breaking a ceramic vase, afraid of everything: an intruder with a gun, a poisonous spider beneath the sheets, a monster in the closet. A raging fever. Knife wielding babysitters.

But nothing was wrong.

Caitlin wanted to take a bath.

"You aren't sick?" Marie said, out of breath, trembling.

"You forgot my bath." Caitlin was standing up in her crib, holding on the bars as if she were ready to revolt. "I feel sticky. I want my bath."

Caitlin was red from screaming. Marie was shaking with anger. Relief. She lifted Caitlin from the crib and discovered that the little girl was, in fact, sticky. Not only sticky, but visibly dirty. Her face was smeared with chocolate ice cream; they had eaten soft serve earlier that day. Marie put her finger on Caitlin's round, hot cheek.

"We forgot your bath?"

Though Marie was paid to take care of Caitlin, she often felt that Caitlin was looking after her. Marie always felt guilty for the things she did wrong. Every day there was some small new mistake to make, but so far, there had been no consequences. Marie smiled, feeling Caitlin's sturdy legs lock around her.

"I'm sorry, Caty-cat. You need a bath."

"I want a bath," Caitlin said.

"Good," Marie said. "So do I."

Marie carried Caitlin to the bathroom, passing through the living room to reclaim her drink, momentarily glancing at the TV set. The teenage babysitter, still wielding her knife, promised not to kill the girl if she came out of the closet. Marie continued walking; it was bath time, better than TV. Caitlin made happy gurgling sounds, pounding Marie's back like it was a drum.

Marie ran the water, Caitlin at her side, watching the water fill the tub.

"Bubbles," Caitlin said.

"Yes. Bubbles."

Marie generously poured Ellen's French lavender bubble bath beneath the running faucet. This was a secret between Marie and Caitlin; Ellen thought bubbles were bad for Caitlin's skin. When the tub was almost full, she took off Caitlin's damp white nightgown. Marie took a sip of what still remained of her drink, raised naked Caitlin high into the air from her armpits, and then dipped the bottom of Caitlin's feet in the water.

"Too hot," Caitlin said.

Marie nodded. This was part of their routine. Marie turned off the hot faucet, ran in only cold water, and then she dipped Caitlin back down.

"Better?" Marie said.

"Yes."

Caitlin grinned. Caitlin was happy when she got her way. She seemed to get her way most of the time. She would probably grow up into a disaster of a person, confident, arrogant, entitled—just like Ellen. Maybe, Marie thought, that was not entirely a bad thing.

"Let's try again, kit-cat."

Marie lowered Caitlin back down into the tub. This time all the way in. Soon, she would run more hot water. Marie was able to trick Caitlin this way every time. Caitlin reached for a yellow rubber duck and promptly smashed it over the head of another rubber duck. The tub was filled with bath toys.

"So violent," Marie observed.

Marie took off her clothes and got in, lying back against the opposite end. She reached for her drink. She took a deep sip of whiskey. She closed her eyes.

"Quack," she heard Caitlin say. "Quack quack quack."

It occurred to Marie that she was, at that particular moment in time, happy. Happy. There weren't many times when Marie could remember feeling this way. Swimming in the ocean, during those

short, wonderful months in Mexico with Juan Jose. Making love. Taking walks under the stars. Planning their future, together. The babies they wanted to have. Marie had felt her life was what exactly what it was supposed to be.

Marie was happy. It wasn't complicated. All it took was a bath. Caty-bean.

She opened her eyes, looked at naked Caitlin.

"Hi Caitlin," she said.

"This duck is so bad, Marie," Caitlin said.

"Get the duck," Marie said. She felt the lids of her eyes slide back shut.

"Bad duck," Caitlin said.

"Bad," Marie said. "Very bad."

Marie must have fallen asleep in the bath. She had not heard them come in, Ellen and her French husband, but somehow they were standing in the bathroom, fully dressed, staring. Ellen's mouth was open wide. She had those perfect teeth, the result of years of expensive orthodonture.

They were a stylish couple. Benoit Doniel was wearing a dark, striped suit. His blue tie matched the color of Ellen's shimmery dress. Benoit Doniel was looking at Marie, looking at her naked. Benoit Doniel. Marie loved to say his name in her head. Benoit Doniel. Benoit Doniel. Benoit Doniel. It tasted good in her mouth, like chocolate. Like chocolate dipped in whiskey.

Since she had begun babysitting, Marie had managed to avoid contact with her employer's husband. Three weeks and not a single straight on gaze. Benoit Doniel was not strikingly attractive. But he was sweet and sexy in a funny, self-deprecating kind of way. He wasn't tall; quite possibly he was short. Marie seemed to tower above him. His sandy brown hair fell in his eyes. He had also written Marie's absolute favorite novel in the world, *Virginie at Sea*, about a suicidal teenage girl who falls in love with an ill sea lion at the zoo.

Marie had kept her ardent love of Benoit's out-of-print book a secret. She had discovered a translated edition of the novel in the prison library. She'd read it again and again. Sometimes she would

force herself to wait a day, sometimes two, and then Marie would start all over.

This was the real reason she was there. Why she had come to New York, arrived on Ellen's doorstep, asking for a job, though she had no idea at the time who Ellen had married. It was why she was naked in the bathtub, her body on display for Benoit Doniel's gaze. Marie's happiness wasn't about Caitlin, but the close proximity to Benoit Doniel. French novelist.

Now, at last, craning her neck out of the water, Marie allowed herself to look at him. Really look. She looked and looked. Benoit Doniel had a small mole on his cheek. His bottom teeth were crooked. His eyes were brown. She couldn't have known this, not from the black and white author photo. He was also grinning, grinning at Marie, unmistakably amused with the situation. He could not take his eyes off her. Marie held his gaze. Somehow, Ellen had married this amazing man and now he was staring at Marie. Life had finally presented her with a gift.

"Hello there, Marie," Benoit Doniel said.

"Benoit." Marie rubbed her eyes. It was the first time she had spoken his name out loud. "Hello."

"Mommy and Daddy are home," Caitlin cried.

Caitlin kicked her legs, splashing water out of the tub. Ellen still had not spoken, but Caitlin's flailing seemed to stun her back into motion. She scooped her naked daughter from the tub and hugged her to her chest, soaking her blue dress.

"Jesus Christ, Marie," she said. "I pay you to baby-sit, not to take baths with my daughter, and certainly not to fall asleep in the tub. My God. I can't believe this."

Only then did Ellen notice the glass of whiskey balanced on the soap dish. The situation, at least, was interesting. Marie had no idea what Ellen would do. Ellen believed herself to be control of her life. Marie spread her legs open, not a lot, just enough.

"You're drinking? You're drunk? You were asleep in the fucking bathtub. You could have drowned my daughter. Did you lose all of your brain cells when you were in jail?"

"Down," Caitlin said. "Put me down."

Marie had locked eyes with Benoit Doniel.

There was no doubt at this point that he was staring at her. He pushed the hair out of his eyes to get a better look. Marie couldn't fathom how he had ended up with Ellen Kendall. She couldn't believe he was the same man who had written *Virginie at Sea*. He could have been writing about her, Marie, at sixteen. He had stolen her innermost thoughts, transcribed them word for word onto the page.

"Get out of the bathtub, Marie."

Marie was surprised to realize that Ellen was still in the bathroom. Marie couldn't be certain, but it seemed as if Ellen was screaming. It seemed as if her voice was much louder than it needed to be.

"Get out of the fucking bathtub. Get out. Get out."

"Mommy said fuck," Caitlin said.

Marie knew that she should get out of the tub. She understood that Ellen was at the point of explosion. But Marie was too invested in imagining the picture she made at that very moment. As if through Benoit Doniel's eyes. As if it was a scene in a movie. Marie was tall. She was thin. She had long, dark hair and surprising large breasts, which had always seemed out of proportion to the rest of her thin frame. Marie decided she would not move, not just yet. She would extend the moment as far as she could take it.

