

Hotel Paper

By Auriane de Rudder

I met Caleb in a downtown Honky-Tonk on Nashville's crowded, tourist-trappy upper Broadway. Cover bands blare on the overdeveloped strip, and visitors from all places hillbilly swarm the streets; a flurry of thirsty, sweaty locusts. It can be scary, it can be smelly, but if you're in the right mindset, Broadway can also be pretty fun.

I chose to parade the streets alone that night. I was tired of bitching to my friends, and they were undoubtedly growing tired of me, too. I wanted a night off, a night to pretend that Alex had never happened. Losing myself in a sea of people was exactly what I was in the mood for. I was also in the mood to get laid. My friends were all in committed relationships, and I couldn't have any voice of reason steering me away from my plan of action. So, I was solo, and I was fine with it.

Dressed like a ho, and borderline underweight, I was feeling confident. I marched into the first crowded bar on the strip, a trailer-park themed mess, and surveyed the room for cute guys. I downed shots of Fireball because what else do you do when the floor beneath you is literally covered in sod and someone is playing a banjo? Also, excluding the calories, Fireball was the perfect drink for me on my man-hunt. Not only did it bend my perception enough to settle for someone who may have a mullet, but it also left my breath smelling sweet. I was drunk and ready to slur sweet nothings into the ear of anyone who would have me. Thanks to Fireball, those sweet nothings would smell like toothpaste.

When I saw Caleb, the sod beneath my platforms disappeared; the irritating twang of the banjo stopped. In a crowd of six well-built men, he stood out as the most handsome, his bright white smile flashing in the neon lights. Women lingered around the group, but Caleb was too busy laughing with his pals to notice any of them. He resembled an exotic Nick Lachey, but with a distinct posture that gave off a Military vibe. Thanks to the nearby Fort Campbell, Military boys are a common occurrence in downtown Nashville.

“God bless America,” I said to myself, as I tossed back the last of another Fireball shot and made my way toward the group.

Our eyes met as I approached. A familiar feeling returned to my loins. My mind raced, and for the first time in weeks, I could feel my heartbeat. It was beating right out of my vagina! Caleb must have felt his heart beat in his pants, too, because as soon as he noticed me, the attention of the group shifted my way. He sauntered over, meeting me halfway, and leaving his friends a few steps behind. Up close, I saw that he looked more like a young Elvis than a former member of 98 Degrees. He smelled like gum. I smelled like toothpaste. This was going down.

“Excuse meh, Ma’am, but haave we met before? I keep lookin’ over at yew, and yew seem very familiar-like,” Caleb’s approach was pretty lame, but the cinnamon-y fresh connection between us was strong.

The rest of Caleb’s game was perfectly Southern. He had a slow, deep Louisiana drawl, and told me funny stories about “baaack hommmme,” somehow putting extra syllables into each word with his accent. He paid my bar-tab, as it was “tha gentlemannnly thanng tew dew,” and agreed to take shots of Fireball, instead of the Jack Daniels he preferred. In no time, Caleb was holding me close on the bar’s uneven dance-floor as the cover band crooned about big green tractors. We

tried to dance, but mostly just made out. He tasted like cinnamon, I tasted like cinnamon. It was magic. Drunken, Southern magic.

But there was one conundrum getting in our way. The Fireball, although it helped us smell great, was having adverse effects on us both. I was starting to get less horny and sadder. This always happened when I drank brown liquor. I wasn't sure if I was going to cry or have an orgasm that night. Maybe, just maybe, I could get away with both. Caleb, on the other hand, was drinking enough to render his dick completely useless. He knew he was out of the game, and made excuses to avoid taking me back to his hotel room.

"It's nahht jus' mey in tha hotel room, ya see. The other guys frohm my unit are crashin' tew." Caleb looked down when he spoke, kicking at imaginary dust on the barroom floor. "I dunno if you'd wanna deal with all that," he added.

I was relieved, in a way. While sleeping with a floozy on the sofa of your crowded room may be alright in the bro-handbook, it's not exactly my favorite scenario. Besides, politely letting a girl down while you explain your limp penis? In front of your military buddies? Yeah, that wasn't Caleb's cup of whiskey, either. I chose to not lose hope in Caleb, and instead of viewing him as a disappointment, I would consider him a gentleman with restraint. Caleb wasn't a slut. I wasn't a slut. The only true slut in this situation was whiskey, because she had fucked us both. The next morning, Caleb called.

"Heyyy Ariannna," Caleb cooed. Okay, so he couldn't say my name. But who could, really? I wasn't deterred. Caleb was *charming*. With *restraint*. Besides. Caleb was hot. Caleb tasted like gum.

“Caleb?” My hangover was evident in my scratchy voice.

“Thees ees Caaahleb. Imma stilll in towwn and wullld liiike to knoww if I caan taake you tuh lunch tuhday.” In reality, he spoke like a little boy, or a nervous actor reading through the script of Deliverance. But I was still drunk. To me, Caleb sounded nervous and sweet. His southern drawl was syrupy. It was as if I could somehow hear his big brown eyes in his speech. Caleb was a darling!

“Absolutely,” I replied without hesitation.

So what if I hadn’t showered, or brushed my teeth, or sobered up? I sprayed dry shampoo on my roots, touched up my caked but still in-tact eye makeup, and checked my breath. Wow.

Cinnamon-y.

“Perfect,” I said, smearing deodorant on under my shirt as I blew a whiskey flavored kiss in the mirror. I decided then and there that I really liked Caleb. I really liked Fireball, too.

Lunch turned into dinner, as it was already almost five p.m. when Caleb and I met. A sober man who hadn’t been up partying all weekend would have seen that I was a hot mess. But Caleb—sweet, southern, still-drunk Caleb—was not that man. To Caleb, I looked beautiful. My filthy hair looked full, not stringy, through Caleb’s bloodshot eyes. My lips seemed cherry red, when in actuality they were chapped, burned, even, from slugging shots and aggressive public kissing. My breath was still awesome. We were still drinking my new favorite booze. I tasted like I had just brushed with Close Up. Half-way through dinner, we were back to making out like teenagers.

Normally, I’m not big on PDA. For those of you who are unaware, PDA stands for Public Display of Affection. I capitalized these words because our display was very Public; capital

Affection, and absolutely capital Display. In very little time, our waitress at the downtown Joe's Crab Shack grew tired of our under-the-table antics, so Caleb suggested we move our make-out party somewhere more private. I acquiesced.

An upscale establishment with reasonable prices, the Millennium Maxwell House Hotel had luxurious white beds and fluffy down pillows. Caleb's room was a nice one. The only problem was that there were three army guys spread out on my luxurious, fluffy bed.

"I dew ahhpahlogize but I wasn't planning on meetin' a laaady," Caleb smiled sheepishly. I wasn't entirely deterred, but I wasn't up for a gang-bang, either.

"Maybe we can find something else," I said, pulling Caleb by the hand. We set out into the hotel hallway in search of a dark corner where we could consummate our whiskey-fueled love.

I mentally examined our options. There were cameras in the hallways, and no dark corners at all. The elevator alarm system would go off if we hit the emergency stop, for sure. I noticed a large, colorful banner displayed at the end of the hallway.

"Nashville Welcomes Louisiana Shriners at Millennium Maxwell House Hotel," it read. Below the large print, smaller script informed me that there was a conference room on the twelfth floor of the hotel. "Got it!" I pulled Caleb into the elevator and hit a button. "Twelve just happens to be my lucky number," I told him as I leaned in for a kiss.

To my readers, an aside: Because I am at least 50% white-trash, it is in my nature to *love* hotels. This comes from years of carting me and my family's shit on long, cross-country "road trips." What this means is that we moved around, and my mom made it seem fun by calling it a trip. Good job, Mom. But remember, white-trash road trips aren't all glamour and Hilton Hotel stays.

Oh, no. We're talking hostels, campgrounds and Super 8s, people. I hated camping only as much as I hated the strange cat-ladies who ran nearly every hostel I had ever stayed in. But hotels? Even the dumpy motel version of a Super 8? I loved them. As a young girl, I fell hard for the luxury of an early morning wake up call. I reveled in the glamour of those tiny little wrapped soaps, the abundance of clean white towels, and the idea that someone else would clean up after me. If we stayed somewhere *really* fancy, somewhere like, err, a Holiday Inn? I would position my bathing suit at the top of my packed belongings, ready to bask in the sun like a movie star, poolside, of course.

But that's not all a hotel has to offer. A hotel is chock full of all kinds of goodies. If you sneak into the hallway while the maids are cleaning? Say hello to as many free packets of coffee as your little fists can grab. Ever crashed a hotel conference, shortly before the attendees arrive? Pens and pads of pristine white hotel paper are *everywhere*. And sure, maybe you're judging me right now. But I truly feel that something about my poor-girl pillaging nature was what landed me and Caleb a romantic, camera-free space in the heart of the Millennium's largest conference room.

The room had a lovely view of the Nashville skyline, and without the harsh electric lighting turned on, we were visible only in the soft glow of distant city lights. It was the perfect, quiet space. I smiled when I noticed the neatly arranged pads of paper and Maxwell House pencils atop each table.

"Lovely," I cooed as I lifted several pads and placed them in my purse.

Caleb pushed me against the floor to ceiling panel windows first, reaching under my shirt and kissing my neck. We stripped items of clothing off one another, and in what felt like a romantic slow fall, but was really a drunken crash, we dropped to the floor. We pawed at one another, and almost knocked over a large Fed-Ex-style print on display; a picture of two smiling Shriners.

You know Shriners, right? The cute elderly guys with the burgundy Baron hats? Yeah, those guys. We rolled around under their supervision, giggling at the absurdity and playfulness of it all. Tiny crumbs from the filthy carpet stuck into my exposed flesh, and when I flipped on top of Caleb, I earned a wicked rug burn on my right knee. What looked like a small piece of a Dorito was crunched into the fresh wound.

“This won’t work,” I told him.

We made our way over to an ominous, oak conference table framed by two flags—one American, the other Cuban. I couldn’t think of any association between Shriners and Cuba, but then again, I didn’t major in history.

“This could work,” I offered, pulling Caleb toward me as I opened my legs and leaned back on the table. The table proved to be as sturdy as it looked. Still, the ridges of my spine felt smooshed against the wooden surface.

“Caleb, I don’t want to be covered in bruises,” I whispered.

Caleb sprung back from me, his eyes darting from object to object in the room. He was in some kind of horny, stealth spy-mode, and I laughed. His eyes stopped on the American flag, perched to my left. He moved quickly to the flag pole, and began removing the flag. I watched his biceps

flex as he ran the ropes holding the flag through his hands. He was facing away from me, exposing what can only be described as a perfect, perky round ass.

“An ass like a peach,” I thought to myself. I watched in awe. Look at my hot, Southern piece. Just beautiful.

With the American flag half-way down the pole, he stopped. I watched as he raised the flag back to its original glory, pausing at its return. Was he going to salute? Was he going to salute the American flag, totally naked, with those biceps, and that ass? I wished he would. He set across the room to obtain the Cuban flag, instead. Once he had hoisted the flag from its pole and secured it as my tablecloth, he leapt back on top of me; A true patriot.

Our lovemaking was simultaneously sensitive and rough, intense and then playful. We were young, and shockingly mature all at the same time. It was all a joke, and it was also so, so serious. Best yet, Caleb didn't care that I was absolutely disgusting. Not sexually, not in a perverse way, no. But physically. I was whiskey bent, un-showered, and—since the other 50% of my heritage, the non-white trash part is French—pretty stinky. Caleb was undeterred. He soldiered on, and an hour or so later, we watched over the Nashville city lights below, naked and wrapped in only the flag of Cuba.

“What time do you have to be back to base?” I eventually asked, breaking a comfortable silence.

“Chaack ouut is aat noon, but we's prahbaablay git on tha road 'round seex,” It was already 4:30 am. “But ah'd liike to see ya ahgain,” he drawled.

This I was hoping for. I had met a sweet and handsome drunkard with excellent stamina and a penchant for exploring hotels. Plus, he didn't care that I stunk. Score.

“Buttt therein lies a snaaag,” Caleb hesitated. “I go tuh Afghaaanistaaan real soonish.” My lushy little heart dropped. “Liiike, as in tew weeeks soonish,” his head slumped down as he spoke.

We sat facing one another, naked and quiet for only a moment. I lit up a cigarette, and looked away, surveying the room. My eyes drifted over a nearby smoke detector and stopped instead on the American flag. I turned to look at the Cuban flag under us, our makeshift bed.

I exhaled and laughed a little, an instinctual laugh to lighten the mood. I reached for Caleb, but he recoiled.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to laugh,” I leaned my head on his shoulder, but the spark between us had been fizzled by my callous reaction.

“Ees alright, yah know,” Caleb unwrapped himself from the Cuban flag, and walked toward his boxers, halfway across the room. “Jus’ sucks sohmetimes when the reality of it all soaks in, if ya know what I mean,”

And of course, I knew what he meant. Hell, he had said what he meant. I had my own selfish fears in that moment. A rocket-fast romance would only leave me more heartbroken. And if Caleb was really this amazing? Could we have a fling and just let go? Would he get hurt at war? Would I ever find out? This was sure to end in ruins. But Goddamn, Caleb was cute.

“We’ll give it a shot,” I punctuated my decision by standing, letting the sweaty Cuban flag fall to the floor. I stood before him for just a moment, stark naked. I winked and pranced away in search of my scattered clothing. Tiny crumbs and chips fell from my skin.

As the days progressed, and Caleb’s departure grew gloomily closer, we began to argue. It seemed natural to fight, knowing that the end was so seriously nigh for our baby-affair. We

picked at each other, nagging here and there, reaping the benefits of each argument with mindblowing make-up sex. But the intensity of the arguments steadily increased. Suddenly Caleb's sweet Southern drawl turned into an uneducated hiss. My high-energy and strong opinions became irritating and all too Northern for him. Even our rip-roaring make-up sex couldn't makeup for how different we really were. And then one day Caleb was gone.

I found myself alone that morning, wrapped in the last of our tangled sheets, wondering if Caleb would be okay. I didn't request contact information, as we had agreed to just let our affair end. The arguments had become too frequent, too exhausting. Sobered by that creeping reality Caleb hated so much, we were forced to face the dreaded Real Life versions of ourselves. Sadly, we were strangers at the end of it all.

Despite our painful ending, I would love to send Caleb a little note, making sure that he is okay. Flawed relationship or not, I'm nothing if not patriotic. I support our troops, especially when they're super cute and amazing in bed. I can see myself writing the letter now:

"Dear Caleb," it would read. "The Nashville lights just aren't the same without you." The letter would be romantic, and friendly. I would write from the heart, and from the vagina. I would assure young Caleb that he would be home in one piece soon, and Nashville would welcome him with open arms, and open conference rooms. As I wrote, I would be hunched over my desk and smoking, enjoying a fresh brewed cup of stolen individually packaged coffee, scribbling on Millennium Maxwell House hotel paper, of course.