

THE LONDON SITUATION

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It was quiet in room 815 of the Markwell Hotel. Caroline Cantlon could hear the hustle and bustle of New York City outside her open terrace window; she shivered from the cold, but was happy to hear the sounds of the city she loved. She bit her lip in concentration, studying the words that sat in her lap. As an actress, she had to have her lines down pat. She lifted the pen between her fingers to her lips, chewing on the cap, something she had done since she was a kid. Her late father had called it a nervous habit.

Caroline's raven-colored short hair and pale skin contrasted greatly with the burgundy of the sofa she sat on, lending an eye to her natural beauty. Her long, bare legs were crossed, covered by a midnight black skirt and her usual pantyhose.

She read her lines aloud, rehearsing yet another female character pigeon-holed by marriage. Caroline herself was regularly cast as a subservient housewife. She didn't prefer it, but who was to be picky during the depression?

Caroline knew her life was much more stable than most people's, especially in her own country's depression. While other people were being thrown out of their houses, she and her husband were staying at an uppity hotel while their mansion was being renovated. Sometimes she felt guilty, but that was her life.

She heard the front door swing open, startling her from her train of thought. She assumed it was her husband, James. He had been at work most of the day with his father at their family-owned bank, Cantlon & Cantlon. He walked into the living room, leather briefcase in hand. His lean shoulders shrugged, slipping out from his navy suit jacket. His forest green eyes met Caroline's, giving her a small smile. He towered above her, something she hated with a passion. His height made her feel small, something he liked to use to his advantage.

"How was your day, dear?" she routinely asked.

"Nothing out of the ordinary," he replied. "More poor people wanting loans."

Caroline chose not to reply, not wanting to further discuss a topic she and her husband would never agree on. So, she instead stood from the sofa and tip-toed into the small kitchen, warming up the kettle for a serving of chamomile tea. But James followed, loosening his tie and setting his briefcase on the table. Settling into one of the rich mahogany chairs, he spoke again.

“You know, father and I don’t just give free hand-outs. But these people seem to think otherwise. It’s exhausting.”

Her husband had the tendency of holding his head higher than socially acceptable. He could never quite grasp the severity of the depression. He was the type of man that if a twenty-dollar bill would meander from his pants pocket to the sidewalk, he wouldn’t even care enough to notice its absence.

Once the sharp whistle of the kettle sprung into the air, she poured the liquid into two separate cups; two sugars in hers, one in James’s.

“Did your audition go well this morning?” he asked while sipping his tea.

She sat in the chair opposite, blowing on her tea before taking a drink.

“Quite well, actually.”

He nodded, crossing his legs.

“I see,” he replied.

James was acutely aware of the scarcity of work being offered to Caroline. And he loved it. He preferred her as dependent on him as possible. So, when an audition went well, he didn’t tend to celebrate.

“And what is this you are rehearsing now?” he asked, pointing to the script she had been studying earlier.

She glanced to the sofa, taking a deep breath for what was to come.

“Angel Street,” she said slowly.

James walked to the sofa and swiped the script into his hands, inspecting it himself.

“So, where is it?” he asked.

“You know, the character I’m auditioning for is everything I’ve been wanting in a role,” she said, biting her lip from nervousness just a tad too hard.

“Caroline, where is—”

“And the plot itself is so interesting, dear. It has the potential to be my biggest—”

“I said, WHERE IS IT?!” James yelled.

Caroline jumped back slightly from her position, always secretly afraid of when her husband’s controlling side came

tumbling out. She took another deep breath.

“London,” she whispered.

“You’re not going,” he said with a tone of finality.

His reaction wasn’t shocking to Caroline. Years ago, when they were first dating, she had travelled to California for two weeks to film a small commercial. She was elated to have work—something most people had been struggling to find. But not James. When she returned home from the west coast, he made it clear that she wasn’t to leave again. And she complied. Within a year, they were married. Now, she didn’t know if there was any going back from the submissive wife she had allowed herself to become.

“I told Robert we would meet him and Shirley at the hotel restaurant by 7 p.m.,” he said, shifting the subject.

“And when did you decide that?” she spat back.

“Today, of course,” he said.

He never consulted her when he made plans. But, then again, she never put up much of a fight. James gave Caroline a familiar look, one full of control.

“Now go put on that party dress I bought you last week, and we’ll be on our way.”

Caroline stayed silent, slowly changing out of her casual attire. She could feel James’s eyes on her figure, scanning down her spine to the back of her thighs. At one point in time, she remembered loving that sort of attention. Now it made her want to cover up. She shimmied the tight, black fabric up her form, letting him zip her in. He spun her around, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. He kissed her reddened lips softly, lingering with the romanticism their relationship once held.

“I do like this dress,” he whispered into her neck.

They locked up the hotel room and rode the elevator up four stories at a slow, yet comfortable pace. They were meeting at the Markwell Rooftop Restaurant, where one could see what seemed like all of New York City. It was the only thing Caroline liked about their current situation. She looked over to James. He appeared so simple, so gentle, so unassuming. She tried to remember when he had turned so sour. He had always been controlling, always wanting to take care of her. At one point, he had been a loving husband. But somewhere along the line, it become less about being in love and more about controlling her every step.

“You know, Angel Street is important to me,” she said in a careful tone.

He looked back at her with violent, angry eyes.

“And you staying here is important to me,” he replied.

The elevator came to a halt, quickly stopping their already

dead conversation. The doorman welcomed them both through the entrance; James with a firm handshake, and her with a pristine nod. James smugly handed the man a tip, and proceeded to lead them through the restaurant crowd to a waiting Robert and Shirley, who sat at their usual overly-decorated table.

“Why, hello!” Robert said, standing up to showcase his casual chivalry.

“How’ve ya been, old chum?” James replied.

The two working men laughed together, embracing each other in a way only long-time friends would. Robert turned to Caroline, feigning surprise by her presence.

“Why, Jimmy, this here is still yours?” Robert asked with a smile.

James nodded, much to her disgrace.

“All mine. So, don’t you get any ideas, ya old son of a bitch.”

James pulled out a chair for her, gesturing for her to sit. The men followed suit, immediately catching up on life. She watched them with intent, wondering if she would be included in the dinner party she was invited to.

“Oh honey, you know better than to even try,” Shirley said. “They’ll be talking for hours about the same old fraternity stories we’ve heard before.”

She looked over to the woman, who was taking rather large sips of her red wine. Her pearl necklace was draped down into her bosom, and her silk, white gloves shone in the moonlight. Even her red lipstick looked like pure satin. Shirley never came to a dinner party underdressed.

“A woman can dream,” Caroline replied.

“Darling, don’t I know it,” Shirley said with a laugh.

Caroline moved her chair closer to Shirley. She had become great friends with her over the years, especially during types of occasions such as these.

“You’d think they’d acknowledge us for once,” Caroline said with a disappointed look.

Shirley took her hand, leaning in close enough for their husbands not to hear.

“So, how’s the London situation going?” Shirley asked.

“He shot down the idea on the way here,” Caroline replied defeatedly.

The women shared a knowing look, one of solidarity. Shirley had at one time been a nurse at the Metropolitan Hospital Center on 1st Avenue. She’d adored her job. But then Robert came along and wanted Shirley to stay home with their future kin. So, she did just that.

“Carrie, I can only imagine travelling the world acting, pretending to be people I’m not,” she said. “But you don’t have to.”

Caroline looked down, contemplating her answer. She noticed her ankles were crossed tightly underneath the table, forming red marks on the white of her skin. It was the part of a lifetime she could be giving up, something she could resent James about for years to come.

“What am I to do?” she said, not looking up from her chosen spot on the patterned carpet below her high-heeled feet.

Shirley shook her head and pointed at James, who was still speaking rather loudly with her own husband.

“It’s a rarity that you even act outside the city. And because of him?”

Caroline tried to remember the last time she’d even acted beyond the limits of New York City. She couldn’t recall, and that frightened her.

“You know James doesn’t like when I leave...,” she said, ashamed to speak the truth aloud.

Shirley shook her head, looking her straight in the eye.

“Are you going to do everything James says for the rest of your life?”

Caroline looked over at him, watching his hands flail throughout the air like they usually did when he told a story. Why did she do everything he said? She’d always tried hard to separate herself from the subservient wife she constantly played, but she somehow had become a version of one.

Shirley put a hand on her shoulder, comforting her with solace.

“Can I give you a piece of advice, sweetie?”

She nodded, watching Shirley make sure the men weren’t listening.

“You have so much more to offer this world. I married Robert when I was twenty-one years old, and if I could go back and change one thing, it would be to make choices. Choices that I wanted to make. I’m happy to be raising my three beautiful children, don’t get me wrong. But not a day goes by where I don’t wonder what I could’ve become had I not let Robert dictate my future.”

Caroline knew she was right. She squeezed Shirley’s hand in her own, silently thanking her for the pep talk. She looked around, seeing a place she’d never wanted to be in and made a quick, freeing decision.

“James?” she asked, calling her husband’s attention to her.

He paid no attention, continuing his pointless conversation with Robert.

“JAMES!” she yelled.

He gave her his third threatening look of the night.

“What?” he asked flatly, not to make a scene.

“I just want to inform you that I will be going to London,” she replied. “On the fifteenth of December, that is.”

His eyes widened, shocked by her statement and sudden self-assurance. Caroline smiled, finally happy to be speaking her mind to her husband.

James shook his head, pounding his fist on the white cloth-covered table.

“Caroline, we’ve already decided you are not going and that is final,” he said slowly.

“Dear, I am going. And that’s final,” she replied with a newfound confidence.

James swiftly stood up, towering over her again like he did when he wanted to feel powerful.

“How dare you argue with me in front of our friends? You are making yourself look like a foolish girl,” James replied, red in the face.

Caroline laughed at the mundanity of it all, crossing her arms in the most decisive way.

“I think the only one who looks foolish here is you,” she said.

Suddenly, a hurried waiter ran past their table and towards the restaurant radio, turning it up to its highest volume. A male voice boomed from the box, bouncing off the walls of the restaurant like an echo in a cave.

“Ladies and gentlemen...latest bulletin from the Intercontinental Radio...Professor Morse...a total of three explosions on the planet Mars. And it is reported that at 8:50 p.m. a huge, flaming object, believed to be a meteorite, fell on a farm in the neighborhood of Grover’s Mill, New Jersey, twenty-two miles from Trenton.”

Caroline furrowed her eyebrows. Something about the bulletin seemed familiar. But how could it be? Maybe she hadn’t heard right. She looked back to her husband, still standing tall above her as the power-hungry man he had become.

“Caroline, I’m only saying this one more time. If you don’t—”

She pointed at the radio, signaling for him to listen. The man spoke of alien-like creatures the crowd had yet to come face-to-face with. The man continued on for listeners, describing what he could:

“The things, whatever they are, do not even venture to poke their heads above the pit. Seven thousand armed men closing in on an old metal tube.”

James looked to his wife in a bewildered state.

“Is this some sort of joke?” he asked, only a hint of fear coming through in his voice.

Panic began to ensue throughout the rooftop restaurant, with people suddenly fleeing from their tables. James quickly put on his coat and hat, taking a large sip of his brandy.

“Something’s moving. Solid metal...kind of shield-like affair rising up. It’s going higher and higher. Why, it’s standing on legs! Hold on—”

The radio voice was cut off. Sheer silence. But soon, bits of a speech broke through the static blockade. A different man’s voice came through, speaking like an announcer would.

“One hundred and twenty known survivors. The rest strewn over the battle area from Grover’s Mill to Plainsboro, crushed and trampled to death under the metal feet of the monster, or burned to cinders by its heat ray.”

James’s glass fell from his hands, shattering when it hit the ground. The sound startled Caroline and Shirley, causing them to jump in their seats.

“I’m speaking from the roof of the Broadcasting Building, New York City. The bells you hear are ringing to warn the people to evacuate the city as the Martians approach.”

James screamed, grabbing Caroline’s hand and running them towards the door. Shirley and her husband were not far behind. They quickly stopped, seeing a throng of people waiting at the elevator. He panickedly searched the room, looking for a quick escape.

“STAIRS!” yelled a man from the crowd.

James followed suit, tugging her along with him.

“You need to calm down for just a—”

“Don’t you dare tell me to calm down! We have to GO!” he shouted.

Once they made it to the stairs, James forced Caroline’s descent down the first flight.

“You don’t get it! This isn’t real! It’s from H.G. Wells’s novel—”

James pulled her arm too hard, ultimately throwing her down. She rolled down the hardwood steps, smacking her arm against the bottom platform.

“Caroline!” he exclaimed.

She looked at her arm, seeing the odd way it bent. She felt the pain, but was enraged by something else entirely. Shirley ran to her side, helping her up while being careful with her badly broken arm. She allowed Shirley to help, not bothering to look up at James, whose helping hand she flinched away from. He threw his arms up exasperatedly, shaking his head. He tried again, but received a

threatening look from his wife.

“I’m not leaving, James,” Caroline said flatly.

He looked around, seemingly deciding what to do.

“Just go,” she said.

And with that, he ran. She felt a tear roll down her face and hit the underside of her chin. By this time, the crowd of panicked people had dispersed into the streets of the city, leaving Caroline alone. Shirley and her husband stood behind her, looking more confused than she’d ever seen them before.

“Why aren’t you two running away like the rest of them?” she asked.

Shirley and her husband laughed, giving each other a knowing look.

“War of the Worlds is one of our favorite books. We recognized it as soon as the broadcast began,” Shirley replied. “Plus, we listen to Orson Welles’s show each week. This episode has been advertised for weeks.”

Caroline laughed so hard her broken arm felt like fire. But she didn’t even care. Because for once, she had power over James.

“Can you help me back to my room?” Caroline asked the couple. “I need to call the airlines about a plane ticket to London.”