

Three-day Stand Part I

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Ruby and Ron get together one more time

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The phone rings and is answered. "Concierge, Hotel Royale, how may I help you?" The voice on the other end of the line is the Bell Captain. "He's here." "Are you sure?" asks the Concierge. "Think so. Gray brown hair and not much of that. Glasses. One white bag and one black plastic bag," says the Captain. "HmMMM, sounds right," says the Concierge. "Thanks. And make sure he gets in all right." "Will do," and the Captain hangs up. The Concierge looks at her watch and thinks, "Early again." She glances across the vestibule and confirms that his chair is there. The decorating plan these days doesn't call for a chair, but she'd moved one there a little earlier in the afternoon." She leaves her post and strides to the Reception Desk. She leans over the counter and says to a clerk, "Go find the Manager and tell him he's here." "Who's here?" asks the Clerk. "Don't worry about that, he'll know," says the Concierge, turning to leave. The Clerk bustles into the back room, reappearing minutes later to whisper in the ear of one of her colleagues. The Manager soon follows, bringing with him a bevy of clerks to open up as many stations as needed to process check-ins and check-outs as quickly as possible. "Besides," he thinks, "they'll want to be out front anyway." Radios begin to crackle through the hallways of a thousand rooms. Housekeepers descend in elevators to line the banister on the Mezzanine. Waitresses in the restaurant agree to cover one another and post a watch. Bellman go about their tasks with alacrity, not even waiting for tips to get back down to the Lobby. Even a few Engineers hang up their gruffness and circle uneasily among the guests in the Grand Foyer. The Concierge, back at her post, the best seat in the house, checks her watch again. "Good thing it's good weather," she thinks, "or he might be even earlier than usual." Every time the elevator dings, there's a noticeable drop in the chatter. As a guest emerges toting a suitcase, a sigh floats across the great hall like birds released in a cathedral. "He's getting old," the Concierge thinks, "it never used to take this long. Well, maybe he stopped at Starbucks for a special treat." An elevator clangs. The door opens. The tip of a black cane emerges and pulls its owner forward. The old timers know the Bell Captain had been right, it is him. The Concierge looks over her shoulder and sees eight pair of eyes staring across the Reception Desk. She cranes over her counter and looks up at the housekeepers and bellman crowding the Mezzanine. Waitresses all "go on break" and stand around the potted plants lining the way to the Bar. Cane and all, the old man is still sprightly for his age, whatever that may be. He makes his way from the elevator to the chair oblivious, it seems, to the gauntlet he is

running. Hotel guests are not so oblivious to the inattention being paid them. They begin to murmur among themselves, some complaining gently. The murmur soon changes tone and, as if some Maxwell's Demon had appeared, the random jostle of the Lobby and Grand Foyer begins to settle and clump, jostling now not randomly but to gain line of sight. A young housekeeper, obviously late for her shift, wends her way briskly past the Reception Desk toward the staff lockers in the back. As burdened as she is by the thought of yet again being late, something niggles at her, something she can't quite finger. The old man leans his cane against the glass table that is some wag's idea of a decorative piece and gently lowers his bags to the floor next to the chair. The black bag, less steady than he, falls over and rolls until it clinks against the table leg. The old man mutters, bends over to grab the bag by its neck, and stands it upright sandwiched between the white bag and a chair leg. He unbuttons his coat but does not take it off. The young housekeeper slows her pace scanning the scene to see what is nagging her. It takes a few moments for to realize that it is the nothing that is unnerving her – no noise, no milling. There seem to be as many guests as there always are and yet, most are almost motionless. And there are far more hotel staff visible than she's ever been aware of before. Among them, she spies her supervisor and hustles toward her, dreading to apologize again for being late. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but the bus was..." she begins. "Ssssh, don't worry about that now," says the Supervisor, barely taking the time to glance at the cowering housekeeper. "But, I want to..." "Not now," snaps the Supervisor in whispered tones. "Take your coat off and stand here," pointing to a spot next to her behind a great chair, "you might learn a thing or two." The housekeeper complies and then follows the Supervisor's gaze across the Great Foyer into the hallway where she sees the old man. If eyes were lights, he'd be lit up like the Luxor Hotel, a place she someday hopes to work. "Who is he?" she whispers, a question on everybody's mind. "No one knows," says the Supervisor, "except for one person." "And who is..." "Ssssssh! and that's the last time I'll warn you," snarls the Supervisor. The old man turns slowly, careful to reach behind himself and neatly fold forward the tail of his coat as he sits down. His eyes reach the Concierge and he nods with a small smile. She politely acknowledges his anonymity and makes busy. He sits handsomely, patiently, straight as his slightly stooped back will allow. His feet are planted firmly in the thick carpet, hands rest atop the cane that he has stood up to help him stand. He worries, as always, that he doesn't have it quite right. Did he bring everything he was supposed to and wanted to? He reaches down to his left for the easy bag, the black one, lifts it up and lightly peels the plastic toward him. "Good," he thinks; "Merlot and a bottle opener" – the one he hides in his sock drawer the rest of the year. The white bag is more a puzzle and, ostensibly, the bigger problem as he switches black for white, necks crane over the banister wanting to see what's inside. He rummages, bag precarious in his lap for all its odd shapes. There's no given, save one, "Ensure, chocolate," he gleams. All the others depend on the day and the year and the love as it is when they see each other. Today, picking his way through the objects, there are pickles, long frozen Christmas cookies, a small box of chocolates from La Chocolatier (which he has yet to see her eat), her favorite hid dry cereal and, best of all, the lemon grass. Even if she can't get that back through customs, they'll be able to hold it between them, stroke it's razor leaves, and revel in the soft perfume they will leave behind for the mystified staff. Satisfied, he restores the white

bag to its rightful place on the floor, wedging the black bag against the chair leg – memory has served him well, one more time. He leans the cane toward himself and pulls back the sleeve on his left wrist, glancing at his watch, as if none of the dozens of clocks scattered about the Lobby and Foyer can be trusted. “Hmmm,” he thinks, “early again. Better that than late, like that one time.” He reminisces about the one and only time he had been late, or she’d been early, who knows. They were younger then, in their relationship that is, and had not yet worked out the protocols of unpredictability. “God, that was terrible,” he shudders, closing his eyes as if to shake away the dread. “Wasted time, precious time,” he recollects. “I didn’t know she was already here and she didn’t know to wait for me here. I sat here until dark before getting worried enough to call her only to find she’d been upstairs all along. No, I’ll never do that again and now she knows better, too.” A few of the staff scattered about the gallery had been present on that awful day. Back then, they didn’t realize what was supposed to happen, so they took no note. But in the years that have intervened, they’ve come to understand the pattern. By now, if she arrived and if he weren’t here, someone would remind her to wait. The lore is passed on in whispers, even now as people wait. In hallways and locker rooms, they’ll talk about it tonight, maybe even for a week. The newbies will be learned with truths and untruths like “Someone saw him once kneel down right there in the Lobby and kiss her hands like a courtier.” Another will say, “I saw him once kneel down right there in the Vestibule when she first arrived and kiss her tummy, as if she was pregnant or something.” “He comes twice a year,” pedantically states an old hand, “usually April and December.” “And you’ll only see them together twice,” whispers the Supervisor to her miscreant charge, “once when she arrives and then, again, when she leaves on Thursday.” The old man, well, the both of them, would be amused by the air of mystery that surrounds them. To each other, it’s the only time and place in the whole world where the mystery of the other can abate and, yet, soon, in that very fact, oh so temporal act, they will fire the imaginations and wonder of those who see them together just twice. “We even have a name for their room,” swoons a Receptionist to her younger colleague, “it’s called the ‘Do Not Disturb Suite’ up on nine.” If a oil tanker exploded in the harbor to the east or the Wyman Tower crumbled and laid waste to the westside, neither would have caused the flutter of hearts that rippled from the spectators closest to the elevators when a chime rang, the door slid wide and the one he’d been waiting for, they’d all been waiting for, rolled her luggage cart across the threshold. Business-like as ever, she strode from the elevator banks and turned right down the Great Hall. She could see his feet and, these days, the tip of the cane. “He doesn’t need that,” she thinks, “he’s just trying to get sympathy from me.” A little smirk creases her lips as she thinks on, “Specially here; he’s not going to need it at all. He may as well leave it at home, just like he tells me to do with my make-up bag.” The thick carpet muffles her steps and the clatter of her luggage wheels. He doesn’t notice her until she’s right beside him. Not that he wonders, but he takes his time gazing from her black shoes, up her shapely black stockinged legs to the dark gray skirt and then on up over her rounded tummy (“that I did in fact kiss here in the Lobby,” he thinks with a smile), to the black blouse that masks the industrial strength brassiere he knows he’ll find when he clasps her. “Cheery garb you’ve chosen, once again, Ruby,” he chortles, “on this glorious Spring day.” “Don’t you start with me,” she beams, “BITE ME, Ron”! That part never

makes it into the lore. That is for only the initiated to know. If you haven't heard it, you won't be told it. Simple as that. They smile widely even as they kiss politely; just a peck. He takes the handle of the suitcase as she strides off to the Reception Desk. He bends down for the two bags and loops their plastic handles over the handle of the suitcase so that they can't fall. Cane in one hand, suitcase in the other and with a polite nod to the Concierge, he straggles after her into the Lobby. As they approach the Registration Desk, clerks scatter to look busy, but none disappear into the back room. As always, he stands apart, just outside the stanchions. There is no line – she wonders why that always is – so she makes her way to the counter unhindered. The Manager has taken it upon himself to serve her. “Welcome back to the Royale, Ma'am.” “It's good to be here,” she says, “always good to be here; feels like home.” “Your room is all ready. It's the same one you had last time, if that's alright with you,” the Manager fusses. “Yes, fine, it'll be fine. Never had a bad room in all these years,” she says. “Besides, we don't need for much. I do like, though, that this one has a refrigerator and microwave.” “Here are your keys; you'll be wanting two, I assume,” the Manager smiles, nodding slightly in the direction of the man hovering over her luggage in the foyer as he had for years. “Yes, two, will be fine,” she stumbles, quizzing the Manager's eyes to see if there is just a bit too much familiarity there – something she dreads. When she rejoins her man, she links her arm under the one with the cane and guides him back toward the elevators. “Maybe we need to find a new hotel,” she says. “How come?” he asks. “I think they're getting to know us,” she grins and then they both break out laughing knowing full well it will drive the gallery crazy. “I don't know if I like this room,” he grumbles. “Takes too long to get up from Starbucks. I'm not moving as fast as I used to, you know.” She reaches down and taps him on the ass, the doves gasp to roost in the cathedral, “We'll see about that,” she chirps. The elevator doors ring down the curtains ending the show. The first to clap is the crusty engineer. “Damn, what a fine woman,” he says enviously, “that's one lucky guy”! His light claps bemuse his younger journeyman as the older man turns. Uncomfortable in the public eye, he hastes down the spiral steps to the Grand Foyer, across it to the double doors leading to the service elevator, and down it to the bowels where the engines he owns will give them warmth and hot water and the light they need to see one another. Soft applause follows – no cat calls or whistles denigrate the scene. They ripple like a murmur until they thunder like the wings of a million butterflies throughout this now hallowed chapel. It spreads, collapses, swells, breathes, cheers and 'rounds the rooms like humanity restored – even guests clap in, not knowing quite what for but caught up in the palpable spirit of the whole. “That's it? What was that,” the young housekeeper asks, gathering up her coat and bag in the process? The Supervisor, entranced, says, “Yes, THAT's it. What you saw, if you saw, was love my dear, enduring, plain, deep and for as long as they can keep it. Now, get yourself back where you belong on your shift and we won't talk about this again.” Tears well and spill, streaking a mascara she is now almost too embarrassed to wear. On nine there's no question which way to turn; right, then right, then left to the end of the hall. It's the one with the “Do Not Disturb” sign already on the knob. Inside the room, safe from prying eyes, they hastily shuck their coats and embrace deeply rocking. “It's so good to see you,” spills from their lips as they touch. Sighs, deep, like gasping for air while drowning fill the room. They moan into each other deeply, healing the wound

of separation, rejoicing in the closing of the circle. Hands wander up and down, swirl back and forth and clasp. And then the deepest hug of all, as if each struggles to pull the other inside themselves to keep forever. He swirls the champagne bottle in the iced bucket. She opens up the small card stood upright next to a box of chocolates. "Happy anniversary," the card reads. She looks at him, a small tear on one corner of her eye, and says, "How sweet of you to call ahead for this." The crunching of ice ceases. He takes the card from her hand and reads it. He looks her in the eye, unblinking, and says, "I didn't." A celebration is in order, for sure, but there is work to be done. They both know the drill by now; driving as a synchronous team to maximize time together. As he begins to unpack his bags - Lemoncello in the freezer; merlot, chocolate mousse, marshmallow fluff, sprinkles and shea butter stay on the desktop. Everything else goes into the fridge. Cocoa butter goes in the microwave on low for 20 minutes - he's guessing. Meanwhile, Ruby disappears into the closet, stowing valuables in the in-room safe: money, passport, earrings, bracelet - none of which will be needed for three days. It would be good if she could stow lipstick and mascara as well, but that's a different maneuver. As he feeds the fridge, he hears a squeal of delight from the closet. "What, what's up?" he questions. "They finally get it!" she exults. "Extra sheets, they gave us extra sheets - four days worth it seems." "Cool," he comments, distractedly. "Next year, maybe," she continues, "they'll figure out we should have a plastic or rubber sheet as well." And with that, she swoons through memories of the years and what they've done together and wanted to do. Every time together is a new chance to explore, not only bodies, but souls. He still figuring out what goes where and monitoring the cocoa butter being micced, she slips into the bathroom to lose the makeup she does not need for three days and the garments that clad her perfect body. Echoing out the door, he hears another squeal of delight... "What now?" he asks. "We have extra towels and extra soap. They're on to us," she shrieks, chuckling around the corner from him! He's done unpacking his stash, their fun and sustenance for three days, and struggles upright on old knees. He turns toward her voice and sees her emerge, beaming at first, then demur under his gaze. Fire on ice! DAMN! "You ARE gorgeous, Ruby, you always have been," Ron says. "Simply, plainly, unbelievably fucking gorgeous."