

## EXCERPTS FROM *CAROLINE*

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By Adrian Spratt

In these two excerpts from my unpublished novel *Caroline*, it helps to know that Nick (the narrator) and Jack are colleagues in a law office and that Nick has recently met Caroline. By the second excerpt, she's moved in with him. Nick and she are taking a creative writing course (his first) with one Professor Stern. In the second excerpt, having bought a new couch, he decides to move his old one from the apartment to the sidewalk. Not exactly his cleverest idea. Both excerpts are set in the early eighties.

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That evening I went to the opera with Jack. He'd been urging me to join him for months, but I'd put it off until doing so one more time would have been offensive.

"I have two tickets on Thursday, and Elaine can't go," he'd said.

It was to be *La Bohème*. If I had to suffer through an opera, it might as well be *La Bohème*. When I'd heard excerpts on WQXR, the orchestration sounded lush and intense.

After a light meal across from Lincoln Center, we entered the Met's lobby and joined the throngs of opera-goers, with their expensive scents, cultivated accents and melodramatic surprise when acquaintances encountered each other. I grew conscious of the plainness of my suit and my no-nonsense haircut. At the Defenders Alliance, extravagance was out of place, but Jack, on the

surface a self-effacing man, was living with a woman, Elaine, who had inherited wealth and I suspected he'd dressed up to fit in with tonight's crowd.

As the performance started, I discovered we were a long way from the stage, on the whole a good thing because when the singers belted out their arias and recitatives, my eardrums didn't break and the orchestra's sound was balanced. At dinner, Jack had taken me through the plot, and during audience applause, he would lean across to tell me which scene was coming up.

"This is where they're going to sing about how they love each other," he announced during an early pause in the action.

"But they just met."

His protest at my bovine sensibility was cut short as the applause ended.

Well into the second half, he again leaned across the chair arm and whispered, "This is going to be 'Sono Andati,' the aria I rhapsodized about."

I nodded. Mimi and Rodolfo, reunited, were to sing of the old times and their love while the other bohemians were out pawning their valuables to pay for medicines for the consumptive Mimi. She would die sometime after the duet, and I waited for some sign that she'd succumbed.

A loud sigh from her, an Italian cry of anguish from him, and I knew the moment had arrived. Jack had warned me it always brought tears to his eyes. He stayed quiet the rest of the way.

When the performance ended, he clapped with gusto. "Got me again," he said happily.

From the nearby 66th Street station, he took the uptown local and I the downtown local to meet the express at 42nd Street to Brooklyn. In spite of my resistance, the opera had transported me to a world where poverty was redemptive, tedium had meaning and tragedy was beautiful. Ironic that I should feel uplifted by Puccini's glorification of such things while sitting in a

subway train, with its air of rancid sweat, the roar drowning out conversation, an urgent-voiced beggar snaking along the aisle. The promise of transformation held out by art was no more trustworthy than the dreams of romantic love. Yet I believed in it.

Engaging with an artistic work, even opera it turned out, inspired me to create my own. Back home, despite the late hour, I rolled a sheet of paper into the typewriter, placed my fingers on home row and willed them into action.

It was a late winter's afternoon, sunlight about to evolve into reds and golds.

Atmospheric, at least. A start. I kept going.

Memory of that beauty turned him inward. If with friends, he'd know the sunset had begun because he'd sense their mood change under the talk, even their laughter.

"Whoa!" I yanked my hands away from the keyboard. Where had that come from? How depressing.

But I had an inkling. My mind's synapses responded to sad stories, end-of-love songs and the second movements of classical symphonies. I was drawn to the *andante*. Not tragedy. Vicarious anguish at Mimi's untimely death was experience I happily did without. The *andante* was pretty and touched the heart. Tragedy was grim and gouged the soul.

Yet what I'd written wasn't *andante* at all. It wasn't pretty, and it didn't touch the heart. It wasn't even tragic. It was pathetic.

Where did I go from here? If I hated or despised my character, it could have been okay,

but I disliked him the way I would an uncomfortable pair of pants. If anything worthwhile could be written about ill-fitting clothes, I had no desire to be the one to do it.

Stern's insistence on writing from a single point of view was getting in my way. But what if the narrator was a blind person? Visual description was so much a part of fiction. If my character couldn't see beyond recalling a generic sunset, how could I establish a setting in a reader's mind? How to get the reader to picture my characters?

I could create a narrator with sight, but I hadn't seen in a decade and a half. The world had moved on. Fashions had changed. New buildings had been erected. My world was populated with people I hadn't known when I had vision. I didn't even trust myself to describe anything I did recall because details eluded me. So even if I did use a sighted narrator, how could I create authentic images of a setting and the people in it?

This was the morbid, unhelpful way I tortured myself when overly tired. I'd get no more writing done tonight. But antsy as I was, I wouldn't sleep. I should settle myself down by doing some late-night housekeeping. Nothing like manual tasks to take me outside my head.

Turning off the typewriter, I thought how there was something *andante* about Caroline. It contributed to my curiosity about her.

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The decision to get rid of the old couch came to me two weeks later during a sleepless night when I'd succeeded in leaving the bedroom without waking Caroline. She was right, there was no space for it. But having refrained from asking the delivery guys to take it with them, I convinced myself I had to remove it myself. The timing would never be better. The Sanitation

Department's weekly furniture pickup was scheduled for later that morning, and the doorman didn't come on duty until eight, so I wouldn't be making a spectacle of myself. I resolved to do the deed then and there.

I'm guessing the couch was seven feet long, with a straight back and rounded arms, all vinyl. I removed the cushions so they wouldn't fall off in the hallway or lobby, but the couch was still heavy. Without its wheels, it would have been impossible for me to handle.

I first had to push it across the living room floor to my apartment's narrow entrance, then out to the hallway. Once in the hallway, I'd need to drag it to the foyer, where I'd have to turn it ninety degrees and maneuver it down two steps. Ahead of me at that point would be two sets of glass doors, both closed. On the sidewalk, it would just be a matter of finding a wide enough space at the curb.

Wheeling the couch across the living room presented no difficulty. I steered it into the passageway leading to the apartment's entrance, where I climbed over it to open the door. Only then did I realize that the couch was too long to push on its wheels into the narrow hallway and turn. I needed to stand it on one end to ease it over the threshold. I'd then have to turn it around and lower it in such a way that it didn't scrape a wall.

I should have known then, if not from the outset, to abandon the whole idea. Looking back, I see two sides of myself vying with each other. On the one hand, the law had taught me to anticipate the consequences of every action. On the other, living with a disability had taught me there was always a way. That morning, befuddled by insomnia, I ignored my legal brain and acted on the dubious lessons of experience.

Clambering back over the couch, I raised it by the end. Vertical, it was more than a foot taller than me. It just passed under the top of the doorframe, a potential deal breaker I also hadn't

anticipated. Holding the couch's back and twisting this way and that, I edged it over the threshold.

Now the couch was in the hall, but standing precariously. Its bottom faced across the way and threatened to crash through my neighbors' door. Still gripping the back, I turned the bottom to face back along the hallway so it could land safely on its wheels. However, now I was trapped inside my apartment, facing my neighbor's door but with the couch pressing down to my right. The angle prevented me from maintaining complete control, and I worried about the couch's front rubbing against the opposite wall. But I couldn't retreat back inside without losing control altogether.

Using all my strength, I commenced lowering. Then I felt, more than heard, metal scrape something. My neighbors' door. Later, I would run my hand under the couch at the front and discover a metal flange at either end.

Gravity kept pressing, and I couldn't pause the descent; I could only try to keep turning the couch. At last it landed on its wheels. No one emerged from my neighbor's apartment.

I negotiated my way over the couch's arm, which still blocked my doorway, and pulled from the front end. Once in the foyer, I'd have enough room to turn the couch toward the steps leading down to the entrance.

"What are you doing?"

I froze. Then I took in the voice. Caroline.

Turning, I said, "Getting rid of the couch."

"At the crack of dawn? By yourself?"

"No longer. You grip the couch by the arm at your end and I'll lift it from the front so we can get it down these steps."

“Hold on while I go get my jeans.”

“Be quick.”

She was. With her help, managing the steps was easy. Now we confronted the building entrance, consisting of two doors, one after the other. The couch had to go vertical again. I did my routine of pushing one side forward, then the other. Caroline simplified the maneuver by holding open the first door. She complicated it by voicing dismay: “Nick, you’ll never make it!”

I eased past her and shifted the couch over the first threshold. God, it had better not fall here. All around was glass. Probably unbreakable, but I didn’t know if unbreakable encompassed being slammed by a flailing couch.

Now the couch stood between us and the final door. I twisted it some more to make room for Caroline to squeeze by and open the door. The couch wobbled, succumbing to gravity again. I hung on tight, all the while concealing panic to forestall Caroline from renewing her anxious commentary.

She made it to the door. “Hold on. Now go ahead.”

The couch and I edged over the final threshold. She closed the door, and together, we lowered the couch to the sidewalk.

“Along here,” she said. She piloted from the front and I pushed until we got the couch to a clear space facing the street. Relieved, I sat down on the couch and let my feet dangle over the curb.

Caroline sat beside me. “I didn’t know you were so crazy.”

I gave her a mock-puzzled glance. “What crazy? This is furniture pickup day. You told me the couch had to go.”

“Is this something I’ll have to get used to?”

“Moving furniture? Are you kidding? I’m the most incompetent person the world has ever known.”

“I see that, but it doesn’t seem to stop you.”

The birds that hadn’t yet retreated south began a ragged dawn chorus over the distant roar of BQE traffic. No cars drove down the street, and no one was out walking.

Caroline said, “I’m tired. Let’s try to get an hour’s sleep before the alarm goes off.” I tapped the couch and said goodbye.

In the hallway I pointed to my neighbor’s door. Caroline cried out. Yes, I had scratched it.

“Keep it down,” I hissed.

It happened that all the building’s doors were repainted soon afterwards, and my conscience was allayed. For some things, all it takes is not being caught.