



# Shipwrights

*The Review of De-centered English*

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## **Caroline** **By Charlotte Webb**

Not in Utopia, -subterranean fields, -  
Or some secreted island, Heaven knows where!  
But in the very world, which is the world  
Of all of us, - the place where in the end  
We find our happiness, or not at all.

*-William Wordsworth*

It was a new program at the uni, so there was only my class and the year above us. The school did its best to inspire a feeling of 'community' between the two groups and often threw us together with varying degrees of success at get-togethers, joint seminars and field trips. So I had seen Caroline around. She was the one in the daring red suede ankle boots, giant earrings and tight jeans, or mini skirts, huge artistic scarves and pointy black flats of the kind my mum used to refer to as 'winkle pickers'. I was always a little amazed by the way she managed to pull these outfits off. Not only did she not look trashy, her clothes seemed to be worn with an air of apparent irony. She'd throw in an offbeat detail or two—a single earring, a bowler hat— so that getup you'd expect to see on a sixteen-year-old mall rat, on her, seemed almost alternative, beatnik.

I was grudgingly impressed by all of this. Firstly, because I lacked the *cojones* necessary to casually rock up to a mid-winter lecture in tights and a miniskirt. Mostly, however, because of Caroline's apparently impenetrable wall of cool. Yes, she got straight A's, but this seemed to be an unsolicited side-effect, rather than the goal of her studies. She was charismatic and nonchalant—a power completely

beyond my ken— and endowed with the unsettling ability to evoke your deepest insecurities in the midst of casual conversation. The slight elevation of one manicured eyebrow summed you up and dismissed you before you'd had time to extend a hopeful hand.

We didn't have a lot to do with each other during that first year. She and her band of boho-styled future grad students swanned about the halls and drank beer with the professors, and I headed student council meetings and stayed up nights researching obscure topics for the head of the department. Another day in the life.

Our first real encounter took place in the spring of the following year.

A lot happened in the interim. Mostly personal things, of little interest to anyone but myself: gear changes, sudden realisations, a relationship breakdown, rather a lot of cheap red wine, and a dodgy involvement with a third-year American exchange student. Some, or all, of these things seemed to bring me within the range of Caroline's orbit.

One night in late spring I attended an impromptu barbecue behind the apartment building where said exchange student was staying. He was due to head home soon, so a bunch of the third-years got together and bought beer and wine (steaks were also purchased, as an afterthought) and gathered in the courtyard. The American and I hadn't emerged for most of the day, so I only had the clothes I'd put on that morning: jeans, an Independent Trucking Company t-shirt and a cotton jacket, which proved useless in warding off the early evening chill. At first I didn't give it much thought. I was flushed and stupid with infatuation and, in any case, fair-to-decently toasted. As the night wore on, however, I began to throw increasingly covetous looks towards the small bonfire that someone had built in the barbecue pit. It was being expertly poked and prodded into continued existence by a determined lone figure in an oversized sweater. Caroline.

After half a bottle of lighter fluid (it had been raining during the day, and the firewood was still damp), the blaze was smoking profusely. Upwind, the smell was pleasant, comforting—a warm, ashy scent thrown into relief by the sharp clarity of the night air. Downwind, it was a different story. Choking on clouds of smoke that stung the eyes, invaded every orifice, I observed how different Caroline looked in

the firelight. Her chic haircut was hidden beneath a woollen beanie, pulled low over her forehead. An absence of make-up made her features appear larger, softer. Like two geriatric line dancers, we shuffled from side to side, unspeaking, hands shoved deep in our pockets, trying to predict the whimsy of the wind. We stood that way for a long time, while the others drank and sang and laughed. We stayed that way even after people began to leave or fall asleep on each other's shoulders.

Then, for God knows what reason, I began to talk. It was completely out of character. Raised in the Anglo-Saxon school of communication, I was not given to personal confidences and rarely solicited them. Shared emotion was an unnecessary discomfort.

It didn't matter. I told her everything.

I told her about the American and my fiancé, about guilt and confusion and freedom and loss.

I told her about deserts and oceans and distance and the point at which home ceases to be home and becomes something else entirely.

I told her about blind panic fear and pill-bottles and nights in darkness thicker than blood.

And she listened. Silently, with large brown eyes tinged golden from the flames, she heard.

I didn't see her for a month or two after that. I don't remember thinking much about it. It was the end of semester and there were exams to contend with. The American had left and I wasn't sure how to feel about not feeling very much at all. One day we ran into each other somewhat awkwardly at a bus stop. She asked for my number and I knew that she was being polite. I went home and didn't wait for her to call.

Surprisingly, she did.

A week later, we met up at the foot of a small white lighthouse on a peninsula outside town. It was early in the morning and we sat on a bench overlooking the archipelago, squinting in the reflected glare of the ocean, listening to the gulls.

Right away I noticed her agitation. She seemed restless, moving in sharp, angular motions abruptly cut off by every new thought to enter her mind. The

coastal winds whipped her fine brown hair around her face and flushed her olive skin. She was gazing at me intently, sizing me up, eyes glittering with swallowed questions. We each began a number of abortive sentences and thought the better of them.

Finally, twisting the fringed edges of her jewel-coloured scarf between two fingers, she came out with it. She was involved with one of the school's female professors. Middle-aged, married, one kid a world away in West Virginia.

On the surface of things, it was the usual story. Joan's marriage was failing. It had just happened. They were in love. At the same time, as she related to me the events of the past few months, I realised that something about the affair just didn't seem to fit the mould. For one thing, Caroline spared me the usual bit about the emotionally unavailable spouse. Nothing about her tone was resentful, or even proprietary. She had met the guy once when he came to visit. Liked him. Felt genuinely sorry for them both. For another thing, there was not, as far as I could tell, any obvious imbalance of power in the situation. Caroline was intelligent, independent, late twenties, far from blue-eyed, no longer a student. If anything, the older woman stood to lose the most should word reach departmental ears.

Although a part of me was perversely thrilled by the magnitude of the discovery, the truth was that I wasn't really surprised. Not that I had suspected an affair exactly, but I had seen the two women together— the playful teasing, the easy intimacy. On nights when the American would bring me round to a third year gathering at Joan's place and we'd sit up, drinking whatever was available and watching episodes of *The Office*. At the time I had chalked it up to Caroline's effortless magnetism, to the way she had of making anyone feel at ease in her presence. She was as capable of inspiring confidence as she was of evoking insecurities. It was all a matter of whim.

I was flattered that she didn't seem to feel the need to swear me to secrecy. It was implied, of course, but never spoken. I was the only one she had told. Joan had gone back to the States for the summer, leaving Caroline to agonise over the relationship alone. I was grateful to be trusted with her secret. She was relieved to have uttered it. I quickly saw that she shared with every other fool in love the

compulsive urge to speak the object's name a hundred times a day, to pore over the minutia of individual utterances and their infinite possible interpretations. To evoke coffee rings left on tables and foreign toothbrushes entrusted to bathroom cabinets.

This was where I came in.

I was a faithful and attentive sounding board. My life had been one long traineeship in the detailed analysis of texts. I read the relationship as greedily and as mercilessly as an Eliot anthology: picking out the significances, layering the nuances, paraphrasing and softening my responses where necessary. Making footnotes and endnotes and cross-referencing with my own limited experience. I sat in the open window of Caroline's garden apartment and smoked cigarettes and drank endless cups of ancient instant coffee left behind by a former tenant. At night we lit candles, rain soaked the window panes and we talked and talked. Sometimes I stayed over and we slept back-to-back in her large single bed. I had always hated sleeping next to someone else, resented the presence of foreign feet next to mine. But there was no arguing with Caroline and, in any case, I found that I quickly became fond of her soft white sheets, her mother's homemade bread that we toasted for breakfast each morning.

Caroline's world was a revelation to me. She knew every vibrant mind in that dreary, backwater town. She read the clumsy poetry I scrawled on bits of paper with a discerning eye and read me her own more sophisticated Swedish offerings from a mother-of-pearl notebook. I relished the foreign sounds, turned the dark, sensuous imagery over and over in my mind. On warm days we sat in the garden and wrote for hours, me in the partial shade, she in the full sunlight. Friends came and went; a tall blonde man with long elegant fingers and a self-effacing expression brought bottles of wine, played guitar long into the night.

She often spoke of her brother. She had four, as it turned out, and a sister (I'd had her pegged as an only child. I liked that she surprised me). He was the youngest. You'd like him, she told me, growing visibly excited, caught up in the momentum of her own plans. Nothing said 'Caroline' quite like her plans. They were vibrant, living, breathing entities, with arms and legs and multiple shifting expressions. They embodied all the world's shining sense of promise. They were carefully nurtured, or

abandoned like children by the side of a highway. They were also, very often, completely insane. Like the time she was convinced the two of us should move to Brazil and start a writers' commune. I'd never even had a tetanus shot.

By this time I had learned to view these elaborate contrivances in much the same vein as the weather itself—as a greater, unfathomable force beyond my control. The best thing to do was to grit your teeth and wait for the winds to change. Usually, this didn't take long. So when she informed me of her brother's impending arrival, it was clear that, to her mind, he and I were already wedded and bedded, the three of us sitting around in the garden drinking beer and playing canasta.

I smiled and nodded, picturing two awkward figures engaged in a chuckling, cheek-clenching, positively Victorian verbal interchange:

“You know, I do think she expects—”

“ Oh no, surely not.”

“Well, I never; isn't this a to-do!”

I was completely unprepared for what was to come.

A few days later, Caroline had gone to work for a couple of hours and I was alone in the apartment, in a tattered pair of oversized jeans, lounging around on a tawdry brown and orange sofa right out of a photograph of my childhood. It had its charm though. Right up there with the semi-erotic eastern wall-hanging and the candles shoved into the necks of wine bottles, not for any aesthetic effect, but for lack of a better place to put them. She had mentioned, in passing, that her brother might show up in the afternoon, but that he probably wouldn't get in until tomorrow. Flipping through a book of Zen poetry, I conjured up a vague, faceless image, somewhere in the neighbourhood of Caroline herself:

tall man with dark eyes  
chatters at the speed of light  
Egyptian cotton

When he came, it was with blue eyes and a battered and overburdened backpack, wearing one of his sister's old T-shirts and breathing quiet warmth into the forgotten corners of the room. I was lost.

For a time, the three of us coexisted in a sort of Edenic paradise. Reality was suspended as we wandered barefoot around the island where their parents lived, somewhere outside the city, utterly outside time and space. We swam in the ocean, sunning ourselves like lightly intoxicated lizards on the warm rocks, or drowsed in the cottage garden amongst the heavy, drooping heads of full-blown peonies and expanses of lavender clouded with humming insect life. We drank gin and tonics from icy glasses and watched the sun descend, inch by inch, into the sea.

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In the sixteenth century, Thomas More formed the word utopia by collapsing two Greek words together: *eutopia*, meaning good place, and *outopia*, or no-place. That is where we lived that summer, with our beautiful, new forms stretched out in the sun, absorbing into the depths of our common bloodstream all the beautiful clichés that spring from the word 'free.' We lived in the good place that is nowhere, that can't survive the dust and banality of daily life, of telephone bills and toilet paper and scheduled conversation. But real places have a habit of intruding, and eclipsing the private universes we create. Over the next few months, small points of divergence began to rise menacingly upwards between Caroline and I like the tips of a glacier, betraying a greater, expanding body of ice spreading just beneath the surface.

It would be cynical of me to say that our friendship was purely the result of two intersecting and complementary needs—her need for an accomplice, my need for an escape. In truth, it was far more complex. In truth, such relationships are as ephemeral as lust, and without its heady lifeblood to sustain them. They are secret gardens, private rooms, baby universes. They are everything, until one day they are not. For a few moments, we were untouchable. The world moved through and around us, and everything shone. It still shines, when I look back at it, but the glare has faded a little, retreated to the periphery of my mind, where all of this is

preserved. In the no-place, where it is still summer, where I still believe that I am free.