

### **About the Author**

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# I LOVE MY HUSBAND'S WORK

ELLA PFALZGRAFF



n the night before my wedding, my mother, a bursar's wife, told me that I must learn to love my husband's work.

"That is your life," my mother said. "If you do not love his work, then you will not love your life."

My husband bought the motel after our first year of marriage. It was twenty years old in 1963. The outside was built to look like a ski chalet, with a sharp, tense roofline. It had sixteen suites, all of them with double beds and standing showers and green carpet that softened underneath, as though wet. Next door was an empty lot full of shrubs and tin cans, and beyond that the highway. We lived in a trailer at the back of the property. We had a bedroom, a kitchen, and a room with a television.

In the motel, the ceilings were three inches lower than standard height. Whenever anyone entered, they instinctively ducked their heads. An attic ran the length of the building, cavernous and dark. The last owners used it for storage. Old mattresses leaned against the wall. Cans stuck to the floor in pools of wan yellow paint. My husband brought in a space heater, a urinal, a desk, and a lamp. He laid down slabs of insulation, piled until the weight of his footsteps made no sound. He installed false air vents, sixteen of them. When he got down on his knees, he could see into the rooms below.

We opened to the public just as the roads began to thaw. My husband stuck a sign next to the highway: Under New Ownership. Travelers came, carrying grease spotted sacks of food, limp sandwiches, and Coke bottles full of spent cigarettes. In the summer they stayed up late, the windows flung open wide. In the winter they woke early to scrape the ice off their windshields. My husband said, in the winter they have sex. In the summer, they fight.

Most nights, my husband worked until morning. He left the table after dinner and emptied his pockets of change. I loaded the guests' sheets in the washing machine that occupied our bedroom closet. I did the dishes that were left in the sink. Then I crossed the parking lot to sit behind the front desk until eleven o'clock, when our office closed for the night.

The motel was never silent. Every night, I could hear television sets and conversations. Children ran up and down the halls, smearing handprints along the wallpaper. In the morning, I'd find my husband's reports, written on catalogue cards and stuck beneath the sign-in book. A typical night might have a thin stack, a tally of all the things the visitors did with the lights on. *2 women*, one might begin. *Not sisters*.

*Man with 3 suitcases*, another would say, *watches* Nightly News.

*Young woman writing a letter*, *tried 9 times*.

Before I married, I worked as a secretary in my father's office. I filed forms. I helped my mother cook dinner. I read books in my room. One day I left my purse in the back of a taxi cab. The driver returned it to my home, and that was how I met the man who would become my husband.

On our first night in bed, he told me that he recorded the people who rode in the back of his cab.

"Why?" I asked.

"Gives me something to do," he said.

"What if they find out?"

"They won't," he said. "They forget I'm even there."

He played the recording he made of me. I could hear my voice, distant and low, as though I was speaking through water. The past me told him my address. He asked if I wanted to take the highway. After I left the cab, his next fare came.

We listened to the tapes until morning.

In time, I began to transcribe the contents. The small talk, the debates. Sex, furtive and quick, the squeaking of the backseat leather. Fights, occasionally violent. One woman going into labour. A man yelling at my

husband to drive faster. By the time we bought the motel, I had 300 hours of recordings on paper.

After we moved in, I filed my husband's reports in a set of old library drawers, according to a system of my own devising. Under Denial: *Infant, coughed until morning*. Under Suppression: *Teenage boy, will not eat*. Under Heartbreak: *2 Airline pilots, one crying*.

I added sections over the years, varying with my husband's passions. Early on, my husband had an interest in sleep. When they left a light on, he watched them for hours.

*GI, talked in his sleep.*

*Beautiful woman, went to bed naked, snored.*

*Sleepwalker, kept combing her hair.*

Sex was the largest section in my catalogue. Acts and their results were tallied. *Missionary, 1 orgasm. Girl on top, 2*. He described the acts themselves in detail, his handwriting growing crowded. These were bland, no better than a paperback at a secondhand store, but a man must have his hobbies.

During the day, while my husband slept, I cleaned the rooms. I emptied trash cans, I changed sheets, I washed the towels until they frayed. My husband asked me to bring him souvenirs. He kept them in the attic, these items left between blankets, in closets, and hanging from the shower rail. Occasionally, the visitors called. I told them I could not find what they had left. Matchbox cars, umbrellas, a silver case full of cigarettes: they lost them all. Once, a man told me he'd left his camera. Please, he said. I'm desperate.

"It's the film," he begged. "Just the film, that's all I need."

My husband sent the cartridges to London Drugs. What came back were pictures of a family: a boy in a raincoat, a swing, and a dog in a blue bandana.

Years went by. My files overflowed. In the eighties, the ring road opened. Traffic slowed. The stores on our route began to shutter. When the coin laundrette shut down, our motel was the only business along a lonely stretch of street. We did not talk of moving. We knew we would never find another attic. We added a sign tall enough to be seen from the highway: "Clean Rooms," it said, "Adult Movies," and "Vacancy." We lowered our rates to keep the rooms full. I picked needles off the bathroom floors and clumps of hair out of the beds.

Occasionally, there were bodies. I found one man slouched inside the shower, t-shirt furled around his throat and vomit trickling out his mouth.

When my husband woke, he demanded to know what I had done.

“Did you call the police?”

“No,” I said. “Of course not.”

We left his body outside of the bus station on 143rd street. It didn’t even make the news.

The second was a girl. There was nothing remarkable about her. She brought a handbag, the strap worn through, and an oversized sweatshirt, the front pocket full of cigarettes and matches. She may have asked for a wake-up call, but I don’t remember.

My husband woke me at 4:30 that morning, his hand clenched around my shoulder.

“There’s a girl in room twelve,” he told me.

“Call an ambulance,” I said.

“She saw me,” he said.

His hair was damp with sweat. There was a stain on his collar, a dark brown streak I’d wash out later, scrubbing over the kitchen sink.

“I’ll take care of it,” I said.

I gathered my cleaning supplies. The rubber gloves, the steel wool, the bleach. I crossed the parking lot. The motel was quiet with all the visitors asleep, the light in the hall sallow and flickering. In the room, a lamp was overturned. The drapes sat in a heap, curtain rings littering the floor. The girl was lying width-ways across the mattress, one arm hanging stiffly over the edge. Three of her fingers were bent back, broken.

“It’s a mess,” I said.

My husband stayed glued to the foot of the bed. His fingers picked at the loose threads on the coverlet. He would not go any further.

“Bring the truck around,” I said, shoos him from the room. “Let me work.”

I approached the bed. The girl’s eyes were swollen shut, her face deflated like spoiled fruit. Her ears were pierced with silver rings that ran along the curvature of her lobe. My mother hated pierced ears. She said they were conspicuous, and so I never wore them.

I began to gather her things: the bra draped over the bathroom door, the sweatshirt crumpled outside the shower. Below the window, her purse had spilled open. A hairbrush fell from the front pocket.

I made quick work of the bedsheets and the liner. There was blood there, but stains were stains, and I knew how to get them out. I wet a towel and got on the mattress, rubbing the splatter off our ceiling. I stood on the balls of my feet to wipe the air vent clean. By the time my husband pulled the truck around, all traces of her were collected and ready for disposal.

We were questioned about her some weeks later. Witnesses recall a girl of her description staying here, the investigator said.

"I suppose she may have," I told them. "But I can't recall her specifically."

No one looked for her for long. There were other bodies, here and there, though nothing much to remark on. I didn't care for all that business, but we had to protect ourselves.

We continued on for a decade or more in much the same way. There were still reports. We began to advertise long-term stays, and I filled my files with the daily activities of oil rig workers and battered women. Then, on a particularly hot day in July, my husband slipped from the roof and fell onto a pile of shingles. He spent twelve weeks in bed, recovering from a broken back. He never did the exercises that the doctor prescribed to him. He called them a waste of time. And so he was not able to climb up to the attic anymore, never mind the hours he once spent stooped over his peepholes.

My husband began to drink a great deal. His eyes took on a glassy sheen, and his hands had a permanent shake. He sat at home, listening to the laundry machines. I carried on, minding the front desk and paying the bills. When something broke, I fixed it.

The suburbs began to encroach. An arcade opened down the road, and a family dining restaurant. The bright neon of Now Open signs came in through our bedroom blinds. At the grocery store, I saw pregnant women wearing sensible heels. All around us were the sorts of people who might have come to our motel 40 years ago. Young families. Dreamers. I would never again know what they did in private.

One day, a man walked in and offered to buy the property for a very large sum of money.

"Condominiums!" the man said. "You're sitting on a gold mine."

"I will have to discuss it with my husband," I said.

My husband told me to sell without another thought.

"I'll sign whatever they want me to sign," he said.

“If that’s what you want,” I said.

“We’ll move to Arizona.”

People our age were always moving to Arizona.

“What about the attic?” I asked my husband.

“What about it?”

It was as if none of it had ever happened.

We prepared to move. I packed very little. Whatever we left behind would just be another part of the refuse pile that would remain after everything was torn down. The front desk, with the accounting books and the records of our guests. Those beds with the comforters that had been washed until the fabric wore away. Those sinks with the rust stains that never would come out.

I boxed my notes, years of them, and put them in a storage unit. For a while I thought my husband might want to see them, but the notes had always been for me. He wrote them in his neatest handwriting, quite unlike the usual scrawl he left around. I do not know what I will do with them, but it is comforting to know that they are there.

On the final night that we were open, the developers came in to survey the property. They paid for a room, so I had no reason to complain. I went up to the attic to sort through my husband’s belongings. This is where I am standing now.

I have never come up here. My husband left the place in some disarray, with old shirts hanging from the rafters and bottles of half-drunk beer along the floorboards. There is a smell of sweat and staleness. I am sure he never cleaned.

All of the things that we collected from our guests fit into a single large box. My husband must have thrown some items away over the years, but what remains is well maintained. The photographs are uncreased. There is a wind-up car that I rescued in the 1980s, which has been repaired. The layer of dust is thin, reflecting recent use. My husband must have taken these objects out regularly, examining them. Perhaps he was remembering, as I am remembering now.

I hear the developers below me. They are talking about the work that they have ahead of them. I find the air vent that looks into their room, and I get onto my hands and knees. Around the vents, the carpet is worn from my husband’s weight.

There are two of them in the room. I am close enough that I can see dandruff flecking the taller man’s hair. The air vents do not provide a

good angle. You cannot see their faces, not from this close. But this is the vantage from which my husband made all of his observations.

The shorter man makes some remark, how the property values in the neighbourhood will go up once the motel is torn down. The taller man agrees.

“It’s a dump,” he says.

I see his hand reach toward the vent. His fingers brush the shutters. There is a ring on his finger and a blister on the tip of his thumb. He brings his hand down and brushes it against his pant leg. Dust flies everywhere.

“This ceiling,” he says, “will be the first to go.”

I stand and gather my husband’s box in my arms. I will take it to him. Perhaps he will see something that he likes. Perhaps it will make him think of earlier, happier years. As for me, I will leave the attic and never return. This is my husband’s place. I do not need to be here.