

marshmallow

She recognized this was exactly what everyone thought happened at these international conferences. She was the pretty young postdoc, he was the handsome and highly regarded psycholinguist. There had been at least twenty in the group that closed down the hotel bar, but now it was just the two of them, standing outside her room.

Even so, and even though she was drunk, she was not that drunk. “I don't do this,” she said, flatly.

How drunk he was she could not tell. “I'm just asking you to say *marshmallow*.”

“You're married.”

“I'm ridiculously happily married. Over the moon in love. It doesn't mean I can't want you to say *marshmallow*.”

“But you want me to say it all dirty.”

“I admit, *dirty* was a poor choice of words. *Sultry* is much better. The way that you said it with everyone at dinner, when you made the joke about the desserts.”

“I didn't mean for it to make such an impression.”

He moved closer. “You must know you do a good sultry voice. I'm sure you love when you get the chance to work it into conversations.”

She laughed. “I do, actually.” She wondered if she might be more drunk than she realized when she reached out to steady herself by putting her right hand on his chest.

He took her other hand in his own, and she thought he might try to kiss her. Instead he said, “Do you know the psychology experiment with the four-year-old kids and marshmallows?”

She did not.

“So, imagine, you're four. They bring you into this little room and sit you at a table by

yourself. They put a marshmallow in front of you. You *love* marshmallows—the experimenters only used kids who loved marshmallows. They say they are going to leave you alone for fifteen minutes. Then they tell you that, if you can wait and not eat the marshmallow until they come back, they'll give you two more marshmallows and a toy.”

“That’s horrible! What did the kids do?”

“Well, some ate the marshmallow, and some were able to wait. The interesting thing is they tracked all the kids down thirty years later, and the ones who didn't eat the marshmallow tended to be much more successful in life than the ones who did.”

This made sense to her, given various friends who still hadn't finished their dissertations because they couldn't resist the urge to check e-mail every five minutes. “Self-control seems particularly important in our line of work.”

“I was one of the kids in the experiment. Apparently I put the marshmallow in my mouth the moment they left the room.”

She pushed slightly with the hand that was still on his chest. “You're making that up.”

“Discipline is something I've had to work very hard to cultivate,” he said. “One thing I've learned is that there's nothing you can do to keep yourself from wanting things. But when those wants are going to lead to other problems, you need to figure out solutions.”

“I hope one solution was finding a wife who'll talk *sultry* to you.”

“My wife is the most radiant woman in the world, no offense. And her voice is sublime.”

“So why don't you have her say you-know-what?”

“We have a different word,” he said. “Every night, just before we go to sleep, she tells me *amaranthine*. It means everlasting.”

They were standing even closer now. “Will you tell her about this?”

“She doesn’t want to know. She made that clear after my pursuit of a botanist I just had to hear say *canoodle*.”

She giggled. She had always liked *canoodle*, and she wished that could be their word instead. He was looking at her expectantly, and she knew she needed to make a decision.

This was Paris. He was charming. It was just a word. So she said it. “Marshmallow.”

“Say it in the voice.”

“Marshmallow,” she said, in the voice, throwing in her best sultry look as a bonus.

He swayed a little, as though knocked woozy with delight. He closed his eyes. “Please,” he murmured, bending slightly. “In my ear. In the voice. I want to concentrate so I’ll remember it perfectly.”

She leaned forward on her tiptoes. Her nose brushed softly against his earlobe.

“Marshmallow.”

She wanted him. She fished wildly around her purse for her room key. He opened his eyes only slightly, and, still smiling broadly, he turned away from her and walked to the elevators.

When he was back in his room, he retrieved a tiny red notebook from a pocket of his carry-on bag. To a list he added her first name, the date, and *marshmallow*. Then, as he did every night he traveled no matter what the time difference, he called his wife. He told her he loved her beyond all words. She told him *amaranthine*.