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I

A smooth midsummer evening. Two-thirds full. Four-hundred-and-fifty-euro rack rate, two hundred minimum for a walk-in, although depending on who was around there might be room for negotiation. The open space of the lobby was shushed by the thickness of a sand-coloured carpet and populated by the kind of bodies you would expect – solid, expensive, a mix of foreign and local. Nobody out of place, all familiar, everywhere. Middle-aged. Tanned. Jackets and ties. The smell of heavy perfume. Here for a couple of drinks. Mid-week dinners that cost real money. Occasional mad blowouts that everybody would enjoy, remember, never regret. But not tonight. Quiet tonight.

Just walking through the door would let you know you were safe here. The cool air, the smell of lilies and freesias. The width and depth of the couches. The low lighting, hushed conversation, a tinkling water-feature. The benevolent portrait of a smiling Turkish-looking man who had some unspecified significance in the hotel's history.

Piano music, some cliché of easy-listening, drifted down like cigar smoke from the caged, dark-wood bar. Two girls were behind the desk at Reception, pretty but within reason, blonde but not too much. They stood a couple of feet apart, smiling blankly out across the open space. From any kind of a distance you wouldn't notice, but they were having a conversation. Their lips barely moved. Occasionally one or other would vibrate with contained laughter. The next shift was coming on and the girls were giddy with the anticipation

of finishing. They weren't going anywhere, weren't doing anything. Just down to the car-park, into separate cars, a quick wave to each other and home. But it was the end of the day and that was always something. One of them flashed a look around, then, coast clear, checked the time on her watch and the other laughed again. State of you. Oh, who cares? We're finished now.

The night manager, nervous and thin, had arrived and was in the back office setting the daily audit in motion, a computerized process that would click and grunt and warble through the night. A hundred pages of data would print out and tomorrow an administrator would split that report into sections and pass them on to a more senior administrator, who would record the information, file it and then ignore it. Three weeks into the job the night manager was moving quickly from unfamiliarity into edgy boredom. The reality of what he would have to do was beginning to reveal itself, the unhappy prospect of long slow time that would need to be served. When he sought some source of comfort in his future, he could think only of sleep.

The night porters arrived, three of them together. Ray, Tommy and George. Clean-shaven, ironed shirts and dark uniforms. Everything in place and all as it should be, but still, somehow, they looked wrong, ghoulish underground creatures who didn't belong to the day, too addled and distracted to thrive in the night. Personal histories that you could see in their faces and that you would turn away from. They went to work in silence, checking stock and floats and the messages of the day in the book left for them by the day shift, a well-oiled routine that came from years of working together. The newest recruit, a young Polish fellow, shiny-faced and blond-haired and smiling, arrived last. The night manager watched him come, nodding in a curt way to acknowledge his

over-familiar greeting, his friendly wave. It was a bad start for this guy. In the night manager's last place of employment people turned up before the appointed hour. Here it just seemed to be a loose guideline. Ten past. Twenty past. No apology or explanation.

But there was no point in making a fuss. Not on a quiet mid-week night with rooms to spare, only two guests left to check in and the bar emptying. The first wake-up call wasn't until six o'clock. If they kept their heads down and said nothing, they might get away with it. The night manager let the girls go. They walked off together, linked at the arm. The further from Reception they went the louder their talk became. The door opened into the inner workings, then closed on their conversation and they were gone.

An hour passed. The last of the bar crowd cleared out. Just before midnight the quiet was broken by the sound of a car horn, beeped twice. Two porters went out. After a moment a man in a polo shirt and chinos came through the revolving door, talking over his shoulder to his companion. Their conversation could be heard clearly. They were discussing the plant out in Celbridge, how far it was and how long they would need to get there in morning traffic. 'What do you think?' the first man asked the night manager, as they arrived at the desk. 'To get to Celbridge for eight?'

'Forty-five minutes should do you,' the night manager said. 'Maybe an hour.'

The two men talked back and forth, then agreed to meet at six forty-five in the lobby. They arranged alarm calls, the first guy for six and the second for five thirty. One of the men talked to Ray on the porters' desk about a place that might be suitable for jogging in the morning.

'Along Sandymount strand would be your best bet,' Ray told him.

‘Is it far?’

‘It’s far enough. A mile maybe.’

‘That sounds okay. How do I get there?’

‘I can book you a taxi.’

The night manager smiled. He was entering the men’s details on to the system, hopeful that this would be it. Most of the people staying that night were Germans on bus tours. Middle-aged and elderly at a rate that was too low, but they were no trouble. Their days were too structured for them to run riot at night. Not the done thing anyway. Bad for the group dynamic.

The two guests crossed the lobby to the lift and waited, talking idly to Tommy, the rise of a laugh from all of them, the ping of the door opening and then, with a clunk, silence fell again.

‘That’s us done,’ Ray said to the night manager, as he passed the desk. ‘We may relax.’

‘I hope so,’ the night manager said back.

‘I’ll get the dinner on,’ Ray said, and headed towards the kitchen. He disappeared through the doors and the manager was left alone.

But Ray didn’t go through to the kitchen. Instead he went down a set of raggedy stairs, their rubber edges flapping, walls dented and scraped by porters and housekeepers carrying new furniture, special beds for special people, outsize plastic figures for sales conferences, rolls of blackout blinds for the sensitive eyes of soft-rock giants, humidifiers for the vocal cords of country-and-western legends, every extra little something to make the day or night special. He walked out into the car-park’s warm dead air. The floor and walls were concrete, the ceiling low and obscured by a network of pipes, plastic and metal, some with insulation, others raw and brassy. The sound of liquids purging and flushing and draining

just inches above his head made him nervous. There were bunches of cables, tufts of fibreglass, holes and plasterboard patching jobs along the walls, storage cages, electricity stations, and then the grotty open area lit with fluorescent tubes that showed the way to the staff changing rooms, the laundry and another stairway up to the hotel. Water was dripping everywhere, the ground covered with puddles of varying colours, and as he walked across he watched to keep his feet dry. The air smelled of detergents and cleaning products mixed with car exhaust and rotting rubbish, a sweet, distant reminder of where he was. Extractor fans roared in the background. At the edges of his vision there was always something moving that wasn't there when he turned. He was sure there were underground creatures that resented his presence but weren't big enough or numerous enough to do anything about it.

Guests' cars were parked in a separate area close to the entrance. The guests never came down here but still the divide was always maintained – cleaner, clearly marked spaces with no pipes or tubes running above. The cars sat there, proud, shining, untouchable, all facing out. The porters parked them that way for a quick, tip-friendly exit. They stared across the puddles at the smaller, older, more decrepit staff cars, parked at varying angles to each other, a mix of fronts and backs.

He turned a corner and walked straight into someone, a short, hard body that pushed him back. In his surprise he shouted, an involuntary yelp. When he saw who it was he spoke: 'For fuck's sake, Dessie.'

'I was coming up to you.'

'You nearly gave me a heart-attack.' He put a hand on the other man's arm. When he got his breath back he laughed and handed him a key card.

★

Tommy was giving the new fellow instructions for the night's work, moving a silent Hoover back and forth over an already clean floor. 'Like this. Yeah? And when you finish here,' he said, his arm waving across the expanse of lobby carpet, 'do the bar and the terrace and then the toilets. Later on I'll show you how to do the cards. Are you all right with that?'

'Okay. Yeah.'

'Good man.' He turned quickly and moved off before the gimp could start asking questions. They came anyway.

'Sorry, Tommy.'

'Yeah?'

'What toilet is it?'

'The public toilets. The ones in Reception. Across there.'

'I Hoover that?'

'No. You clean that.'

'This is job for porters? Is not job for cleaners?'

'Is job for you,' Tommy said. 'Talk to Ray if you're not happy.'

'What are you doing now, Tommy?' the boy asked.

'Are you really asking me that?' Tommy walked back slowly towards him.

The boy smiled, showing no sign that he understood Tommy's intention, as if his tone was lost in translation. He was a good-looking fellow, not without charm, but Tommy wasn't having it. He came and stood a foot closer to him than was necessary. 'Why? What's it to you?'

'If I need to ask you something, I will know where you are.'

'I'll be on room service. In the kitchen. On the phone. Okay? What would you need to ask me?'

The boy shrugged. 'Cleaning questions.'

'Ask George. He loves those. Knows everything about cleaning,' Tommy said, as he walked off again.

'No problem. And when will I do room service? Tommy?'

‘Soon.’

‘Soon is good,’ the boy called after him. ‘Maybe tomorrow?’

‘Maybe,’ Tommy called back. ‘Or maybe fucking never, you smart cunt,’ he said, into the middle distance, as the noise of the Hoover started up behind him.

Ray crossed the other side of the lobby to the porters’ room. He took a key from a hook, walked over to the lift and looked across towards Reception. The manager was out of sight in the back office. He pushed the button on the lift and waited. When it arrived he stepped in and put the key into the security lock under a panel, turned it and pressed B. He felt the moment of hesitation, a shudder, then heard the gentle groan of protest from a lift expected to do something out of the ordinary. He went down two floors to the basement and came to a rest. It took a few seconds for the doors to open. When they did a man was waiting and Ray stood neatly into the side.

‘Good evening,’ he said, and nodded without making eye contact.

The man stepped in and said nothing. He stood behind Ray and watched him press the button for the fifth floor. The doors closed and they took off. The two of them watched the numbers on the display above the door, counting up. A ding. A mechanical voice with an English accent spoke – doors opening. The man stepped out. As he passed he reached out and, without looking, pressed a small wad of notes into Ray’s hand. ‘Thanks,’ he said. Ray said nothing in return. The doors closed and he took the lift back down.

As he walked over to Reception the night manager called out to him: ‘What’s for dinner?’

‘Stew.’

‘Again?’

‘You never get tired of stew,’ Ray said.

‘Apparently you don’t.’

Ray smiled. ‘Any time you want to cook, you can decide what we have.’

‘It wouldn’t be right, Ray. Not the way it’s supposed to be.’

‘Indeed,’ Ray said. ‘A gentleman like you couldn’t be seen cooking for the scum.’

‘I’m joking,’ the night manager said.

‘So am I,’ Ray said. He headed back to the kitchen. Alone in the still-steammy heat of the empty kitchen, he checked to see that the money given to him was correct.

Five of them, four porters and the night manager, had dinner on a raised lounge area of the lobby. During the day business people met there and polite, tidy women drank tea and ate small cakes. The working party sat in darkness and shadow so they could see if anybody came to Reception without being seen themselves. Spread on the low glass tables in front of them were plates, a large casserole dish sitting on a kitchen cloth, cans of Coke, pots of tea, cups, ashtrays. They ate off their laps, mostly in silence. When they were finished they lit cigarettes, ignoring a law that they felt shouldn’t apply at night, and drank tea. They talked about what was left to be done – who would get the breakfast cards, who would do the papers, the rest of the hoovering and the ballrooms. It was a conversation that had no resolution, just spirals of good-natured recrimination and grievance, same conversation every night. The new guy would end up doing the bulk, whether he realized it or not. The night manager listened to it again, then interrupted and asked about the Americans from earlier: ‘How much did they tip, those two?’

‘Nothing,’ Tommy said. ‘Fuck all.’

‘Well, which was it?’

‘Couple of quid. For six bags. Suits. The whole fucking lot of it. Taken out of the car, the car parked, everything brought up. For two euro? No use. Waste of space.’

The revolving doors began to turn. Every one of them looked over. A girl emerged into the lobby. Young, dressed for a night out, small bag on her shoulder. The only thing unusual about her was that she was alone. She walked straight across the floor of the lobby to the lifts. The night manager stood up as the others kept smoking, drinking, sitting. He took a couple of steps and stopped. In the darkness it was hard to see where any of them was looking. ‘No use at all,’ Tommy continued. ‘The Americans are getting worse, you know. They’ve got it into their heads that you don’t tip in Europe. How much would a porter in America get for what I did, Ray? Five dollars?’ The doors of the lift slid open and the girl disappeared.

‘More like ten,’ Ray said. The night manager turned back to face them, pointed vaguely in the direction of the lift.

‘Twenty, yeah. And yet they come here and think two euro is appropriate? They’d be run out of the place in New York.’

‘Run out of it.’ The night manager tried to speak over them, hesitated, then sat down again. Ray got up after a minute and lifted the empty plate from in front of him. ‘How was that for you?’

‘Very good,’ the manager said.

‘You see, I know what I’m doing,’ Ray said. ‘That’s the difference.’ The manager wasn’t sure what he was talking about. ‘We’ll get this place cleared and then we can start organizing things.’

‘I could sleep for a week,’ said Tommy.

‘After the work,’ Ray said. ‘But you have a rest there now,’ he said to the night manager. ‘If anyone rings or comes in

we'll look after it. We'll be around. You sleep and we'll wake you when we're going down.'

The night manager looked up at him in a moment of clarity. 'Tell me everything's going to be all right,' he said to Ray, smiling now. Easier. Conspiratorial, but admitting nothing.

'It'll be fine,' Ray said, smiling back. 'We'll look after everything. The work will be done. You get yourself rested. I'll wake you if you're needed. But you won't be. Just relax.'

'Okay so,' the night manager said. He stretched out on the couch and got himself comfortable. This was how they did things. He could spend his life worrying about everything that went on. He could dig around and find out and nobody would thank him for it. Things worked, and he didn't need to know how. A place like this was too big for any one person to handle. Any staff member, any room, any guest could lead you into a quagmire, if you chose to poke around. Night manager? He was a clean man in a suit. A figurehead. The porters understood the dirty mechanics of it all. Let them at it, he thought. If I wake and the place is still here then I've won. He closed his eyes and was lulled to sleep by the distant sound of someone hoovering the women's cloakroom while whistling to himself.