

IN THE EMERALD HOTEL

The corpse in the corridor

After nine months, one hundred and twenty-seven flights, one hundred and ten hotel rooms (fawn walls and twenty-four-hour corridors) and two hundred and sixty-five thousand frequent flyer miles, I've arrived on this high plateau called exhaustion. Nothing much grows here: a few leathery-leaved plants, xerophytes adapted to low moisture, low fertility and air freshener and there's us, the travellers.

Here comes one now – dark rumped suit, uniform tie, cubic briefcase and staring amphetamine eyes.

Dinah says it's all just an excuse to avoid intimacy but she's wrong: I want nothing more than to be held (and to hold), and be close and talk about the day just gone and prepare for the day to come but how can I explain what's happened to me?

'How can I explain?' I ask her photo, which I carry from one hotel to the next. It's such a beautiful image: there she is smiling, hair flying about, our brown dog looking up at her adoringly, and over her shoulder you can see the black restlessness of the trees, the leaves glowing like lanterns.

'You're so fragile,' she says. 'When you're home, it's like you've just been discharged from hospital.'

She's right. Look at me. My body is slumped, muscle tone collapsed, my skin is pale and my hair is blowing away, the bony skull peeking through.

And all these interchangeable places – Dayton, Seattle, Adelaide, Islamabad – are overlain by the question on all our minds: could we sleep here? this conference? this restaurant? the back of this taxi driving round and round? A few minutes, half an hour max, is all we need to be restored.

We kid ourselves. No one sleeps.

Slip (1)

Slip is under pressure. The front desk called saying he'd been asking for me and would I please come down. I found him there in the lobby standing beside the water feature massaging his temples.

'I've found the source,' he says, grabbing my hand and pulling his hair aside to bare his temple.

'You know,' I say, 'your symptoms are all we ever talk about these days. Where was it before? The Best Western in Galveston before Katrina, and then it was your kidneys –'

He stops, my hand hangs in empty space. Slip is so lost. 'All right, show me,' I say. My finger completes the journey,

touching down on the side of his head. 'Here. Here.' He tilts his head towards the light and in the

brightness I see through the translucent skin to the plumbing below: blue veins and dark intersections.

'Well?'

'A little red,' I say, pulling away.

'It's infected,' he crows. 'In-feck-ted.' He finds a bottle of tablets from inside his jacket and flips the cap. 'Once you know what you're dealing with –' He dry-swallows three or four '– you can do something about it.'

Slip is a veteran. He's been crossing the globe for years, long before any of us began. He used to try to get us to think more about what we were doing and why. 'To make history, you need to understand your own context,' he would say, or 'Be activists not just bureaucrats.' Renowned for his epigrams, I remember he once asked us, 'Which is more beneficial: a lorry passing a factory with a hundred employees or a lorry passing a music school with a hundred students?' And as we scratched our heads he added, 'And which is more musical?'

But now he has become eccentric and obscure and our meetings are difficult. Sometimes he'll lay his head on the table and start groaning or slap his hands down and stand abruptly even though they haven't finished with the welcoming address. Yet somehow he still manages to meet his quotas and we cover for him: apologise, intervene, smooth those he offends, prop him up. You see, we need Slip: he's our guide, our great white pointer. If he can survive, we all can.

So I collect his luggage, help him to his room and get him settled. And that's where I leave him inspecting his temples in the bathroom mirror.

On the way back, I look out into the rain and there's the swimming pool alive with a fierce blue light. Ambitious little waves are splashing up over the side and the drains are already banked up.

Free

I know: if it's so bad, why don't I quit? That's what you're asking. Simple answer: the people. They depend on me, hundreds of them. 'Work is good,' I say in my standard presentation. They agree but they don't understand. How could they? Generations of displacement and subsistence and bartering and scratching about in the dirt, they have no sense of the opportunities within their reach.

I say it again for emphasis, 'Work is good.'

Sometimes I'm so struck by their ignorance I almost cry out. It's like watching a family starve right outside a supermarket – the answer is right there, palpable, obvious. Yet all they can manage is to nod listlessly, they're bored already and they can't imagine a life better than the one they're leading now.

But I also see assent in their eyes: they're willing to trust me. And that's enough. I have the papers in my briefcase.

Room service

My feet are always too hot. It's a handy trait if you live in a cool climate or need to be tracked in the infrared but mostly it's embarrassing. I'm overheated and my feet are often wet. It's worse travelling: while many passengers slip their shoes and stretch their toesies during the flight, I have to confine my damp doggies to their nine-and-a-half double Es.

So when I enter my room, first thing I do is open the mini bar, turn the contents into a bin liner, remove the shelves and sit on the floor with my shoes and socks off cooling my feet, staring at the ceiling and mouthing off:

mongrel, she-devil, fuck-face, prick, castrating bitch, dickhead, wanker,
shit for brains, cunt, tart, slut, unfeeling inconsiderate bastard, liar,
liar...

I am neither a container overflowing with rage, nor do I disrespect them:
I love my work, it gives them a chance, a kick at the moon and if that means I
have to be away from home for months a year, then...

No. It's only noise, voided of meaning. Say anything over and over and
it soon loses content. I could as easily be reciting a dictionary or reading from
the room service menu – it's just an exercise to stop me thinking while my feet
chill.

Feeling better

So once I start feeling better I get up and explore. I don't know why I
bother. World over, hotel rooms are more-or-less identical and everything has
been sterilised before I get there. Yet sometimes there's a hint of the previous
occupants, I pick up on the remains of their energy, the afterglow of their
auras.

Sometimes I'll get a flash on the bed – bedecked with chains and
handcuffs. I'm walking down the corridor:

- they caught him there
- shot him where he fell
- drugs. He owed
- no one heard/saw anything
- the body's outline is chalked on the carpet, arms askew, a stain

like a rose where the heart –

The thing is they can't move me. There are no rooms anywhere. A convention of dentists is in town and everywhere's booked solid. So it's either spend the night in the parking lot or step over and around and avert your imagination.

The reception guy says the mess will be gone by the morning. 'First thing,' he promises. 'By the time you come down for breakfast.' He leans forward, confiding in me, 'They said it was real quick. Guy wouldn't have known anything about it.' He leans away distant now. 'Look, mister, why don't you go and have a drink. On us.' He passes me a voucher stamped with today's date.

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So I'm propped in the Mermaid Bar watching storm flung newspapers wrap around the legs of fleeing pedestrians. I'm finishing my third and ready for my fourth while I'm rationalising the inevitable fifth. I'm thinking about calling Dinah, thinking maybe I should text the kids:

(Da-ad!? You're so bad at it.)

b home wed 18 if i can get flight. if they open th
airport. if it ever stops raining. lv u. b good 2 yr
mothr.

and behind every door

-- a tray with a used wineglass, a few drops at the bottom, a small

red ocean receding

and behind every door

-- a couple going at it without variety or affection. The furniture

groans to their rhythm

and behind every door

-- a terrorist adjusting his backpack, charging up his mobile
phone

or someone like me with their feet stinking up the bar fridge,
mouthing rude words at the ceiling.

Storm

It's four a.m. I'm inert on the bed in the dark, not thinking, not sleeping.
The muted TV shows a dusty street, a car on fire, a woman a man sobbing,
trouble somewhere.

I feel their sadness radiating through the screen filling the room and
soaking into my skin, entering my pores.

There's a bang. The room is lit and suddenly the window is rattling in its
frame.

Rain like stones thrown at the glass over and over. Torrents over roofs
cascades down the sides of buildings filling gutters pavements and trenches
gone surge past sandbags drowning basements garages and laundries.

Slip (2) – ablation

The phone rings. His room is a mess. In his delirium, Slip had gone
shopping at a late night hardware store and on the table is a cordless drill
loaded with a fine silver bit. There's a blood spray across the wall behind the
bed and Slip. He's upright, still in his suit, holding a stained towel to his
head, a look of vacant surprise on his face.

'Jesus. Are you...? How does it...?'

Gently I peel the towel away. There's a small neat hole and as I watch a dark pearl swells from inside, over-tops the wound and slides down his cheek.

I dial emergency, I call reception. No one's answering, there's only the tide on the line ebbing and rushing.

'It's better, you know,' he says. 'Cold. I feel cold but the pressure's gone.'

I find some tablets and hand him some. Jesus. I swallow some myself. 'I'll go for help.' And for the second time tonight, I leave him there.

The lift is full

The light comes on and there's a chime. The doors slide apart and a column of water collapses across the carpet and pushes up against the wall opposite.

Now drained, the lift hangs in place bobbing gently: an invitation. The bright recessed lighting, the framed advertisement for the bistro with the two-inch steak cooked just-how-you-like-it, the mirrors reflecting endlessly upon each other: it's all waiting for me. Just step in. The arrow is flashing away, giving it one more try but no deal, I'm hanging onto the rail.

Audrey (1)

The tide is high and the floor rolls and bucks. I'm inching back along the corridor trying not to slip off into the torrent of the carpet. The walls bulge and tilt and the fluoros buzz and drip. I only just manage to dodge by the

body's outline, which has now become a sucking portal into some further darkness.

The swell carries me up against a door. Finally a frame to hold but at the last it opens –

'Well, hello,' she says, getting up from the desk. Her room is identical, of course, yet different – the inverted artwork, the television turned away, the curtains. At least her room isn't involved in the tidal surges outside.

'I just need a moment,' I say.

'I wasn't doing anything much, just working on my novel.'

'You're a writer?' I ask, holding onto the kitchenette and trying not to vomit. 'You look a little –'

'I haven't slept.' (I didn't tell her about Slip, the depth of my exhaustion, nor the fact that the corridor outside was awash.)

'Who sleeps? Drink?' she offers.

'Just water.' She gestures to the sink right in front of me. So I run some water into a tumbler and drink, swallowing half and then spluttering and coughing as I suck the rest into my lungs.

There's a hammering at the door. It's the guy from reception pushing a trolley stacked high with life jackets. He hands us two.

Audrey (2)

She's lying on the bed. I'm on the floor, my feet in the fridge staring at a similar ceiling: smoke detector, electrical conduit loosely screwed, and the bloom of a water stain in one corner.

Three years ago she nearly died.

She was held hostage by a stranger.

He grabbed her off the street, just down from her house.

'He kept shouting at me, saying filthy angry things as he held this long blade up against me. Then he raped me. Then he tried to set fire to me. He had doused me with petrol, cursing me all the time.'

But she escaped.

'It was a miracle,' she whispered. 'I prayed. And God heard me.'

(The neighbours had heard and called the police.)

'God reached down and turned the circumstance.'

(If the patrol hadn't been passing, if the neighbours hadn't cancelled their holidays at the last moment, if the killer hadn't spilled the matches...if, if, if.)

Knowing this, changed everything.

'For the first year I was in ecstasy. I sloughed off my previous life. I divorced Michael, left the kids; I could never return to that. I got rid of all the things in my life. Until I was empty.'

A vessel.

Ready.

'It sounds insane but I was grateful for what had happened. I knew without something awful like that I would never have... But the rapture passed and now it's all hard to fathom. I do meaningful things – that's why I do this work – and I pray. But I'm still uncertain what God intends. And

when I get depressed I think that I've let him down, that I'm not doing the thing I'm supposed to.'

'—'

'And you?'

I told her about Slip.

Slip (3)

Day is up and with it the flood.

I'm back in Slip's room. This time with Audrey.

Slip is still in his bloody turban and he's staring out the window. The waters are high and things are floating by the glass: cardboard boxes, polystyrene cups, a string of oranges. At one point a fat black woman swims past. She's wearing a floral dress which blooms about her but it doesn't impede her progress – her arms come over and her feet kick strongly. She sees us peering out at her and smiles and waves before continuing on up the street.

And then the dinghy passes in the stream.

This is what he's been waiting for. He hurries to the window and pulls it open and the flood falls in upon us, drowning the room.

Audrey and I climb quickly up on the bed, which starts to lift from the floor. The boat is sucked into the window gap and we watch as Slip clambers up onto the sill, reaches an arm over the side and climbs aboard.

'You're leaving?' I say.

'If you can't use the door, take the window,' Slip shouts from the surging boat.

I wade through the current to the window and I call out to him, 'Will you be all right?'

'You'll be fine,' he replies from the boat. 'Just remember...'

I strain to hear what he's saying. I can see his lips moving: he must be calling out some important last words but it's too late, he's gone too far. As I watch, the boat drifts further out into the middle of the street where the current whirls him away.

'He's gone,' I say, clambering back onto the bed. 'He's left us.'

'You'll manage,' Audrey replies, putting a hand on my shoulder.

'It's not me I'm worried about,' I insist. 'Anything could happen to him. He's wounded.'

She hops down from the bed and slobes over to the door.

'You'll get used to it.' Then she too was gone.

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Coming home

By afternoon the sun had come out, doves were flapping about, twigs and leaves in their beaks proving that the waters had receded.

The phones were back on, so I sat on the bed and dialled. 'I'm coming home,' I said. 'For good.'

'Are you OK?' Dinah asked. 'We were worried. The pictures on the TV.'

'I'll be there as soon as I can.'

'What about...the people?' She was testing my resolve.

'They agree. In fact, they're here with me now.'

And there they were, standing beside the bed as the phone slipped from my fingers. They smiled and nodded as I fell back towards the pillows and, although my eyes were already closed, I sensed that after all this, at last we understood each other. I am a man – human just like them, fallible, always failing to see the thing that's right there in front of me –

– and for now, I'm allowed to sleep.
