

Hotel Life

Peter LaSalle

The whole look of the city late in those dim winter afternoons was enough to make you jumpy. In Times Square most of the lights were out or glowing low, like muttered lies, because of the power shortages. But the Cup O' Noodles sign shaped to resemble a genuine, yes, cup, still steamed high up on that skinny building smack in the island above the little streamlined box for the Armed Forces recruitment center now totally vandalized. And the giant lit-plastic billboards of girls lounging, long, in hundreds-of-dollars lingerie remained, their goldenly fleshy luminescence burned out only in spots.

*

One afternoon, dim again, Hannah tugged at the sleeve of my pea coat.

"Look," she said, tipping her head up toward the billboards.

"Naked girls in expensive underwear," I said, "girls as big as clouds."

"The way they're burnt out."

She had on a knit toque and a parka that she maybe wore when she was an art major at Oberlin or Antioch, some place like that, lithe Hannah, beautiful yet lately with a certain gauntness, admittedly, her genuinely lavender eyes too big.

In the cold there on near-deserted Broadway she told me how that as a kid she always pictured her soul as maybe an upright, tubular fluorescent light bulb somewhere in her rib cage, every sin a burned-out mark on the light.

Her breath puffed steam, almost mimicking the billows coming from the Cup O' Noodles.

"Strange, isn't it," she said, smiling so the dimples showed, though that gauntness was rather frightening for a girl only twenty-five. "A fluorescent light with burnt-out marks, it's true."

It was at moments like that when I knew I loved Hannah more than was fair to love anybody, that I knew that as crazy as it was, I would continue with her on this search for her long-lost father in some Theater District hotel.

*

I'm not sure I fully understood it.

But the way I think I understood it was that when in New York for a few days Hannah's father would book a hotel, always in this vicinity.

Of course Hannah hadn't known him while growing up. He had left her and her mother when she wasn't even in grade school. He traveled in his business, which she was never clear about, and with Hannah's mother back in the Midwest tight-lipped about saying too much concerning the man she held such a grudge against, Hannah didn't have a lot to go on. Apparently, from the few black-and-white photos that her mother did keep, her father was a decidedly handsome man, with wavy mahogany hair and a strong jaw line; Hannah said that even her mother herself always admitted it: "He wore clothes well, he had a certain tall elegance that only a few men have, that would make anybody who saw him say that he looked good in a suit." I didn't want to press Hannah for too many details because I especially knew there was a definite pain to that whole business of her father. In fact, the several times she had tried to make contact with him over the years had resulted in an undeniable cold treatment from her mother. Nevertheless, every once in a while, she confessed to me, that despite all that her mother had given her, the woman working hard on her nurse's job so Hannah would have everything (the viola lessons, the trip with her high school French club to Paris—where she admitted the kids were only interested in sneaking into cafés and downing as much grape purple wine as they could—the good summer camp in maybe leafy Minnesota or possibly leafier Michigan), despite how much her mother had provided and how much Hannah, in turn, was more than eternally grateful to her, Hannah longed for that contact with her father. Especially in times of real sadness for Hannah, which surely could be said of the moment, and then some. Her life as a young artist struggling to get noticed in Soho or Chelsea was going nowhere; Hannah was starting to lose belief in herself. And as for me, somebody who had failed my oral exams in literature twice up at Columbia for a Ph.D. that I really didn't want (the British Romantics, my so-called field, Byron specifically), I

wasn't exactly the variety of strong, reassuring presence Hannah definitely could use at the moment.

True, once the long-distance calls back to her mother touched on the topic of Hannah seeking out her father yet another time, then conversation turned particularly awkward. Sometimes there was just silence on the line, when something was said that shouldn't have been said, Hannah told me, resulting in an answer much worse than what had been spoken, what really shouldn't have been said. Aching silence.

And just all those miles and miles in between Hannah and her faraway mother—or as Hannah explained it, more than millions of miles, veritable light years, because there was just the sound of the call computer faintly beeping in the satellite transmission, communication lost in the true nothingness of the Black Universe itself, frightening and utterly unfathomable

*

One thing she was very sure of was that though her father, traveling businessman that he was, wouldn't stay in an outright fleabag, he wasn't one to splurge either, go beyond his means. Which is to say, he wouldn't be at the Trump (the old St. Moritz?) or the Plaza facing Central Park, and certainly not in that black glass monolith of the Renaissance, high-rising there in Times Square proper.

It was another afternoon, and we were looking for him. We continued along Broadway, more people in rags there than the last time you had noticed and the stubbled ruffians in filthy yellow coveralls who passed for city workers raking discarded American flags (banners, stickers, placards) into piles along the gutters, where they incinerated each heap like so many leaves in those forgotten autumns when they used to let you burn leaves; understandably, the burning of the flags by this point in History wasn't done in any disrespect, but just as a matter of practicality—there were a reasonable number of flags at first and then there were, well, just so goddamn many of them, more than anybody needed, and something, well, had to be done. Most of the big theaters were shut down, and finding ourselves soon having overshot Times Square itself and on particularly dim Thirty-eighth Street, I looked up to see some pipe-and-plank staging, blue enameled, for a rehab project underway, and then the lit oblong neon sign for the Broadway Manhattan Hotel.

"How about this?" I said.

"Maybe," Hannah said.

I could tell she was hesitant.

Nevertheless, with that we did what we had been doing in all of the other hotels for days now. Hannah had a belief that she would know the place where her father was staying when she saw it, or, more so, when she was actually there, in a room possibly. Which meant that we had to work what was a minor ruse, asking each attendant at each reception desk about "availability and price," claiming that we would need a spot for a few nights the next week; we always requested to see the room ourselves, and that done, we also always thanked whoever did the showing, saying we would return when we had the exact dates firmed. Actually, the look of the Broadway Manhattan was all wrong as soon as we entered the overheated warmth of the cubbyhole lobby, though there was no backing out. The place was maybe family run, or, more exactly, everybody around the high desk seemed to be from some balmy, palm-rattling tropical country that had little to do with New York City in winter; they all spoke a happily tooth-flapping gibberish. The rack of glossy brochures for various aspects of tourism (Madame Tussaud's on Forty-second Street, Circle Line Tours, etc.) seemed a front for something else. The woman who worked the desk wore too much heavy gold jewelry, and the guy who reluctantly took us up the steps in the hallway encased in cinnamon ceramic tiling wore a checked sport jacket and baggy slacks, an especially gaudy wide red tie; he was decorated with more than his share of gold jewelry himself. There was the dull smell of hot plate cooking as cut by a sharp disinfectant odor, and the room was mostly frills and pile carpeting, red predominating and the whole package adding up to a look altogether cheap and shabby (seedy?). The red drapes, also frilled, were closed above a single window with an air-conditioner, surely looking out to nothing but a brick shaft. The guy in the wild clothes, maybe wise to our routine, perfunctorily tried to tell us something about the good water pressure in the bathroom, but Hannah was already thanking him.

Out in the cold of Thirty-eighth Street she told me: "My father would *never* stay in a place like that."

"Of course he wouldn't," I assured her.

*

Before giving up that particular night we tried a place called the Portland Square Hotel on Forty-seventh and then another, really crummy, called Aladdin Hotel off Ninth Avenue on Forty-fifth.

*

Apparently we had forgotten where we ourselves lived. Or—yes, maybe this is it—where we ourselves lived didn't matter at the moment, and the whole trick was to simply rest for a while every night, before we resumed the searching the next day. After all, we were young, and as a struggling artist and an eternal grad student in literature, we knew how to get by, half-impooverished; over by the entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, under the ancient girder overpasses, there were good rice-and-bean nooks where you could eat for next to nothing, ditto for the couple of calzone places along Ninth Avenue with its blood-red tenements, what used to be called Hell's Kitchen. And as for that resting every night, it was easy enough for the likes of us to put up with roughing it some and head clear over, in the direction of DeWitt Clinton Park, to Eleventh Avenue and then Twelfth Avenue, past the cluster of gritty car dealerships and to the pocket of garages for the seemingly exponential number of cabs let loose every morning like a flock of crazed yellow birds—better still, like an explosion of so many prayers, everybody everywhere in the whole uncontrollable hugeness of the city reciting, “Oh, please let this day be better!” or “Please, surely please, let the city bring me something, let it not wear me down so much today!” It was also in that pocket that they stabled the horses for the Central Park carriages (Fifty-second and Twelfth, to be precise), and snuggled in the golden hay there, using a heavy green horse blanket quilt if it turned really cold, Hannah and I slept. Or, more exactly, we floated untethered through the darkness like happily liberated young cadavers, venturing far into our own dreams every night, the horses often snorting, knocking loudly in their wooden stalls, for an appropriate background music to it all.

Once, I told Hannah how the whole idea of nightmare was literal for the people of the Orkney Islands in Scotland, where the twentieth-century poet Edwin Muir (just because I was a Byronist didn't mean that knowledge of other periods was denied to me), true, where Edwin Muir wrote of how the ancient islanders actually once worshipped red-eyed horses, knowing of their power to run away in the night with everything you knew deep down, which is to say, with your very dreams—nightmares absolutely literal indeed.

“I like that,” Hannah said, snuggling closer to me, under the horse quilt admittedly smelling of dung, “I

really do. I like how you know so much about everything, everything in books, anyway.”

Which, of course, I didn't, but it was good to hear her say that.

*

Because, oh, how I longed for Hannah to believe in me.

*

What happened with the Howard Johnson's and the Days Inn, both on Eighth Avenue, was a setback, I have to admit. Hannah thought that possibly either might be the kind of spot her father would choose, a comfortable room in one of those dozen-story motel-style blocks, places simple but clean.

“I've heard their advantage is that unlike the older hotels they have really big rooms.”

That made sense, seeing that from the looks of them they were built in the sixties; it was that long-ago era when the essential concept of hotels was suddenly passé and motels seemed to be as “in” as big-finned cars, as thoroughly up-to-date as the plethora of new, looping freeways in the Republic (going nowhere, if truth be known, though the large picture spreads I had seen in old issues of *Life* magazine on the marvels of the interstate system apparently never admitted that to anybody). The Days Inn had a yellow-and-black plastic sign out front, with a spacious lobby and well-groomed staff in blazers. One of the men working a computer terminal for reservations was only too glad to escort us upstairs to see a room, and key card in hand, he took us up on the elevator and then down the long carpeted hallway, to open the door to what surely was a room more spacious than most anything you would expect in the city proper: two large double beds, a wall-sized glass slab for the window, and a bathroom large enough that it could have held still another bed; everything was in muted maroon and gray tones.

“These are large rooms,” Hannah said, walking around. She looked out the triple-paned glass of that full window with Eighth Avenue several stories below, ducked her head into the bathroom again, where on the long vanity counter sat two glasses wrapped in crisp white tissue, saying confidently on the side, “Sanitized for Your Protection.” She nodded, “Such very large rooms.”

We told the man in the blazer we would get back to him.

Up a ways on Eighth Avenue, the Howard Johnson's rose almost identically, a dozen-story elongat-

ed cube, in this case with an orange-and-aqua lit plastic sign out front. But that was only the beginning, and never mind that a guide book somewhere was probably whispering to anybody interested the odd fact that the two buildings had been put up at the same time and designed by the same architect, and despite the differing names of the two chains the places were currently owned, through acquisition, by the same lodging-industry conglomerate; as said, forget that, and for us the corporeal evidence right then was suddenly disconcerting, dizzying, really.

Because in the spacious lobby was a staff of well-groomed men in blazers. One of the men working a computer terminal for reservations was only too glad to escort us upstairs to see a room, and key card in hand, he took us up on the elevator and then down the long carpeted corridor to open the door . . .

But why go on with it.

Except to emphasize that it was all exactly the same there at the Howard Johnson's as it had been at the Days Inn, a very spacious room identical right down to the muted maroon and gray tones, right down to the glasses in tissue in the same bathroom layout—right down, in fact, to Hannah saying the only thing she could say, her having no choice in the matter and inevitability now afoot with all the power of the tug of gravity of the massive planets themselves, first her observation that “These are large rooms,” while walking around, inspecting, then the adding of, “Such very large rooms.”

It ruined everything for days (or months or years—what's the difference, right?), with Hannah totally defeated. Because what if there was no hotel where she would find her father? Or, to put it another way, what if nothing was real at all, and everything was just a meaningless mirror of everything else, to the point of total lack of any corporeality—never mind abstract consequence—because one hotel could just as well be another hotel?

She whimpered in my arms and the horses snorted some more in their stables that frigid night, and I patted her beautifully tangled auburn hair that cascaded from below the knit toque, purple, pulled nearly to her nose. I held her tighter, because I knew what she was getting at—her doing her art meant nothing, my getting a Ph.D. meant nothing, and we ourselves being young and hopeful and expectant, all of that especially meant nothing. She whimpered and I told her, in low

tones, over and over, that we would find her father, I wouldn't abandon her on that.

“There is a hotel life,” I whispered.

Again and again and again.

Not that the situation didn't get even worse before it got better.

*

Strange things transpired.

In the Warwick—probably beyond her father's budget, anyway—we stumbled in the lobby down a brass-railed marble stairway and into a subterranean holding room for beautiful young Hispanic women in dark-blue suits and nylons and silk blouses with blue scarves, sort of formal stewardess get-ups, screaming to be set free from the slavery of having to work such hotel desk jobs only because they themselves were thoroughly bilingual; and why, they pleaded, didn't a handsome young man, Don Somebody, marry each one of them, take her to his large horse-breeding ranch in the hazy emerald mountains of Colombia or even gentle Venezuela, let's say, where she would live in a sprawling white villa with a red-tile roof like any fiery princess in the *telenovelas* on Spanish-language TV? And in the very modern Hilton—surely also well beyond Hannah's father's means—across the street from the Warwick, the lobby with its criss-crossing escalators seemed to be just that, a lobby with numerous empty, stainless-steel escalators taking you to the second-floor convention-room concourse. However, at the same time those escalators obviously led to places that could be quite devastating, like one aimed at “Undiagnosed Hodgkin's Disease,” another at “The Suicide of Your Best Friend That You Were Responsible For,” and still another set of moving steps that would transport the entire nation into yet another “Almost Discernable War”; there, innocently impoverished peoples in faraway places made for large-scale video-game play for yet more—a never-ending supply—of brave Brigadier Generals using the highest of tech weaponry, helpless women and children and really old men zappingly incinerated to laughable, ashy puff-puffing—but who cared, because as our Supposed Leaders assured us, those were people, all right, but they weren't our people.

That sort of thing. And call the Hilton, with its many escalators leading to who knows exactly where, “The Shaky Future” or whatever you want.

Until, walking up Seventh Avenue still another time in still another winter dusk, the Cup O' Noodles

placard steaming away behind us and the girls in lingerie still lounging large on the billboards (oh, how my Hannah had beautifully once spoken of being a child and seeing her soul as a fluorescent tube, with whatever sins she had accumulated simply burned-out spots in the light!), walking one more time, we couldn't help but see the massive vertical sign on the side of an art deco 1920s brown-brick skyscraper, twenty-five stories or so and turreted on top, with a row of red awnings at sidewalk level showing plenty of gilt trim. The letters were lit bright, each one as big as one of the windows beside it, stacked high on that building on the corner of Fifty-fifth and Seventh:

W
E
L
L
I
N
G
T
O
N

"That's it," Hannah said.

"Yes," I said to her, "I guess it is."

Indeed, as simple as that, and neither of us had any doubt now.

But we didn't go to find her father at the Wellington Hotel that afternoon. She wanted to wait, to be prepared and ready for what she had anticipated so long.

And that night at dinner at the Market Diner on Eleventh Avenue—a block up from the mountainous aircraft carrier moored there forever (hypnotized there forever?) and with dozens of limos in the parking lot of the Market Diner, because chauffeurs, as everybody knew, swore by it, a hopelessly streamlined artifact also from those sixties—we splurged on bacon and eggs and homefries, plenty of buttered toast, too; the Market Diner, naturally, served breakfast at any hour (some claimed the Market Diner was gone, torn down, but we didn't believe that). We ate, and Hannah told me things I had never heard before about her father.

*

"My mother knew he was a con man from day one," she said.

I didn't want to challenge her on this, yet the more I heard of her mother's rancor concerning her father, the more I seemed to understand how the woman's viewpoint was rather tainted, to put it mildly.

"He conned everybody on the priest thing," Hannah said.

"Priest thing?" I asked.

She explained.

Her father had been raised a Catholic, and after starring on his high school football team for two years, he announced at the end of his junior year that he felt that he truly had a calling, even if he hadn't ever been particularly religious as a kid; following numerous sessions with the local parish priest, it was decided. Apparently, he would begin his religious studies at the boarding-school seminary that summer before his senior year, and as was the custom there was a party thrown by his working-class parents to celebrate his leaving the everyday world, so to speak, for a higher good.

"My mother said he really hauled in the loot. Sure, there were some presents from friends and relatives for what I guess was a backyard party on a sunny May day, things from a local religious goods store like a lace surplice or whatever. But moreover there were just contributions, checks and cash, to help defray the expenses of his studying for the priesthood. My mother said everybody should have known. A young man that handsome didn't swear off women for life at age seventeen, and there was even something she told me about him playing the sax wildly for everybody out there that afternoon—I guess he always was a fine jazz alto sax player—which should have been another clue. My mother claimed that the take he netted was in the thousands of dollars, though he didn't last more than a month that summer at the seminary. What happened was that the seminary was in an old rural estate, a place donated by some aging thief of a corporate millionaire trying to cut his own deal with the almighty in his will before dying, and it was near a big lake that was a popular resort. My father started sneaking out to the lake at night, dating both of a set of twins, bob-haired and big-boobed, the way my mother tells it, who were working as waitresses in one of the big restaurants of the lakeside dance halls there.

"He was booted from the seminary pronto," Hannah went on, "and he got back to his own home-

town in time for August preseason football practice, a fat wad of dough still in his checking account. Nobody who had given him money at that party had the guts to ask for any of it back, the whole business of a so-called failed vocation too painful and embarrassing for them to discuss. But, get this, it didn't keep my father from sinking every cent of it into buying a second-hand yellow Chevrolet convertible, one with a tire in a chrome donut of a case on the back, which like the big-boobed twins, was a detail my mother always emphasized, too. My mother claimed that that was about as low as you could get, conning people into thinking you really had a calling, no different from the way he would con her into marrying him, my father promising to her then that he was swearing off his partying when out on the road for his business—he claimed he was putting behind him all the girls there when he had been a bachelor, all the booze there when he had been a bachelor. My mother eventually came to believe she was probably the biggest sucker of all, and there was a trail a couple of miles long of his double-dealing, not only that priest thing, and when you considered it, she said, those suckers who gave him contributions for that were nothing compared to her.”

“I suppose,” I said.

“What do you mean, you suppose?” Hannah asked me.

She was spreading more orange marmalade from a little packet on her toast; a splurge at the Market Diner meant that you ate everything, even if you didn't want it, and we had been used to being broke for so long that it was almost automatic to ask the gum-chomping tough waitress for extra packets of orange marmalade. Actually, Hannah's lips were smeared with it, gooey, which was cute as all hell and making her, admittedly gaunt Hannah of those giant authentically lavender eyes, somehow look like a kid—a kid a bit angry at the moment, however.

“Well,” I said, “I suppose there could be the other side of it, that a handsome young man, even one who could blow a good alto sax to boot, found at some point a spiritual side to himself, was called away in some dreamy moment to want to give his life to something higher. Or even if he didn't fully believe, possibly he just wished to devote himself to doing the kind of dedicated social work that priests, clergy of all sort, do manage to do. Maybe it didn't last, was just more of a temporary rapture, Blakean, I suppose, and that money must have

been as embarrassing for him as for the people who gave it to him. He couldn't hand it back, so why not buy a convertible, yellow, as you say.”

Hannah turned short with me after that. And I realized I shouldn't have challenged her, but I knew that at some point she had to tread beyond the nagging bitterness her mother had instilled in her.

Nevertheless, it turned worse back at the stables, as Hannah, not snuggling with me in the spicy hay, laid into me the way she sometimes did, telling me it was pathetic how I always reduced everything to dead literature (what she had praised me on earlier, certainly), and what was this excuse of Blakean rapture when it came to her father? What kind of “blah-blah seminar-table bullshit” was that? Couldn't I see a simple situation, a classic con, for what it was? Was I stupid?

Her loud arguing got worse, and the horses even whinnied some in the absolute darkness, the starkly blank cold of it, as if to tell the two of us to “Shut the hell up!” She really laid into me.

*

She told me that if I was such a bigshot English literature scholar why had I failed my orals twice? And that her mother was right, I wasn't good enough for her, and did I have any idea of the men she had dated before she met me, the two she nearly married—the elegant industrialist's son from Milan or the celebrated young film director who had pined away for her so, there in Manhattan? She yelled, though before long she was crying, of course, exhausted and welcoming the warmth of my embracing arms again, telling me that she was sorry, that she had never met anybody in her life quite like me and her own failure to make a go of it as an artist (no acrylics, only oils) in the rodent race of that Soho/Chelsea art-gallery world had turned her into what she was lately—so touchy, so sad, so outright lost lately. She assured me that the fact I had failed my exams twice, in truth, not only showed no slackerism, but rather that I really understood the wisdom of the great writers, that I was beyond playing the game of the uptight, self-satisfied profs who wore their safe tenure like a wrestler's gaudily plated championship belt, just pawnshop junk and not meaning anything important, really.

“Would Blake,” she asked, “actually sit down in a bar and talk about anything serious with one of those whiningly egomaniacal fools, constantly hustling to publish more meaningless articles in meaningless journals? Would Byron?”

“Maybe,” I said. “Yeah, maybe, if the prof was buying the drink.” I was relieved to be able to make a joke out of it. “Or in the case of Byron, anyway. I don’t think Blake touched much of the hooch; he had an ongoing natural high, so to speak, clear into white-bearded dotage.”

There was a pause.

“I love my father,” Hannah whispered. “I want to see him now.”

“You will,” I said.

“In the Wellington Hotel,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And you’ll be with me, the way that you are always with me, will always be with me, forever and ever.”

“And ever,” I told her.

We slept, at last.

*

On the streets around Times Square the next day the green newsstand shacks were filled with papers shouting headlines about another War far away that our country was winning by a more than lopsided score. The famous, nationally-circulated financial paper even told of a significant rise in the stocks of major flag manufacturers; we could hear some crackling automatic weapon (Uzi?) gunfire, maybe across Forty-eighth Street there at the Radio City skating rink, which lately had been drained and encased in razor wire, an impromptu detention center for another roundup of Corporate-Happy Executives (orange tans from expensive Caribbean vacations and hundred-dollar silvery haircuts), following the latest outbreak of pension-fund theft down on Wall Street.

In other words, the world was transpiring as normal as possible all around us, but for the moment we didn’t care. We, like everybody, if one is honest, had our own Personal History to concern ourselves with for the time being.

We were on our way to the Wellington Hotel.

*

How does one describe the Wellington?

It made for, simply enough, a classic New York hotel, the tower of brown brick from the twenties, as said, everything within a bit worn. There was a lobby that was very art deco: a huge art deco black marble fireplace, flanked by long rising panels with comic-book-colorful Beardsleyesque female figures entwined in a leafy patterning; a giant art deco crystal chandelier, iridescently glistening and hung a full story above the well

of that lobby; carpeting of dark green and bronze (the Wellington colors), real wool and, if you looked closely, showing a tastefully repeated “W” woven into it; some rounded-off art deco easy chairs and a lot of emphatically art deco, streamlined polished brass—winkingly bright—everywhere. There were arrow signs indicating the location of the barber shop/hairdresser and the newsstand and the modest diner-style restaurant.

At the reception desk was a staff in dark-green uniform suits trimmed with bronze, the outfits of the several bellboys matching. We inquired about Hannah’s father. An attractive blonde woman with substantial makeup poked the computer keyboard some and told us that, certainly, Hannah’s father was staying in the hotel, Room 1407. She nodded to the house phones, though we simply proceeded to the row of elevators, the chime for the “Next Car Up” soon sounding.

Hannah was radiant.

“It is the way I always saw it in drea—” but then she caught herself before finishing the word—“the way I always knew it would be.”

On the fourteenth floor the walls were pink wallpaper, fine cream-colored trim for the woodwork and the panel patterning on the doors; without hesitation, Hannah knocked on the door to Room 1407. There was no reply.

She knocked again. Still nothing, and in frustration she tried the knob in a somewhat shaky twist, it giving way and the two of us soon finding ourselves in a decidedly small room, neat and unoccupied; the bed was made and fresh towels laid out in the tiny tiled bathroom. Above horn-blaring Seventh Avenue, the radiator alongside the window competed with its own racket, clanking a couple of gongs then dying off in a staccato clatter. It was only because of what Hannah found in the closet, a single hanging blue-silk tie with white pin dots, that we warded off complete disappointment, because she immediately recognized it as one of his ties. Left behind?

The blonde, heavily made-up young woman downstairs apologized for her mistake.

“He moved into another room just yesterday, I see now that I check on it”—she stared blankly at the computer the way people do stare at the melancholic luminescence of a computer very blankly—“I’m so sorry. He’s in 2343.”

We returned to the row of elevators there in the lobby, itself rather empty in the sluggish period for any hotel late in the afternoon.

*

Coming out of the elevator as we stepped on was (strangely again) the dark-complexioned guy in the gaudy sport jacket and slacks, so much honey-gold jewelry, who had shown us the room at the Broadway Manhattan Hotel. (No doubt—and why not say it—he was a bona fide pimp.) We ignored him, the way one tries with every ounce of will to ignore the obstacle of any doubt or potentially dangerous distraction when—how should I put this?—one is close.

The elevator rose higher and higher. The doors wheezed open. We headed down the corridor to Room 2343.

Hannah's father answered before the second knock.

*

And for a good half hour after that, he continued to show us around and expound on the room, telling Hannah why she shouldn't have wasted her time looking for him in so many other hotels, when the Wellington was the perfect kind of spot for him.

"Though I suppose even I had my doubts. When I first checked in they gave me a box of a room, not much more than a glorified coffin, down on the fourteenth floor. I'm lucky I slept more than twenty minutes that first night, what with the sirens and the all-night buses, even at some point the clip-clopping of the big old horses for the Central Park carriages tramping back to the stables."

That said, I couldn't help but notice Hannah squirming where she sat on the edge of one of the two pink-upholstered, high-backed mahogany chairs, even brushing her hand across her pillowy white parka, the thighs of her old jeans, maybe to sweep away an imaginary sprig of straw. Her father seemed to have thought that possibly she didn't understand what he was talking about with that last line, adding: "You know, those horses, and they must have stables for them somewhere around here. The Central Park carriage rides."

"Yes, I guess I know what you mean," Hannah said, surely hoping that he didn't press on with that to discover that the impoverished pair of us had, if bald truth be known, been tiptoeing through dreams in those very same stables every night for who knows how long—the red-eyed, shaggy-maned beasts watching us, always watching us, also whinnying and complaining about us, on that one occasion. "I guess there must be somewhere nearby that they keep them," she said.

She looked nervously at me on the other high-backed chair; I forced a reassuring smile.

And how handsome her father was, somehow caught forever in the prime of early middle age, with a heartily ruddy complexion and the wavy mahogany hair, cut matinee-idol style, plus the strong jaw line. (It didn't matter that he had died years before of lung cancer, the man nothing more in the end than a hackingly coughing skeleton in a Catholic diocesan hospital in some place inconsequential like Seattle or Buffalo or Dallas, and when it came to Hannah's father, something as mundanely meaningless as tick-tocking chronology—good for feeding parking meters or rushing to an overcharging dentist on time—was the last item figuring into any of it.) His suit was double-breasted, gray, and though probably only a department-store suit, he wore it well indeed—a tall man who you might expect to see posing for a screen test with soft backlighting, maybe silently taking a cigarette case out of his suit jacket's inside pocket and removing one of the Camels or Luckies, to casually light it and inhale deeply, suave. He had thin-soled amber wingtips; the blue tie with white pin dots (where had I seen that?) was knotted tastefully lopsided at the starched spread collar of a good white shirt. Walking around the room, he talked more of the Wellington.

"I mean, the next morning, before I set out to do what I had to do around town, I went down to the desk and I said that the room just wouldn't do. The manager himself happened to be there at the computer, saying that he understood, that he wished he had been on duty when I first arrived and, if so, I never would have been given a room like the one I had been given on the fourteenth. It was bullshit, but I played along with my own bullshit, telling him that, of course, I knew it would never have happened if he, in fact, had been there. Actually, the apology was more than well taken, when he had the bell captain escort me up to the old room and carry my luggage up here to the twenty-third, where I got this." He waved his hand around, as if to lasso it all in.

It was a fine room, good sized, and with a huge panel of a wall mirror facing the double bed with its patterned, deep pink spread. The mahogany furniture was edged with brass, hopefully classy, and the cream-colored woodwork might have been scuffed and dinged here and there, but it was decidedly ornate woodwork, hopefully classy, too. There was a tiny black clock radio

with digital red numbers on a night table, telling of hours and minutes that never were or never would be, and over on the desk by the wide single window, you could see the room service menu encased in protecting plastic as well as a page of cream-colored stationery—bearing a “W” in a laurel wreath at the top in dark green, for the hotel logo—alongside a dark green ball-point pen with the hotel’s name; Hannah’s father had possibly been starting to write a letter when he had been interrupted by our knock. A framed print of a single small orange tree hung above the desk. The TV was on but silent, showing a screen with the hotel’s house channel; there were instructions on where to call for room service and how to go about renting movies, the black remote clicker set on top of the big black plastic case of the new Philips set.

You would think that after all of this searching for her father, the need to see him and get some answers at last, Hannah would have been peppering him with questions, but she simply sat there staring at him, rather dreamily, taken in by his charm.

“Hannah,” he said.

“Yes,” she said, whispery.

“Hannah, come here.”

She got up, walked over to where he stood by the window; its deep pink drapes that matched the bedspread were pulled fully open.

“Look, Hannah.”

And there was certainly something to behold. Sandwiched in by a couple of glass skyscrapers—one blue glass and one black glass—was a view from that twenty-third floor that looked over the rooftops of several lower, older buildings, even a cone-topped water tank, past the orange-brick rear of Carnegie Hall and past Fifty-ninth Street and the sooty stone wall of Central Park, then the low, feathery-topped winter trees, for a full panorama of Central Park clear up to its northern perimeter, nearly to Morningside Heights; the rows of stately apartment buildings, baroque and turreted, there on the massive rectangle’s eastern and western edges made for almost fairy-tale castles. He put his hand behind Hannah’s back to escort her closer.

“A view of the park,” she said, still whispering. “It’s beautiful.”

“I mean,” he said, “I’m not paying all that much for this room, but with the, well, upgrade, I got something I never expected. I mean, maybe you’d get a cleaner view from the Pierre or even the Plaza or the Inter-

continental, but those places are well beyond what I can shell out. But look, I didn’t do bad. I’m getting a kick out of this hotel life, if truth be known. And that’s the whole trick, isn’t it?”

It was exactly what Hannah had to hear, I knew. Despite so much of her mother’s raving, she needed her father’s casual wisdom at certain times, when she had to go searching for him again. Because there was maybe a truth about hotels and the life therein, and in hotel life or any other life you had to eventually make the most out of these several dozen years (a veritable blink of the nervously sleeping eye) that any of us is allowed on this planet, just a heartbreakingly finite amount of so much oxygen to be gulped, and appreciate what came your way (which meant that Hannah already wasn’t a famous artist with museums bidding for her work but just the advertising illustrator in the boondocks she would eventually become, that I myself already wasn’t a big-time university prof but simply the high school English teacher living there with her that I would eventually become, totally sans anything close to a Ph.D., both of us happy enough), you had to face what you had to face, appreciate what you were dealt, at last.

Everything happened fast after that.

*

Turning from the window, a very radiant Hannah, of those oversized lavender eyes, the cascading auburn hair, noticed the blank sheet of stationery. Hannah said something like, “Such nice hotel stationery, too,” to which her father replied that wasn’t it a coincidence, but when we had knocked, he had just been sitting down to write a letter to her, tell her “some things” at long, long last. She continued to stare at the blank, cream-colored page, Hannah smiling, and unnoticed to her, he winked at me, as if to say, “That’s the kind of thing a dame always likes to hear.” I, for one, knew then that he was a con, that this was a guy who definitely plotted that going-into-the-seminary ruse to pocket the dough needed to buy a yellow Chevrolet convertible with a wheel in a chrome case on the back, perfect for chasing more—to borrow a term—“dames.”

Hannah continued to look at the blank page; he winked again toward me.

And then it was as if we weren’t even in the Wellington Hotel anymore. We were out of there.

*

We were already fleeing the city, for a territory labeled The Years Going On. A band of winter tanger-

ine showed above the Hudson at the end of the day before the coming of dark, before the splattering of all those glowing yellow stars, a moon, too, in the hard and very black cold; we crossed the traffic-clogged George Washington Bridge on foot, kept going on foot across New Jersey and Ohio, even Kansas of its wheat fields and sighing children and so many interminable interstates, Kansas not all that unapproachable as it could sometimes seem, actually.

*

“Hotel life,” Hannah said to me, beaming.

“Yes, hotel life,” I said to her, pecking a kiss on the top of that purple knit toque.

*

And knowing that for once (and at least for a while) I was the one.