

# A SMALL HOTEL

A STORY BY

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## **Origins**

I've stayed in numerous small hotels across Europe and some of them were distinctly weird. The hotel in this story is a mixture of some I've found.

A Small Hotel

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**T**he train arrived in Nice in the evening, much later than I liked. Business had brought me to the South of France, and meetings in Antibes had kept me very late. There was one more client to see next morning, then I could get back home. I hadn't booked ahead, so I was relying on my luck to find an empty hotel. It wasn't a problem, not in November. It was that dead time between the summer season and winter skiing. Everywhere is empty.

I had seen a gem of a hotel just as the train drew into one of those little stations on the run into Nice. The hotel had a pink neon sign flashing in the damp night air, a bedraggled palm tree on the front lawn, and a bright pink dome on the roof over the lobby. It looked for all the world like a 1930's cinema. It should have been called Bijou, or the Regal. I love staying at these little places.

They ooze kitsch and eccentricity. This hotel must have seemed exotic in its time, but modernity overtook it, and left it high and dry in a sea of '60s functionality.

I've lived from a suitcase for many years, which is why I keep my job regardless of the economic winds. The others don't want to travel, don't want to risk turning their backs on the office politics. They never bother me, I'm no threat, and besides, someone has to get the projects. To make this suitcase life bearable I scrutinize a town's hotels before I choose one. Let others head for the standard executive night stop, with its predictable rooms, standardized menus, mass produced decor, and automaton responses from the hotel staff. I always prefer the surprises and warmth of those little hotels off the main roads. I've never had a family. At some of my regular

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stops I'm treated like the long lost cousin who turns up unexpectedly, so the lack of family life has never bothered me. This travelling life sounds attractive, but the realities of it soon wear out all but the most intrepid.

The hotel that beckoned me was less than a kilometre from the station, too short a journey for a taxi, just right for a late night walk. The streets looked safe enough, so I walked. It had stopped raining some time ago, leaving the streets damp but not wet. The bright lights of the town centre lit up low clouds. Autumn is the only interesting season on the southern coasts. Endless sunshine may seem attractive, but after several months it gets tedious and everyone craves a good thrashing storm. I had arrived at the tail end of one, and the tail end of a series of unsuccessful business meetings. A damp autumn wind flapped at my raincoat as I trudged along the road with suitcase and briefcase. At times like this I wished for the comfort of the settled life, a regular day at the office, wife and family to go home to, neighbours to argue with on Saturday afternoons, and Sundays mowing the lawn.

A neon sign blinked off and on, announcing 'Hotel' in florescent pink. I trod the crazy paving of the front steps and pushed my way through a gold-tinted glass door to the reception desk. I had stayed at a place like this once before, owned by a Clark Gable lookalike. True he was only five foot four and balding, but the pencil-slim moustache was a dead give-away. Some ragged tropical plants in pots stood to one side of the desk. Ancient film magazines were scattered on the glass top of a cane table. The dining room was deserted, tables laid ready for breakfast. It was a quarter to midnight. Only one key was off its hook. Not much custom tonight, nor any sign of the desk clerk. I rang the bell on the counter, and a figure shuffled out. He was about seventy years old, with a big bushy grey moustache hiding his upper lip. He looked at me over the top of his half moon spectacles. Clark Gable was off duty that night.

'Yeah? Whadya want?' the night clerk asked. He could speak my kind of English, though how he knew I was English I couldn't guess. Maybe it was the classic rumped suit. After several days

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of intense meetings, my French was also pretty ruffled. I wasn't complaining.

'I'd like a room for the night,' I said.

Strange how we always say that, I mean, what else could I want? The night clerk moved to the book on the counter and studied the entries. We both knew the hotel was almost empty, but he still looked.

'Front or back?' he asked.

'The sign flash all night?' I asked in return.

He nodded.

'I'll have a back room then.'

He scratched his moustache as if I had suddenly presented a problem, then reached a decision. He turned round and took down the key for room 17. He told me the price.

'Payment in advance,' he added.

I offered my credit card which he took and studied. He shook his head.

'We don't take that. Got real money?'

I always carry real money. US Dollars were a good standby in those days of collapsing exchange rates. I paid, and he made out the bill with great ceremony. It was very cheap, I suppose they relied on the restaurant for business. Not many people want to stay at a place like this these days. I signed the register. The last entry was two days ago, when the present guest had booked in.

Just then a car drew up outside, and a man and young woman got out. She rushed up the front steps and swept through the glass doors. She was dressed in a tight evening dress, off the shoulder, trailing a mink stole. I assumed it was mink, though it was totally out of fashion, and rather risky, to wear one these days. The man was still outside arguing with the driver of the car. He shouted something, made a gesture to the driver, and came inside. The young woman had stopped on the stairs, watching the scene outside. I hadn't seen her face properly until then. She could have been the twin of that movie star who disappeared in the fifties, but I couldn't remember her name. I was only a teenager at the

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time, more interested in Rock'n'Roll than Hollywood. Fashions change, the cycle comes around, and you've reached middle age when the fashions of your youth come back.

She noticed me gawping at her and gave me a smile. She shrugged her shoulders at the trouble outside, and switched her attention to the man who came through the door. I was forgotten again.

'Has he really gone now?' she asked.

'He'd better,' the man replied. They continued up to the second floor. I heard little snatches of conversation as they went.

'Do you think he'll come back?' she asked.

'Doubt it, not if he's got any sense. How did you get mixed up with a creep like that anyway?'

'I didn't, he keeps turning up, that's all.'

'He won't now. Who was that you were smiling at in the lobby?'

'Just some man who liked to look at me. I don't mind.'

'Well I do, one creep is enough. Jeez, I'll sleep tonight, no kidding.'

The voices drifted away into the upper floors and the night clerk and I turned to look at each other. He shrugged.

'Strange how fashions come back,' I said. 'She looked just like that movie star, the one who disappeared in the fifties. Do you remember?'

'Never liked the movies, wouldn't know.'

I nodded to the magazines on the table.

'My son,' said the old man. 'He's crazy about them.'

The old man continued to look at me, then said, 'Your room is first floor, turn right at the top, down the end, on the left.'

It was a hint rather than a set of directions.

'Oh, right,' I said picking up my suitcase.

The door of my room concealed a surprise. The room was huge and lavishly furnished. The bathroom suite was real marble. I looked at my bill. It was very cheap. Perhaps the other rooms were

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closed for redecoration. That had happened once before. I had booked an upmarket country hotel recommended by a colleague. When I arrived they put me into the 'Presidential Suite', the one with a ten foot bed, and a bucket under a leak in the ceiling. The smell of fresh paint was everywhere, and I was charged only for a small single room. I told my colleague when I returned, omitting the bucket and the smells. He never recommended a hotel again. Funny things, office jealousies.

I filled the bath, shook my herbal bath salts into the water, undressed, and got into the steaming foam. Don't laugh at my herbal bath salts, they're essential after a day on the road, and my mother would never forgive me if I forgot them. She died twenty years ago, but I still take her opinion into account.

I didn't need any help to relax that night. The water turned lukewarm while I dozed, and my fingers wrinkled into little pink prunes. Above me, raised voices drifted down through the ceiling. I yawned and grabbed the towel to dry off. My alarm clock showed nearly two o'clock. It's a real

clock, one that goes tick-tock, not one of those electric things that only last a couple of years. It has been my constant companion for thirty years on the road. I dried, and got into bed.

Sleep was just creeping up on me when a crash on the ceiling disturbed me. Great, just what I wanted, a lover's tiff. A muffled scream drifted down through the ceiling, then another crash, then shouting. I rolled over, pulled the pillow over my head and tried to sleep. However, something kept my attention glued to the noises coming through the ceiling. I sat up. More crashes came, more shouts, more screams. I'm not an expert on family rows, never having had a family, but this one had some disturbing qualities. I listened to the sequence of noises, then realised what was wrong. The man was shouting, but the woman was screaming, she wasn't shouting back. I never like interfering, though on this occasion I decided to go upstairs and complain.

The noises were much louder. We must have been the only people in the hotel that night, nobody else seemed to have complained, and the old man was probably asleep in the reception of-

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face. I reached the door of the noisy suite, braced myself, and knocked. Nobody took any notice. The man shouted a string of obscenities, and followed it with the sound of something being broken. I supposed she must have thrown something at him, but I couldn't hear her shouting back, just a sob. I knocked again, much louder and longer. It was useless, the shouting and crashing and screaming continued. Nothing was going to stop a fight like that until dawn, so I decided to ask the night clerk for another room.

As I walked away, a different kind of crash came from the room, one that wasn't a vase or an ornament. It was followed by a piercing scream from the woman, then sobs. I walked back to the door and knocked harder, insistently. The handle wouldn't turn, the door was locked. I shouted for someone to open the door, but the only reply was the woman's sobs. Something was seriously wrong. I braced myself and pushed hard at the door with my shoulder, but it wouldn't yield. I kicked the handle to break it, but it held. The woman's sobbing came louder, breaking into desperate pleas, then more sobbing. I grabbed a

chair from down the corridor and slammed it against the door. At the third blow the door gave way. The man I had seen earlier that night with the woman was tied to the end of the bed. His face and chest were smashed in, blood splattered down the front of his body. Blood was splashed across the walls and ceiling, the floor around him was awash with it. It's strange how we pause in moments of shock, as if we're trying to reduce the significance of what stands before us. I stood, fascinated by the patterns of blood splashed across the bed sheets. Bloody chair legs lay next to the man. The immediate reactions of the film hero are false. In reality it takes time for horror to sink in. My response was to walk away and blot it from memory. I couldn't understand why the woman was lying on the floor. She seemed dead, but her eyes rolled and looked at me, warning, but too late. Something crashed down on the back of my head and I passed out.

I don't know how long I lay there, but daylight was streaming through the window. I sat up, rubbing the back of my head, trying to remember

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what I was doing there. The memory slammed into me. I stood up, looked around for the bodies, then noticed the room. Whereas I had broken into a hotel bedroom, I was now faced with a damp and dirty room, the bed linen filthy, the carpets rotten and worn, or eaten through, boards across the windows. I remembered being booked into an expensive suite, then thought my attacker must have dragged me into an unused part of the hotel.

I staggered out into the corridor. This whole wing of the hotel was in the same rotten state. I couldn't get my bearings, but guessed that this wing must be the complement to the one where my room was, so staggered down the stairs to my floor, and along the corridor. There was bound to be a connecting door to the inhabited wing, I reasoned. I passed a room and saw my suitcase laying on the bed. The room was an exact counterpart of the one I had paid for. My attacker must have had a bizarre sense of humour to drag me and my suitcase down here, unless it was done to increase his chances of getting away. I looked at my alarm clock. Half past eight. The police

were bound to be in the other wing, so I shouted for someone to get me out. I looked down at my pyjamas and dressing gown, and started to dress, still shouting. Nothing came back but the sounds of passing traffic. This was ridiculous, the place must have been crawling with police. The man was certainly dead, but the woman was still alive the last time I saw her. Maybe she still was. I pulled on my shoes, packed my night things into my suitcase, and closed it. I staggered along the corridor. I was still unsteady on my feet, my head was sore, but the skin was unbroken. There was an enormous bruise. I'd get an X-ray later to make sure the skull wasn't fractured, but in the meantime I had to find the police.

The stairs took me down to a darkened landing on the ground floor. A glass door partly smashed was hanging on its hinges. Plywood panels blocked my way out. It took a good half hour to get through. Every time I pushed at the panels my skull crashed and thudded from the previous night's blow. I tried shouting, but nobody came.

I broke through at last, staggered out into the daylight, and stumbled through bushes growing

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up through broken crazy paving. A fence separated the grounds from the road. I climbed the fence and dropped down onto the pavement outside. My suit was a mess, but at least I had an excuse to miss the meeting. I walked around the corner of the old wing looking for the reception lobby. I walked around two corners, but couldn't find it. I walked back past the place I had climbed out, and around the other corners. No lobby, no main entrance, no newer wing. I walked all the way around the block and back to the front of the old wing. I stopped a passerby.

'Where's the front of the hotel?' I asked in broken French.

He looked at me quizzically. 'You're standing in front of it now.'

'No, the modern part, where you book in.'

'There isn't one, it's been closed for years.'

'There must be, I stayed in it last night.'

'Bit damp, was it?' he asked sarcastically as he walked off.

I stared at the old facade, putting it in the dark

with the neon sign flashing on and off 'Hotel'. Where the sign had been, there were just rusted clamps holding some pieces of broken glass tubing. The pink dome was still there, the paint faded and peeling, dirty streaks running down from the metal fittings on top. The palm tree had gone. Apart from the condition of the hotel, everything was exactly as I saw it on my walk from the station. I sat down on my suitcase.

I put the incident down to some bizarre practical joke, though for whose benefit I couldn't guess. Nobody, not even me, knew I was going to stay there last night. I called the office, made some excuse about having had an accident, and promised to call from the hospital later. I hailed a passing taxi, and asked for the station.

'Odd,' I said, 'I could have sworn that hotel was open last night when I passed it.'

'No chance,' said the taxi driver. 'It's been closed nearly forty years.'

'Must have been another like it.'

'Doubt it. There's none like that around here.'

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'Why is it closed?'

'You're not from around here then, asking a question like that. There was a murder. Some film actress and her boyfriend back in the 1950's. Blood all over the place. They never found the bodies though.'

'Did they catch the murderer?'

'Sure. Executed him too, but he never said what he did with the bodies. He murdered the night porter too. Proper massacre it was in there that night. Nobody wanted to stay there again. There was a funny thing though. Someone else booked in that night, but when they traced the address, it was just a building site in London. They still don't know whether the murderer booked himself in with a false address, or whether there was another victim.'

I shuddered, and tried not to look back at the hotel. The taxi turned off the main road and toward the station. In the plateglass window of a car showroom I glimpsed a reflection of the hotel's facade. It might have been a trick of the light, but I swear I saw a scruffy palm tree on the front

lawn, and a neon sign flashing on and off, 'Hotel'.