

The No-Tell Hotel

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I'm on the phone with my father's credit card company when I hear the rat raid in the kitchen. I call it a rat raid because I'm lucky if the teenagers leave me a tea bag. They even eat my Weight Watchers popsicles.

"So," I say to the customer service agent in Delhi, "it doesn't strike anyone as odd that my father orders two computers in a row and then two telescopes?"

"Vee are just here to please the customer," the nice lady informs me in trotting syllables.

"But my father has short-term memory loss."

She speaks to me as though I'm the one with short-term memory loss. "Again, vee are just here to please the customer."

"I get it. You calculate the shipping charges and keep on sending."

I hear laughing and shouting from downstairs. Homer has slopped orange juice onto his toes.

"Clean it up."

"No, you fucking clean it up."

"What?" I say to the woman.

"You could have your father declared legally incompetent," she says emphatically. Evidently customer service in India knows more about the American court system than I do. My sister keeps asking me, "Where will he go when he has spent his retirement?" This morning, my concerns about the homeless are more immediate.

After high school graduation, some kids get cards and money, presents, even cars. They get taken out to dinner; they are the ones for whom the cards are made: "Congratulations! You did it!" Then there are the ones you don't hear about over all the bragging. They get kicked out of their houses; they have nowhere to go; my son invites them over.

There are four of them in my kitchen when I come downstairs in my kimono with the golden Koi fish on it. Mothers in bathrobes are entirely dismissible, but not women wearing kimonos. My son is slinging cereal boxes onto the counter from the cupboard above the fridge. The backs of his friends' heads look like blown-down grass. Apparently, they all slept on my floor.

The dress code among the guys is pure Value Village: other people's tourist T-shirts—the Chicago Skyline or Lake Tahoe—occasionally a Baby Boomer's concert memento (these are considered a score), such as Iron Maiden proclaiming “Wasted,” or Steven Tyler with his mouth over the mike. As an outer layer, they all wear oversized Pendletons that can double as a blanket on bad nights—pure post-grunge. Except for Carl, who is a one-man version of the British Invasion, tall and skinny enough to carry off that charcoal, stick figure, punk of the Sex Pistols. He's like a walking flashback.

By the time I enter, the teenagers are making coffee, the bitter steam emitted by the machine better than their beer burp smell.

“Good morning, Your Motherness,” says Sid. Last time I talked to Sid, he was only applying to jobs where persons with dreadlocks were accepted. Sometimes I feel like Doctor Phil: “And how's that working for you?” Today, Sid admits that the dreds do narrow things down considerably. Beads and corks bob in his hair, which really is a masterpiece, a vertical basket, if only he were majoring in textiles. His father is on disability with Labor & Industry after a forklift accident at UPS, and he lives in a one-bedroom apartment, so Sid sleeps on the couch, and when they argue he splits. As I listen to the teenagers' conversation, I feel like I am overhearing the saga cycle of a nomadic tribe. Sid starts in, “I come home and he's asleep on the traction board. You'd think his head would bust like a tick. Fucking painkiller blues. He gets up and he's all yada-yada this and yada-yada that. List a mile long, like I'm everybody's bitch.”

“Man, you are,” says Carl, digging into his corn puffs with a soup spoon.

“At least your mom lets us hang out at her place,” adds Homer.

“Yeah, then my sick mother kicks us out,” says Sid.

“Hey, don’t say shit about your mom.” This is my kid, Reeve, issuing a warning. “She’s cool.”

Sid’s mother, Tamara, has MS, and the kid has done for her since he was old enough to understand that she wasn’t the kind of sick you get well from. He’s a regular on my couch, but I always call his mother or she calls me, because if he’s with me, I want to be sure it’s on a day when the home health care workers are stopping by.

I admire Sid, because he tries to conceive of the future. He has a plan to enter the technical college and study to be an electrician, though occasionally I question his motives. “It’s the most dangerous of the trades,” he says. “One wrong wire, man, and you’re fried.”

“Hey,” I say, “There’s sausage in the freezer. You want some?”

“Yeah, cook it up, woman.” My son says this, and there’s a general ripple of assent. Reeve likes to talk to me in this he-man-cave-dweller diction; it makes a joke of the fact that I am still his mother cooking for her kid.

“Your mom lost it when you blew a bong hit up the dog’s nose. Why’d you tell her that, man?” Carl hides behind a dark bank of hair, unless he wants you to feel his defiance, in which case he swings the curtain back, revealing eyes barbed and black. Some hurt has lingered there a long time.

“I thought she’d think it was funny,” Sid says. “She’s got a scrip for dope, for fuck’s sake. It’s not like she doesn’t smoke it.”

“For pain,” says Homer, putting in his characteristic two words, always uttered quietly, without swagger.

Carl turns to Homer. “You caused your step-dad some pain all right. Shit, me and Reeve couldn’t pull you off the guy.”

“Jake’s not my step-dad. He’s just some washed-up dude.”

Jake is the boyfriend of Homer’s mother, and Homer’s house is ostensibly where they all went two days ago for a graduation party.

“He had it coming,” says Reeve.

“Yeah he did,” says Homer. “My mother says I broke his thumb. I’ll probably have to go live with my grandpa for awhile.”

Homer’s mom would turn her socks inside out for him, give him her last beer, but Jake is her particular weakness and together

they are raising his six-year-old daughter whose meth-head mom is in jail. Managing an AM/PM Minimart is the best job Homer's mother has ever had. Homer looks like a Homer, sans the overalls; he's tall, oafish, ginger-haired, and sensitive. The kids call him Homey. His mother once offered me advice when my kid and I were going through a particularly rough patch. 'Patch' was quite a literal reference for me back then as my son kept socking holes in the house. "Walk the walk with him," she slurred. "That's what you got to do."

By this, she meant that I should smoke dope and get drunk with my kid. Apparently, it's not enough that he knows my politics—legalize the leaf and tax it so we can get out of war and debt—or my own extensive sampling of all the drugs a post-60s California childhood had to offer. Babysitters came with joints and mothers disappeared on the backs of motorcycles. Homer's grandfather has staked him to a bartending course, and I'm thinking that despite the obvious occupational hazard, he's already got a real knack for handling alcoholics.

"You guys want pancakes?" I ask, now that I've got the requisite amount of coffee in me.

"I'd be down for that," says Sid.

"Yeah, thanks Mom," says Reeve, looking up from the screen he is thumb-punching.

"Thanks, Mrs. Barton," says Carl, who hasn't known me for very long or he wouldn't call me Mrs. "I hope you don't mind, but I stacked some of my stuff by the front door. My father's threatening to sell it."

I look down the hallway and see an Xbox, a laptop, and a hair dryer stacked on a guitar amp.

"That's fine. No worries."

"I'd be happy to take 'em off you," says Homer.

"Shut it," says Carl.

"It doesn't matter what your father says." Carl's waif girlfriend has appeared from downstairs. She looks at me as she speaks, and I hold her gaze. "He wouldn't even be able to figure out how to set up a PayPal account on eBay."

There's a momentary silence. Shelby has dumbfounded us all by speaking. Most of the time, she sucks on her hair and then examines the point she has made. It's quite a calligraphy brush. When she sees that everyone is looking at her, she presses her hand over Carl's. Shelby has a home, just not one that allows her to have a boyfriend in it, so she's usually here when Carl is.

"He gave you one week, man," says Sid.

"Who can find a job in one week? That's fucked up, man." This from my son whose own father spent months helping him look for work, until Reeve landed a busboy job at a restaurant his father frequents.

"What happened?" I ask, putting the sausages on the table. Neutral, that's me. Because for teenagers, even time is an opinion.

"My dad told me not to come back. He told me it wasn't my home anymore," Carl says.

"People say things they don't mean when they're upset."

He gives me a quick look before I withdraw from the table. "Oh, he meant it."

The conversation changes course, and I turn back to the pancakes bubbling in the pan. Despite how looming and loping these teenagers are, I still catch myself referring to them as children. After all, they still get excited by new kinds of cereal, and they dearly love their parents who have kicked them out, or are stretched too thin to help out, or can only offer beer, bong hits, and Top Ramen.

My own boy wears his hair conservative, short-shorn, no more Mohawks or checkerboards. He's the therapist of the group, which means most of the time he doesn't have a girlfriend although he does keep Shelby's supply of birth control in his sock drawer so her mom won't find out.

"It's like a cluster diagram, Mom," he complains. "Everybody's already slept with everybody except me so I'm bound to piss someone off no matter what I do." On bad weeks, he'll carve tic-tac-toe on his forearm, and I'll hide the sleeping pills, but most of the time he's upbeat these days, and I'm lucky I guess that he already dropped out of high school and took the GED, because

he's leading the way by being the first to hold down a job while making his desultory way toward an AA at the local junior college.

After the tribe at the table has been fed, they lean back onto two chair legs and stretch. I can hear the rattan chair backs straining. Two of the guys are text messaging while the others are cooking up the next plan, but occasionally they contribute to the conversation by saying, "Word, dude."

"Are you down for the party?"

"Yeah, I'm down to kick it."

"Clayton Beach, man. Bonfire."

"Did you see how ripped Joann got last time?"

"Chick would drink salt water on a desert island."

"Hey, be chill. Her mom's like mental."

"Yeah, and Homey still loves her."

"Shut up, dude."

"Shit man, she's a mushroom cloud."

"Word, man."

"Peace out."

Sid drums on his belly. "Pancakes. Oh yeah."

I wonder sometimes what kind of values I'm imparting to these kids. I only know that if I keep this no-tell hotel running, the teenagers are less likely to run off the road or get pregnant in vacant lots. I don't ask too many questions: I just keep the freezer full of burritos and pizzas, the medicine cabinet stocked with Band-Aids and condoms, and the coffee machine prepped with filter and grind. I've heard that in Scandinavia where Sex Ed assumes that young people will make love, the teen pregnancy rates are very low. US teenagers have to get smashed first so that they can pretend they didn't know they were going to do it, which of course makes planning for birth control nearly impossible.

I myself grew up in a cul-de-sac of dangerous divorcées with just enough alimony not to care whether they were the talk of the carpool or the scandal of the neighborhood. They smoked in bed and wrote screenplays for TV or music scores for movies. They kept *The Joy of Sex* in their underwear drawer and said scary things

like “You’ll remember your first time forever so you want to make it good.” A tough L.A. bunch, they bossed each other’s kids around regularly. Martyrs to the cause of childhood, they were not. “You live with your children, not for them,” my mother said regularly. And live you did, if you were lucky. We had to be a scrappy bunch. Mrs. Hardeen ran over Mrs. Linde’s son Dieter one frantic morning in the driveway, but since Dieter was only two, the bumper hit him smack in the middle of his forehead and he managed to land square between the tires, so no harm done. Another time, our shepherd picked a fight with Mrs. Hardeen’s boxer beneath her window. Mrs. Hardeen thought to drop down the Oxford English Dictionary, volume by volume, but since she didn’t have her reading glasses on, she landed one on my mother, who’d come over to break up the fight. My mother was immediately invited in for a drink. Again, no harm done.

From this childhood and these mothers, I am supposed to draw my models. They let us run the neighborhood like a pack of jackals. We rode the rich kids’ bicycles into their pools at night and abandoned them at the bottom to rust. Youth is an uprising and our mothers left us to it. Most of all, they trusted us to come out all right—scrappy moms made for scrappy kids. And despite all the consciousness raising, they kept their exes around to fix things. Politeness can be a detriment. You might spend a couple of years wondering: “Am I married or am I just being polite?” But with exes, politeness works.

My former and I don’t fight because we text message on the big issues. When he says “don’t B uptite” or “Ng. not a plan I can stick2,” it looks funny on that teeny-tiny screen, as though there were a little man in there stamping his teeny-tiny foot.

Then I think about my own one-liners going the other direction. It keeps our divorce in perspective.

This morning, once the table tribe has broken up, I bring the phone to Sid on the porch, to be sure he’s called his mother. Usually he responds by punching in the number. “It’s all good,” he’ll say. I’ve known Tamara, his mother, since I moved to the Northwest after

college. Our boys went to pre-school together. We watched them dance around in bug's wings made of netting and paint on each other's tummies with chocolate pudding. We took up with each other in that casual way women of a common sensibility do and stuck together at school events; she a social worker with oncology patients; me, a manager at the university bookstore. We both laughed easily, and it seemed to mean something that we'd chosen this hippie pre-school. She didn't use a cane back then, though the motion of her gait was as much sideways as forwards. This morning, Sid shakes his head when I hand him the phone.

"No, man, I can't handle it."

He sits in a green plastic chair, smoking. Phone in hand, I sit down next to him. I don't want to give the physical impression that a lecture is coming. Too late.

"Tell me you're not going to get on my case," he says.

"I'm not going to get on your case. Just tell me what's going on."

He gets up and paces, fingering the ceramic beads in his hair. I imagine the tenderness of some girl placing them there, or at least I hope it for him. He is looking away from me, at the townhouse next door. Someone has painted sunsets on old saws and hung them on the patio wall.

"She's always on my case about something. There's always something I'm not doing."

"She's afraid you won't be able to take care of yourself."

"Yeah, she tells me she's only here because I'm not eighteen yet. I don't even want to eat her food anymore. I've been going to the food bank."

"Sweetie." Here I can't seem to help myself. "What about your aunts and uncles? Do you hear from them?"

"Yeah, they call and she always tells them she's fine. Shit. I wish she would go to her sister's in Oregon."

"How long have you been away, Sid?"

"Three days. I couch-surfed it at Carl's till he got kicked out. Then we went to Mom-ers. Now, I'm here. I can't go back there. I can't."

Sid's cheeks are flush, and he pushes a few dreds away from his face. He forgets to smoke, and I'm eyeing the long ash that curls from the filter, waiting for it to drop. I recognize the T-shirt he's wearing as one of my son's: Johnny Cash flipping the famous finger at Folsom. Sid's forearms are covered in an angry eczema the color of crushed cranberries. He scratches at them.

"I've got some cortisone cream," I say.

"I don't need cortisone cream," he says. There's a sheen to his eyes, pellucid as it catches in his lashes. He presses the palms of his hands against his eyelids, hard.

I pat his knee. "Sounds like you need a place to chill for awhile. I'll call your mother, Sid, if you don't mind."

"That'd be cool," Sid mumbles from behind his hands, which now cover his whole face.

I clasp his shoulder as I stand up, and I close the screen door behind me quietly. I hear Reeve's voice boom in the stairwell, "Hey dude, you ready to bounce?"

Tamara doesn't answer the phone. I tell myself that she's like anybody else—she could be at the store or in the bathroom. I call her again before I leave to do my shopping in town. No answer. But it's not like I'm in her close circle of friends and know her schedule or anything. It's Sunday, and I want to market for the week. Tomorrow I'll have a flash flood of order forms to process at the university bookstore because the deadline for next semester just passed. I shop at the grocery outlet, the ding and dent store of food. It's the only way I can keep the teenagers in Cheetos and Cheerios. When I finish, I call Tamara again from the parking lot, then swing out the back by the bread racks and flattened boxes.

Her house is tucked in a brambly neighborhood where the Victorians are painted popping colors like lavender and yellow; beside them, the stoops of student-occupied duplexes sag into the weeds. An overgrown willow hides Tamara's front door, which is always unlocked. I knock then enter, calling out her name. Her grizzled dachshund wags at me amicably, used to all the coming and going.

Inside, the house is a style you see a lot in towns like Berkeley, Ann Arbor, or Madison: intellectual shambles—plants stacked atop books stacked upon everything else. From the ceiling, Balinese house gods fly like harpies with gold and black enamel wings, hanging above the scrollwork of threadbare Persian rugs. The corners of the house are filled up with dead televisions and abandoned walkers and leather suitcases, everything an inch deep in dust. I hear Tamara's voice, muffled, as though she too were an inch deep in dust: "I'm in here."

I walk through the living room to the kitchen, the cracked panes of the French doors fractured again by spider webs and the sunlight behind them. The chairs at the table are empty. "Tamara?"

"I'm in the bathroom."

In this house, like so many of the era, there's one bathroom off the kitchen, as though the builders only considered it one better than an outhouse.

"Tamara, should I open the door?"

"Yes, I've been in here for hours."

I open the door slowly. I see her lying on the black and white parquet in a periwinkle housedress, her long dark hair caught beneath her waist. She is lying on her side; one arm pinned beneath her. The door bounces against something: her heel.

"Tamara, can you move your foot?"

"I don't know. This leg quit on me. I went to stand up and it quit on me."

She is facing the tub, away from me, but I can't get the door open enough to reach in and help her. I watch as she hooks her free arm under the one knee and pulls. We gain two inches, enough to swing the door open.

"Jesus, Tamara, you poor thing." I squat and embrace her. Together we pull her away from the tub and commode.

"Yeah," she says, "I haven't exactly had the best view from down here."

"No, I guess not." We laugh together and I see in her face the quick girl prettiness she possessed before the disease inhabited her.

I see black scorches on her legs and on the floor, and it takes a moment before I realize it's dried excrement. The smell seems to rise as our laugh subsides.

"I don't want you to see me like this," she says, propping herself up on her elbows.

"I bet you don't want to see yourself like this either," I say, reaching for the washrag by the sink and running hot water.

"No, I really don't want you to see me like this."

"Tamara," I say, scrubbing at the marks on her legs. "Do you think I'm scared of a little poop? C'mon, we've seen a sea of poop raising our babies. Been barfed on, shat on, you name it."

"One time," she says, her voice quavery with the effort, "I was changing Sid's diaper, and you know, his thing was waving around, and he peed in my eye."

"The little bugger," I say. We keep up this amiable banter while I use all the washcloths I can find and fetch the paper towels from the kitchen, then she tells me where to find clean underwear and another pinafore. But there's still the problem of the leg.

"I used to be able to drag it, but now it won't bear weight."

We both stare at her leg quizzically, as though it were a busted lawn mower.

"I don't know where Sid is," she says.

It seems the opportunity I've got to take. "Tamara, Sid is at my house. He kind of broke down. I was calling and calling you. I think it's just gotten to be too much...for you both."

"What do you think I should do?" she says, and I can tell she knows but she wants to hear someone else say it.

"Well, I think we should get you to the hospital and find out why your leg isn't working, and also call your family to help...so Sid won't feel so overwhelmed."

"He's a good boy," Tamara says, and I follow her eyes to the portrait on top of the piano. "He just needs his space right now—"

"And that's okay," I finish for her. She is leaning against my knees now, after the effort of getting the dress over her head, and I have my arms loosely around her.

“My sister’s number is in the rolodex,” she says, shutting her eyes. “On the hall table next to the sewing box.”

When her sister Jen picks up on her end of the phone, I duck into the kitchen and introduce myself, explain the situation.

“Where’s Sid?” she asks, in a flat tone. “Why isn’t he there?”

“Well, actually, Sid is at my house. He ran away a few days ago.”

“He doesn’t do enough around there.”

I take a breath. “It’s an awfully big burden on his shoulders.”

“Okay,” she says, with the tone of one moving right along. “Why don’t you call me back when the medics get there, tell me what they say.”

I hear the sound of Jen’s sigh push through the vent of her teeth. I can hear how much she wants to forestall the moment that has arrived, and I don’t blame her. At the same time, the tone of my voice surprises me. I am made of elemental substances—bone, blood, shit.

“I doubt they will be able to get her leg to work. You need to come now,” I say. “It’s time.”

Someday soon, I realize, I will use this phrase with my own sister. When I call her about our father, I will say, “It’s time.”

Tamara calls for me to get her glasses and a sweater. She is thinking ahead to the hospital now, and when I return she has dragged herself half out of the bathroom into the hallway. I pick up the uncooperative limb and we finish the job. I understand this effort. I wouldn’t want to be found in a bathroom either. She looks haggard from the strain, so again I prop her back against my knees.

“Will you look at that?” she says, pointing to one blackened toenail. “Poop toe.”

We laugh, but I don’t move to fix it and she doesn’t ask me to.

“I used to be a sailor,” she says. “I sailed to Mexico with Sid’s father. I was so strong.”

“You’re still strong,” I say. “Stronger than most.”

“Sometimes I see my hands pouring all the goddamn pills on the table. I couldn’t actually do it, but I see it, you know. And I begin

taking them with a vengeance. It's not an act of self-destruction. People don't get that. It's open aggression, against ailment. 'Yeah,' I think, 'this will kill it now.'" She laughs, not bitterly, but in bafflement, at herself and her predicament.

"We need to go to Mexico," she says. "You and me. And meet us some nice men." Her eyes go soft-focus and drift. "Mine will have this special shell that's the exact shape of my inner ear and he'll come to me whenever I whisper into it, you know what I'm saying, he'll come to me and be my lover and it'll be...it'll be..."

Here, Tamara just closes her eyes and makes a low sound. For a long moment, I wonder if she has passed out, but she stirs, opening her eyes and holding her hands up in front of us where they quake like aspen leaves in a fall wind.

"You know, I used to play violin with these hands. Now I can only play the sound of a siren." She drops her hands and they land against her hips with a thud.

I hear it then, the far-off wail of the ambulance, wail without interval, that one relentless note. It doesn't reverberate through the air; it cleaves the night into dark falling shapes.

She turns her head against my forearm, and I feel a rivulet of tears run down the thin skin. "My boy," she says. "He shoved me."

"It got too hard for you both," I whisper.

"I know. I should have called my sister sooner. But I wanted to make it to graduation."

"And you did," I say.

"He would never hit me," she murmurs. "He's a good boy. He would never hit me. He's just young is all."

We keen to the sound of boots on the drive, but I don't break her gaze. I would like to promise her something forever, this woman in my arms, but the truth is I am only a way-station boss, from this locus to the next transfer. I try to be sure each charge given to my care makes it safely, but beyond that, the train gets too small in the distance for me to see.

"That's right," I say, "he's just young is all." ∞