

Hotel Chelsea

by George LaCas

What he remembers most about the hotel is not what he remembers best, not what he talks about when he tells people about his time there. He tells people about the whores, but what he really recalls is when someone from a room above dropped a rug on his patio.

Vaguely he recalls check-in: the lobby, the clerk behind glass, a conversation about rates, the red plastic Samsonite suitcase clenched in his fist. Your cheapest room, I guess is what I'm saying, he said. Maybe he'd set down the suitcase by then. Maybe he'd taken a cab there, and had not stumbled up (or down) West 23rd Street carrying his luggage, which he found out later marked him as a non-New Yorker. But that was back when he still had his suitcase, and his black leather jacket shiny with zippers, and his boots.

And of course he remembers the heroin, which he snorted off the table by the patio door, the sliding glass door like you see in any hotel or motel or efficiency. Lines of it, which would have killed him if it had been good, but lucky for him the H was shitty H off the street. It was something, though. It was something that put him out good, put him in a long low dream, and that was why he didn't know someone dropped a rug on his patio from a room above.

Until the knocking at the door, which takes a long time to wake him. Who the fuck can that be? he wonders, or must have wondered, for his thoughts are furry and not easily shaped with words but still he thinks them. Front desk, maybe, or else P.J. and that bitch Doria the art chick he runs around the City with, but first he thinks police! it must be the cops. Sitting up now, snorting back God-knows-what (no, it's heroin, tastes like real H) he knows it's not the cops, the knocking is soft and polite but somehow regular, insistent, and it hasn't gone away.

He doesn't remember if he had to put on his pants first, or if he still had them on, but all of a sudden—framed in the garish yellow light of a hallway normally just regular and dim—stands an Indian woman, humbly smiling at him, and if she thinks he's a piece of shit

or a psycho or a junkie he can see no sign of condemnation or judgment in those glimmering black eyes. Only a question.

Which she speaks with her mouth then, and he must not be that wrecked, must not be that bad off right now because it's clear enough:

"Sorry to disturb you, but I dropped my rug when I was cleaning it, and it's out on your patio," says the woman, who seems very nice though quiet, not at all like an American woman but that could be just how he sees her. Not that he thinks this.

He blinks. "What rug? What patio?" or words to that effect.

"So sorry ... but my rug is on your patio," she says smiling faintly as though she knows something it's no use explaining to him just now, "and can I have it please? So sorry to disturb you."

He hadn't noticed it before, but behind the curtain of this room (he finds, opening it) is a large square window, and that window is a sliding glass door, which he opens after finding the handle and fingering the lock open, and sure enough (he finds, squinting, facing the blinding overcast outside his room) there's a rug out on the patio. He wants to thank the woman for giving him this patio, a gift he's never seen before now, and the only way he can thank her is:

By moving onto the patio, which he must do for long and liquid though he feels he can't reach the rug from where he stands so he goes to it and leans to pick it up, he picks up the rug still heavy with sand and life and smells and strange time-flattened wool and brings it to the woman, where she still smiles ethereal in the yellow-framed doorway.

He remembers the sand on his sticky hands, crossing the room to her, and he also remembers the gratitude in her eyes, but he doesn't recall how quickly she leaves him to stand there, in his dark room again, a room like so many other dark rooms, but outside this one—as seen, now, from his brand-new patio where he stands looking out, and then stands again after lighting a Marlboro to keep him company, to give this city meaning, which he so far hasn't found even in the geometry of West 23rd Street as it stretches away in three dimensions now, not two dimensions as it seems from the

pavement.

He doesn't remember at all how P.J. and Doria stood outside, calling his name frantically and with much worry in their hearts (or so they claimed), because outside was an ambulance and they thought (Doria and P.J.) he'd overdosed, or killed himself, or something like that, they tell him later in some bar in the Village, laughing about it, making jokes about it with a kind of pretend-concern, so how worried could they have been, really. He doesn't remember the ambulance or the two friends calling his name or the night it happened because he is asleep, and not dreaming because that's the whole idea isn't it, you put yourself way down deep with this shit (shit being H), which is not yet a lifestyle, not yet addiction, just the tease-and-please that comes beforehand.

But, he pieces it together later (in the bar in the Village, or by himself at his little table in Room Whatever back in the Hotel Chelsea with city-sounds drifting through the lifting breathing curtain): P.J. in his scuffed leather jacket and Doria in her black pants and black shirt and black everything, the two of them lifting their faces and calling his name.

Which seems highly unlikely, he later decides, more like a fucking lie the two of them cooked up, where actually they might have mentioned over a beer, hey I wonder where X is, and then only because of a lull in their babble they needed to fill.

Still, he sees them calling up to him. He can still see it: two moon-faces upturned, full of fear, calling and calling, each moon-face painted red (then blue) in unison.

He can still see it.

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[to be continued]

