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Our Lady of the Ellington

The grand lobby was three stories tall, bounded by high, dark-paneled walls that disappeared into shadows overhead. Out of the gloom gigantic chandeliers hung down, depending from chains fastened to unseen rafters. Over the years, simulations had replaced many of the chandeliers' elaborate brass components; now they only drew attention to a failed uniformity.

Looking up, the woman wondered what event might require the replacement of chandelier parts—had crystal prisms fallen, one by one, onto the lobby floor? What a marvelous tinkling crash they must have made. Did rusting chains simply give out, over time? Perhaps the original iron eye-bolts, too high up to perceive, slowly pulled from the ancient timbers, one fiber of cellulose snapping every now and then, until the threaded bar came free and another huge tree of brass and glass plummeted the last twenty feet onto the polished marble.

She looked back across the lobby. There were no guests this late. She held her breath and listened closely, straining to hear the faint distant crackle of slowly splintering beams. The chandeliers were silent. In fact, everything overhead, even the rooms, was utterly silent for a few moments.

Once in a while, in such a silence, something far off in the hotel would make a sound—a door closing, a voice, a suitcase dropping to the floor. The sound would reverberate down the long corridors and a few of those echoes would cluster together and make their way circuitously to one of the cavernous grand entrances of the lobby. There, these softened bundles of secondary sound would float back and forth, caressing anyone who was quiet enough to listen. She savored these gentle occasional tones, feeling

the hush of her blood slowly fill the long gaps between each echo, louder and louder until another impossibly faint inarticulate activity drifted past again, blotting out the sound of her own hearing.

With a rattle and clank one of the main entrance doors opened. The great hinges squeaked and groaned, and the din of traffic flowed into the lobby, enveloping a heavy-set man in a raincoat. He hauled himself through the entryway and looked around. Carrying such large bags, he would not have fit the revolving door. He spied the front desk, and made for it with manifest deliberation, leaning forward, hauling his suitcases against an invisible hurricane.

He dropped the bags by the front desk and looked around again. He saw no one; the woman was hidden at her far, dim-lit corner table beneath the fringed lampshade. He moved the bell on the counter closer and pressed the button three times with the flat of his hand. The bell rang and echoed through the lobby and into the back offices. The man watched the office door behind the front desk expectantly. The lobby fell silent again. The woman could hear the man's loud breathing.

After the bell faded, the man scanned the lobby for signs of life. Finding none, he whacked the bell several more times in rapid succession and then stood still, head tilted, listening.

He was just reaching out to ring the bell even more vigorously when the door behind the counter opened and the night-man hurried out, rubbing his eyes, straightening his bow-tie, trying to smile. The night-man squinted to see how many large men were standing impatiently at the counter.

"Ah hum. Good morning, good morning," he muttered, looking around with dull excitement, then fixing on the new guest and bearing down on him in an eager blur.

"About time," the man said. "I been ringing this damn bell for five minutes."

"So sorry," the night-man replied, shuffling registration forms on the marble counter top. "Caught me in the filing room. Very late, not a lot of guests this time of night. Sorry to keep you waiting. Room with a view?" He held out a form.

The man took it and said, "You got a pen?"

The night-man scooped up a ballpoint imprinted in gold and handed it to the guest with a flourish.

Wordlessly the guest filled in the form and slid it across the counter.

“Chicago, eh?” said the night-man.

“Chicago?”

“In from Chicago, I see, ah, Mr. Jensen,” said the night-man. “Have a nice flight, I hope?”

“I came from San Francisco,” said Mr. Jensen.

“Oh, well, that’s a nice flight, too.” The guest was holding out his hand for a room key, and the night-man quickly plucked one from the matrix of empty boxes behind him. He jotted down the room number. “Room 709,” he said, putting the key into the guest’s outstretched hand with a little slap, like an operatory nurse.

Mr. Jensen glanced at the key, picked up his bags, and headed for the elevator, again making good progress against the unseen gale.

The woman watched Jensen moving along the opposite side of the lobby. He heaved his bags beside the elevator doors and pressed the button. She watched the antique pointer slowly rotate around to the lobby level; the doors slid open with a metallic thump. Mr. Jensen shoved his bag into the waiting cell, walked in, and turned to survey the lobby one last time. He leaned to one side and punched his floor, straightened, and looked directly at the woman as the doors closed before his eyes. She saw a brief movement of surprise in his face just before the bronze panels met, inches from his nose.



Jensen was not an unusual late night arrival. She had seen many men drag themselves in from a long journey, checking in with various night-men, leaving their names on forms, slogging to the elevator, and disappearing up into the distant reaches of the hotel. They were all exhausted, curt, bundled, alone, grim, and thoroughly male—deep voices, brusque aggressive manners, determined focus, distracted by serious, professional, difficult matters weighing down their worlds.

She had seen Jensen, in another guise, another man, another Jensen, staring at her across her little round table in the corner of the lobby. He had pushed his ruddy face close to hers, breathing heavily, exhaling hotel spices, urgently demanding, consumed by distracting responsibilities. She forgot the substance of their conversation, but the vibrations lingered in

the spacious lobby; in her thoughts they coalesced into semi-tangible form even now, years later.

“Who do you think you are?” one prior Jensen had demanded, injured, requiring surcease. “I don’t open up to just any woman I meet in a hotel bar.” He shifted in his chair, crossed his legs the other way, then uncrossed them and hunched forward even more, close enough to sip her drink. “You gotta come clean with me, Doris. You can’t just sit there in judgment, like some damned sphinx, for chrissake.” He sat back, looked around the lobby, then turned back to her. “Aw, come on, honey. Have a heart.”

She said nothing; had said nothing. His pleas weren’t relevant anymore, and her mind was wandering.

He slammed his hand down on the table, but the round marble slab absorbed the impact and the only sound was a small high slap. He shook his head and stared at her in wonder. “You aren’t gonna let me off the hook, are you?”

She remained silent; a family of five was getting out of the elevator and heading to the main dining room, chattering and giggling.

“Aw, damn—” he began again.

She couldn’t let him escalate his outburst any further, so she spoke, conciliatory noises without actual meaning, knowing that her tone was sufficient to afford a little relief from whatever was annoying him. She really didn’t know.

“Hush, dear,” she said. “I’m not judging you. I’m not. Truly, I’m not.”

“Well why are you giving me the cold shoulder all of a sudden? Explain me that.” He sat back, already more secure, already turning the tables, instinctively.

“Oh, I’m not,” she said, a little surprised. “Was I ignoring you? Did I seem distracted? I’m so sorry—those kids at the elevator, they were so happy and frantic, it was adorable.”

“Honey, I don’t care about some kids. Please, can’t you see what this is doing to me?” He gripped the edge of the cold stone with both hands, like a steering wheel, scanning her eyes for oncoming traffic.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “It’ll be alright. Everything will be alright.” She paused, and he remained silent. To prolong the peace, she added, “When you come back through LA again you won’t even remember this. You’ll be

fine.” To herself she added, *And you won’t be staying at the Ellington ever again, as long as you live.*

He sat back, unable to articulate the wrenching frustration that knotted his throat and churned his stomach. He stared at her like a total stranger, which she may well have been. He looked down at his hands, let go of the table, turned in his chair, and began to study the hundreds of liquor bottles behind the distant bar, hundreds of glasses hanging by their stems, the brass railings, ornate blackened mahogany cabinetry, guests perched on green leather stools, and the head-level thermocline of cigarette smoke. He heard the sound of ten dozen conversations near and far, blending in a hum of phonemes.

He looked back at her again. “Doris, honey—” he began, then stopped. She was looking right at him, but he could see her eyes moving, tracking some activity far across the lobby, behind him, through him, without him. She was willing, wasn’t she? She would keep talking, keep on encouraging him and saying it would be alright, but already it was obvious she could no longer even see him. He had become transparent to her, a mirage just wavering a little before disappearing completely.

She smiled at him, right at him, eye to eye, grateful that he finally understood, and then looked away.



The empty lobby rang out in its special predawn silence. With a discrete click, the night-man shut his door behind the counter. *Whoever was this Doris*, she wondered, fingering the marble table. It was the same table, unchanged for decades, virtually unmoved by legions of mopping and wiping custodial staff, its flowering iron base cemented to the floor in a thousand layers of ossified wax, ashes, and city grit, an intricate lamination of history that gripped the entire building like tree-rings, absorbing and embedding the spoor of all that passed through, rounding all the corners of the sharp-cut florentine slabs.

She looked up. Tonight’s Jensen had returned and was standing before her, peering at her curiously. “Do I know you?” he said.

“Definitely not,” she replied.

He seemed not to hear, or not to believe what she said. He bent forward and peered harder, then checked himself and straightened up. “I’m sorry,”

he said. "I was staring, wasn't I? You seem so familiar. I can't believe we haven't met."

She smiled. "We haven't. I'm sure of it." She gestured at the table, the chair opposite. "Have a seat. I'll prove it to you."

He looked at her strangely.

"I'm joking," she said. "The bar's closed, but I'm available for conversation if you like."

"I just got in," he said, sitting. "Noticed you when I registered. Thought you looked familiar." He paused. "Damn! You really do look like someone I know. And this isn't a come-on, believe me."

"Sure," she said, and they both laughed.

"Well, it's not, honestly," he said. "But if it works, hell, that's OK, too."

She said nothing, searching his eyes.

"But I don't want to pressure you," he added, becoming uncomfortable again. "What's your name?"

She flinched at the old question. There was no suitable answer, because there was no plausible identity anymore. She was the hotel, she was Ellington, she was a lonely mirage in an urban desert, passing the time in empty chatter with strangers. She was the stranger, too. She looked at this new Jensen, and wondered if she had ever had a name.

"Call me Cathy," she said, so softly that Jensen barely heard her voice.

"Say what?" he said.

"Catherine," she whispered. "Cathy the first. Cathy the last."

"OK," he said. "I got it. Dear sad Miss Catherine."

She looked up into his face. "Who said I was sad?"

"Nobody. Sorry. I thought you sounded a little down."

"I'm fine. Happy inside, even if it doesn't show."

"OK." Jensen took a pull on his cigarette. "You want to go upstairs?"

"No. I don't go upstairs."

"Alright." Jensen was only mildly disappointed. He skidded his chair heavily, closer to the table. "So where do you go?"

"Pretty much nowhere, these days."

The chandeliers swung very slowly among the shadows overhead. The lobby was so different at night; during the day it was almost festive, if you didn't notice the dust and the grey-brown film accumulated on every surface.

“You should get out more,” Jensen said.

“Get out yourself.”

They both chuckled, then sat in silence.

Jensen pulled himself to his feet. “Gotta go,” he said. “Meetings all day tomorrow.”

She looked up and smiled, but said nothing.

“Thanks for the chat,” he said, and then headed for the elevator.

“You’re quite welcome,” she whispered, and then, under her breath, “You always are.”

Later, hours past midnight, she said to the vast empty room, “Gotta go.”

She rose easily from the big chair and gathered a body back into herself. This took some effort, but soon she was all inside, ready for action. Everything worked. It was like old times.



For the first time in years, the woman headed for the main entrance. She paused for a moment at the revolving door, heedless of the lobby that sprawled behind her, and then pushed her way through to the street. The sea air enveloped her and she walked more and more briskly, heading into the gentle hills of Santa Monica, among the sleeping bungalows.

She crossed several residential streets, mostly devoid of lights, and came to Lincoln Boulevard, which was still blazing with cafés and gas stations, pet shops and shoe stores. She turned onto Lincoln, walking fast now, as if determined to get somewhere.

A short distance down Lincoln she found the blackened iron railing that framed the subway entrance. She felt the cold steel handrail as she descended the stairs, but her eyes were focused on something beyond the train tracks she was approaching.

At the turnstile, she fished a token from her small beaded purse and swiveled through to the platform. The station was silent. Even the sound of the nearby surf was lost in this subterranean world. She stood like a statue, feeling the still salty dampness, waiting outside of time.

A faint breath of air moved against her cheek, and then another, and then the distant rumble of an approaching train crept into the station. A subtle rhythm pulsed within the growing roar of the subway, and soon the platform was vibrating with the massive movements of rail cars and

electric motors; the tunnel smelled of machinery and recent lightning. Brakes shrieked and the train shuddered to a stop; the car windows shone sallow and empty.

The doors slid open in unison with a loud pneumatic gasp. She looked down the platform and saw the conductor's head poking out at the front of the train. She stepped into the bright car and sat down by the opposite door. Another loud chorus of hissing doors, a firm jerk forward, and the train began accelerating. Masonry walls sped past on one side, the half-lit platform on the other, with small framed billboards along the tiles. Then the tunnel wall closed in and there was nothing to see but dark shadows of conduits sparsely punctuated by dim caged light bulbs.

The train steadily picked up speed, heading downtown again and again.



It's not all that far, by subway, from the upper Bronx down into the Village, to Astor Place. She gets off the train, and ascends the concrete stairway into a new world. The towers of lower Manhattan rise darkly all around, and there are no pedestrians in sight. Taxis cruise past without passengers; now and then a late night delivery truck.

She goes into a dingy bar with sawdust on the floor and drinks a beer and then strolls back out into the city.

She hears jazz on the empty streets and follows the sound to the Five Spot where Roland Kirk is playing, blind and eloquent. So she enters the tiny club and takes a table, watching the round little man spewing jazz filigree around the room, manzello, stritch, flute, nose-whistle, chords on his tenor sax, impossible combinations of notes in an impossible performance.

She is dismayed to feel an emptiness in the music, a missing voice among the chords and cadences of Kirk and his sidemen and his one-man brass section, but then a tall figure rises from the audience, and strides onto the little bandstand clutching a grey felt bag. He pulls a trumpet from the bag and touches Roland on the shoulder, and whispers into his blind ear, and the chords flow from the blind sax while Lee Morgan puts the trumpet to his own lips and adjusts his embouchure.

He starts to play delicate short intervals, filling in tiny voids in the

brass choir from Roland's multiple horns, and then he climbs the musical staircase into the light, blowing a searing run of notes that lasts for bars, winding around the harmonies of sax and manzello and stritch.

The woman sips her beer and taps her foot to the music; she nods at Mr. Morgan in appreciation. Far away in a distant Santa Monica, high chandeliers tremble above a polished floor.



The sun had not yet crowned the Santa Monica mountains, and the sea breeze was still cool and moist. Some blocks from the hotel, a local shopkeeper en route to open his doors for the new day was hurrying along the sidewalk. He was one of the few Los Angelinos who lived within walking distance of anything.

He rounded the corner of 5th Street and Strand, and stopped. Ahead on the sidewalk someone was sleeping across the pavement, most likely one of the homeless drawn to SoCal's balmy weather. As he drew closer, he could see it was a woman, an old woman. No, an extraordinarily old woman, wrinkled and almost skeletal in her frailty, her face a translucent maze of blue-veined tissue-paper. But she was obviously not homeless. She lay in a penumbra of immaculate embroidered silk and fine crinoline, looking up as if star-gazing. Her eyes were open, but they did not move. There was a broad smile on her face.

