

Table Talk

IT WAS my first job out of college. I wanted to be a writer and had romantic notions of leading a quiet life in some semi-rural setting, learning my craft while holding down one of those nonexistent positions that are themselves the stuff of novels. Firewatcher on a spiritual mountaintop. DJ at a radio station broadcasting from an enchanted forest. Desk clerk at a crumbling old hotel. Shockingly, I scored the third of these, becoming night auditor at the Gideon Putnam Hotel in Saratoga Springs, New York. Located in a state park, the rambling, Depression-era establishment had a unique lease which required it to stay open year-round, though its only business was in July and August. The rest of the time it was eerily reminiscent of the Overlook Hotel in Stanley Kubrick's movie *The Shining*, with endless hallways rumored to be populated by long-dead guests, ghostly sounds straight out of an underwater whale recording, and a staff that, at times, seemed less the product of any hospitality management school than the nearby Mount McGregor Correctional Facility.

My hours were midnight to eight A.M. The first night on the job, I was introduced to Tom, the ancient watchman, who had spent all his working life at the hotel. He applied, he told me, the day the place opened, "hoping for your job." He nodded to my exalted station behind the sweeping marble counter. "The manager told me I had to wait until something opened up. He said, 'These things take time.'" Tom recalled dolefully, and shuffled back to the chair in which he spent most of the night. It had a large stain where his head rested.

My tasks were to post room charges and balance the bar and dining room accounts, all while greeting late arrivals and insomniac drunks who haunted the lobby for the first few hours of the shift. After that, it was just the two of us. Tom sat, pinned against the threadbare upholstery as if traveling at warp speed, and talked. It was never clear if he was addressing me or one of the several dozen other clerks he had shared his nights with over the decades. A small-town autodidact, a pillager of the local library, he rambled on about current events, European history, and his own past, as well as making (surprisingly accurate) speculations concerning the future, all delivered in a non-stop, uninflected monotone that gave the impression you were listening in on the workings of his brain. It was not a conversation. If I tried to respond, which I did the first few weeks, my words bounced off as if he were in a hypnotic state. Yet when he sensed my attention wandering, he would suddenly prod me, ending a randomly selected thought with "Well? Well?" forcing me to grunt in response.

"You know what Napoleon did to those protestors?" he laughed, unprompted, into the shadowy lobby. "He blew streets through them! That's

what he did! Blew streets right through them!"

Napoleon being Napoleon the Third, I worked out later. Blew streets through them referring to Baron Haussmann's rebuilding of Paris, the wide avenues having a political purpose: future communards would not be able to build barricades across them. Is that what he meant? Or was I imposing my own equally idiosyncratic take on his inscrutable pronouncements?

He smelled. Guests sometimes complained. His "security system," the worn leather-encased clock he carried with him like a purse, the keys he always fumbled with, was antique.

"Has this man ever actually prevented a crime?" one of the new bosses asked.

For years afterwards, I tried working the experience of those eighteen months into some kind of narrative. I had spoken to Muhammad Ali, Fred Astaire, and the rhythm section of REO Speedwagon. I had physically shielded our life-size ice carving of Santa and his reindeer from a homicidal ex-employee behind the wheel of a Jeep Cherokee. I had discovered several pounds of white powder in a famous horse trainer's safe deposit box. But those incidents did not coalesce into anything resembling a story.

Then, five years ago, I started a novel that was just a man talking. The subject, the time, the people, had nothing to do with me. And the voice certainly didn't. It was a comma-less stream of memory, insight, and teasing insinuation. I didn't even realize for several weeks that it was Tom, applying himself to subjects he had never addressed in our sessions together, but still with his unmistakable attitude and melded-together, poetic way of thinking out loud, of addressing the dark. That job is finally paying off, I thought, hanging on for dear life while the voice took me further and further into the night, thirty years after the fact. As the manager had warned Tom on his very first day, these things take time.

—Thomas Rayfiel

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