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Essayist and poet who writes about anything that grabs his attention.

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The Monroe: Life at a Residence Hotel

Tales from a San Francisco institution that captured the former spirit of the city



Standing four stories high with Victorian bay windows overlooking the street, 1870 Sacramento Street looks like any other apartment building at the eastern border of Pacific Heights, along Van Ness and Franklin. But the building is not an ordinary apartment complex; it's home to something very different: a unique and odd residence hotel.

In 1993, I finished graduate school and decided to take a break. The classified ad in the *San Francisco Chronicle* promised that part-time work at a local hotel would give me free room and board (and get me out of my parents' house). It seemed like a promising idea.

Growing up in the city, I knew about SROs (single-room occupancy hotels), or “residential hotels,” as they’re sometimes called. An important (and disappearing) type of housing in the city, SROs tend to serve low-income residents and are concentrated in neighborhoods like the Tenderloin (and previously SOMA). The Monroe Residence Club was a different animal. It catered to foreign students who came to learn English at one of the city’s private English-language schools. Most of these guests stayed for a few months. There was also a small set of older, long-term residents. They were few in number but were held in high regard by the staff due to their age, longevity at the hotel and self-restraint.

The staff was a wholly different lot. Like the guests, many were in their 20s, joined by a few older souls. An ever-changing cast, the staff was diverse, but a common thread was that many were in states of transition. Some (like myself) were recently out of school. But the majority were already working—or surviving—at the lower end of the economic spectrum. The Monroe’s arrangement (free room and board) also attracted people living on the margins. Some struggled with alcohol and drug addiction, or had issues maintaining regular employment.

The resulting atmosphere was one part college dorm, one part youth hostel and one part halfway house. It’s no surprise that anything could happen.

My interview took place on a sleepy summer afternoon. Most of the students (I later learned) were at school in the afternoons, and the place was empty. The assistant manager, a blonde giant named Sven, interviewed and toured me around the property. Sven was huge and lumbering—I heard later that he had played football in college—but he had a preternaturally quiet voice. My memories of the tour included his huge hands opening doors to different rooms and his voice being almost at a whisper.

The first room he showed me was tucked away in the back of the lobby—next to the billiard room. Sven banged on the door and shouted, “Mikey!” A croak from inside told us to come in. Sven unlocked the door, and I was met with stifling heat. The lights were out, and a lump of a person lay half awake on one of two beds. I thought Sven was

showing me the room as an example of the staff rooms and was privately glad that I was not to be assigned to it.

I was next taken to the rooms below, where most of the employees lived. These living quarters were tight and bare-bones, and gave the impression of the servants' quarters in *Downton Abbey*. I was offered the job on the spot as a front-desk clerk. Sven gave me the room key and said I could move in anytime—to the room I'd share with Mikey.

Mikey

Mikey introduced himself. He started the conversation by disparaging his previous roommate. I made my bed and cleaned the shelf above it. It had a recent issue of the English porn magazine *Mayfair* and fliers for a local dance club. There was a portrait of my predecessor—a tall, lanky guy with a tiki necklace and his arms around two women.

After moving in, I got into a routine. I worked part-time at a book publisher in the Financial District. In the afternoons, I worked at the Monroe's front desk. Mikey's job was to prepare the weekday lunch. This was the one daily meal exclusively for staff (since most of the students were in class). I usually missed the lunches because of working downtown.

Mikey's schedule was irregular. I would often find him sleeping in the afternoons, after which he would emerge to go out for the night. I soon realized that Mikey would sometimes work on Polk Street, part of a wave of young hustlers around the bars of lower Polk Gulch. Not surprisingly, this sex work funded a drug habit.

Mikey and I were roommates for six months, and due to our different schedules, we were never close friends. At one point, another employee who wasn't getting along with his roommate asked me to switch rooms. He was a night owl and was close to Mikey. I moved downstairs.

Toward the end of his tenure, Mikey seemed to be drifting away from the Monroe. He would disappear for a couple of days at a time. The last time that many of us saw him was in the dining room at an employee lunch. He'd been AWOL for several days. Everyone had started to wonder where he was—and if he was OK. When he did return, he crashed in his room for three days. It was the talk of the hotel. Finally,

he emerged to work his lunch shift. He looked pale and sickly as he shuffled around the dining room.

The chef had turned on a boom box to a classic-rock station. While we ate and chatted, Simon & Garfunkel's "Bridge Over Troubled Water" played through the speakers. Mikey was loud and obviously high, puttering around with the dishes. All of a sudden, he jumped up and stood in the center of the dining room. He started to lip-synch with the song. He then grinned and showed us several pills in his hand, all different colors and shapes. He popped them in his mouth before anyone could stop him, and he swallowed the whole lot. The climax of the song approached. Mikey shouted over the music: "Are you ready? Here it comes!" He waved his hand in the air as he mouthed the final words: "Oh, if you need a friend ... I'm sailing right behind ... Like a bridge over troubled water ... I will ease your mind!"

The next day, he was gone.

Glenn

Prior to the Monroe, my experience with people who could be described as "con artists" was limited. Growing up in the city in the '80s, I encountered hustlers riding Muni who tried to lure passengers into playing "three-card monte." But I had never met a con artist in the classic mold: one who fakes his identity, befriends unknowing victims and makes off with their savings, leaving bewilderment and devastation in his wake. If I had thought about it at all, I probably would have believed that I would never be fooled by one.

At the Monroe, I learned that the secret of the best con artists is that they are really good listeners. Their trade depends on it. They must learn the motivations of potential targets. In this way, I've thought that a con artist functions as a mirror, reflecting back a representation of who you are. They zero in on something that's very important to you, even if you aren't aware of it. Using this, they gain an emotional foothold—a handle—on you. The rest is simply execution.

When he arrived, Glenn—in retrospect, a strange name for an ostensibly Italian American from Philadelphia—introduced himself to everyone as a photography student at the Academy of Art University. He said he was a Vietnam vet and appeared to be in his late '50s or early '60s. Along with studying at the art school, he worked at the Monroe.

He said he was a musician (he did play piano) and had worked in various and sundry jobs throughout his life.

Glenn was a larger-than-life personality who could fill a room with conversation. We were soon regaled with tales from a varied and exciting life. My friend Joseph, also an Academy of Art student and Vietnam vet, reminisced with Glenn about the war. They bonded over the incompetence of officers and the capriciousness of combat. However, while Joseph was clearly weighted by his experiences, Glenn in retrospect seemed untroubled. The fact that he fooled a Vietnam veteran was a testament to his highly developed skill of dissembling.

A coworker who was a musician in the local punk scene told me that Glenn was a keyboardist and that in his younger days he had toured with Bob Dylan's band. She asked Glenn if he had recorded on any of the albums. He responded no, but mentioned that he was listed in a book about one of Dylan's tours. A minor role in a "touring band" seemed believable and (in the pre-internet days) would take some legwork to disprove. Indeed, Glenn possessed the skill of lying in moderation.

Although friendly with everyone, he was closest to two sisters who were both working at the Monroe and saving money before starting their enlistments in the Army. I was on my way to work on the morning when Glenn departed. I recall him talking volubly in the lobby. Darren the cook later remarked that Glenn looked very nervous, not letting anyone handle his suitcases or help him to the taxi. The amount of money he had "borrowed" from the two girls was significant; I heard it was four or five thousand dollars each. But their enduring loss was likely greater: a newfound lack of trust. "He must have realized that he was going to hurt a lot of people," Darren said after dinner that evening.

The Inventor

My new roommate had the most difficult job on the staff: after-dinner kitchen duty. Like the drummer for Spinal Tap, it was a role that had left lots of bodies in its wake. The longtime hotel manager liked to test the person who had this job, leaving an orange in a hidden spot or checking for dust in a corner. The manager could always count on a mistake. After a while, he gave up and stopped testing Neal.

The first things that I'd heard about Neal were that he was very strange and that he claimed to have invented something that Microsoft wanted. A fellow staff member mentioned, while smirking, that Neal maintained that he once had to hire bodyguards to protect him from the long arm of Bill Gates, who wanted his invention. Not many people had the privilege of glimpsing it. But because I was his roommate, I eventually did see the contraption. Resembling a hand-held vacuum, it was a cooling system to be used during microchip production. When he turned it on, it did in fact making a humming noise and blow air. He would occasionally fiddle with it.

At this point, he seemed disinterested in his device. He had lately come under the influence of a cranky elderly resident named Walt who refused to accept US mail and scolded any front-desk clerk who unknowingly tried to give him mail addressed to him. This was apparently motivated by a refusal to acknowledge the authority of the federal government (and reputedly pay taxes he owed).

The One-Eyed King

Though Mikey, Glenn and Neal stood out, there were others like them during my time at the Monroe. In a sense, this was the result of the longtime manager, Larry. Indeed, no account of life at the Monroe during this period would be complete without mention of him. On Yelp, there's a single photo with him in the background with a caption that reads "infamous ex-manager." Online reviews relate stories about his outbursts.

On the surface, Larry was a classic eccentric. He kept several parakeets that accompanied him (on his shoulder) as he worked and chirped incessantly and defecated on his shirts. He used a room in the basement next to the boiler room to keep his model train set. A few staff members were occasionally invited to hang out there.

His treatment of the staff was deplorable at times. Indeed, a constant feature of life at the Monroe was verbal outbursts from Larry and a steady state of firings. But this behavior had a flip side: Larry hired people whom others wouldn't. He took a chance on people who would have been unhireable elsewhere and also granted second chances. Though not as noticeable as his temper, he did have a generous side.

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Although the Monroe was socially a world unto its own, there were a couple of other hotels under the same ownership. One served an elderly and retired customer base. Occasionally, a Monroe employee left to work at a sister property. Together, these places offered an affordable option for living in the city for groups that might not otherwise have been able to afford it, including low-wage workers, students and artists. In this way, these establishments did function similarly to SROs.

Despite the sometime craziness and the ongoing partying, residents had positive and even life-changing experiences at the Monroe. The hotel was a meeting place for people from all over the world—when many were young and open to new experiences. The staff worked and lived with people from different economic and cultural backgrounds. Throwing together close to two hundred people from all walks of life and parts of the world did create something unique, crazy, illuminating and fun. It was a social experiment that repeated itself in varied forms every few months.

Of course, some people left without a trace, often those who were already at the margins. Did they return to their home communities across the country? Did any end up living on the streets? I sometimes wonder where they have scattered in the passing years.

Author's note: The events in this essay are portrayed to the best of my memory. I've changed the names and identifying details to protect the privacy of the people described in this essay.

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