



SHORT STORIES



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THE DINING ROOM

Tonight, the atmosphere was just right - sparkling chandeliers, candlelit tables, and a dance floor with festive white lights.

Lisette looked up, flashing those notorious blue eyes at John Henry. Then it came, her laugh – deep-bellied, full-throated, piercing the room with its glee. The others at the adjoining tables paused their conversation. There was a unison tilting of heads, then smiles of acknowledgment. Ah, just Lisette, flirting with John Henry again. They turned back to their dinners, buoyed by the merriment of Lisette's table.

John Henry was telling another joke or perhaps one of his stories about his brief stint at the Goldwyn Mayer studios. He claimed to have known Mr. Goldwyn personally and made sure everyone knew it. Tall, tan, with jet black hair falling rakishly over his eye, when he stood up to lead Lisette to the dance floor one could easily imagine him a leading man. Almost as suave as Gable or that new guy, Cary Grant.

More laughter erupted now at the big table with JoJo, Ernie, and Maggie. On cue, Ernie stood up and bowed, then he zipped across the room and fussed with the contraption connected to the big speakers. He was the only one who understood the darn thing and he changed the music to a big band beat.

“Hey, it's Saturday night,” he shouted, as he always did on Saturdays. “Dance night!”

JoJo and Maggie vied to reach him first to dance. JoJo won and swooped him away into a light-footed swirl. Maggie grabbed quiet Jim who was close by and they joined the other two couples on the dance floor. Usually stubborn Marty gave in to Meredith and soon the beautiful couples were twirling and passing suggestive looks as they swung and swung with abandon.

THE DINING ROOM

Meredith, fresh-faced, red-lipped, blonde and beautiful, gave exotic Lisette a run for her money. Lisette, slim and dark, with her smoky blue eyes and slight French accent, usually garnered the most admiration from the men, but tonight Meredith was on fire. Slinky in her tight turquoise sheath, Meredith radiated charm. Even John Henry had turned his eyes toward her, a gesture not missed by Lisette, who pulled him closer in their mad dance.

Saturday night. It always brought out the passion, the tempestuous looks, and the taste of freedom, of dancing one's own dance, of feeling alive, desirable, worthy of jealousy. A heady mix.

Once back at their tables, Meredith, JoJo and Lisette held their iced tea high and clinked glasses to all, seeing only champagne bubbles. Occasionally, one saw a red, ripe strawberry floating in a crystal champagne flute as if suspended in the same world they had slipped into at four-thirty.

Beautiful, handsome, fully alive and desirable. It was dinner time again.

Soon the lights blinked, and Ernie slid over to the speakers, turning off the Bluetooth and picking up his phone, stopping the playlist. JoJo's smart phone beeped - her daughter texting again, checking in. She meant well but didn't understand at all.

Six-thirty. Dinner over. Lisette left the dining room first, pushing the button to open the door and grabbing her walker as she headed down the hall. She had to wait a moment while her milky eyes adjusted to the light. Her glaucoma was so bad now sometimes she could hardly see, even with her thick glasses.

John Henry followed, picking up his cane and stooping to gain his balance. His thin gray hair barely covered his high forehead, shiny with sweat from the effort to walk. Within minutes they all filed out of the dining room, heading back to their single rooms, with only their walkers and hearing aids and paper-thin skin to keep them company.

"See you tomorrow!" Ernie waved, knowing they would all be young again tomorrow evening when they entered The Dining Room.

GEORGE GIVES IN

George just turned seventy. Times were changing. Once, he had loved his daily life. He had watched TV in the evenings; CBS, ABC, NBC, Dick Van Dyke, The Beverly Hillbillies, Carol Burnett, oh, how he loved Carol Burnett, then Cheers and Magnum P.I. He rehashed them the next day with his co-workers, laughing at the water cooler. He waited for the daily newspaper and the evening news, Walter Cronkite was his favorite, always objective, with his authoritative voice making you feel all was under control. His friends all heard the same news and they discussed it, often vehemently disagreeing, but ending up having a beer together.

Over the past few years he stopped leisurely reading newspapers with his morning coffee and began 'consuming media'. The information came constantly, by the hour, the minute, the nanosecond. It was unceasing; the breaking news, the fake news, the commentary, the sheer volume of it like a barrage, rat-a-tat-tat, machine gun pellets of ever increasing urgency, endless, dire, would he get through another day, could he cope with the sheer weight of it all?

He resisted at first, then soaked up this daily deluge - this information unencumbered by verification or confirmation, the truth irrelevant - like a sponge. The excruciating cinema verité of close-up, live coverage of every event, recorded by armies of smartphones, jumpy images screaming their authenticity, no polishing, no editing, no vetting, everything regurgitated, pure and raw as it happens, a full-frontal onslaught.

Was it right, was it wrong - did it matter? He said, she said. Liar, liar, liar!

Far from bothered, he now loved the fire!

GONE

Harry drove up Alaskan Way. He smiled at the beautiful day - bright blue sky, sixty-five degrees, the Olympic mountains in full regalia, snow-peaked and jagged. Ahead, majestic Mount Rainier rose up south of the Puget Sound. He knew these halcyon days were quite common, Seattle not deserving of the bad rap it got as a dreary, rainy city.

Well, let them think that, better than having even more people move here. It was bad enough, with Amazon and Microsoft and the other tech companies bringing in rich millennials by the thousands, pushing up house prices and pushing out regular folks.

But it's not all glorious. Seattle had its dirty secrets, like the omnipresent homeless problem. The encampments were sprouting everywhere it seemed. As Harry rode home to the Eastside every evening, he passed hundreds of filthy tents, smothered in trash and tucked into any highway underpass or off-ramp, some so close to I-90 or I-5 they were like a surreal border hedge.

Toward the end of Alaskan Way, he always saw the same homeless man, whom he dubbed "couch potato" because he was always seated on a discarded sofa, watching the cars pass by in a semi-stupor. Harry was surprised that he was not there today, but sure enough, the sofa was empty, with only a few empty beer cans holding the man's place.

Odd. Harry continued to I-90 and the floating bridge over Lake Washington. Crossing over I-5 he saw the usual array of tents, close together in clusters all along the highway's edges. Usually he saw a few of the homeless sitting out on decrepit old lawn chairs. But the encampments were now quiet, with no one in sight. Even the tent sites

at the Rainier Blvd exit were empty. Very odd. Maybe the mayor had ordered another rounding-up of these groups. Occasionally, futile, but sincere efforts were made to clean up the camps and move the residents into shelters. But usually the sweeps were in the news.

Harry tuned the radio to the local news and traffic station. After the traffic report, an interviewer came on talking to Mayor Bryce. Reports were coming in from Downtown, North Seattle, West Seattle and other homeless hot spots. It looked like the residents of the camps were gone. Did the mayor greenlight a raid? No, this was the first she was hearing about it. The mayor had no idea what happened to the people in the tent encampments. She said they were also receiving reports from some of the local shelters that people were missing. No one was in line at the city soup kitchen.

The homeless had just vanished.

When Harry arrived home, his wife, Shana, already had the TV on. CNN was covering the story. San Francisco reported that their homeless had also disappeared, the same for New York, LA and Chicago. Similar reports were streaming in from all over the country.

“Well,” said Shana, as Harry walked over to the kitchen island to kiss his wife, “This is what everyone wanted.”

“Hey, Dad,” Vin, sitting in his favorite chair in the family room, looked up from the TV. “Did you see that? The homeless problem is over.” He smiled and turned back to the TV.

Vin. Harry and Shana’s son Vin was back from college for the summer. Serious and deep, Vin worried about things. About problems. Problems in the neighborhood, in the city, in the state, in the country, in the world. Harry and Shana in turn worried about him, knowing he turned inward to himself to find ways to help. He always wanted to help his parents, too, to please them. Sometimes, things happened.

Shana stole a panicked glance at Harry. “You told Vin,” she whispered, “didn’t you, just last night, how you hoped the homeless problem would go away.” Harry stopped short, shook it off, and entered the family room.

“I don’t know what’s going on,” Harry said. “Maybe some billionaire swooped in and picked them all up last night, to try to rehabilitate them.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Shana countered, “And even if they did, it’s really the mess they make that’s the worst part, all their stuff is still there. Plus, there will be new people to take their place within days. Oh, no. Someone will definitely be coming back to the tents.”

Vin stared at his mom, then closed his eyes and shook his head. “Then I wish the whole problem would go away,” he said, “the people and the mess.”

“Be careful what you wish for, Vin.” Shana stole a fearful glance at Vin and went back into the kitchen.

The next day, as Harry drove to work, he did a double take on I-90 - the camps were gone. All the tents had disappeared, all the trash was gone. In their place was a variety of bushes and wildflowers. No trace of the camps at all.

The same thing had happened all over the U.S. The news was on nonstop about the complete disappearance of the homeless. That night, Vin, Shana, and Harry ate their dinner silently, not daring to look at each other. Finally, Vin let out a big sigh and said, “Well, solved that problem.”

The news channel could be heard in the background - another troubling situation was arising. In Seattle, a waitress had been let go that afternoon and her brother had worried about her. He feared she and her daughter could become homeless without her tip money coming in to pay the rent, so he drove over to her apartment to talk to her. But she was gone. Her daughter was gone. The apartment was completely empty. It was as if she never existed.

The same situation was occurring in other cities. The potential homeless were disappearing before they could become homeless. Overhearing this new development, Harry and Shana simultaneously looked up from their dinner at Vin.

Suddenly the troublesome next-door neighbor’s dog began to bark ferociously. They could see it through the kitchen window. It was straining at its chain towards their tabby cat, who sat tauntingly out of reach.

“I wish that dog would stop bothering our cat,” Vin said under his breath.

Abruptly the dog leaped at the cat and then vanished, leaving just a heap of chain on the grass.

Harry and Shana stared at Vin in horror.

GONE

“What?” You said to be careful what I wished for. So I was.”

Vin shrugged and turned back to his meal.

THE PRIVATE TOUR

A Night at the Empress Hotel

The stately old Empress Hotel in Victoria, British Columbia, had certainly seen her share of changes, Ellie mused as she left the gift shop. She was still thinking about the replica teacups she had almost bought - the ones designed especially for King George VI and Queen Elizabeth upon their royal visit to Victoria in 1939. Photographs of other royal visitors and straight-backed foreign dignitaries in stiff collars and stern smiles, were prominently displayed along the walls of the recently remodeled public areas.

But, despite the renovations and remodeling, the heart of the Grand Dame was left intact. Burnished wood accents and elegant sconces adorned the hallways. Across from the gift shop Ellie saw a closed wooden door with dark square-paned windows. She walked over and peered in, trying to discern what the room looked like through the gloom of the unlit interior. Next to the door was a brass plaque with the word "Library" etched on it.

"Would you like to go inside?" a man's voice inquired from behind her. She looked up to find a tall, handsome man in his late thirties staring down. He wore a dark suit and had a brass Empress nameplate on his jacket. He pulled out a set of old-fashioned keys from his pocket. Ellie was surprised but pleased that he was willing to let her into a closed-off room.

"I'd love to see it - is it the library?"

The man unlocked the door and ushered her in, hitting a light switch that turned on dim sconces.

“It was a library at one time,” he explained, closing the door behind them. “But now it’s reserved for private events. This room was originally designed as the Ladies Lounge. When the hotel first opened, the ladies would come and socialize in here while the men retired to the Men’s Lounge.”

The space was not very large, with dark paneling and built-in bookcases along the walls. The far side contained several large windows that looked out onto Victoria Harbor. It was dusk and the lights of the harbor were glowing golden against the deepening blue sky. The room struck Ellie as comfortable and elegant, despite the eight-person plywood round tables sitting starkly unclothed in its center.

“Would you like to see the original Men’s Lounge? It’s on the other side of the hall,” the man offered.

“Yes!” Ellie replied quickly, she was enjoying this private tour. “But I’d like to ask my sister-in-law to see this room, too, if it’s okay – she’s right over there, looking at the photographs.”

Ellie was visiting Victoria with her husband, Steve, and his sister, Shannon. Her husband had gone back to their hotel to catch the end of a baseball game, but Shannon and Ellie decided to stay to see the Empress in the evening.

“Of course,” he nodded. Ellie caught Shannon’s eye and beckoned her over. Single and outgoing, Shannon immediately asked the man’s name, even though it was on his badge.

“I’m Cal,” he offered.

Not satisfied, Shannon pried, “What do you do here?”

He smiled as he replied, “I’m the Night Security Manager.”

Shannon nodded, accepting his answer and moving deeper into the library. Cal gave an abbreviated version of the Ladies Lounge story, stepping aside as Shannon walked the perimeter and touched the books that lined the shelves.

“Are any of these books original?” she asked.

“No, the thirty-five first editions have been moved for safekeeping.” Cal turned off the lights and carefully relocked the door.

He led them down a long corridor to the other side of the wing, stopping in front of a large wooden double-door entry. Above the closed doors was the name, “The Bengal Room”, in brass letters in an exotic Indian-style font.

“Here we are – as promised, the original Men’s Lounge,” Cal said as he unlocked the double doors and swung them open with a flourish and flipped on the lights. “The décor was inspired by a 1930’s visit by Rudyard Kipling.”

Inside, the room looked like a vintage British Men’s Club in colonial India. The Asian-style ceiling fans, with their long horizontal brass axles connecting large, leaf-like paper blades that rotated slowly, were cleverly designed to cool the early occupants. One could imagine the lugubrious feel of the air as it once wafted across the room. A huge stone fireplace sat against one wall. Ellie and Shannon were impressed.

“Shortly after the idea of a men-only lounge was determined to be too restrictive, this became a curry restaurant and bar for many years. It was famous, many of Victoria’s citizens celebrated their milestone events here – birthdays, anniversaries, and such. But it was shut down during the recent renovation. Caused a bit of a local uproar for a while.

“There was a famous Bengal Tiger skin over the fireplace for decades,” he motioned to the empty space above the fireplace, “It was storied to have been a gift from a Shah, but it went missing in 2013. No one knows who took it and it has never turned up.”

The sadness of the room overwhelmed Ellie for a moment. All she could feel was the emptiness, the absence - the absence of the fabled tiger skin, the empty armchairs and tables, devoid of celebratory or conspiratorial conversation, the magnificent mahogany bar, purposeless without the glittering backdrop of whiskey bottles and martini glasses.

Lifeless.

“Shall we move on?” Cal broke into her reverie.

Ellie, subdued, trailed behind with Shannon as he closed the door on that now widowed piece of history.

“Many parts of the hotel had been closed and forgotten until the recent renovation, when workmen uncovered some hidden gems.”

Cal led them down another corridor to a much larger locked room. It looked like a banquet room, or even a lobby, bathed in an eerie darkness. When Cal flipped on the wall lights, the room filled with a soft glow. Up above, a large stained-glass domed window emitted a rosy hue.

“This is now called the Rose Room,” Cal explained. “This room has been operational for years, but no one knew this beautiful rose window existed. It was a big surprise when the standard drop ceiling was removed and it was revealed.”

The dome window put off an aura, as if, freed from the suffocation of being sealed up for decades, it could finally breathe and expel its light upon the vacant room.

“Exquisite,” murmured Ellie.

“Do they know what this room was originally used for, with such a magnificent ceiling?” Shannon asked.

“Well, recently, while the ceiling was boarded over, it had been used as a banquet room. But at one time it was the main tearoom.” Cal's eyes misted over for a second. “It was beautiful - the patrons would arrive in their finery; elegant society men and women enjoyed the afternoon tea service - it was the place to be seen. In the mid-afternoon the dome window would cast everyone in a rosy glow - it was like seeing the world through rose-colored glasses.”

“Or so I imagine.” He turned abruptly, turned off the lights, then led them out.

“Now I'll show you one of the best views in Victoria. It's an open terrace that's a bit hard to find, but worth the effort.”

As Cal strode through yet another long corridor, Shannon asked, “You seem to know a lot about the hotel, do you give tours as part of your job?”

“No, I don't usually, but once in a while I like to show a few visitors the secret side of the Empress.”

“Do you have a business card?” Shannon persisted.

“No, I'm afraid I don't have one on me.”

Cal pulled out his set of keys and used one to unlock a service elevator. “We'll take this lift up – it's the fastest way to the rooftop.”

The elevator barely held the three of them. Ellie and Shannon had to push up against the wall to avoid pressing into Cal. They stopped on the seventh floor and walked into a narrower hallway than most. There were no doors on either side, but it was finished with the same pale green paint and white crown molding as the lower corridors. At its end was a very large window, raised slightly from the floor. There was a small carpeted step just below the glass.

“Here’s the secret,” Cal smiled as he swung the large window outward and passed through it to the outside. Ellie and Shannon followed, ducking their heads as they stepped out onto a beautiful outdoor terrace.

The large rooftop area looked out onto Victoria’s Inner Harbor; the lights along the waterfront twinkled in the late dusk. The terrace itself was softly lit by lanterns hidden among large planters. Cushioned benches and lounge chairs were scattered about the deck.

Ellie gasped at how romantic this tucked-away treasure was. She wished her husband had been there to see it. The large orange moon was just rising and was reflected in the waves of the harbor like molten gold. A soft breeze rustled the leaves of the large fern plants.

Shannon batted her eyelashes at the scene. Cal beamed at their reaction – the Empress still had her effect.

Once they all caught their breath, they slowly left the enchanted space, climbing back through the window like Alice climbing out of Wonderland.

“One last stop,” Cal motioned them back towards the elevator.

On the way, they stopped to observe a few more of the framed photos on the wall. These showcased Hollywood luminaries who had visited the hotel. They recognized Shirley Temple, Bob Hope, Jack Benny, Katharine Hepburn, Rita Hayworth, Barbara Streisand, and Harrison Ford.

“Have you heard about the ghosts of the Empress?” Cal asked. “Every old property in Victoria has its ghost stories.”

“Do tell!” Shannon blurted. “I love ghost stories.”

“Well,” started Cal, “There’s the famous ghost of the sixth floor. Guests sometimes see a maid cleaning their room, but then she just vanishes.

“And then there’s the old lady in pajamas who knocks on guests’ doors asking them to help her find her room. When they try to help her, she is seen going down toward the lift and just disappears into the wall there. A woman died on that floor, many years ago. But her room was removed to make way for the construction of the lift when it was installed. So, it’s said her spirit can’t rest and she wanders the halls, looking for her old room.”

“Eerie,” responded Shannon. “But this place definitely seems like it would have its share of ghosts. Have you ever seen one?”

Cal just smiled and shook his head. “But I can tell you a true ghost story that isn’t commonly known.

“Back in the 1930’s, when the hotel held an annual party for the staff, they would have a drawing to allow one employee and spouse to stay at the hotel. It was a highly desired prize because none of the staff would have been able to afford a room here. One year, a Night Manager won and brought his wife to stay in one of the standard rooms on the third floor.”

The elevator arrived and they squeezed in again, this time Shannon held Cal’s arm as the car jerked before starting its descent.

“So, what happened?” Shannon asked, her curiosity stoked.

“Sometime during the night, the man’s wife woke up screaming, saying someone was trying to strangle her. The husband later said he had told her it was just a dream and to go back to bed. The next morning, he found her dead on the bed, with bruises around her neck.”

The elevator came to a jolting stop at the basement level and both Ellie and Shannon let out a stifled scream. Cal seemed absorbed in his story and didn’t notice. He just continued talking as they stepped out.

“Of course, the husband was suspected immediately. Since his story of a ghost attacking his wife was laughed at during his trial, the jury found him guilty and he was sentenced to death.”

“But it really was a ghost,” Cal added in dreamlike voice.

Shannon and Ellie were quiet.

Cal quickly changed his tone and walked them outside and across a recessed driveway. They entered another door into the area where the horse-drawn carriages were once stored after dropping their patrons off at the front portico. It was now a large private banquet room lined with old framed photographs.

Suddenly, he said he had to run to take care of some business that had just come up. How he knew that without a cell phone or beeper was a mystery to Shannon and Ellie, but they thanked him profusely as he left them alone to find their way out.

It took them a few attempts, but they managed to work their way back to main level and let themselves out the front lobby door.

Excited about their private tour, they quickly walked the few blocks back to their hotel, noting that the moon was now just a white spot in sky, not the golden orb they had witnessed from the terrace. Ellie couldn't wait to tell her husband.

Since the ballgame was still on, Shannon made Ellie a drink from the mini-bar and they compared notes on their strange encounter, agreeing that they would take Steve back tomorrow to show him what he had missed.

After the game, as they described their private tour, Steve was intrigued, but skeptical. "Are you sure you really saw all those closed rooms?" he questioned them.

"We'll do better, we'll show you the same spots tomorrow, if we can find them again," Shannon assured him. "If we get lost, we can ask for Cal at reception. I'm sure he'd point us in the right direction."

They spent the next day taking a water taxi and visiting the quaint, colorful section of Victoria Harbor known as Fisherman's Wharf before heading off to the Empress toward evening.

Shannon immediately led them to the locked "Library" across from the Gift Shop. They peered in but couldn't see much. Then, they found their way to the abandoned Bengal Room and the Rose Room. Steve was beginning to believe them. They were stymied by how to get up to the rooftop terrace without taking the service elevator, so Shannon marched off to ask for Cal. Ellie and Steve waited under the breathtaking crystal ceiling sculpture in the lobby.

When Shannon returned, she looked like a ghost. "No one named Cal works here," she told them. "They don't have a Night Security Manager; they only have a Night Manager who oversees the security staff."

“There must be some mistake, it’s probably his night off,” Ellie said confidently. “Let’s go back and retrace our steps.”

Steve appeared skeptical again. “Are you sure you weren’t imagining him? A few too many Cosmos maybe?”

Ellie bridled at his lack of belief in her. Ignoring his remark about too many drinks, she proposed a new plan. “Let’s try working backwards from the old carriage garage banquet room, using the stairs instead of the service elevator.”

Once in the big room, they paused to look at the old photographs they had missed when Cal left so abruptly the night before. The photos were from the early days of the Empress, the twenties and thirties. They found photos of the hotel staff – footmen in full livery, uniformed maids, management staff in three-piece suits with stiff white collars. Some depicted carriages lined up out front unloading guests at the main entrance.

Suddenly Shannon gasped and grabbed onto the wall to steady herself. There, hanging right in front of her, was a photo of the hotel management in 1933 – four men posing behind the big mahogany reception desk. The caption read: Mr. Irwin Gaines, Hotel General Manager; Mr. Joshua Butterworth, Assistant Hotel Manager; Mr. William Blaine, Head Chef; AND..... Mr. Calhoun Carter, Night Manager.

There, staring right at her was Cal, his hair was slicked back and he had a thin moustache, but it was him. Plain as day.