

## Paradise Hotel

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The old Paradise Hotel sat on a hill, looking out onto the town in the small valley below it. While the town was dull and dusty almost all year round, the hotel gardens seemed to be in a permanent state of greenery. It had once had manicured lawns and treetops pruned into mathematically perfect circles. Weeds had never dared poke their heads in the paths and all bushes and flower buds had been carefully planned, planted and perfected down to the smallest leaf.

The gardener had been in the middle of a redesigning frenzy when Molly was hired back in the 1960s. The garden redesign had been very serious business: the owners had even discussed with the gardener whether gravel was good enough for the main road or if pavement was now called for. The old eucalyptus trees that had lined the main road since the turn of the century had been uprooted and moved; bushes had been planted instead, to allow a better view of the hotel.

But after a dozen different owners since the hotel had last closed thirty years ago, it had lost its splendor. The roads were now half gone, patches of pavement peeking through the bone-dry earth; the bushes had grown into trees, the old eucalyptuses had died, the grass was at times tall enough to reach Molly's hip; civilization had subsided into a jungle.

After the hotel closed for good and her cousin Ira had gone from becoming a waiter to being a caretaker, he had tried to maintain the lawns. He had even made the then-owner of the hotel buy one of those small motorized lawn mowers, so he could sit in it and cut the grass as comfortably as if he were reading a magazine on a couch. But even that had changed lately. Molly had moved back to the hotel to take care of Ira himself, whose mind kept drifting back to the past more often than normal.

Like the hotel, Ira's health had slowly deteriorated over the years. After all, he was in his eighties now, after all. As the hotel lost its structural elegance, as its walls peeled off showing layer upon layer of ghastly old paint jobs, as floors lost their integrity and caved in, so had Ira gone downhill.

And while Ira had it worse, Molly herself had begun to indulge in bouts of recollection. Alone with only Ira and the hotel for company, the past was hard to ignore. Whenever she took the side road towards the small place she shared with Ira, she couldn't help but look sadly at the few patches that remained intact from the last coat of paint the old Paradise had received. She felt a pang in her chest when she saw the Carrara marble front steps caked in mud when they used to be so polished and waxed that from a distance it looked like an overflowing bathtub.

But when Ira remembers, it's an event on its own; it's the past suddenly coming uninvited. Ira was simply a waiter in the hotel for a little over a decade more than thirty years ago, but it's different for him. When Ira walks towards home and sees the boarded up windows, he doesn't just get a whiff

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\* 1º premio del Concurso Literario USAL en Lengua Inglesa – Categoría cuento (2016).

of paint from the summer where its owner had decided to paint the hotel all over. For Ira, the smell of fresh paint obliterates all other aromas. Jasmines and roses lose their scent, and the burnt food loses its taste; all he can smell is the acidity of the fresh paint. He can still remember how long it had taken to dry, and can pinpoint exactly where the blotch of paint in the ground used to be from the time when the scaffold had given out and the painter had tumbled down towards a broken leg.

Ira doesn't only see the crumbled walls of the old outdoor tea square, he sees his old colleagues climbing up the steps with trays laden with scones and tea pots, he can still remember the laid tables down to the last chair and dessert trolley and even get a whiff of the hot tea, its aromatic fragrance mingling with the spring flowers.

So, when Ira remembers the fire in the kitchen, he doesn't just feel sad because his best friend died. He can *feel* Andy's screams, and goes numb for days on end when he remembers that the worst part about his friend's screaming was the silence that followed. The air around him turns grey and black, the heat makes him sweat, and his voice begins to wheeze.

Molly rounds the path and makes a right, and in the distance she can see their front door is open, allowing the freezing air in. She frowns; her shuffling feet are now barely touching the ground.

Ira is half dressed when she arrives, but not in his usual clothes. He's wearing his pajama bottoms and his slippers, but also his one good white shirt and his crumpled black vest. He's in the process of putting on one of his old silk gloves, which had once been pristine white but now looked more as though they had been soaked in tea for days. One of its fingertips has been ripped open by time, and Ira's finger is poking slightly through.

"Ira," she calls, gently leaving her bags of groceries by the door, behind an armchair, because when Ira's in a mood, he can't understand supermarket chains, or door-to-door deliveries ordered by phone. In his mind, their food still comes from the hotel's farms and their water still flows directly from the mountain spring to their table. There are days when he still believes Molly gets their milk early in the morning from the hotel dairy cows.

Molly grabs Ira's arm and stops him from putting on his gloves all the way through. "It's your day off," she says. It's the only thing that's been working on him as of late.

Ira knits his brow and he becomes pliant under Molly's hands, allowing her to take off his gloves, vest and shirt and pushing him a little in the direction of the bedroom, where she hopes he'll change into a sweater and trousers rather than dressed in another delusion.

It's one of Ira's easy days. The morning dress-up was the only thing manifested throughout the day, though at one point she found Ira silently staring at a photo of Andy, faintly asking her if she smelled something burning.

Molly swells a bit with a mixture of pride and relief when Ira's talk during tea time is completely normal and measured. He mentions how they should maybe think about moving out of their little shack next to the old employee quarters, since everything is looking a bit worn out and might be dangerous for them. He talks of the hotel's peeling paint that he can see

through their kitchen window, and his only worrying instance is when he goes to the sink to drop his empty teacup and freezes, his eyes looking through the window. Molly allows him only a brief moment of stupor. She doesn't like him constantly wondering why a hotel that in his heart is only a handful of years old has crumbling balconies and peeling paint, why some of its blinds have fallen down and some of its windowpanes are broken; why management doesn't seem to care enough to repair any of this.

Molly gets up, noisily. Her chair scrapes against the worn down floor, she makes sure to bump the table with her hip so the tea-pot, teacups, saucers and plates all knock easily about on top of the table. By the time she reaches Ira at the window - heavy feet dragging on the floor, a fake cough escaping her mouth - Ira has been shaken out of his flashback. The hotel has once again metamorphosized in front of his eyes and looks its proper age. He looks down at the teacup in his hands, probably wondering why he's holding it.

"More tea? It's still hot," she says, taking the teacup from his hands. He's forgotten they've already had tea, of course, and he pours himself a cup and eats more scones and cookies, deigning them the best ones Cook has ever made. The cookies, however, were bought at the supermarket. They are rather hard and flavourless, but in Ira's mind they are still warm from the hotel ovens, made with Swiss chocolate and home-made flour.

Molly smiles at Ira as he takes a book and begins reading. She grabs the crinkly bright blue packet of commercially produced cookies and thrusts it in her pocket. She'll throw it out later.

It has rained during the night, and it begins clearing up by morning. When Sunday dawns, the trees are twinkling in the sun, the skies are clearing up but the downpour continues under the trees as the sun rises and warms it all up.

It's a quiet day. Ira and Molly take a walk around the hotel; the current owner likes to get periodic reports about its state, though Molly has always suspected this is mostly to check them both out and not the place itself.

Still, it's good exercise for them, mostly for Ira. Seeing it in its ruinous state keeps him from flying about in his delusions too often: it's difficult to imagine tourists are calling you to serve them lunch in the gallery when its floor caved in during a storm years before.

By mid-afternoon, when they are both waking from their naps, a faint rumbling is heard. Molly goes outside to find out what it might be. Crunching gravel is soon heard and round the corner of the hotel a shiny storm-sky coloured car comes to a halt near her. She can see its occupant putting papers away (maps, no doubt) and when he gets out of the vehicle, he's tall enough to tower above his car. He alarm-locks the car: city man.

He's elegantly dressed but a bit lanky, in his thirties or forties. She has to squint in order to get a better look at his face; her glasses have been carelessly left on top of the kitchen table. It's only when he greets her that she realizes who he is: Ira has pictures of his son in every single corner in his room: Marc, newly born. Marc, with his mother on a beach. Marc, graduating from high school. Marc at his own wedding a few years back.

Marc, Marc everywhere. Whatever picture frame isn't filled by Andy's photos, shows pictures of Ira's son.

She tries to leave them alone. She wasn't there for Marc's childhood and while they *are* related and have talked on the phone a handful of times, she's a virtual stranger to this man. She feigns duties and chores and other excuses.

Marc will have none of it. He insists, cajoles and coaxes her into staying. He even pulls her chair out for her. Molly can't help wondering why someone as attentive as Marc seems to be hasn't visited his father in years. Molly doesn't remain in the dark for long: it soon transpires that he doesn't know how to handle Ira: Molly is there as a safeguard.

Marc and Ira chitchat for a bit - Marc isn't sharing most of his life, and Ira's life isn't eventful enough to have anything to share, so Marc soon blurts out the reason for this strange visit: he's had a baby daughter a week ago. Ira is now a grandfather, and Marc thought the occasion deserved a visit.

Marc pulls out of his coat pocket a small bundle of photographs, which he hands to Ira. The baby is all round and pink and enveloped in a dozen blankets or so, each picture showing a different outfit, a different set of blankets, the same manicured hands holding her up. Father and grandfather look proudly on: Ira deems her identical to Marc as a baby, but that she has his grandmother's nose. He asks about the baby's name.

Molly feels the rumbling of the storm before it even pokes its head over the horizon. The baby's name is Andrea, but Marc's wife has taken a liking to calling her *Andy*.

Andy.

Molly shoots out of her chair as soon as the last letter of the nickname is uttered, pulling a chair close to Ira, who's just staring into the pictures hard enough to bore a hole through them. His knuckles are turning white, the photos are starting to bend a bit. Molly tears them out of Ira's grip and tosses them at Marc, keeping a firm hand on Ira's shoulder.

"I don't understand," says Marc, looking at the photos as if they had actually been the ones to cause Ira's state.

"You know your father has problems with that name," says Molly, gathering strength from some place she can only tap into when Ira's safety is involved; she hoists him up off the chair as if he were a toy doll. "You know better than that." She pushes Ira towards the hall: he has become pliant in her arms, a puppet that obeys her every order.

Marc is still frowning at his father, now not in confusion, but wearing an expression she fails to recognize. Anger, maybe, or annoyance. Something. "The fire? That was years ago. I thought he was over it!", he says as Molly makes her way with Ira towards his bedroom.

Molly gawks at Marc: yes, he's serious. He's so dismissive of the death of his father's best friend he wonders if Marc has any friends at all. She doubts it. "Wait there," she orders.

She gets Ira to his bedroom, flipping down Andy's photo frames as she walks by them, covering him with a blanket, fluffing his pillow, making sure he has water to drink. She pulls the curtains shut, and is in the process of

turning the heater on when she hears a car engine. Loud at first, very loud; tyres squeal next. Then the car engine fades.

By the time Molly leaves Ira at peace, his eyes blank and void, Marc is long gone. A bad memory, a bent stack of photos, a still steaming half-full cup of coffee.

By the next day Ira is still almost-catatonic. Molly has heard him get up to go to the bathroom in the middle of the night, and found a half-eaten sandwich on the kitchen counter, so her worry subsides considerably. When she gets up in the morning, however, he's still in bed, duvet up to his eyebrows, windows wide open.

Marc calls mid-morning, quietly inquiring after his father's health, as if Ira had simply got a head cold. Molly is curt and polite when she informs Marc that when his father goes into a haze, it can last for days. When he expresses a curt wish that he get better soon, she can't help answering "He'll be fine, not thanks to you." He hangs up soon after that.

Tuesday goes its way in the same fashion, but when Molly gets up the next day, Ira isn't in his bedroom. There are remains of a sandwich in the trash can, an empty teacup in the sink. She searches for him, but he is nowhere near the house. On a whim, she checks his room: he usually takes his cane when he goes on a walk around the hotel on his own. The paths are uneven, the tiled floors around the hotel even more so.

An invisible hand grips tightly at her heart: the cane is still there, his clothes are all crumpled up as if Ira had been searching for something. The day turns cold all around Molly, and the sixty-five year old woman suddenly has the strength of someone half her age. She checks the hotel galleries and verandas, she goes to the back of the hotel and checks the old laundry, the garage and the workshops, although Ira couldn't have come down on his own down this rickety staircase. She checks the stables, the employee's quarters. Nothing.

The back of the hotel can be seen from where she is. One of the upstairs balconies is hanging at a slight angle, the walls are three or four different shades from years of storms and peeling paint that reveal old paint jobs, the kitchen windows are all boarded up, and the back door is wide open. Ira's inside.

The old Paradise has silently witnessed it all. Years of locked doors and abandonment have managed to deposit a thick layer of dust everywhere, and the path Ira has taken unfolds before her eyes. His footsteps go here and there inside the kitchen and finally go further into the hotel interior. A hand has disturbed the dirt on the counter, and an empty drawer lies open.

Molly fights her urge to look away. The last time she stood in this kitchen was almost thirty years ago, and the hotel still kept its old glamour. It still stole your breath away and made you want to get to know it. Everything still shone and sparkled, everything worked in perfect order. Now it's as if stepping into a mausoleum.

Molly walks gingerly, following in Ira's footsteps which have crossed the kitchen, then gone down a hall full of cobwebs, to the right towards the

main dining hall: she still remembers the quickest way the waiters took to the dining hall.

Except that the main dining hall floor isn't made of cement and ceramics like the kitchen. It's mostly wooden, like the buildings of old, and half of it has long ago wasted away. The basement below now holds most of the furniture that had been left behind in the dining hall, or at least what little had been left by the owners and pilferers. A yellow mantelpiece or two, stylishly hand-carved chairs and tables, all of them now cracked and snapped into pieces at the bottom of the basement. Molly looks carefully from the door frame, peeking at the holes nearest to the door; one of them is so large it renders any further venturing into the room as foolish.

Ira is lying at the bottom of the basement. He too, undeniably broken and gone and beyond repair alongside the rest of the hotel. He's got his silk gloves on, one of her kitchen trays lies near him. His black and white uniform is now stained not just in brown and rust but also in crimson.

She can hear the wood beneath her feet groaning under her weight and she runs out of the hotel, she runs towards her home, towards her last hours at her home, towards a phone, and she can't bear to look at the hotel again.