

Room Service

by Michael Olsen

BETTY BUTTERWORTH — 40-something

Lights come up on a bare room—a room made more bare by the few articles of furniture that are distributed around it: a camp bed, a dresser with a small TV on it, a portable clothes rack, and a chair. BETTY sits on a chair with a bag on her lap. She is a woman in her mid to late 40s. She wears a maid's outfit: grey dress over which is a white pinafore.

Can you smell it? Smoke. The kitchen's on fire. That's where it started. The flames are whipping their way down the hallway to your bedroom. The living room's gone. It went up in three minutes. What do you take with you? Your wife slash husband slash children? A photo album? A favourite tie, perhaps? Maybe a pet. I know what I'd take.

Betty pats the bag.

It's all in here. A life, such as it is. I never thought about before this morning, but now that I have, I wonder if I need this at all. After all, you're you. You're not just your memories, are you? That's why we've got eyes in the front of our heads: we're supposed to look forward, not backwards.

Betty opens the bag.

Everything in here is about all my yesterdays. Everything except this.

Betty removes a bottle.

Yesterday, today and tomorrow. All in one.

Betty unscrews the lid and pulls a white handkerchief out of the bottle. She sniffs the handkerchief. She makes a great effort to calm herself down—but instead, she starts to cry.

You see I'm crying. You think I'm sad. But I'm not sad. I'm not. It's just—Well, you think you know the world so well, and then it takes a right turn you never expected. It's just the shock, really. I have to keep reminding myself of the fundamentals: there are 13 floors above me, and 642 rooms, 517 toilets, 1565 coat hangers hanging in guests' rooms, along with 2572 towels all up. That's quite a responsibility. And not just anyone can do it. I've been here all my life—absolutely all my life—and I know every single room in this

hotel like the back of my hand. *(She looks at the back of her hand.)* Why do people say that, I wonder? I suppose I know it better than my backside which I've never seen, but they make it sound as if the back of your hand never changes, and it changes from day to day. Little hairs on it. Lines. Blemishes. Cleaners on it making the skin go red and angry.

Pause

I don't know what I'm going to do. How do you approach someone you haven't seen for 27 years?

Pause. Suddenly listening.

Can you hear it? Room 2031 flushing the loo. That's the third time in 20 minutes. Maybe something's wrong. Maybe they're ill. She certainly doesn't look well. Ah, now it's Room 1517. There's a fault in the pipes—a leak. That's why we have water seeping into the shower in Room 1417. It's not bad, but they'll have to replace it—soon. And there goes the air conditioning in Room 1746. I don't need it down here. Down here—seven by seven, so regular—it's always a very pleasant 21.4°. The whole world is here. I sometimes think I don't even need the tele to keep me amused.

Betty rummages in the bag, pulls out a bottle, unscrews it, sniffs. She wrinkles up her nose.

Mother. The bitterness of lemons preserved in gin.

Pause. She picks up a black and white photo of a woman.

Mother would know what to do, even with a drink in her hand. She always knew what to do every minute of every day. It was like she was an actor in a movie and knew every line that was coming up, every line you were going to say—and everything she didn't like you saying she had an answer for. *(Pause)* She cleaned every room in this hotel three or four dozen times before she died. I'm sure I've already beaten that record. To Mother the job was just a job. Something you did because the devil made work for idle hands as she always said. But I always saw it differently. I used to follow her around when I was a little squirt, hanging up the towels for her or grabbing the rubbish. But I never saw it the way she did. There were people who lived in those rooms. People who'd come from far away to stay with us. People with exotic names like Clement and Cynthia and Regis. It wasn't our job—it was our calling—to make sure the moment they stepped into their room they felt as they were the first person who'd ever been there. Every trace of the past was to be eliminated. The bed had to feel as if it had come straight from the showroom. The towels, straight from the shelves of the local Harris Scarfe, factory fresh. Mother never

understood that. Even the last footprint on the carpet inside the door—I'd get rid of that before I left. Of course, things have changed, haven't they? Years ago there used to be an understanding between the guests and the hotel. You never had to tie anything down for fear it would go walking. Nowadays everything's bolted to the wall or the desk, and the desk is bolted to the floor. Mother would not have approved of it either.

BETTY frowns at the photo.

Why did you always frown, Mother? Always frowning, like every person you were going to meet was going to tell you bad news. I always thought that if this day ever came I wouldn't hesitate to do what I should do, but now that it's here, Mother makes me think about what I'm going to do. Always the case, wasn't it Mother? The only way I could please you was to be better than you at everything. Every crease in every sheet, every fold of every towel, more than just so—a work of art, like origami. I watched you every day and I got better and better, and you couldn't stand that. I could tell. The way you grew more and more silent as I grew up. Maybe you had less and less to say, but there was less and less you needed to say, because I was two or three steps ahead of you all the time. "What about the towels?" you'd say, and I'd come back and say, "Already done, Mum." "What about the sheets on the bed? Did you replace them?" "Yes, Mum, and fitted hospital-style with 3 creases per corner." She never checked. Well, she did once, but that was it—never again. She knew I knew what I was doing—and I was doing it faster and better than she was. Doreen, lovely Doreen, who worked the opposite rooms to us, used to say, "You're gonna make a great little maid of this girlie one day, Gladys" and Mother could only nod and say, "If that's all she wants, then that's what she'll get," like a curse.

Pause

I was never asked what I wanted. Is anyone? Life with Mother was a bit like dinner. She'd serve it up from a can and say: "Eat it and shut up." Not that I'm ungrateful. It's just that in the whole mix of life there has to be some love, doesn't there? and the greatest tragedy in life is not to have lost it, but to have never known it in the first place.

Pause

Mother must have loved once. I know she made love at least once.

Betty picks up the photo frame again.

Can you see the fellow in uniform? That was Father—or so Mother said. He was stationed in Belfast and killed with seven others in a massive car bomb. Not even enough of him left to fill the smallest bottle.

Betty looks through the bag and pulls out a very small bottle.

There's nothing of him except his hand patting the back of my head. Of all the senses touch is the one that fades the fastest.

Pause

We both knew Mother would go on the job. She was cleaning Room 1214, on her knees scrubbing the bathroom floor, when she had what they call an aneurism: a blood vessel burst in her brain—boom!—and she was dead. One moment she was getting dried vomit out of the gaps between the tiles, the next—nothing. And I do believe it's nothing. A nothing we don't even know about, like sleeping without dreams. Mother of course believed in God. She had a crucifix above her bed and used to mumble something to herself each night before she went to bed. I always wondered what God thought of Mother. That's why I never took up with God. I used to ask the question all the time and I never got an answer.

Pause

Mother made it sound like the worst job in the world. And it wasn't. I'm sure of it. From the television I caught glimpses of what it was like, other people's lives. There was hardship and hunger and disease and here we were in the grandest hotel in East London, warm and well fed, with the world walking in through the front doors every day. There was no way I was going to buy into how Mother saw the world. I'd come to see things differently, and it was because of some of the guests. Some of them were unbearable. No matter what you did they weren't satisfied. Something not clean enough. Not enough soap. Food not good enough. They demanded more. They demanded better—more often than not, simply because they could—and it made me wonder why I couldn't—some day, some way—do the same. I did it when I was 17. I don't know if it was just curiosity or stupidity, but at 17, who can tell the difference? I wanted the outside world to come to me. I couldn't go to it, so it must come to me in my hotel.

Betty fishes through the bag and finds another bottle, opens it, sniffs.

Hamburgers: 100% American beef.. November 17, 1975, Room 1610. His name was Chuck Bramble and he was from Stockton, Utah. I found out later that Stockton is famous for its cheeses—or was it a cow, or a horse? I can't remember. Every town in America has to be famous for something. At the time, though, Stockton, Utah, sounded like the Wild West. Chuck was a businessman, in town for a conference on Fluid Dynamics in Non-Core Rotating Engines, I think it was, and he handed out tips like they were going out of fashion. He'd called room service, and he wanted a sandwich of some sort so we made it and I took it up to him. He called me in and the moment I closed the door I felt like I

was in a different world, as if the room had detached itself from the rest of the hotel and was somehow, somewhere, floating free of the rest of the world. He smiled at me nice and easy like Americans tend to do. When he saw the sandwich he wasn't too happy—it wasn't mayo on rye like he asked for—but he said it would do. He offered me some, and I took a bite, and he said, "Don't that taste good?" and I nodded, and he kept talking about how life was back home, and I just kept looking at him, and pretty soon he noticed me looking at him, and he sat on the bed and patted the bed beside him, and so I sat down beside him, and he asked me my name and I told him and he said, "Betty sure is a pretty name." And he leans over and kisses me full on the mouth. His lips are soft and warm, and there's something thrilling and comforting about it all at the same time. And then he's guiding me back onto the bed, and he's above me all blonde teeth and cowboy hair, and I'm not sure what to do, so I lie there, and he does all the work, moving my skirt up, pushing down my knickers, unhooking my bra, and all the time these things are happening I'm lying there and I can see our reflection in the large mirrors on the front of the wardrobe, but for some reason I notice an ugly smear of a handprint on the mirror and I think to myself: I'll have to come back here tomorrow morning and clean that. And then there's a sharp pain inside me—for an instant—and I come back to this hairy chest lying above me, and then I see the girl in the mirror and it's not me, it's not, it's someone else, I can tell. And then it's over, just like that, and he's getting up and he holds out his hand to help me up, and I take it without thinking and I'm pulling my clothes on and then he's gently moving me out the door like there's nothing else to be said, and there I am standing in the hallway and the door closes behind me, but there's something in my hand and when I look down there's a whole tenner that he's given me—for services rendered. When I went back down and saw Mother watching tele I didn't tell her about the money because I knew for certain she'd just take it and turn it into another bottle of gin. "Did he like his sandwich?" "Yes Mum," and she just nodded at me, and kept watching tele, like it was just another day. Of course it wasn't just a normal day, and it wasn't a normal 9 months either. Always practical, Mother wanted me to keep working, and get rid of it, but for the first time in my life I stared into her eyes for longer than 5 seconds and said, very quietly: "If you touch me I'll scream, and I'll tell them you sent me up to him." She was outraged but it was her silence she retreated into. She didn't have an answer for me straightaway, but there was no way she was going to even try and explain how I got pregnant in the first place, so at the 7-month mark I was sent "up the country." What a lovely phrase that is. I

think they like you to be near farm animals. It was the most beautiful six weeks of my life.

Betty finds another bottle, opens it, and breathes in deeply.

Summer. High grass, lush rivers, trees swollen green and the sky burning blue. They were very nice at the farm. I called them Aunt and Uncle. They'd handled girls like me before. They knew people who wanted a baby and wouldn't ask questions. You weren't supposed to, but I had a couple of names picked out. Anna if it was a girl, Billy if it was a boy. I was in the kitchen when I had the first contraction. Anna arrived three hours later. Very fast, I was told. Couldn't wait to get into the world. She arrived with one little cry and that was it. I saw her once. I never touched her. But I breathed her in.

Betty pulls out another bottle.

It wasn't the smell of blood and hot water and disinfectant, but her smell, the smell of a new animal, its own smell that no-one can take away or cover up. When I returned from the farm Mother didn't say anything, just handed me a bucket and mop saying someone had been sick in 1002 and I better hurry up. And even when I was in 1002 cleaning up that mess I could still smell that little baby near me—even though it was days later—and it wasn't until today that I knew that smell again.

Pause

How long I've been here! So many little bottles! I don't know why I've never thought of living anywhere else. It's—normal—isn't it? to live in different places during the course of your life? We're supposed to be a nomadic species. I saw it once on tele once years ago. A documentary about how we walked out of Africa and took over the world. Well, this is my entire world. I've lived down here all my life. If I need to eat, I go to the kitchen. If I need new clothes, there's a catalogue I just ring up and order over the phone. If I need friends, I just turn on the tele and there they are, always smiling and bright, like the world is a beautiful place and we are glad to be in it.

Pause

Still, even I know there may be times you have to make a decision about your life, whether to continue living in the same way or not. And now that it's here, I don't know if I can do it.

Pause. She pats her dress.

After all this time you've probably noticed the uniform. Do you like it? I have three identical ones I just mix and match from day to day, so I always have one on that's fairly clean. They want you to be clean for a dirty job like cleaning up after people. Typical.

The world wants it all put right without having to think about the nitty gritty of what's really involved.

Pause

I know every inch of this place. Every sound of the elevator, every curve of the banister down from the ground floor to the basement. Do you know what that can do to a person? Being in the same place for so long that you tend to wonder where the furniture ends and you begin? Never mind. Mother always said that to me: "Never mind," she'd say, "you're still here breathing that's the main thing." I suppose I am still here, still here breathing. That is the main thing, isn't it? Isn't it?

Pause

But now I have this (*holding up the handkerchief. She sniffs it again.*) Unmistakable. Totally unmistakable. You'd think I would have lost my sense of smell after all these years, after all the cleaners and the polishes and the window sprays I've used on thousands of rooms. But no. I think it's become even more acute, more sensitive, as time has gone by. There's now something defining about my sense of smell. It's like the cornea, or a fingerprint. Unique.

Pause

In 1521 I shivered like a jelly. I didn't know what it was. And then I saw it. An open suitcase: underwear, a slip, a shirt. It was automatic. I just picked up the shirt—sniffed—and I knew it was her. Straightaway I told myself I was a fool, but then I thought, why not? Why shouldn't it be her? She'd be the right age to be travelling around, about 28, something like that, and why not? Why shouldn't she be successful, and have her own business, even, and have to travel to the city to do some deal with a bank or another company, and she decided to stay at the Crown Royale? Why not indeed? I did the one thing I have never done in all the years that I've been working. You laugh, but it's true. I do have standards, you know. No, the one thing I did do—I stayed. I stayed longer than I needed to. Much longer. I had to know more. There was another shirt hanging over a chair. English, not imported: expensive. Perfume was French, of course, I could smell it in the bathroom. She'd sprayed all over the place. Nice toothbrush. Expensive face cream. Expensive everything, I thought, but tasteful. Elegant. Of course I pretended to clean as I went, busy busy busy all the time. But I was watching everything. Nothing slipped my sight. I am the detective of the forgotten: everyone forgets what they leave behind in their rooms, but I see it and I join it all together into one picture that makes sense. That's what I do. A day hasn't gone by where I haven't reconstructed the lives of

every guest whose room I've cleaned. You think a paperclip, a dirty shirt and a wet towel don't say much but together they say everything. It's taken years of practice, years of observation. It makes me sound like a voyeur, doesn't it? But I'm not a voyeur. A voyeur is someone who helps bring about what they see, someone who gets themselves into a position to see, but I simply watch. I just happen to be there when things happen—or just after. Of course it's helped by the fact that I do thirty rooms every day. We swap, of course, to give ourselves a bit of variety, but it's till 30.

Pause

Of course we get all sorts here. Some of the managers here think of the guests as royalty. Years ago they used to be guests, now they're "clients." Typical. Change the words and you change everything, apparently. Well I still call them guests. I'm respectful, mind you, very respectful. After all, where else does my pay cheque come from? I must admit, though, it sometimes strains even my professional smile sometimes. I cleaned up once after one of those rock stars had stayed. It would have been alright if a bomb had gone off, but this place! Food in places you wouldn't imagine! Things broken that you would have needed three men to rip off the wall. Just as well I'm always early for work otherwise the little girl I found in the bathroom would have successfully overdosed on her cocktail of drugs. No-one thanked me. Not even the girl. It didn't even make the newspapers, though, as you can imagine, I was tempted to make an anonymous phone call and tell some scandal rag what had happened, but I couldn't figure out what would be better publicity for that rock star: if the girl were to live or die.

Pause

Of course, I haven't always made it in time. I've found three dead people in the course of my life. They say the first time is always the worst but I don't agree. It was actually the last one that upset me the most. The first two were fairly straightforward: heart attack and food poisoning. When you see someone lying still you naturally think they're sleeping, but then the way they're arranged on the floor, or in the bed, and their complete stillness makes it pretty clear they're dead. The room takes on a whole different atmosphere, and you suddenly feel like you're intruding. For some reason I can't explain I've said a little prayer for them each time it's happened, even though the words mean nothing to me the moment I step outside the room.

Pause. She half crosses herself.

I don't know any prayers for the living.