The Sea Breeze Motel

The morning after he arrived, we watched Victor leave his room and set out toward the water, a ragged figure shrinking slowly beneath the band of cliffs at the southern end of the beach. The day was bleak and cold. Victor was the first guest we’d had in several days, and, from the beginning, the old man interested us.

When Zoe returned from straightening up his room, she said neither bed looked like it had been slept in. I was sitting behind the reception desk, running over a list of room repairs we’d put together the previous week.

“Think of it,” she said, leaning against the desk. She brushed a loose strand of hair out of her eyes. “He’s in there all night, just staring at the TV.”

I pictured Victor sitting in the chair by the window, his head tilted back, mouth open, hands crossed over the hollow of his chest.

“Maybe he sleeps sitting up,” I said. We exchanged a look. We were always exchanging looks. “He has breathing troubles,” I said, “and needs to keep partly elevated.”

“Okay,” she said, “maybe.” She looked doubtful, twisting the strand of hair around her finger, the contours of her slim body concealed beneath a baggy sweatshirt.

She said, “It looked like he didn’t touch anything in the room, though. He didn’t even unpack. The suitcases were right where we left them.” She squinted at the wall behind me.

Then she shook her self, removed a slip of paper from her pocket, and handed it to me across the desk. “I found this in the wastebasket,” she said. The paper was a stub from an Amtrak ticket, the departure dated six days ago, a one-way ticket from Champaign Illinois to Emeryville. I laid it on the desk, and leaned forward.

“How old do you think he is?” I asked, examining the ticket.

“I don’t know,” Zoe said distantly. She turned toward the window. “Mid-seventies. Could be older than that, but I don’t see why it exactly matters.” She paused, gathering her hair into a ponytail. “He’s old,” she said, “we know that. Old age is the context. The number isn’t all that significant. You’re missing the important question.”

“No I’m not,” I said, though I realized it was entirely possible. I looked around the office, trying to buy time. I knew Zoe was happy to find a point to contest. This was a routine, a kind of game. We disagreed to test each other, to mark the difference in our perceptions.

I looked past her, out the window. There were no cars in the parking lot. I thought back to the previous day, trying to remember the moments before Victor showed up.

“How did he get here?” I said, “Who brought him?” These were good questions, I thought. If Victor had arrived in a cab I hadn’t seen it. When I think of it now, and think of the things that came next, it still unsettles me. I lose myself a little. One moment the parking lot was deserted, and the next the old man was standing outside the office, setting his suitcases against the curb, as though this were the purpose for which he’d been created.

Zoe turned back toward me, squinting again. She bit her lower lip. The grey light from the window fell around her and I remember thinking she looked tired then, tired and beautiful.

“What?” I asked.

“Why,” she said, “not how. The how isn’t very interesting. He took a cab or a bus. Someone gave him a ride. What does it matter? It’s why that matters. Why did he come here? Why is he alone?”

I shrugged, trying to think of a way to argue the point. How *didn’t* seem insignificant. But I couldn’t think quickly enough. Out the window, I caught a glimpse of a plastic bag, snagged in the gnarled scrub at the edge of the parking lot, rippling in the wind. A pause like this was a show of weakness, a tacit abdication. Zoe was a rigorous thinker. And most of the time she was way ahead of me, working an idea out to a level of interpretation I hadn’t even begun to consider.

When I first met her, when we were both still in college, I was awed by this. We were in a writing class together, we both liked to write stories. But Zoe was the only one in the class with real talent. She wrote things that left me feeling the world was infinitely describable and I thought she was remarkable, self-possessed and complete, a solid form against which I could lean to feel the comfort of a permanent shape.

She tapped her fingers on the edge of the desk. The bag had torn loose from its snag and a gust of wind carried it in a haphazard arc over the parking lot, holding it for a moment against the grey sky before propelling it inland, out of view.

I said, “Okay, he has family in town. He’s visiting family here. A son or daughter, grandkids maybe.”

Zoe stared at me incredulously. The light in the office flickered. She shook her head, ponytail bobbing, and folded her arms across her chest.

“Did you see him at all? This is not a man visiting family.”

“He’s going to surprise his daughter,” I said, “They’re estranged and he’s going to try make things right. He’s staying here because he needs to gather the courage to face her.”

This last only had provocation value. I knew that. Zoe regarded sentimentality as distasteful, believed it was lazy.

She groaned. “Good grief,” she said.

A few hours later I was on the beach walking in the direction the old man had gone. The air was cool and damp and it felt good to be out in the weather. Rain blew in rippling curtains across the water. Seagulls wheeled, crying plaintively. I skirted the base of the limestone cliffs that jutted out to the edge of the surf. Beyond the cliffs the shoreline opened out again into another wide stretch of beach. The waves folded over and hissed as they broke and spread across the sand, nearly reaching my feet.

I hesitated when I saw Victor coming in the opposite direction. I stopped and waited. A few minutes passed during which I watched him quietly. He walked with slow plodding steps, his hands clasped behind his back. When he reached where I was standing, I nodded and lifted a hand in greeting. He came to a halt and stood beside me with his head tilted back, small drops of rain accumulating on his forehead. I didn’t know what to do. I watched him out of the corner of my eye. After a few moments he turned toward me. His gaze was foggy and his face bore the same unsettling expression I’d seen the night before. I don’t think he recognized me. How can I explain that this seemed inevitable?

“What I can’t believe,” he said suddenly, his voice hoarse and cracking, “what I can’t believe is how anyone could stand so much water.”

I said nothing. I hadn’t expected him to speak and I had nothing to say to this. I looked at him sidelong. His face was gaunt and stubbly. I felt strangely elated. Victor huddled beneath the hood of his raincoat. It had begun to rain harder, and he was suddenly racked by a wheezing fit of coughing. When the fit subsided, he looked up at me blankly. Our eyes met for a moment before I looked away. Then he began walking again, slower than before, heading north back the way I’d just come, hunched into the wind and blowing rain.

Later, when I got back to the motel, I didn’t tell Zoe that I’d met Victor on the beach. I still don’t know why. I guess maybe I liked the idea of knowing something she didn’t, believed it gave me some kind of advantage. What he’d said to me, that detail, it was mine, a secret between him and me. Maybe that’s what I thought. In any case, she wasn’t fooled. I’m sure of that. I stayed up late, sitting in the reception office until after midnight, but when I went into the bedroom, Zoe was still awake, waiting in bed with a book open in her lap. She looked up when I came in, and her eyes following me as I crossed the room to the dresser. She didn’t say anything, but her expression was amused, knowing, as though nothing I could do or say would surprise her.

It had been almost eight months since Zoe’s uncle, Raymond, moved into a retirement community in Marin County, leaving Zoe and me to manage his motel. He’d bought the place in 1972, and it had remained largely unchanged since then. Raymond always claimed this was its main appeal. People are comforted by anachronism, he said—small reminders, the illusion of immutability. It never really seemed worth pointing out that some things might be better off forgotten.

The guests we had all that winter were almost all on their way other places: men and women in disheveled clothes, who arrived after dark and moved on in the morning, leaving hardly any evidence of their night’s habitation. Individuals who, when I think back now, seem more imaginary than real—blurred together in my mind, like faces in the windows of cars passing on the highway.

We’d been living at the motel for nearly two years—in a modified suite, connected by a short hallway to the reception office—and, though my life with Zoe was familiar and comfortable, there were still moments when I imagined something different, a life with different things in it, in a place that was not this lonely stretch of coast and was nothing like it.

Victor kept the room for the rest of the week. He came into the office in the evenings and paid for the next day in cash. He said almost nothing. He’d look at us and nod his head, placing the money on the desk, then turn and walk back out the doors. In the mornings, we watched from the office as he set out across the parking lot, his body at a forward tilt, walking slowly until he disappeared into the distance at southern end of the beach. He returned in the afternoons and went directly into his room. Everyday he did the same thing.

The wind blew continually off the water and carried a heavy fog that remained suspended for miles over the coast. For days we didn’t see the sun, except occasionally, near the horizon where golden light temporarily broke apart the clouds and flickered in bright patches on the water. There seemed to be a system to it: a pattern formed by small flashes of light in that endless gray, like the special glint of stolen ornaments, like something predetermined and only a little uncommon.

We began timing his walks. We noted things about him, sort of unspokenly at first—the pants that looked several sizes too big, how he favored his left leg, the windbreaker he wore everyday. The old man fascinated us. He seemed to be operating on a plane all his own, as though he knew no better than we did what he was doing here. And, either because we were bored or because the lack of context made us uncomfortable, at some point we began writing things on pieces of motel stationary as we sat in the office, passing them back and forth, filling out a sketch of the man in brief sentences, burdening him with something like history.

*What he remembers about the train ride are the long flat views out the window, before they reached the mountains.*

*He tried not to sleep. He wanted to remain awake, alert to the landscape, the distance a human eye could see, the great annihilating sky over the plains of Nebraska and eastern Colorado.*

*He imagined himself swallowed in the emptiness of those places, a feature of the landscape without any awareness of itself, like the crow on a telephone wire that doesn’t understand itself as a crow.*

At night we heard the murmur of the TV in his room. We heard him coughing, a dry hacking cough that came on in half-hour intervals and lasted several minutes. After the second day, Zoe began adding an extra serving to our evening meals, and taking a plate to Victor’s room when we finished eating. She said he accepted the food, but we soon learned that, although he picked through what she brought him, the meals remained for the most part uneaten.

“I see him as a war veteran,” I said, “The Second World War, Korea.”

I was stretched out on the bed, looking up at the ceiling. It was late, the third or fourth night. Beside me, Zoe rustled, turning over.

“Could be,” she said. She lay on her stomach, her chin in her hands, eyes narrowed. “How do you get there from here?”

The lamp beside the bed was on and the room felt warm and close. I held my hands up to my face, inspecting the nails.

“He has a limp,” I said, glancing toward her.

Her brow furrowed. “A limp could be from anything,” she said, “Maybe he was an athlete. Maybe he has arthritis.”

“Okay, so what else?”

“Plus there’s a whole lot you aren’t considering. For example, you don’t even know if he’s American.” She yawned and turned onto her side, her back to me. “Hoeflich is German,” she said, words muffled, “Maybe he only came here recently.”

“He’s American. He’s from here,” I said, “Anyway, you’re missing the point.”

“Great,” she said, her voice distant, turning cold, “so what’s the point?”

“It’s an accurate formulation,” I said, “the pieces fit.”

She pulled the blanket up around her shoulders, then reached over to turn off the light.

“If you say so,” she said.

I began staying up late in the office, staying long after Zoe had gone to bed, thinking about Victor. I wanted to know why he’d come here. No explanation fit very well. Where were the people who should be caring for him? How did a man his age come halfway across the country alone without raising concern among those he’s left behind? Why would he stay here, some nowhere motel in the middle of a long and rainy winter? I toyed with these questions, but the answers were never satisfying, and before long I’d turn back to the notes, alone now, trying to build some kind of meaning from available facts.

*He ate almost nothing on the train to avoid problems with the body that no longer hesitated to humiliate him, the indignity of an old man with shit in his pants.*

*He had coughing fits.*

*At some point, one of the sleeper car attendants, a big red haired woman with a round, pale face, looking at him with genuine concern as she passed by, asked “are you okay, hun?” He bared his teeth in what he hoped was a smile, but then began coughing again.*

*She brought him hot tea and mentholated cough drops.*

*In Denver, he got off the train for a few minutes to stretch his legs on the platform. It was cold and dark, and after that he must have fallen asleep, because the next thing he remembered sunlight was falling across his lap from the window, and the train was hurtling through a blazing white desert beneath an enormous blue sky.*

On the fifth day, Zoe found a crumpled page torn from a notebook on the floor in Victor’s room. She came into office and spread it flat on the reception desk.

“There you go,” she said halfheartedly. She smiled at me. But the smile was strained.

The page was blank except for a single line scrawled in pencil at the top: “Anna and my old friend Nietzsche, June 1976.”

What was this supposed to mean? I read it twice, then looked up at her. It seemed important. But Zoe just shrugged. I held the paper up to the light. A date and two names—it wasn’t insignificant. I imagined a photo album collecting dust on the floor of an attic no one had visited in years, surrounded by piled boxes. The words on the paper gave no concrete answers, said little on their own, the meaning blurred, entirely ambiguous. But that hardly mattered. It was never a question of literal truth; I think I believed then that the truth only depended on being believed.

I said, “Anna was his wife’s name, and . . . they called their dog Nietzsche in honor of the philosopher. A bearded collie, or something like that.”

“A Maltese,” Zoe said, “a Shih Tzu.”

I grinned at her. I was thrilled. I wanted her to continue. But, after a moment, she sighed and then looked up at the ceiling, dark eyes reflecting grey light from outside the window.

“Think of it,” I said, “the wife and dog, all those years ago . . .”

I didn’t say the rest; I assumed she knew where I was going. Didn’t she see it? If not dead, then what? It matched the old man, explained the aura of loss that surrounded him. He came here because he had no life left back there at all.

But Zoe didn’t say anything, and we sat there listening to the wind blow steadily across the beach, whipping the sand in violent eddies.

*Victor Hoeflich dreamed at night of his wife who’d been dead for eleven years.*

*In his dream he reached over in the dark to touch her body and found it cold and rigid beside him.*

*He stopped sleeping.*

*In the motel room he kept the TV on all the time, turned to the twenty-four hour sports news, a repeating litany of ballgame scores, loud and endless commentary.*

*He left the beds made, and sat in a chair by the window, looking out at the dim parking lot and the dark water beyond that.*

*If he drifted off for a moment he found himself back in his old bed, turning over in the dark.*

*And sometimes what his hands touched wasn’t cold yet, the body stirring beneath the covers, soft and responsive.*

*But when he switched on the bedside light, the eyes that looked up at him were empty, two vacant pools . . . the old flesh of Anna’s face drawn and withered, her mouth open, lips pulled back to show dry, graying gums.*

*And that image remained with him even after he woke to the clamorous voices of sportscasters, the TV flickering luridly through the dim room.*

A week after Victor arrived at the motel, a man showed up in the parking lot in an old Lincoln sedan with a sagging bumper and tinted windows. He got out of the car and stood for several minutes talking on a cellphone, staring out at the water. He was thin and balding, wearing a grey overcoat with long tails that hung below his knees and flapped loosely in the wind.

He didn’t come into the reception office. Instead he walked from his car directly to the room where Victor was staying. We heard him knocking on the door. It was the middle of the day and the old man hadn’t returned from his walk. Zoe got up and went to stand by the front windows, looking down the line of doors to where the stranger stood. I wondered how this man had known which room to check. After a few moments he walked briskly back to his car, and got in. He circled the parking lot, and slowed the car down as he passed the office, staring at us I imagined, though it was impossible to say because the dark windows obscured his face.

The man had left a note tacked to Victor’s door. In bold slanting print he’d written a phone number and below that:

*Please call, Victor.*

*Your granddaughters miss you.*

At the bottom he’d written his full name, *Simon Lee*, and, in parenthesis after that, cousin *Adele’s husband*.

The message made no sense to me and I kind of thought it would be equally puzzling to Victor. After spending days constructing the man from the barest facts, it felt as though, before me, he had become what I chose to see. I couldn’t account for Simon Lee, and his intervention seemed like a personal affront.

I removed the note from the door, and took it to the office.

Zoe and I argued about whether I should return it. She told me flatly that I had no choice. But I wanted to keep it. Did it matter if Victor saw it? I didn’t think it mattered. Still, I didn’t want him to. The note was interference; it was a violation.

“The note isn’t part of the context,” I said, “why should he see it? He’s old and frail. It would only confuse him.”

“That’s crazy,” Zoe said.

I shook my head, pacing back and forth. I began talking quickly. I didn’t want to let this go. I felt the pleasure of operating on pure impulse. Victor was not a man with granddaughters; he wasn’t someone people send a distant relative to find. Simon Lee, was a caricature and an aberration, a narrative mistake; the note would mean less than nothing to the old man.

Zoe stared straight at me, exasperated.

“What are you talking about?” she said, “Do you even hear yourself?”

She was sitting at the reception desk, and I was standing on the other side facing the windows. Over her shoulder I saw Victor approaching from across the parking lot and felt a sudden wave of relief. On the window, across the huddled figure of the old man, I saw, for a moment and faintly, myself, superimposed. My hair stood on end, my eyes lit up wildly, the whole of my narrow face trembling on the glass, like a reflection in water.

I smiled; I couldn’t help it. This was a simple story after all, and our options were limited. I pointed and Zoe turned to look.

That evening a man and woman checked into the motel with a small child, a pale boy suffering, evidently, from the flu. His parents’ jaws were set grimly, their eyes strained with worry. Zoe heated water in our kitchen, and took a pot of tea to their room.

I sat in the office until after midnight, listening to the wind and the sound of cars passing on the highway. Caravans of souls moving through the night. All the people I’d never know, I thought, this is what makes the world.

The couple with the sick child checked out early the next morning. I waited for Victor to go out on his walk, but by ten o’clock, he still hadn’t left the room. He didn’t respond when we knocked on his door, and when Zoe finally unlocked it, I wasn’t surprised to find the room empty.

On the dresser, Victor had left his room key and enough cash to pay for an additional night. Beside the money was a scrap of paper on which he’d scrawled “301 Endicott Hotel,” and below that the date and time of a flight from SFO to O’Hare.

That afternoon the fog was replaced by low rain clouds and the middle of the day became like a dismal twilight.

For two days we did nothing but wait. I spent hour after hour watching disaster reports on the Weather Channel, engrossing myself in other people’s misfortunes. Occasionally Zoe played a record on her uncle’s old turntable in the office, sad songs, invested, for me, with a poignancy they probably didn’t deserve. I wanted to believe Zoe felt the same way I did. The sadness wasn’t misplaced or melodramatic, I was sure of this. I drank from the liquor cabinet, unwillingly almost, only so as not to feel so acutely the loneliness of the rainy afternoons.

On the second night after Victor left, I was in the old man’s room, pacing, with the TV on. In my hand I had the little scrap of paper he’d left, and I remember looking at his scrawled writing and thinking it could not have been a mistake, thinking it had to mean something. An hour later, I was lying awake in bed and the idea came to me. It came from nowhere, fully formed, with a simplicity that extended in several directions. I still don’t know how I convinced Zoe to go along. We talked about it, we must have, but the conversation, what was said, her objections, I can remember none of these things.

The next evening, when Victor walked out of the rotating doors at the Endicott Hotel to leave for the airport, Zoe and I were waiting for him with a cab pulled up in front. Beneath his windbreaker he wore a white collared shirt tucked into the top of grey corduroy trousers. The driver held the curbside door open. Profiled by the palm-filtered lights of the hotel lobby, the old man looked small, his face downcast and sad. We helped him carry his suitcases to the cab. Zoe sat in the front beside the driver, and Victor and I sat together in the back. The driver had on gloves with cutoff fingertips and he didn’t speak, looking straight ahead the whole time. The old man tilted his head back, closed his eyes, and exhaled softly into the cab’s still interior.

“Where do you want to go Victor?” I asked, without turning to look at him.

He shrugged and said something in an indecipherable whisper. I hadn’t expected him to respond.

The car began moving; beyond the passenger–side windows the lights of the hotel slipped away gradually. The tires generated a disconsolate cadence that was distinct for a moment from the regular noise of the engine.

“What are your names?” Victor said suddenly, voice slightly raised.

“Sebastian and Zoe,” I replied.

A quizzical look came over his face. He took a crumpled piece of paper out of his coat pocket, and examined it intently.

The car entered smoothly into the stream of traffic. Zoe’s dark hair fell across one eye as she turned around and looked between Victor and me at the traffic behind us. Her eyes were hard and distant. She wouldn’t meet my gaze. The downtown lights slid over the tinted windows like intimate projections. The radio was on, a soft voice speaking slow, modulated lines that had the sound of incantations or prayers, but you had to strain to make out the words.

In the darkness of the cab, the events of the previous days seemed completely unreal, invested with a childish solemnity. I closed my eyes and leaned my head back. As my thoughts drifted, I saw the figure of a man, a head and torso, a face. He looked down at me from above as if I were lying on my back at his feet. His head was ringed by yellow light and the main part of his face was inscrutable. There was the disconcerting impression that he was examining a distasteful thing, like a fish convulsing on dry land, or a cadaver. I heard a low voice murmur, “no one will notice,” felt something touch my shoulder, and only then did I realized I had fallen asleep.

After a while we seemed to slow way down. When I opened my eyes I saw only the twin red taillights of the car ahead of us; otherwise it was dark. Eventually we passed into the outer edges of the city. Zoe was facing backwards from the front seat. She reached out and touched Victor’s knee as the road turned down toward the water. The old man shuddered and looked around. I put my hand up to my eyes, and then didn’t know what to do with it, and let it fall back into my lap.

One thing I remember clearly about that night is the sound of the wind. In the afternoon, coming off the water it had picked up and blown the sky clear. As we came down along the coastal road, with the city behind us, the town, lines of regular houses approaching the water looked sort of provincial in the moonlight. The motel was down there, but the lights were off and I could not see it. The wind buffeted the car, and the sound it made was like a freight train rushing behind us.