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Rage for Order
Josh Emmons
Orange curtains slid apart and Iratxe’s faint brown reflection curved outward in the opening windows. Like all the other women, she wore a white uniform and white tennis shoes and no makeup and an absent look cut with mastery of the task at hand. Her hair was forced into a glossy ponytail and tendrils blackened the edge of her forehead. While she worked her hair tie came undone by the millimeter; she refastened it and picked up a torn package of instant coffee that left a light gun powder trail on the floor as she walked to the wastebasket, which had been moved from its regulation spot beside the desk. Then she sat on the microcouch and her mouth moved as though in conversation or song, her left foot tapping her right. Seven minutes later she got up and finished cleaning the room and I closed my stinging eyes.

When I took the job as a surveillance monitor at the Gaslighter Motel my whole life seemed in retrospect to have been building toward tragedy. For most of elementary school I’d had only two friends—twin brothers who shared a rare heart condition for which they were frequently in the hospital—and so during recess did nothing but watch the other kids. Therefore I was nicknamed, in a cruel way, the Umpire, and, being very small, beaten up regularly. For high school I transferred to a different district and joined clubs and made lots of friends and vowed never again to be as alone or observant as I’d been as a child. After graduating I worked on the factory floor of a shipping company, always surrounded by people, until I turned thirty-
four and started dating a woman who wanted me to do something white collar and so urged me to respond to an online want ad that read: “MOTEL SERVICES, office job requires an eye for detail, good pay and benefits, f/t.”

Julio Ramirez, manager and acting human resources director of the Gaslighter, thanked me for coming to the interview and I thanked him in return. We both smiled and then stopped. As at other travel lodges in the area, he said, holding my resume in both hands, some people had started renting rooms at his motel in which to cook up potent batches of methamphetamines. Did I know of this phenomenon? To the untrained eye, these sick degenerates were hard to identify. If they had open facial sores or twitched or were obviously high, the front desk knew to alert the authorities, but many of them hid their illegal agenda behind a clear complexion and steady voice. When they finished making this drug in the rooms, they left behind mounds of pseudoephedrine boxes and broken Bunson burners and blast radii of scorched carpet like craters on the moon. The Gaslighter, therefore, said Julio, through a special arrangement with the Drug Enforcement Agency, had just installed microscopic surveillance cameras in all the rooms in order to catch these sorry degenerates in the act. My job, if he were to offer and I were to accept it, would be to sit in an observation chamber and watch four video monitors systematically rotate through all fifty-two rooms at the Gaslighter.

“Isn’t that illegal?” I asked.

“I told you,” said Julio, slowly, like a teacher responding to a question he’d already answered, “we have a special arrangement.”

“But can the police really enter someone’s motel room without a warrant?”

“Perhaps this job isn’t for you.”

“It’s for me.”

“I need someone who can follow orders.”

“That’s me. I love orders.”

Julio gave me the job the next day, and a month later my girlfriend moved to Sacramento with a friend of her father’s.

The second time I noticed Iratxe, when at six-thirty in the morning I was getting
ready to go home and she was cleaning the room of a guest who'd left early with no luggage, she stopped in the middle of vacuuming to remove a pocket diary from her supply pushcart. Her mouth moved and she wrote something down, pausing between phrases to chew on the end of her pencil. It seemed that she was writing down song lyrics and I wished the video had sound. How nice it would be to hear a song in the making.

During the nine months I worked at the Gaslighter Motel, I only saw two guests manufacture crystal meth. On both occasions Julio said that his contact at the DEA was too busy to come make the bust, and that we would have to let the them get away with it this time. He sounded weary and defeated, as though after decades of trying to make the world a better place he had finally admitted that it was impossible. However, we had, he said, done all we could and should not blame ourselves for what the drug was doing to our community and neighbors and loved ones. I, especially, was to be applauded for alerting him as quickly as I did.

Instead of produce drugs, most guests simply unpacked, charged their phones, slept, watched TV, played cards, ate, stretched, drank, packed, undressed, dressed, and performed a wide range of sexual acts. For instance, I saw seven or eight thousand incidents of masturbation. Thousands of couples having sex. Dozens of threesomes. One foursome. Four fivesomes. With the lights on and the lights off, clothed and naked, with dogs, in costumes, with professional bondage gear, with minors, with the elderly, with toys, interracial, on camera, in and on top of and beneath the bed, lubed and dry, choreographed, awkward, beautiful, obscene, violent, somnolent, involving bodily waste products, involving tears and post-coital prayers.

It soon became clear that Julio, having sworn me to secrecy about my job in accordance with the special DEA arrangement, used the log I kept of each room's activities to locate and preserve every second of video footage that could be cleaned up and doctored into salable pornography. Stopping by in the mornings when my shift ended, he would scan my log, written discreetly but unmistakably, and say, "Another night without any sick degenerates, thank god." Then he would shake my hand and sometimes give me a fifty-dollar bonus "for diligence on the job," with a
great brotherly grin. I knew what the money was for and so perhaps became a type of unspoken accomplice.

Iratxe stopped wearing a wedding ring in the middle of my sixth month on the job. When carrying a dry-cleaned suit she held it above her head so that its bottom didn’t scrape the ground. She never lingered over forgotten items in the rooms. Never scratched herself or failed to vacuum under the chairs. One morning in my ninth month she lay face-up on the bed of Room 215 and flapped her arms and legs like a child making angel patterns in the snow. Then she got up, smoothed her outfit, and finished cleaning.

She looked a few years younger than me and, like the other cleaning women, probably spoke no English, but she seemed to harbor romantic impulses that beat synchronously with mine, and she was apparently a songwriter or at least interested in music, and she resembled Frida Kahlo, and at a certain moment I decided that we might, under the right circumstances, fall in love. I told Julio one morning, while folding a stack of five-dollar bills into my small wallet, that Iratxe was a very good maid.

“Yes,” Julio said, underlining something in the log.

“Did she get a divorce recently?” I asked.

“Who?”

“Iratxe.”

“Iratxe who?”

“The maid we’re talking about.”

“She was married to my cousin, but he left her. She is very controlling, very small-minded. I am going to fire her.”

“Why?”

“I only hired her as a favor to my cousin when they had twins and needed more money.”

“She has children and you’re going to fire her?”

“A man in my position must do many regrettable things. All managers do.”

That night I got off work to attend the wedding of a friend who took me aside.
at the reception and asked when it would be my turn, because I was becoming one of those aged bachelors whom people half pity and wholly avoid. In my lonely apartment and lonely job. Was that where I wanted to be? “God,” he said, reeling on two legs, “you’ve got to become a participant and quit lurking on the sidelines.” He seemed to grow less balanced as we stood there, so I put my arm around his shoulder. “I mean,” he said, “it only gets worse from here on out. Worse and worse.”

Two days later Iratxe placed two mints on pillows instead of the regulation one. She shampooed carpets by hand. Replaced plastic daisies on office tables with real ones. Wiped down televisions and flipped over mattresses and disinfected telephone handles with Lysol. She scrubbed the bathroom floors’ grout with a toothbrush, her hand moving back and forth along the tiles’ stitching, the trails of resulting white like dynamite fuses burning in reverse. The rooms grew lighter and she dumped out the water and consolidated her cleaning materials.

When Julio came to collect the night’s log I showed him Iratxe in action, pointed out her diligence on the job, the way she put much more care and energy into her work than any other cleaning woman. Surely this helped the case for her remaining at the Gaslighter more than his cousin’s complaints hurt it. “That bitch,” he said, tucking the log under his arm and shaking his head. “I have told her to get gone from here.”

“You fired her already?”

He left the room and slammed the door behind him. I quickly followed and caught up with him in room 204, where he ripped the electrical cord of the vacuum cleaner Iratxe was using out of the wall socket. After so many months of seeing the machine move about soundlessly on video, I’d forgotten the hateful wailing sound it made, even as it died down. Julio grabbed Iratxe’s arm and dragged her toward the door, spitting Spanish at her like an angry priest exorcising a demon. Iratxe said nothing, submitted docilely to her mistreatment until she was outside the room. Then, beginning to cry, she said something in Spanish. Julio looked at her and then turned to me.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.
“Give her her job back,” I said.

Iratxe stared at me curiously, as though slowing down the words in her head to make sense of them.

“You are not concerned in this matter.”

“I’m prepared to tell the police what I do here.”

“They know all about the special arrangement.”

“They don’t know anything about it.”

“They certainly do.”

“Then I’ll confirm it for them.”

Julio shrugged and in a kinder voice than before spoke to Iratxe, who wiped away her tears and walked away. He stared after her from the doorway and said, without looking at me, “I will give you one thousand dollars a week on top of your regular salary, beginning now.”

“I won’t be bought.”

“Eleven hundred.

“Hire Iratxe back.”

“I cannot do that. Eleven-fifty and we never discuss this again.”

Expecting to come to my senses at any second, I watched Julio walk away. I looked around as though I’d just woken up from sleepwalking. Eleven hundred and fifty dollars a week. In the pushcart sitting in the middle of the room I found a small pocket diary filled with Spanish, some of which was arranged in stanzas, the rest in standard prose. I flipped the vacuum cleaner on. In one corner of the room was a circular burn mark in the carpet, and it was as though after decades of trying to make the world a better place I’d admitted that it was impossible, and I said, “No, I won’t be bought,” which in the roar of the machine’s noise sounded like nothing at all.

I went home and slept fitfully, waking up every hour to turn on the television and watch a movie or crime show or congressional debate. I went to work that evening and after two hours of looking at adults slump down on worn stained furniture and kids run around frenetically, no one satisfied, no one capable of such a condition,
all the deflation of human beings at night when their best ideas and selves are long
gone, I decided that I couldn’t be there anymore, that if I did it would get worse
and worse. I stood up and cleared out my things—a hard plastic water bottle, a bag
of potato chips, a deck of cards—and went to Julio’s office.

“What do you mean you’re leaving?” he said. “We have a special
arrangement.”

“Not anymore.”

He licked his lips and squinted at me, quickly assessing everything. “Twelve
hundred. I will pay you that every week on top of everything else. Untaxed, this is
an offer you can’t refuse and you know it.”

“Where does Iratxe live?”

“Why do you concern yourself with her? She is a terrible maid. She takes too-
long breaks and unless she thinks she’s about to be fired she cleans poorly.”

“Tell me where she lives. That’s all I want.”

Julio stood up and came over to me. “Sit, please,” he said, turning a chair.

“No.”

“Iratxe has gone back to my cousin. There is no need for you to do what you
contemplate doing. They had a reconciliation. With her twins and without a job,
she is back in his home.”

“Then you’ll hire her back.”

“My cousin would hurt you. It is for this that I will not tell you where she is. I
admit that they are not back together, but he is a sick man. A sick degenerate man.
You do not want to get involved in that sordidness, not a decent man like you.”

I left his office and he called after me that even if we no longer had a special
arrangement, I shouldn’t do anything foolish or cruel. I owed him this. Please! he
yelled.

Outside I got in my car and there was no escape from the sordidness. Not
really. It was everywhere, hidden and out in the open, during the night and during
the day, alone and together. We watchers saw this confirmed again and again. As I
sat in my idling car it began to rain. I moved to turn on the wipers when I noticed
two mints placed above them on the windshield. I got out and grabbed them and
looked around and sitting on a bench beneath the bus awning fifty feet away was Iratxe. I grabbed her diary from the car and walked over to the bus shelter, careful to shield it beneath my shirt.

“Hola,” I said.

“Hola,” she said, shivering. She uncrossed her arms when I brought out her diary. Accepting it with her eyes cast down, she counted all the pages and then, satisfied, stuffed it in her coat pockets.

I’d exhausted my Spanish and yet stood there as though waiting to be struck with fluency, as though with enough desire and good will I might like some entranced Pentecostal be able to speak a language I’d never known before. She smiled and I smiled and the sordidness seemed to be only half the picture; looking to the right and left and up and down, one could see examples of something else, something else altogether. Iratxe shrugged her shoulders and I did the same—I felt like a mime, able only to mimic—and then, because hope for the impossible fades so quickly, I turned around and walked away.

“Hey!” she said, and when I looked around she was grinning widely, the happiest I’d ever seen her, the opposite of someone who had been abandoned and fired and left to crumple beneath the weight of too many responsibilities. “I never thanked you for this morning. Or for tonight.”

Walking back I said nothing, for like a reflection curving outward I was getting lighter and lighter until finally the rain stopped and I figured out where to begin.