

Nuala O'Connor

Room 313

- 5 You rap on the door and call out, 'Housekeeping.' You don't wait long when there is silence. You want, sometimes, to swipe the key card and catch people doing things that are the stuff of locked doors. The most you have witnessed is a retreating bare behind, married to a shocked 'Oh'.
- 10 You love business people; their hardly there-ness, their generosity. Before you roll out your cart each morning, you study your list. The list is your map for the day – too many Leavers and it will be a tough one; lots of Stayers means a soft run. If the Stayers are business people, even better: they lie on one side of the bed, barely denting the pillow. They use a single towel and don't mess with the toiletries. It's Hoover humming idly and TV on, a little sit down, then pluck away a few stray hairs from the bed and bath, and job done.
- 15 You like families too; the other maids complain about them – the walked-in sand, the chaos – but families leave behind toys and you get to keep them for your girl. You have taken home to your bedsit hardly loved dolls, sweet picture books, and all shapes of buckets and spades.
- 20 The ones you hate are the lovers: these are the chocolate-on-the-sheets brigade; strawberry hulls mashed into the carpet; sticky champagne glasses and a sodden towel heap. They leave hairs clogging the plughole and floaters in the toilet; they are too distracted to flush. Lovers are slovenly, slapdash, and the bastards never tip.
- 25 All this week you are doing Room 313. Marta, the Head Housekeeper, says it's not normal for a hotel to have rooms with the number thirteen on the door and she refuses to even enter them. But Room 313 is your favourite, your lucky room. It is the room of the €100 tip that you kept secret because the other girls would talk too much about it if you told them. And then Marta would sweep the rooms before you begin each morning, vacuuming up your tips; she would lose her thirteen phobia pretty quick, you reckon. Ever
- 30 since the €100 tip, you've loved this room; it seems to hum with energy. Its current occupant is a business woman; you have christened her Coco. All her clothes are black and white; her underwear too. She wears black slips with white piping that feel soft as baby skin beneath your fingers. Even softer when you slip out of your uniform and try them on. Coco's perfume is citrus sweet and comes in a tiny metal flask that you have to wipe down after you try a spritz because your fingerprints
- 35 smudge the silver.
- 40 You stand at the window of Room 313 and look down. It rains all the time here, a roof of grey covers the place and rarely lifts. Even the sea is dark – it churns and turns, a murky broth. You think of your daughter and wonder what her voice sounds like now. She is silent on Skype these days, staring at you as if you are a stranger. Your mother says she is a great talker but you have not heard a word from her mouth for months. You miss her in a way that did not seem possible when you left Yalta. You would give anything to hold her small body in your arms and place her in bed for the night; rub her back until she drifts. You would love to see her wake with candyfloss hair and one pudgy paw under her cheek.
- 45 Room 313 has a peacefulness that makes you linger. You turn from the window and begin a half-tidy; Coco doesn't cause much mess. You pull the bedcovers straight, fix the curtain pleats and empty the bin. You stay a while in her room, sitting in the chair by the window, enjoying the comfort of the space, the calming view of the seashore. 313 always smells nice, no matter who stays in it; the hotel's corridors are sour and

50 they make your stomach flip-flop. You think how you would like to bring your daughter to the beach – here or at home – and let the water lap her toes. Together you could claw the damp sand with your fingers and make a mighty sandcastle.

55 You are sitting on Coco's toilet when you hear her come in and you have to suck the poo back inside and pretend that you are washing the sink, so she doesn't suspect. You open the bathroom door and she stands there, staring.

'Oh, it's only you,' she says, and laughs. She opens the window and lights a cigarette. 'I'm the solo smoker at the conference. I feel like a pariah, so I come up here to have a fag. Want one?'
60 You shake your head. 'I will come back later; I was nearly finished anyway.'
'No, no. I won't get in your way.'

65 You take your can of Mr Sheen and start to spray and dust the wardrobe doors, knowing that she is following you with her eyes. The cigarette smoke blends with the Mr Sheen and with her perfume, newly scenting your skin. Coco goes to the safe and taps in her code; the safe lows like a calf as it swings open. She takes out a pearl necklace and holds it up.

'What do you think of that?' she says.

70 'Pretty.'

'Come here. Try it on.'

'Oh, no. I couldn't.'

75 'Please,' she says, and points to the mirror, so you stand in front of it.

80 She moves behind you and you feel heat radiating from her body. Her hands come around your front and she unbuttons the top of your uniform. She lays the cold pearls against your throat and snaps the clasp. 'Look at them, like a row of moons,' she whispers, close into your ear. 'They come from the Gulf of Mannar. Imagine the diver, naked, plunging to the ocean floor. Imagine him shucking open the oyster, looking for that lunar glow.' Her eyes are locked onto yours in the mirror. 'Imagine how many times he had to dive through the deeps to find each pearl on this string.' Her hand moves across your breastbone, fingering the beads one at a time. 'Where do you come from?' she says.
85 'Ukraine.'

'I knew you were too good-looking to be Irish.'

Coco lays her hands on your shoulders and you feel like a bird, safe under its mother's wings. She dips her head and her lips are on your neck; you can feel the soft wetness of her tongue; she licks at your skin then bites gently with her teeth. You close your eyes and feel everything swell between your legs.

90 In one swift jerk, she steps back, unclips the pearls and marches towards the safe. She throws the necklace inside, slams the door and punches in her code.

'You never know who'd be wandering around your room,' she says, grabbing her handbag from the chair and leaving.

95 Your skin shines where her mouth was. You run your forefinger across the wet patch then lick it. With the same finger you press the digits on the safe's keypad. Once again it gives an animal groan. You take the pearl necklace and pop it into the pocket of your uniform. With it you pocket the diver and his shucking

100 tool, the oyster shells and sunshine and clear green sea of the Gulf of Mannar. You turn off the light and close the door on Room 313. The grains of sand that the pearls once were, safe now, in your hands.

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