Night at the Grand Hotel

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With thanks to a generous friend who gave me the idea for this story.

There are, perhaps, too many flowers in the big blue and white flower bowls, she thinks, and shivers slightly, though the day is warm — a mid-summer’s day, the afternoon sun coming in through the French windows, honeying the parquet floors — and the flowers very lovely, scenting the air: great bowls of pink and white roses and peonies mixed with blue agapanthi.

She has chosen the best hotel in Paris, The Grand Hotel. She has often walked by it and wanted to go in and have a meal or spend the night. Why not? If she is planning on doing something of this kind, why not do it in style? Style, though she had thought it unimportant in her early youth, has become increasingly important now.

She has dressed with style for this important moment in her life. She’s wearing her new, dark, fitted jacket and her best skirt, the beige one Emmanuel made her buy, with the skirt that opens softly and shows off her slim legs at the hem, like petals opening to the sun. She has on her sling-back patent leather sandals and a soft mauve muslin scarf around her neck, which shows off her blue eyes and the glossy pink of her lipstick. She has brushed her blond, shoulder-length hair till it shines.

She feels something akin to the sensation she had as an adolescent: of being an actress in a film, walking across the lobby, head held high, going through the flowers toward her lover. She can almost hear the background music, feel the lights on her.

Despite her attire, her attractions, the elderly, short-sighted man at the reception desk squints down at her with his supercilious Parisian air. “How can I help you, Madame?” he asks with a doubtful expression, a vague glance in his eye, as though he were convinced there would be no help he could give to the likes of her: too young, too pretty, a woman alone.

“I would like a room for the night — a suite, that is,” she adds, lifting her voice slightly because of the man’s expression.

“You made a reservation under which name?” he asks, looking at the big, black book before him without much hope.

“I didn’t make a reservation, but I have cash — and I’d be very
grateful if you could find me a nice big room for the night," she says lifting up her large white handbag and plonking it down before the man with a little, satisfying thud on the marble counter. She smiles and looks at him sideways, rather surprised, herself, at her words. She is not usually this brave or this brash, but why hesitate at this point?

The man clears his throat and makes a show of looking at his book, but she can see she has already won. Money does usually win with the French. Perhaps, if she had always been this brave, this brash, she thinks, she wouldn’t be here this late afternoon in August checking in at the Grand, intent on following in her older sister’s footsteps.

All her life she has been a follower, a leaner, a vine. She has watched others and listened and learned to do likewise. Emmanuel, who has taken himself off in his green Porsche — he likes fast cars, is just the last man in a list of men she has listened to, followed, leaned upon, used as a conduit into life.

Her sister was there from the start. She toddled uncertainly after her as soon as she could, across the lawn, arms outstretched, calling her name: Rachel, Rachel, Rachel. They wore the same smocked dresses, the same Clark’s sandals, climbed high into the same branches of the same mulberry tree, spreading the purple fruit on their faces. They made up an imaginary language only they could speak. Constance remained in the pool, despite chattering teeth, saying she wasn’t cold, she wasn’t, until her sister emerged from the water in her identical swim suit. They both read *Pinocchio*, with Constance holding her book upside-down and pretending she could read when she was three and her sister a precocious five.

Later, they borrowed one another’s clothes, one another’s boyfriends, one another’s houses, one another’s beds.

"There seems to be a vacancy — one of our finest rooms," the man says, and eyes the white handbag avidly. He names a not inconsiderable sum. "Would that suit?"

"For one night?" she gasps, but when he nods, she hesitates for only a moment. What does a hundred francs one way or another matter any more? She is not going to need money, after all. She takes out the necessary bills, counts them, and adds a few extra for the man, who nods, glances at his colleague who is standing helping another guest, and murmurs that she is very kind.

He asks for her passport or some identifying card, and she hands it to him and fills out the form, writing her name and making up an address.
“May we help you with your luggage, Madame?” he asks, squinting behind her.

“I have all I need here — ” Constance says, picking up her white handbag, which is, indeed, the case.

When the telephone rings, Constance’s mother, by a strange coincidence, is arranging a bowl of pink and white roses in her pretty pink sitting room in California. For a moment, she considers letting the answering machine pick up the call, but the memory of her elder daughter, Rachel, lying on her bed, legs tucked up to her chest — makes her pluck the receiver eagerly, like a weed from the soil.

“Oh, Constance dear, how lovely to hear your voice,” her mother says. “Where are you calling from, darling?”

“I’m at the Grand Hotel in Paris for the night, Mother. Imagine!” her daughter says, a little breathlessly, giggling slightly. The mother thinks the daughter sounds rather silly. She sounds excited, distracted. What does the girl have to giggle about? And what is she doing at the Grand? Has she gone and taken a lover as the mother has suggested?

“Is everything alright, dear? Is Emmanuel with you?” the mother asks, though she has never liked Emmanuel, never trusted her daughter’s husband, and considers she was right. “Shifty eyes,” she said from the start. Now he seems to have found some other woman to eye.

She wonders, too, why the girl is staying at such an expensive hotel. Her younger daughter has never been extravagant, has not seemed to care much for luxury. Neither of her girls was extravagant or cared as much as their mother about beautiful things, though her elder girl, Rachel, was the artistic one, the one who played the piano so beautifully.

The mother remembers taking both her girls to expensive hotels after the death of their father, when they were seven and nine, and their complaining that there were no other children at expensive hotels, that expensive hotels made them feel lonely.

“Emmanuel is not here. He’s off again in Brussels. I’m here on my own,” the girl says slurring her words slightly. The mother wonders if she is drunk. Her daughter is not a drinker, but now she sounds drunk, drunk at this hour of the morning, but perhaps it isn’t morning in Paris.

“What time is it in Paris?” the mother asks her daughter, glancing at her watch. She can never remember if Europe is ahead or behind America. She has a hair appointment in half an hour and rather wishes
she had not plucked up the phone so eagerly. She is going to be late, and she hates being late. She always tells people she is pathologically early. Besides, there is something about this conversation that is upsetting her, though she is not quite sure what. Why is the girl calling her from the Grand Hotel? If she had gone to the Grand to meet her lover, why would she call?

“It’s four thirty in the afternoon,” the daughter says. “I’m just lying down on the bed. Such a wide bed, such a lovely room, Mother. Green silk curtains, a green silk counterpane. There are even flowers in my room: white lilies. It’s perfect.”

The mother would like to ask: perfect for what? but says, instead, nothing.

“Am I catching you at a bad time, Mother?”

“No, no, not at all — just a few errands to do, darling.” There is another long pause. “How are you feeling, my dear?” her mother asks, as it seems the thing to say, and after all the girl must be paying a fortune for this call from an expensive hotel room in Paris all the way to California, though really she is not sure she wants to know.

Constance has always been the sort of child who tells her mother rather more than she wants to know: recounting all her little sorrows from an early age, exaggerating, making a mountain out of a molehill, as far as the mother is concerned, telling her things she would really prefer to ignore, since she cannot do anything about them, after all. Life, she has always felt, is better lived rather than talked about.

In her estimation, feelings, particularly, are better not discussed. She can’t remember any occasion when the discussion of a feeling has ever changed anything for anyone. She prides herself on her considerable activity, which in her estimation is what keeps her mental balance. She still plays a good game of tennis, swims fifty laps every day in her heated pool, gives amusing parties on the lawn, and keeps up with her large circle of influential friends.

She has a memory now of her younger child throwing herself down on the floor — she no longer remembers why — opening up her mouth wide — Constance has a wide, generous mouth — and screaming loudly. Her older daughter, Rachel, had always been the quiet, thoughtful one, the one the mother could count on in a pinch to help out, to drive unwanted guests around the countryside or to make polite conversation at the dinner table with a bore. She was the one who seemed more contained. A gifted pianist, a sensible girl, or so the mother had thought, until she had found her lying on her side on the bed, her knees tucked up like a bird in her nest, the empty
bottle of pills at her side.

There is no response from the other end, and for a moment the mother thinks the daughter might just have fallen asleep on her big bed at the Grand in the middle of the conversation with her mother.

"Constance, dear, are you there?" the mother says loudly. "Are you alright?"

"Well, it's just that I wanted to tell you, wanted you to know, that I have done something I've been wanting to do for a long time."

"Wanted to do for a long time, dear?"

"Yes. Well, it seems like a long time. Ever since you called in the night to tell me about Rachel."

The mother remembers calling her younger daughter in the night to give her the news. She remembers how the girl kept saying annoyingly, "It's not possible," and how she kept repeating, becoming more and more irate, "Well, I'm afraid it is possible."

How could she, how could Rachel, the mother thinks angrily, have done what she did? How dare she have done that to her!

"And now that Emmanuel has left…" Constance adds.

The mother is not sure what the daughter means, but she is afraid the girl is hinting at something that she has tried to do before, something that her older sister has done quite successfully.

"Constance, you haven't done anything foolish now have you?" the mother asks. She wonders if she should just put down the phone and call the Grand Hotel in Paris and have them go into her daughter's room. There must be some concierge who would go up and knock, or even break the door down, if it should be locked. Would the girl have given her real name at the desk? Would they be willing to do that? Would they arrive in time?

Or should she, perhaps, call the police directly, the French police and tell them to go the hotel immediately? But she doesn't speak French, and it might only be embarrassing. What if they broke down the door for nothing? She imagines the French police as she has seen them in a film, in their blue uniforms and capes and peaked hats, breaking down the elegant door at the Grand and barging into the room, only to find Constance there in the big room with its green silk curtains and green silk counterpane, half-naked on the bed, drinking a bottle of champagne, giggling with a lover. She wouldn't put it past her. The girl has always been drawn to men, the sort of unreliable men who have charm and no money and like to drive fast cars.

The mother doesn't want to make a fool of herself. She has been brought up, above all, not to make a fool of herself, not to make a
fuss; she never calls the doctor unless something is terribly wrong; she doesn’t like to bother people unnecessarily, and the girl, after all, has threatened this sort of thing several times before, and nothing has come of it. Once, she remembers the girl drinking a whole bottle of milk of magnesia, which had only made her violently sick. Surely, if she had really done something life-threatening, she wouldn’t be calling her mother up on the phone at four thirty in the afternoon from the Grand to tell her about it.

“Nothing foolish, Mother, nothing foolish,” the daughter confirms.

“I’m glad to hear that,” the mother says.

“I just wanted to say good-bye,” the girl says very slowly, and so softly that the mother has difficulty hearing the words.

“Now you are talking nonsense, Constance. I won’t listen to nonsense of this sort. We are not saying good-bye, but hello. That’s enough of that, please. You must pull yourself together. Go into the bathroom and wash your face and put on some lipstick. Brush your hair and go out and get some air. Take a long walk. Nothing like exercise to make one feel better. Make an effort for my sake. Why are you trying to upset me? You know how difficult things have been for me lately,” the mother says and she sniffs.

“I don’t want to upset you, Mother. On the contrary. That’s why I called you.”

“Why did you call me, Constance?” the mother asks, annoyed, eyeing the pink and white roses which don’t look quite fresh to her anymore. She will have to tell the florist.

“I just called to say I’m so sorry, that it is no one’s fault, that I don’t blame anyone, and that I love you very much,” the voice trails off.

“Constance, Constance! What are you talking about?” the mother shouts, but the girl must have put down the phone.

For a moment the mother stands in her pretty pink living room and looks around her: such a pretty shade of pink on the walls, with the white wainscoting creating a satisfying contrast, her silk pink sofa and the photo of her two little girls in their smocked organdy dresses on the desk, the older sister with her arm lovingly around the younger one’s waist. The younger one holds a petunia up to the camera like an offering.

She thinks again of the French police, of the hotel concierge, or even the American embassy, but really, when all is said and done, the girl is always exaggerating. She likes, has always liked, the mother thinks, to be the center of attention, to create drama, to call attention to herself, to have people run around her in circles. She will have to sort this
out for herself for once in her life. It is time she grew up. The mother remembers calling her Sarah Bernhardt as a girl when she would jump around on the bed, having some wild tantrum over nothing at all. The girl has everything in the world. She is a beautiful, gifted child who has been to the best schools and been given everything she ever desired. Why is she making such a fuss?

And she will be dreadfully late for her hair appointment, the mother mutters to herself, looking at her watch. She will put this call and all the other unpleasant things in her life out of her mind. She will go on with her life.