

Janice Harris / THE CAPRICE HOTEL

At 8:15 or so, Sal, the neighbour across the dog trails gave me a lift to work, as she did every morning. She is small in height, massive in everything else: stomach, arms, rims. I don't know what she really thought of me; I cared then. With Talkative Enigma at my waist, we'd trot into the hotel lobby, Sal at once to call for attention and "good morning" from Rita stalking the front desk. While signing in, she would then occupy Rita with the weather — in vain, Red Coiffure was disinterested. Sal's chagrin at having to work, interspersed the conversation. "What would we do without rent, Rita ha ha." "Don't come to me with your problems, I've got enough of my own," smirked the reply. Sal and I climbed the stairs to the linen room. "... 43 years old and behaving like that." "What do you mean Sal?" "Should be ashamed of herself ..." "Don't worry," I tried to be attentive, "at least we live the gospel life."

"I guess Anne is in." We looked down the candelabra-lit hall to a door that was ajar. "You know Jan," subterranean now, "I'm thinking of taking two weeks off and going to Prince George with Steve." (So it would be just another day, full of intrigue, contraposto; but how to reconcile this fact in the dense morning air still trapped from the week before.) Sal swung her handbag for a bit. We both became lost in the revery beneath our feet: green, yellow star, orange blob, splash, green, yellow ish, threadbare, loose lino squares — the linen room. "Hi girls." "Gooood morning Anne." "And how are you both today?" "Just fine." "You know it's damn chilly out there, how am I ever going to get into the garden when this cold weather is coming on?" Prerequisite "hmmmm" and "isn't it awful Sal," then the "went out with Johnny and Violet the other night" blah blah. The climate warmed, working at Anne perched before the desk. There were the

last slips to fill out, as well as the flush to fill the soft, white cheeks. Sal lit a cigarette. Eight thirty. I hung up my cardigan, searched for comfortable sandals and glanced over to see Anne's white hair falling out of its upward brushes; one, two, Sal's shifting on her shoes.

Private things, thoughts, curled up with the smoke, (Prince George by Monday, the next 12 days to visit the kids, relax), sometimes just colours, (Violet's moo moo she is making for her Hawaiian party). I jacked my elbows beside Sal's on the vinyl counter and made 'still lifes' all over the place: Plastic Detergent Bottle and Dried Grey Whip Mop; Folded Red Cloths in Wooden Shelves . . . These smokey indulgences were invaded as Madge, Birgit and Dotty filed in. The routine rally of "Hi everyone, how are you this morning . . . Jan, you look tired . . . Have a good two days off Dot? . . ." scaled the room back into a long shallow receptacle. A communal eight thirty eight. "Oh, and here's Jeanne," her green coat buttoned and holding a straw bag. Woven Berries and Leaves. Lips. Sal levered her elbow every so slow often to flick the ash. I looked at the reach around Birgit's waist and wondered about her equally fat German husband. Beside her, like a token Ionic column, Dot — classic, peaked, still half asleep.

With toast crumbs around her mouth, Madge shoved in between Sal and me, lit up one, and began to talk about Donna's house in a new subdivision. "So she likes it then, out there in Pitt Meadows?" volunteered Sal. "Sure, it's a nice split level and they're the only ones in the block with a tree." "I wouldn't mind giving her some of the shrubs from my yard ha." "She and Art fought for that lot, just because of the crazy tree." Anne, who had left earlier, came back to find us with keys already chained to the centre button hole and counting the rooms on our lists. "Sorry that there are 17 rooms girls but Sheila rang me up last night and said she was awful sick. Left me in a proper mess again she has." "Poor Sheila," loudly tutted Dot, Her Best Friend, "Sick!" Anne's next pitch was: "And Mr. Mason says he wants the chandeliers in the bathrooms cleaned. Now, I don't expect you to do them all today. Yes Madge, I know you've been doing the balcony windows." White Tufted Sparrow Hawk added, "ah, girls, we're a bit short of pillow slips and facecloths, so go easy until Ray comes around with the linen."

Jeanne was the first into the quiet hall; she hastened to the storage room to secure her well-stocked buggy. Even in times of drought, Jeanne would trundle through without being affected. Sal said there was something fishy about her eyes, always darting. Birgit and Madge followed her quick figure over the crawling yellow and orange stars; lingered by the glass door before climbing the stairs. Dot, Sal and I filled our buggies on the main floor. D's section had the bridal suite. In it, she would take a nap everysooften on the couch (the hallway door closed) and listen to the bodies fling themselves into the water poolside before dozing off. "Anne, could I have some more stationery please." (I was almost ready to push out.) Dotty was folding her facecloths with an elsewhere look that occupied her whole face, her nutted eyes . . . o i got nothing to do but look at you, nothing no nothin to do 'cept ('member) nutting in may, all that day just nuttin to doo oo o. Anne poked some envelopes and postcards into my hand — confidentially — because we are running short and you know Jan, with the change of management . . . "OK Anne, sure thing." (That's what I always said to her perpetual dilemmas.) "OK Anne, sure thing." As I stuffed the square glossies onto my buggy, I could hear above me buggies being jostled down the hall; now I was rolling my one beneath them — except for Dot, who began at her own leisure.

They were already stationed around the table on fold-out chairs when I came into the linen room for lunch — Dot nearest the sugar, Sal and Madge smoking by the stacks of towels. Birgit came in with the kettle. "Hi Janitz, you feal lak a goot cup of tea?" "Sure Birgit, that sounds really nice." I set up my chair by Sal and Madge, while Jeanne watched us from her end of the table. It was then that I heard about it, everyone else knew.

"You see Jan," Madge drew on her cigarette then stared past Sal, inwardly. "Yes," I urged. "I don't think this kid will take it like us who have been through it before." She had abruptly reclaimed Sal's eye and only smoke was between them. "Well, it was this funny smell down at my end this morning. Because I didn't know what it was, I sprayed plenty of the lysol around. But it damned got stronger." Stirring her tea with one hand, Dot rested her head on her other and seemed not to listen. "I thought it was coming from 247, so I knocked on the door. No one answered." Madge picked up her lunch bag with a languid hand and opened it. "In fact, I knocked lots of times

but every time, nothing." Tuna and celery. Thick, very wide, she must lift one with two hands to get it into her mouth, opened, the mouthful became two hypnotic red lips. "So I went down to Anne to ask her if she would phone 247 and see whether the guest wanted his room done up or not. When she rang, there was no answer; then she came up with me and, boy, was the smell ever getting strong." Now I was aroused, with questions, feelings, under the surface, a tight eeriness. "And?" "She knocked and opened the door. This man was stretched out on the cot, dead, with a pile of vomit beside his head on the pillow. His feet and legs were white and she, well, she just turned white too." Sal muttered fiercely, "Anne shouldn't have gone in; it was a stupid thing to do." (But god, the vomit I kept on thinking.) "I just shiver to think of what I saw even from the door." And I hadn't known this man, known if he had been of the living flesh and not some cold, grey stuff, its smell which permeated the nostrils, that all the doors and windows had to be opened so that it could disappear into the flux of air chained to the parking lot at the back of the hotel, hemmed in between a few straggling trees and lincoln continentals. We heard steps measured into the linen room — George, with a can of paint and a brush. "Hiya George and what are you going to?" asked Madge. He grunted, "I gotta paint 247." Sal stabbed her cigarette out in a glass ashtray. Lunch was over.

"Oh! I must get going and finish my rooms. Sally, Dot, are you coming?" As they left to go down to their buggies, I followed George, the dangling can brush soft bristle held aloft, through the muted candelabralight. At the entrance to the room, George paused, then went in. Now I was passing the room, aware of the cold flooded autumn air and the faint smell of the completed ritual. As I went back down to my buggy I heard the noise of maids returning to theirs, we were rolling out . . .