

# *The Bell-boy*

by SCC Overton

**I** AM THE BELL-BOY. I am the Hotel China. I scour my skin on the concrete.

I like the stairs. I do not like taking the lift. Naturally, as a bell-boy, I am compelled to often take the lift: with luggage and with possessors of luggage. However, on returning to my station in the lobby I take the old fire escape in the centre of the building. The old fire escape backs on to the central hard core of the hotel: the structure upon which all the various annexes and projections and appendages are hung; the spinal column. I emerge from this abandoned stairwell through a door marked 'Private' into a service corridor and from there, back into the cool marble interior of the foyer.

I do not speak. I politely accept the leather suitcases from the taxi driver, and I convey them into the lift. My hands break out in sweat: a defensive sweat against the sap of the handles, formed of every taxi driver, baggage handler, check-in staff member, friend or loved one who happened to come into contact with them before me. Thus, as I enter the old fire escape and dash back down, two stairs at a time, I stretch my arms out behind me and scour my hands on the rough, dusty concrete walls. At the bottom, my hands are powdered and dry, and the old, abandoned walls have absorbed the organic residue of a myriad handlers.

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I accept tips, but they are not solicited. I seal them in a jar back in my lodgings. I do not touch the money and so it grows slowly and perversely within its confinement. I am paid a fixed amount by the hotel directly into a bank account. My rent and utilities are paid automatically from the same account. I eat at the hotel. I take a single bar of soap back every week, along with one fresh set of bedsheets and a towel. I do not leave a trace of myself, except at the hotel, except in the old fire escape.

I see the hotel from my window. At night, it is almost formless; its shape only indicated by the regularity of the lighted windows. It hums with electric light: warm yellow light from the low-powered bulbs in the guest rooms and cool blue light from the fluorescents in the lobby. Some of the lights never go out, and as the sickly sun rises in the morning these lights are absorbed and the hotel is once again confined to its natural boundaries, its pale concrete skin and the unbearable weight of its own body.

In the summer, the hotel sweats. The walls are covered with the dew of humidity, the windows have a blind greyness as the sky reaches its most polluted and bleak, and the exterior of the glass-panelled atrium pours with condensation as the air-conditioned interior becomes arid and deathly cold. The bar spills its liquors with renewed vigour and the urine flows hot and dark into the bowls on every floor. The doormen stand at the hotel mouth and saturate their uniforms with thick sweat like saliva at the nape of their necks and the cavity of their chests. I pass through the canal of the old fire escape and scour my hands all the more strongly. The sheets are sodden and the drains are drunk with every secretion of the guests. The pipes and ducts are congested with tepid water and turbid air.

I cannot sleep during the summer. Instead, I wander the streets with my head lowered, ignoring and being ignored by the people around me. I nearly always end up back at the hotel, looking up at the rear of the building from the suppurating back streets that encircle it.

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Occasionally, I enter the old fire escape from where it discharges into the waste disposal area. I have to move the old wheeled skips, bringing up swarms of bugs from their putrefied repast, and squeeze round to the door. The door itself is old, but has been panelled with steel for security. Once it is unlocked and open, the warped layers of chipboard can be seen on the inside, curled like pages of a damp book from the never-ending cycle of rain and humidity.

Inside, it is a little cooler and drier. I often think that the lack of human presence preserves the atmosphere like that of a tomb or an ancient ruin. I lie there, curled in the tiny space where the staircase doubles back on itself, and listen to the muffled sounds around me. I assimilate the rhythm of the hotel and make it my own. I could lie there for days and absorb the movements across the body of the building: people moving here, people channelled there; up, down, across, through. A perfect self-sustaining, autonomic system. At a certain point, when viewed from a certain distance over a certain time, even the people would disappear. They would become as a blur as they are consumed and excreted, and all that would be visible would be the hotel as it ages and matures.

It was during one such restless summer night that this natural rhythm was disrupted. I must have been getting careless with the exterior door of the old fire escape, which was strange, because it was my most closely-guarded secret; my only secret. I had managed to appropriate the keys some months after I joined the hotel staff. In fact, I had taken only one key into my own possession: the last key. The others I had simply de-labelled and moved to incongruous locations and thus they had become redundant, forgotten artefacts and the space which they unlocked had become a cypher in the very heart of the building. Yet, as I lay there, almost comatose in the murky yellow light from the windows, I was disturbed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. They were cautious at first; high-pitched clunks and scuffs on the concrete. Then they paused. I rose to my feet, but regretted it almost immediately. A female voice called out, asking who was there. I waited in

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silence, but the voice called again. I moved down the stairs, wondering what it would take to remove this person from my sanctuary.

She was crouched by the door, sheltering in its shadow. She asked me a few questions as I approached – who was I, did I work for the hotel – but she desisted when I did not answer. I lifted her gently to her feet with my hand under her arm and moved her out into the waste disposal area. She did not resist. I locked the door behind me and stowed the key and then led her away from the hotel. In the darkness I could make out her form and her dress, but these things made no impact on me. They were so many leaves on a roadside tree: glimpsed, registered, but impossible to store in the memory.

I led her to a main thoroughfare. It was a few short hours from the beginning of my shift and I was not in uniform. I walked with her amongst the last few spectres of night-life as they were trudging home heavy and silent, or waiting in a haze of cigarette smoke outside convenience stores. We walked past bitterly pungent piles of rubbish and refuse and the acrid ash of incense and burnt paper offerings. We passed by fast food outlets where the grease was solidifying into white spots on every surface, by ancient trolleys stacked high with broken down cardboard boxes, by dripping air-conditioner units. We presently reached the building in which I had my lodging and the sounds and smells of the street were discernible but a little way into this wretched cadaver before they were replaced by its own emanations.

In my room I set her down on the bed, again by the smallest pressure on her arm, and she collapsed into the restless sleep of the physically and emotionally exhausted. I paused to study her for a moment. Her fleshly body was out of place in my clinically spartan room, just as my sterile abode was itself out of place in this malignant edifice. A wave of loathing passed through my stomach. I watched her closely, even as I dressed for work. She made not the slightest movement. Time passed imperceptibly: hours passed over a single stroke of the clock's hand and the moon passed over the winking lights of the hotel in a

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single stride. I left my squalid little room and locked the door behind me.

I arrived at the hotel some ninety minutes before my shift was to start, but I was not noticed. There were no guests at this hour, and even the concierge had not stirred from his chambers. A single doorman – an insomniac, like myself – was stationed at the entrance staring fixedly into the pre-dawn darkness, and a graveyard-shift clerk sat at reception, blinking with warm, red regularity at the early hour. With no immediate duties, I fell to the constant task of general inspection and auditing. I checked the bathrooms with their crisply cold smell of bleach and replenished the tissues and paper at their dispensers; I checked the car park and swept some dust and cigarette butts into the drains; I checked the lifts with their eerie, silent automation and wiped the buttons clean of fingerprints formed from oil and sweat; I even checked the new, modern fire escapes with their wide, deep stairs and their thick squeaky paint like engorged flesh.

Each circuit of the hotel inevitably brought me back to the old fire escape. I checked the doors and the locks on the doors several times each before I finally entered. Nothing had changed. The atmosphere was full and tight, like a deep breath held in the lungs of the building, suspended in the arching cavity of its chest. I sealed myself in and began slowly pacing the stairs and landings. My movements were languorous and indeliberate; a contrast to the urgent pounding with which I normally thrust myself through this passage. I trailed my fingertips along the concrete, allowing the smallest resistance thus generated to guide my hands and arms on random paths over its contours. I closed my eyes. I listened.

At the peak of my reverie, at my most relaxed and removed, my thoughts were invaded by the woman from the night before, just as she had invaded this space. I began to wonder about her. Where had she come from? Why had she ended up in the old fire escape that night? She had no possessions as such: just the clothes she was wearing

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and a handbag. She had no identification and nobody knew where she was. Except me. She was a nonentity: neither lost nor sought, neither accountable nor holding others to account, neither taxable nor profiting. Existing outside the law, beneath society, between the accepted and the rejected; transient and transcendent. I began to search the old fire escape for something to enlighten me; something to make me think that she hadn't just been created out of my own fear or desire or whatever it was I felt inside that channel. I found nothing. Except the fourth floor.

In passing through the old fire escape innumerable times I had naturally become accustomed to the two extra stairs between the third and fifth floors. Furthermore, I had often speculated that, if an architect wanted to truly eliminate the godforsaken fourth altogether, he would have to do more than just rename it as the fifth, and likewise with all ascending floors. So it was that I discovered a crawlspace, scarcely enough for a small person or a child to squeeze into, beneath the struts and concrete slabs of the fifth floor. It was hidden behind a panel of plasterboard, which, when prised away, released the faint aroma of very old, very dry air. I entered, unskilfully. The muted, watery noises of the hotel's constitution were especially profound inside this space, and for the first time in my life, I felt serenity: the security and peace when all the senses are dulled and one's fear has been dampened. For the first time in a long, long time, I slept.

I woke with a start, momentarily unsure of where I was and of how long I had been asleep. My surroundings were tight around me, as if I were being gripped by some peristaltic contraction. I moved my parched tongue over my lips, but it came back sulphurous and made me choke and retch. I waited until my muscles had ceased in their spasm before I attempted to wriggle out onto the staircase beneath the entrance to the fourth floor. I lay there for a moment, my face against the fleeting coolness of the concrete stair, gaping and gasping for air. My face and hands were covered with a thick viscid substance, formed of my own sweat and the dust and fibres of the hotel's tracts and canals.

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As my energy returned I scratched and scraped and scoured at this membrane, but without success. I rose, and with thick, undisciplined bones I ascended to the upper floors of the hotel.

The old fire escape was tinted with pale blue: the colour of the slow, anaemic dawn diffused through its tempered windows. My progress was slow, laboured. I re-entered the main body of the hotel on the seventh floor. As I had anticipated, there was a room, recently vacated by a guest with an early flight, ready to be made up. I entered using a master key. The bedsheets had been flung into the middle of the mattress and there was a damp towel on the floor. I opened the drawers and then checked the bin, which contained some beer cans and an airline luggage label belonging to Mr \_\_\_\_\_. The towel carried the scent of a woman and it aroused a flush of adrenalin in my abdomen. The room resonated with their presence. The chair faced towards the bed, but both the chair and the bed were empty. I took his companion's aromatic towel to the bathroom.

I switched on the harsh bathroom light and observed myself objectively for the first time. My appearance was as grotesque and seductive as a forensic photograph. My body had become emaciated and my bones and sinews were like a tangle of pipes and wires beneath my thin skin. My face and hands were featureless, anonymous: masked by the cloying colourless compound of sweat and dust. Again I scraped at it, but it did not diminish or disperse – my attempts only serving to create nightmarish leers and disfigurements – neither did water or detergent affect it. I could not even detect my own flesh beneath this viscous veneer.

Presently, I gave up. I dressed and prepared to leave. As I reached for the door handle a newspaper was thrust under the door. This sudden movement caused me to halt in alarm and withdraw slightly into the room. I paused in order to regain my composure and to allow the delivery boy to finish his round. As I stood there, my attention drifted to the paper. The front page carried a photograph: one that may have

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been for a passport or identity card; one never intended for publication or publicity. A photograph taken in happier times, perhaps, and showing an innocent, unemotional face. I blanched in sudden, nauseating recognition. I brought the paper closer, but I could not read the accompanying text. I could read only one character, which was in the headline; a lean and poisonous character: 'death'.

My thoughts raced, each one struggling for priority, but each one losing to all others within the scramble of my mind. It was not possible to understand what had happened, or what may have happened, or what was going to happen. I checked the time. The hotel was waking up. I left the room.

I had not been seen that morning and once again I moved through the corridors stealthily. I re-entered the old fire escape and locked the door behind me. I felt lucid in here. I descended the stairs, checking the doors on the way; the flat, dissonant sound of my footsteps ringing like the isolated knell of a primitive funeral bell. At the fifth floor landing I stopped and removed my uniform and underclothes. My panic had all but subsided, manifest now only in the shroud of sweat that covered my body. I folded my uniform carefully and laid it in a corner, and on top of the pile I placed my key. The last key of the old fire escape.

I crawl back amongst the struts and ducts of the fourth floor. My movements disturb the first few gentle showers of particles and debris, which cling to my clammy body and form the beginnings of the caul that will eventually cover me entirely. I lie, with my legs curled towards me. The weight of the floors above me press onto my chest and my fingers tingle. The sounds and rhythms and pulses of the hotel fill my ears like fluid. I will not be far from my post, and my duty will not be far from my mind. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, everything else ceases to exist.

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