

## Hotel California

There's a buzz about the hotel, an electric buzz that permeates my brain. Otherwise it's completely silent. My feet make no sound on the length of patterned carpet; I meet no one along its wallpapered corridors; no splashes or screams come from the pool. In Florida everything smells of cinnamon. Here in this non-descript portal south of San Jose I smell dust and the earthly scent of concrete and pine.

I'm not remembered by the various different female assistants at the hotel reception; I only ever meet them once, their smile as bored as the shuttle bus driver, pale cream uniforms buttoned tightly around their busts, tapping at keys hidden from me. They don't understand my accent and frown at me for complicating our conversation, cut therefore to the most essential exchanges, mainly as a result of my malfunctioning key card. To the right of the reception, behind the concierge's desk, sit neon lit shelves of breakfast cereal, juice and milk, and a sign saying *Starbuck's Coffee*. I've never seen anyone at the desk, but the number of cereal packets is less than it was yesterday.

The hotel lobby is not unpleasant. Sandy red lounge chairs sit next to persimmon vases holding splays of thin wooden sticks resembling giant room diffusers. Avocado green sofas with dark wooden arms face milky brown coffee tables. Someone has gone to great trouble to match these muted tones, fusing together a complementary furniture palette, only for it to appear faded by a sunlight it's never seen, as though once in the hotel's heyday these colours were dense and bold. The style is indefinable, mixing Victorian Air Force blue wingback chairs with the quirks of a

Modernist chez long and oversized seventies lampshades. High above, two brass ceiling fans wobble beside a long cord ending in a light bulb that is framed by a cluster of tiny, linked, bronze plastic squares. Far beneath, large beige floor tiles are grouped into squares divided by rosewood borders.

My room is a careful extension of this sleepy swatch, as though I have momentarily stepped into a faded photograph. The carpet forms inoffensive stripes of navy, Yale blue, black, burgundy, mustard yellow and bronze, fitted tight against antique cream walls papered with ecru fleur de lis rising to a white pebble dash ceiling. My bed is large, big enough for two, piled high with white pillows and draped in a dull steel blue eiderdown. Around the corner, next to the washbasin, is a small coffee percolator sitting on a tray that also holds two paper cups, a sachet of coffee including one of decaffeinated, two sachets of English Teatime tea, two white pot portions of Classic Original creamer, two blue pots of French Vanilla creamer, two red pots of Caribbean Cinnamon creamer, a plastic sachet filled with powdered creamer, two straw stirrers and some thin paper serviettes. A light automatically comes on when I walk into this part of the room and buzzes.

A tall mahogany dresser stands opposite my bed encasing a television set. Unusually for a television, I can only get one channel, a local news station that keeps me abreast of every kind of disaster befalling the San Jose area. When I questioned one of the hotel receptionists about the lack of channels, she smiled and said someone would come and take a look at it, so now I can get that same channel several times

over and nothing else. I have found San Jose to be considerably bigger than I had imagined and way more disastrous.

The bathroom is yellowy cream, it has never been white, never been a definite extreme of colour - just yellowy cream floor tiles, wall tiles, shower curtain, enamel bath and shiny bathroom suite. My toiletries sit in shiny multicoloured absurdity on a glass shelf above the sink. I use the full length mirror on the back of the bathroom door, gilt edged and slightly foxed, to monitor the aging process. You know, that horrible thing that creeps up on you when you catch a glimpse of yourself in a shop window, round shouldered and frowning.

I'm in pretty good shape for my age, and to keep this up I take the short trip downstairs to the hotel gym: a couple of bedrooms they've knocked together and thrown in some treadmills, a bike and some weights. Recently I've had to work much harder, pounding that treadmill, sometimes literally, with my fists, trying to stop the flesh from dimpling on my thighs and drooping from my arms. Of course hotel food doesn't help. Eggs for breakfast - scrambled, fried or made into an omelette; strips of crispy streaky bacon and fried diced potato; bagels, muffins (English & American); cream cheese; peanut butter; melon (cantaloupe, water and honeydew make a rainbow on my plate), tasteless bread and mini boxes of cereal; baby-sized cartons of non-fat, low-fat and full-fat milk. Different people serve me every day, I can't keep up with the turnover of staff, our conversation reduced to a smattering of broken pleasantries. The dining room is usually empty so I often eat in my room, the tray I leave outside the door disappears by morning. I've been working on a report for my

employers for some time now - a technical spec on microwaves, which consumes me wholeheartedly until I can think of nothing else. Sitting in the dining room at breakfast I crane my neck when a waiter emerges from the kitchen to try and catch a glimpse of that shiny metal box whirring away above the clatter of cast iron and through the steam of bubbling water.

Every day I sit at a mahogany desk staring at a mirror that covers the wall directly in front of me. It reflects just that part of the room behind my head so that I appear like a framed self-portrait immortalised in a place I would never choose to be. Two clear bottles with silver tops full of water from Norway stand like pillars to my left, a sticker telling me it will cost \$6 to consume them creating an artificial thirst. Only one drawer of the desk opens, the middle one, containing a Gideon bible thumbed by wet fingers on Jeremiah, Chapter 28, and alongside it a leaflet guide to the area. Grateful for the distraction, I read listings for theme parks, steak houses, nightclubs, comedy clubs, Hearst Castle, Alcatraz, a silicon technology museum and the Egyptian Museum. I can play golf, whale watch, drink in an English pub, and bowl. I return the leaflet to the drawer, close it, and stare at my reflection.

I have a window, it overlooks the Smoking Oasis: a paved courtyard adorned with orange cushioned easy chairs, folded table umbrellas and ashtrays. By sliding open the window and the meshed screen behind it I can extend half my body outside, so much so I have to be careful not to fall, and the smoking area claim me as its victim.

Cars on the freeway hum through the closed glass. I stare at the traffic skimming the 101: white jeeps, black sedans and chrome plated trucks. It's warm today, the early

morning fog has cleared and the sun (somewhere the other side of the hotel roof) emits a white glow. Once, tired of sitting at my desk all day, I thought about going for a walk, striding out through the automatic glass doors of the hotel lobby, feeling the sun hot on my face, breathing in the dusty road but unable to find a pavement. Dry, grassy banks surrounding the hotel led to a main road too dangerous for pedestrians. I'm hoping one day to get a bus to San Francisco, only about 30 miles up the freeway. A previous guest left a pocket travel guide in my room to this colourful city and I've made a list from it of places I particularly want to visit when, if ever, I manage to get there.

I feel like a break and stretch my arms above my head, elongating my neck to erase my double chin. As I leave my room my feet are silent on the hallway carpet, crushing its gold, green and purple circles. A door slams shut behind me, but when I turn around the corridor is empty. In not out. I press the down arrow to call the elevator, hearing it clank into action below me, rising to meet my floor, opening its doors and sealing me in. My reflection is difficult to see in the smoked glass, so I read tonight's dinner menu that has been posted on the elevator wall, and consider the featured Happy Hour Cocktail. Every three weeks they repeat the dinner menu. I try to work out how often I've had the Linguine & Clams - ten, twenty times? More than the Rosemary Roasted Chicken? My memory fails me, as usual, just as the elevator doors open and I'm handed a peachy orange cocktail, holding it between thumb and forefinger as I creep across the empty lobby.