

Regular English

Most room maids stay one season, two tops. Eight years makes me some kind of pro. That's why my nametag says Mavis Bouchard: Room Attendant *Manager*, being at the Mountaintop Inn so long and doing what I'm told, both. So I do what I'm told the day Craig Ladney shows me little Miss Jenny Parker and tells me to train her, even though you can tell looking at her she won't last—homecoming-queen pretty, dirty blonde hair falling in kinks around her face. You can feel the prissy glowing off her right along with the shine on her teeth.

"Rule number one is do whatever Craig Ladney says. He's the boss," I tell Jenny. "Rule number two—take whatever comes your way and clean it the fuck up. And rule number three—blend with the wall paint. Far as these guests go, we're not even here."

She nods like she gets it, like she'd do anything you said, but that whole first while together, I'm waiting for the prissy to take over.

Think how long it'll take a girl like her to learn how to scrub a toilet, change a bed, and leave a room fresh in no time flat. Her with half-moons at the tips of her fingers, starshine coming out her eyes. Then think how long it'll take us to find the next one when she gives up and leaves. I'll be cleaning twice my normal rooms and dragging my Rosalee home late to bedtime for months to come.

First stop's the utility room off the 100s hallway. The dryers stand at the back, big enough to swallow you up. We got maid dresses in the closet to fit about any size girl 'cause of all the coming and going. They're polycotton and gray like soot with a round white collar. Hanging there in a row they look dull as socks until Jenny walks out wearing one. Might just as well be a ball gown on her, the way it snugs up against every rise and fall of her body.

In the bins by the dryers, we got a day's worth of clean towels to fold, plus toiletry items on the shelves to restock the maid carts, so

we get to work. Jenny Parker folds washcloths into perfect squares straight off. She squirts out words like “cute,” right after she pulls on that maid dress, then again when she gets her hands on those little wrapped-up soaps and tiny shampoos.

“Cute?” I spit out the word. Every damn thing about Jenny is cute, from the perky uptilt of her nose to her bright blinky eyes. What does she know about a job like this? About cleaning up messes bad enough to show up in your nightmares?

“Ain’t nothing cute about this job,” I tell her. “You wait and see.”

First day I keep her at the laundry doing inventory, a job I been putting off for weeks. Something about setting Jenny Parker up to count towels and bedsheets the day through makes me chuckle all the way down the hall with the cleaning cart, even if I got to carry a double load until her training’s done. I been on my own with a double load all week as it is, ever since Manuela called from New Jersey saying she moved.

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At the end of that first day, I pick up Rosalee from my mama’s house, rush her home, bustle through her bath just so we get a few minutes together, me pulling my feet up alongside hers on her bed for reading time. Rosalee’s partial to princesses. Up to me, I’d skip them altogether unless every last one could be like Cinderella. You got to respect a girl knows how to get dirty, don’t shrivel up when the work gets hard. Not too many like her, though, so I make up extra characters.

“You hear tell about the princess’s best friend, Tallulah?” I ask Rosalee. “She went on up to the community college and got her a LPN license.”

“She did?”

I love the way her voice sounds when she’s sleepy, so small and far away, the way the knob of her head rests warm against my arm.

“Yeah. She had to study real hard and stay in school, but now everybody at the hospital loves her. She’s the hero of the whole place.”

“Does she get to wear party dresses?”

That’s what Rosalee wants to know. Party dresses.

“A working girl gets to wear a uniform,” I tell her.

“I want me some party dresses,” she says, half-asleep already, so sure she would’ve been wearing a gold crown on her head and ordering people around all day long, eating fancy cakes taller than her mama if she’d lived back in them olden days. I don’t tell her how there’s always been more folks taking orders than giving them.

Wiping up toilet seats. Chucking out garbage. She'll figure that out soon enough.

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Next day Jenny shows up looking like a fashion magazine in her little gray dress. I tell her she's ready to work some rooms with me. I'm hoping for the worst kinds of messes just to see what she'll do.

Lucky for her, first room we come to ain't so bad. Husband and wife. You can tell they got themselves a system to live by from how they got their little stacks of things just so. His pocketful of change and notes to himself on the one side of the bed. Her lip balm and book to read plus half a wadded up tissue on the other.

Looks like they come up for a day or two of hiking the Appalachian Trail. All you got to do to get to the AT from here is walk along the highway about half a minute, cross over, and disappear into the woods at the white blaze. I like to picture that myself sometimes, wandering up there after work one day, slipping into the trees, walking till my legs give out, then laying back on the dirt and rocks and staring up into a wide-open night sky, black but for the stars peeping back at me. Nothing but me and my thoughts for a zillion miles.

But I got places to be.

The husband and wife are staying one more night, so I show Jenny how to make the bed, smooth everything so it looks like a machine could've done it, tricks for how to get the spread to tuck around the pillows. "It's all in the wrist," I tell her. She shadows my every move, tries them out for herself.

Next room ain't too bad neither. He's a one-nighter, so Jenny gets practice ripping sheets off a bed before we come upon the mess in the bathroom. Now we're talking. Man must've shaved his beard off into the sink. Looks like a body's head coming up out of the drain. "We get a lot like him," I say. "Maybe hiking the whole AT, stopping here 'cause it's near about halfway. This motel might be the first time he's seen the inside of a room since Georgia or Maine. Look out, too. Sometimes what you find in trash cans in these kinda rooms don't sit well with the stomach."

Jenny wrinkles up her nose, a mixture of grossed-out and curious. "Like what?"

"Bandages from blisters five states old, maybe pairs of shoes worn through the soles, stinking like an army of men died in there."

Jenny keeps her nose pinched, but she swabs every last bit of hair out of that sink.

Next day brings the exact kind of test I been waiting for. Drunken frat boys in this room, looking for a wild night some ways out of town. “You take the interstate one hour either direction, you’re at one big old college or another,” I tell her. “Never know what you’re gonna find in one of their rooms.”

Jenny hovers at the door. I knew this kind a room’d be rough on her, and I feel almost sorry. But I can’t have her calling on me whenever she comes across a mess like this one. So I square my hand against her back and shove her forward.

“Frat boys try just about anything drunk,” I tell her. “Hike after sunset. Swim in the pool. Run naked up the highway. Sometimes they get too fucked up, think they’re in the bathroom when they’re standing by the bed. This was some drunken frat boys in here for sure.”

Trash cans full of puke. “At least they made it into the can” is what I say. I peel out the plastic liners, spray some disinfectant. Jenny looks swoony. But she goes over to the bed, smart enough already to snoop around the covers for surprises before she pulls them off. She makes a tidy pile, then she’s back at my elbow, watching and helping.

The bathroom’s another room full of sick. Plus, empties—cans and bottles—fill the bathtub. “Jesus,” Jenny says. “We oughta have Hazmat suits.”

Imagine her and me in a couple of them bright orange jumpsuits straight off one of them cop shows. We’d look almost alike. Not like in these clingy maid dresses, showing my fat shoulders and big broad ass as compared to Jenny’s plum-perfect breasts and firm little tush. Them Hazmat suits even got hoods. They’d hide the way my hair lies flat against my head, gets stuck in the little bit of sweat from working, as sure as they’d hide how Jenny’s curls almost dance at the sides of her face.

Break time, we prop up our feet. Jenny grabs a snack and a book from her purse. Some kind of nut and seed combo you might toss out for birds in winter. And I can’t even read the title of her book. “Eating bird food and reading ‘Tangerine?’” I say. I know it ain’t the right word, but it’s the closest I can get.

She smiles at me, showing those too-white teeth. She says a word in French that don’t sound a thing like tangerine, and she tells the name of the guy who wrote it, a name that looks a whole nother way from how it sounds. “It’s French for the stranger,” Jenny says. “It’s about a murder. Mostly about feeling like an outsider, though.”

“What’s the title in French for?”

"The whole book's in French." The way she says it, you'd think it's normal as pie to sit in the break room of the Mountaintop Inn reading a book in French. I shake my head, pick up a *People* magazine from the floor, and thumb through a whole bunch of trash about rich famous people. This one's back in rehab, that one's got a baby bump, all these other ones with their plastic surgery. But I'd never be sitting in a room with any of them. "What you reading that book for?" I ask.

"I like it. I'm going to major in French literature in college. That's what I'm saving up for."

Saving up for. Like you could get to college from here. For most folks, this is the place you go when there's no place better to choose from, but here she is, ready to waste my time and hers, learning this job just long enough to turn right around and leave it. "So, what? You starting college in the fall?"

"I did my first year already," she says. She rolls a pinch of bird food between her fingers.

What did Craig Ladney expect when she walked in, job application swinging from her baby-soft little hand? Didn't he even ask if she planned to stick around? Probably didn't think past looking at her. And looking at her's all he has to do. I'm the one stuck for months training her and then retraining whoever comes next. I'll be sending postcards to Rosalee before long with all my extra hours. "So when do you head back?"

"I don't." Jenny's lips close up around her shiny teeth. "I guess you could say the money ran out."

I hike myself upright in my chair. "Ran out?" I can't feature Jenny Parker racing up to the utility office before the stroke of five to keep her heat on for the weekend or putting back the Nilla wafers and baby carrots cause the grocery bill ran too high. "How's that?"

"I was supposed to do an internship this summer."

"*This* summer?" All I know about internships is they make better jobs than this one. "And you wound up here?"

"My daddy set it up for me with some friend of his. When I didn't take it, he said I could just make my own money from now on."

"Hard to argue with a man wants his daughter to work for a living."

Jenny says, "Huh." And then she looks off into the dusty back corner of the break room and keeps talking. "I show up for my interview, right? Guy says my daddy didn't tell him how pretty I was." Jenny closes her eyes and hunches her body in toward itself like she's one big fist getting ready to strike. "He had some pretty specific ideas about what I could do for him in that internship."

Jenny keeps her lightning bug green eyes facing the corner. I tug at the back of my shoe, trying to give relief to a blister there, and what do I see but the dainty little black flats on Jenny's perfect little princess feet? Me with ugly-ass fat-soled nurse shoes and blisters. "You couldn't just talk him down?"

"Talk him down?" Like she was the only girl ever had some asshole get the wrong idea about her.

"Yeah, talk him down. Offer less than he's asking, but keep the damn job. Instead of spending the summer folding towels and scooping puke when you could've been someplace better."

"Come on, Mavis. No way you'd stand for that kind of shit."

"Who knows what I'd stand for?"

"If it was your daughter in place of me?"

"Rosalee don't get nothing handed to her so easy as that. Wouldn't catch her turning down so gold a goose."

Jenny shakes her head at me. "Well, I kicked the bastard in the balls and walked out."

Picture Jenny with her tiny shoulders squared. Some ass-wipe fat old man with a waddle shaking under his chin, talking dirty to her. Then the look on his flabby face when her foot comes swinging into his unsuspecting prostate.

Jenny zips her little baggie of seeds, crams her book in her purse, and slams her feet back on the ground. "I don't believe you would've done any different."

She walks off before I can say anything back. And I hate that she's right. Put me in a room with some man that talked that kinda trash to me or my girl? Ain't but one of us coming out fit to reproduce, I promise you that.

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Maybe a week goes by and Craig Ladney says it's time to open up the pool for the season. Somebody's already been to fix up the chemicals, so when me and Jenny pull the latch on the gate and go out there, the water shimmers up at us all blue and green. It's the first day open, so there's no sopping wet towels growing mildew in a pile, no backup of sticky, crushed beer and soda cans crawling with bugs. Just spent redbud blossoms floating on top of the water and a frog or two stranded in the filter boxes, bloated and gray. Jenny's hands wobble when she fishes them out with the net. She looks greenish around the jawline, and I'm thinking, *Here it comes*. But she hurls them frogs over the fence and moves on.

It don't take as long to train Jenny as I thought. After the second or third week, she don't flinch at even the fiercest messes we get.

Another week or so, and we might be in the break room at the same time, but we ain't pushing the cart together no more. She's got her rooms, I got mine. Mind you, Craig Ladney has to sign off before I can give her the full number, so she's only up to half what she should she be, but it's better than it was.

Month or so in, Speak-of-the-Devil pokes his head in the break room. Push-broom mustache polka-dotted with potato chip crumbs. Beer belly jiggling out over his belt and tugging at the buttons on his shirt, same gray as the maid dresses. His pits wet with sweat. Jenny's on to yet another one of her French books and sits there reading it and eating her nuts and seeds.

"You done a fine job with the training," Craig says.

To me or Jenny, neither one of us can tell. We both mumble out a thank you. Jenny packs up and walks out the door, scooting around his wide girth in the doorway. He don't much move out of her way and keeps his eyes fastened at her ass.

"That mean you're gonna give Jenny her share of rooms now?" I ask him when she's far enough down the hallway not to hear.

"Don't wanna chase her off," he says, still staring after the spot Jenny's ass just disappeared from. "Don't wanna push her too far too soon."

Same man set me up with all my rooms my third day. Followed behind me, testing my work. One time he hung his hand from the open door of a room he just looked over. "Finished?" he said with a face like a skunk just went by. He pulled me in and showed me the toilet seat I'd left flipped up. "That look finished to you?"

How was I supposed to know what finished looked like? Rosalee up half the night before, breast milk seeping down the front of my dress. "I ain't never cleaned a hotel room before, sir," I told him. Hadn't never stayed at no hotel neither, not that he cared.

He huffed himself up, taller than he already was, and said, "Guests'll think somebody done used it if it you leave it flipped up that way."

But for Jenny Parker all he can say is how he don't wanna chase her off. I burn holes in his back with my eyes while he walks away, but you know he can't feel a thing.

For now, Jenny Parker knocks off early every day. I watch her take off her shoes, walk barefoot around the pool, dip her feet on in there. Sometimes she spreads out on one of them chaise lounges, hands at the back of her head, staring out at the mountain view like a guest. And here's me, finishing my extra share of rooms till late, getting in each night with hardly enough time to switch little Rosalee into her PJs.

So I start following after Jenny, checking up on her work, hoping to find something wrong, give me a good excuse to shake a finger, tell her a thing or two. But I go room to room. No lazy corners on her tucked-in sheets. Always the right number of clean towels, hanging right-angle straight. All her rooms even feel prettier somehow. I don't find nothing wrong. So I leave one of the doors unlocked. See what'll happen.

A little woman with a shrub of gray hair and red glasses clangs up to the front desk later, yammering about the unlocked door. "I was not aware the doors could be anything but locked," I hear the day clerk tell her. Like she ain't never as much as touched one of the doorknobs around here, didn't even know how the locks worked. The old woman fusses a little more. The clerk gives her a \$5 coupon for the Waffle House up the road and tells her she's very sorry.

It's a habit I take to, walking into rooms Jenny's finished with. Think of all the bubble baths Mama or my aunt Sadie's giving Rosalee in place of me. The times I'm glad for a thunderstorm in the middle of the night cause it gives me twenty extra minutes with my little girl, never mind she might be bawling for fear of the noise.

Sometimes I leave a door unlocked, a bar of soap in a sink basin. Spill the hotel shampoo in the bathtub. Leave the toilet seat flipped up. It's not like it matters. Real world don't seem to touch folks like Jenny. Never seems to ask nothing of them either. If it did, you know she wouldn't have no clue what to answer.

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By now it's full-blown summer. Days up in the 90s. Air so hot all the blue in the sky bleeds out and leaves it just white. Everything smells like sweat and suntan lotion. You can think of the whole wide world of possible messes we got to clean up poolside. Used condoms floating in the water from folks sneaking in and humping under water in the middle of the night. Baby spew and rotten diapers left out in the sun. Raccoons dragging crap from the trash cans hither to yon. And all the while the polycotton maid dresses slicking your whole body with sweat.

In the break room, Jenny talks on and on about her French books. I get used to the sound of her voice. She tells me the stories in English, making them sound as juicy as grocery line gossip. I start to tell her some stories of my own. Mine are about regular things, in regular English. About Rosalee and how she hops between my aunt's house thirty miles south and my mama's house thirty miles west, how she wakes up in the night sometimes and don't know where she's at, walks into a wall trying to get to the bathroom. I tell her

about Rosalee's daddy and how he walked out on us when she was still a baby. She had the colic so bad she could cry five hours straight. Willy'd bury his head in the pillows, then shout out, "What the hell's wrong with that kid, Mavis?" He used to talk like babies was something you got at the Walmart, and if they come out wrong, you could just head back up there and trade them out. I tell her how, when Willy left, I said a little thank you up to God, cause I swear life got easier from there. Rosalee even started crying less.

Maybe I tell all this to Jenny to prove how hard I work or maybe cause I never had nobody to tell before. "You tell a good story, Mavis," Jenny says. "Just like my French ones, with all the right amounts of heartache." Jenny teaches me words. *Serviette. Savon. Clé.* Makes what we do sound classy.

Still, every day, after she finishes her half-ass share of rooms, she slips off barefoot to the pool, and I slip myself into one of her cleaned-up rooms and slather a sink faucet with lotion or leave a blob of conditioner on a toilet seat. Makes my extra rooms that much easier to bear.

One time I pulled all the hair off the brush in my purse and jammed it in the bottom of my shoe so I could stopper a sink in one of Jenny's rooms later, fill it with water, and float that clump of hair in there. But before I left the room, I peeked backwards. It looked so ugly I had to fish it out. I flushed it down the toilet, drained the water out of the sink, then twirled the toilet paper roll one or two spins and left it dangling instead. Just one imperfect thing.

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One clear-sky day, halfway through August, the hot sun's boiling down like hellfire. Except for us cleaning up after everybody, anybody outside is in a bathing suit, half of them in the water. There's mounds of towels squished up into soggy puddles every time we check for them. Styrofoam coffee cups from the lobby self-serve scattered around, forgotten hair bands, candy wrappers. People will make a mess, that's one thing I learned on this job.

A woman in a red bikini's floating her little baby round in circles in the pool. A man sits on the edge with his feet in, baby-talking at them now and then. One or two college girls are frying up their skin in the sun. Some shrimp-faced old lady's tippy toe-ing in at the shallow end. A crow calls out from the trees on the downhill side of the pool patio. The slope of the mountain cuts across the sky just beyond. A big rig engine-brakes out on the highway.

Jenny Parker strides up to our usual lookout—the spot where we can see all around for what needs cleaning next—and stares out at

the mountains the way she likes. My body aches from all these weeks of extra rooms to clean. Seems like Craig Ladney ain't never gonna give Jenny her full share, and the day ain't getting any longer. My paycheck ain't getting no bigger, salary being the up and the downside of that *Manager* on my badge. I get this urge to run up behind her and just smack her into the water. Dunk her under like my brother used to do to me. Hold you down there just long enough to give you a hint of the end of the world.

But I keep un-wadding sopping towels and setting them in the dirty cart. Hurl a sogged out diaper into the trash. Fish crunched up Styrofoam cups from the filter boxes.

The lady in the red bikini sets her baby up on the lip of the pool to crawl around. The daddy coo-coos at her and claps his hands. The baby keeps crawling along the edge of the pool in her bright pink and orange bikini with its little matching bonnet. I think the daddy says something sour to the mama, and something in the air changes.

I look back to Jenny. She's running. Nothing else makes noise or moves. It's hot, but iciness spreads up my back. The baby was crawling, and now it's not crawling anymore.

Jenny jumps into the pool, dives under the water. The red bikini mama lets out a shriek. The daddy flaps his arms like he's trying to fly. Everybody else around the pool's all the sudden sitting up and looking in the same direction, just staring, stupid, at the glassy water and the ledge of pool behind it where a baby's supposed to be.

Jenny pulls the baby, purplish, from the water and heaves back out of the pool. The daddy jumps in beside the red bikini mama and both thrash through the water as fast as they can go, aiming for Jenny and their baby. "Oh Jesus, oh Jesus," the dad moans. The mama whoops for air like she was the one about to drown. They pull themselves poolside in front of Jenny and the mama grabs that baby, tips her upside down until she coughs and spews water and milky white stuff. Every one of us watches the purple drain off the baby's face, leaving it pale but for the sunburned tip of her nose. All the while Jenny stands there streaming with pool water like all she'd done was the most natural thing, and I want to know, how did she know what to do and I didn't?

First words out of the mama's mouth I mistake for some kind of thanks until her words clatter into clarity. "What the hell you think you're doing? You some kinda lifeguard? You could've killed her. You've could've killed my baby!" Water courses down the woman's face and she clutches her baby to her chest like a splayed frog.

I strut over and shove myself up between Jenny and the shouting woman, my face just inches from hers. "You won't watching your

baby, lady. Every single one of us here saw that.” I can smell her sour breath. As for Jenny, water pours off her and puddles at her feet. Her hair flops wet-dog flat at the sides of her head.

The parents hustle themselves and their baby back off to their mound of towels and t-shirts in a ruckus of crying and a few shouts of blaming each other now that I stared them down from blaming Jenny. Then Craig Ladney’s voice rumbles in the distance, asking, “Is there a problem here?” and I remember rule number three about blending with the wall paint. Last thing he ever wants is commotion in the pool area.

“Let’s get you freshened up,” I say and whisk Jenny off to the 100s hallway. Her elbow feels bird-like in my hand, and her eye makeup smears down her cheeks.

She lets me tug her all the way to the utility room. Hot as hell in there with that wall of dryers. She peels her dress up off her head, unhooks her bra, slides her drenched underpants to the floor. I try to look the other way, to not see the milky smoothness of her flesh, the purpled rings of her nipples, goose pimples standing up all over. Soggy and makeup streaked, she looks a bit like a corpse drawn from a lake. But she’s still beautiful.

I can see every knot of her spine, though, the ridges of her ribs. “You eating okay, Jenny?” I toss her wet things in with the tumble of drying towels and fetch out a few hot ones.

“Doing the best I can,” she says. “Budgeting.” And she shrugs a bony shoulder.

She lets me wrap her in the warm towels. It’s like holding Rosalee after a bath, but for the smell of chlorine in place of baby shampoo. Jenny lets me tamp water from her mossy wet hair. With her hair flat, her eyes seem twice as big, twice as green. She curls into my attention like she needs it.

“You ever tell your daddy what really happened with that man and that internship?”

“Wouldn’t change anything.” Jenny wipes her blurred makeup with a corner of the towel. “My daddy’s not the kind to admit a mistake.”

“Not ever?”

“I’m not waiting around to find out,” she says. “I’ll save up my money here and send myself back to school no matter how many years it takes. What else am I going to do?”

Me? I fucked around, married the first loser who got me pregnant, and landed here.

Jenny’s hair dries back into its perfect ringlets and her makeup-less face stares up like a clean slate. And I see that the biggest

difference between her and me ain't how pretty she is and how many breaks the world'll give her on account of that, but it's how my working hard don't push in any direction, just circles the same old things. Toilet bowls, sink drains, pool tiles. Nothing changing. It ain't her fault she knows what to do and I don't. It ain't even her fault she's so pretty or that she came from money and knows a whole part of the world I'll only ever see from the outside.

I start to feel a little sad, knowing one day Jenny Parker will leave the Mountaintop, leave me behind. But then a bright, burning squiggles up in me. Sure, nothing'll change for me if I sit around here waiting for someone to hand me something different. But what if I do the changing? Pick a direction and start moving that way? There has to be somewhere else I could get to from here, just like Jenny. Someplace without so many toilets and overflowing cans of other people's trash.

Real quick when my shift ends, I'm gonna shuffle up that road a ways and disappear down the AT, find a quiet spot with a view onto the valley below and up into the open sky. I'll go there for just a few of my very own minutes and think up something better that might come next.