

The Very Thought of You

It was late and he was exhausted when he reached the town. Due to a misunderstanding with his secretary, no room had been reserved for him. He went wearily from hotel to hotel, from guest house to guest house, and everywhere it was the same:

“We’re fully booked, sir, have been for months, it’s the Conference you see, sir, it’s the same every year; the hotel down the road might have something.”

But the hotel down the road never did.

Left to himself he would have climbed back into his car and driven away, but he was due to speak on the final day of the Conference. It could be the making of him, his boss had said, the whole company was depending on him.

Each hotel was full of drunk and braying businessmen. Dear God, he thought, is that what I’m going to become? Is that what I already have become?

At length he found himself in a dark and forgotten part of town outside a shabby little hotel. He imagined that it was the sort of place visited by men accompanied by women who were not their wives. A fish-eyed concierge stood behind the counter.

“We’re full,” he said.

“Please,” said the man. “I have tried everywhere.”

“I cannot help that. All the other gentleman had the foresight to book ahead.”

“Is there not some box room or other? I must sleep somewhere. I am due to speak on the final day of the conference,” he said.

“Oh for crying out loud,” said the fish-eyed concierge. “Wait here.”

After a short while the concierge returned clutching a key, and beckoned the man to follow.

“There’s one room, only we don’t usually use it, so it probably needs airing, and the furniture’s not up to much, but beggars can’t be choosers can they, eh?”

Alone in his room at last, it was all he could do to undress before he fell asleep. As he drifted out of consciousness, he wondered why they did not usually use the room.

He awoke with a start. As his eyes became accustomed to the darkness, and he saw that he was in his hotel room he became aware of a strange hissing noise. Khhhhik. Khhhhhik. Khhhhhhik.

It was familiar to him. But what was it? A very ordinary sound. It was not a sound to frighten a grown man, and yet as it continued, the room was filled with an atmosphere of pure malevolence and his heart began to pound with terror.

Khhhhik. Khhhhhik. Khhhhhhik.

Suddenly the noise stopped. He looked around and the ordinariness of the room made him laugh. Just a mouse, or a beetle, perhaps, scuttling around the skirting. Early start in the morning. Must get back to sleep. He sank back on to his pillows and slept.

He woke in the morning not much refreshed and with a vague feeling of uneasiness for which he was unable to account. It was next to impossible to concentrate on the Conference. He had to attend a dinner in the evening and as soon as he was able, he returned to his room and climbed into bed.

He awoke with a start.

His heart was pounding.

Khhhhik. Khhhhhik. Khhhhhhik.

That noise again. What was it? It was on the tip of his tongue. He knew what it was, but he couldn’t think it. He was too frightened to think straight. The room

was filled again with a malevolent air, as if evil had taken place in here, and was destined to repeat itself.

Khhhhik. Khhhhhik. Khhhhhhhik.

Suddenly, the room was filled with music.

Of course! The hiss of the needle on a gramophone record. But there was no gramophone in the room. And yet he could hear music:

The very thought of you,

And I forget to do

The little ordinary things that everyone ought to do,

I'm living in a kind of daydream

daydream

daydream

daydream

Now it seemed that the record had stuck. The singer ground on relentlessly:

daydream

daydream

daydream

The man wanted it to stop, but it carried on, not loudly but insistently. He felt that if he could only switch on his bedside lamp it would stop, or if he could cry out, but he was pinned to his bed with terror and his voice was stopped by fear. Each time the singer sang the word, the impression of the presence of evil grew stronger until he felt that he must scream and suddenly it stopped.

He switched on the light, and relief flooded over him. As soon as possible in the morning he stood at the concierge's desk banging wildly on the bell. The concierge hurried to the desk.

“Yes sir, yes?” he said. “Please lay off the bell, sir, you’re disturbing the other gentlemen at their breakfasts.”

“To hell with the other gentlemen. I must be moved from that room. Something is in there. Something evil.”

“Sir, please keep your voice down.”

“I’ll do no such thing. You move me from that room, or I’ll have you closed down.” He leaned towards the concierge, and whispered. “What happened in that room?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir.”

“Something happened in that room, and I won’t stay another night in it.”

“No-one is forcing you, sir. Though if I recollect, sir, you arrived in town without a reservation and were unable to find lodgings elsewhere. You were fortunate to get that room, sir, and you won’t get another.”

“You said, when I arrived, that you don’t normally use that room,” said the man. “What did you mean by that?”

“As I explained, sir, it isn’t the best furnished...”

“Nonsense,” exclaimed the man. “You could re-furnish it. Tell me the truth, damn you.”

“If you persist, sir, with this violent mode of address, I shall have no option but to have you put out.”

“Very well, I’m going.”

His day at the conference was spent in dread of returning to the room. He would have left that instant, but he was due to address the conference the following day, and to miss the occasion would have been ruinous to his career. Whatever that night had in store, he would have to endure it.

He waited as long as he could before retiring that night, and was so exhausted that he slept almost immediately.

He awoke with a start.

That noise again.

Khhhhik. Khhhhhik. Khhhhhik.

The room was dark, but he could sense that he was not alone.

The very thought of you,

As the music began, he heard a man's voice, raised but indistinct.

And I forget to do

The little ordinary things that everyone ought to do,

He heard the man again. He sounded angry. Now a woman's voice replied, harsh and mocking.

I'm living in a kind of daydream

daydream

daydream

daydream

Again he heard the man's voice speak, angrier now. The woman shrieked and there were sounds of a struggle. Suddenly there was a loud thud, and the needle on the gramophone was jolted out of its groove.

I'm happy as a king

The gramophone began to wind down.

And fool-ish though it may seem,

Tooo meeee thaaaaaat's everythiiiiing

Now there was the sound of the man, sobbing, panic-stricken. The woman's voice made no sound. The gramophone came to a stop.

There was silence.

First thing in the morning, he hurried down to the reception desk, and hammered on the bell. The concierge appeared.

“Oh not again,” he said impatiently.

“Now listen, you old idiot,” said the man. “Once and for all, *what happened in that room?*”

“It was a long time ago, sir, when my father ran the hotel. One of our regular guests, a travelling man like all of our clients, was staying in that room. He sold gramophones for a living, not very good ones, had a tendency to get stuck. He liked a drink and had an eye for the ladies. I’m sure you know the sort, sir. He brought a woman here. They were both married, but not to each other. They’d had a bit to drink. They had words, sir, you know what it’s like, and she went for him. He pushed her away and she tripped over a rug. Struck her head on the table containing the gramophone, very unpleasant. I was a youngster at the time, working as a bellhop and I remember seeing him carted off. Sobbing like a baby, he was. I had to clean up the room, and that was a job of work, I don’t mind telling you. Funnily enough, he was due to speak at a Conference that very day. Mind how you go, sir”

He smiled, and turned away. He hung some room keys up on their hooks and began to sing quietly to himself:

The very thought of you...