

Nightshift at the Marriott by Richard W.

It had been a long, hot August day. We'd driven over six hundred miles and it was nearing 11 pm as we entered Kingman, Arizona. We pulled off and picked a motel. Much to my surprise, it being mid-week, the deskman informed me they were full. Next place, same story. This time, I asked the clerk for suggestions.

"Try the Hampton Inn."

At the Hampton we were greeted with, "We're booked. Sorry."

"What's going on?" I asked. "Is there some kind of convention in town?"

"A tour bus just pulled in with 60 people," the deskman said. "Plus lots of people are heading to the Grand Canyon. You might try the Best Western. I think they had one room left about an hour ago."

We tried the Best Western. No luck.

By that time, we'd traveled to the west end of Kingman. We turned around for another pass and were startled to see the moon - huge, reddish and only half full. It was standing just above the horizon in the still of the desert night. "You can even see the craters," my wife said almost to herself.

I'd been in Santa Fe for a conference. My wife, returning from Europe, had flown into Albuquerque the night before. In spite of her jet lag, we'd put in about 350 miles between Belen and then north past Santa Fe to El Rito just looking around. Then we headed west. So now, when I suggested we push on to Needles fifty miles down the road, she balked. "We'd get in at mid-night and who says we'd have any better luck?" She was still on French time and struggling to stay awake.

My confidence about finding lodging was gone. We were part of a shadowy crowd of travelers all competing for a few rooms. The Marriott, I'd been told at the last place, was worth a try. It was new and had just opened for business.

Kingman is a desert town. In August daytime temperatures in the 100 degree range are common. Still, at 3300 feet elevation, it's consistently at least ten degrees cooler than Needles just across the Colorado River in the Mojave Desert at 500 feet above sea level. Passing through Needles a week earlier a clerk told me I'd missed 121 degrees by only a few days. So I was hoping to stay at the higher elevation.

We found the Marriott tucked away from the main drag. A banner was draped across the fourth story. Permanent signage hadn't yet been installed. Entering the lobby, I found myself third in line. Not good.

The lobby was large and spare - a design choice, I figured. The huge tromp l'oeil, soap bubbles in pinks and blues on the wall behind the front desk really jumped out at you. Why bubbles? I wondered. But there were more important things to worry about and I turned my attention to the lone young woman behind the counter. She'd taken the credit card of a man in a t-shirt and cut off jeans with three kids clustered around him. They were struggling with their excitement at such an adventure and kept breaking out in wiggles and various body motions. At one point, the boy, who had been falling backwards

to be caught by his sister, crashed loudly against the front desk. His sister's attention had wandered. The boy jumped up and was fine. But what was taking so long?

Minutes passed as the clerk stared at a computer screen. She was in her twenties, I guessed, and seemed small in spacious lobby of the barely finished, nearly sold-out Kingman Marriott.

Finally, she looked up from her computer screen, "I'm sorry. Your card is not being accepted." All this time, the phone at the front desk had been ringing relentlessly. Now she picked up. I couldn't hear what she said before putting the caller on hold.

Surely she wouldn't allow someone on the phone to get a room ahead of us who were standing there in line, would she?

Just then, from the corner of my eye, I noticed a man walking from the elevator toward the desk. He arrived next to the father with the credit card problem and leaned in trying to catch the clerk's attention.

"You could leave us a two-hundred dollar deposit," the clerk was saying to the father. I guessed he was toast. There must have been two phones, because the ringing continued.

The young Asian man in front of me and I now struck up a conversation - competitors for a room, yes - but united as observers of the drama unfolding before us. The father had the cash it seemed. Papers were signed and he headed away from the desk with his kids. Now she turned to the man from the elevator. The room he'd just paid for hadn't been made up.

"I'll take care of that, sir if you can give me a few minutes," she said.

The phones continued ringing.

Jeez, I thought, this place isn't quite up to speed. As I watched all this unfold, I couldn't help admiring the young woman's refusal to capitulate to the increasing pressure, but I was also beginning to wonder if I'd soon see a meltdown.

In any case, now I was second in line. Was it possible that two rooms were still left?

As the father and kids left, the man in front of me stepped forward. The young woman at the desk took this moment to pick up what must have been a third phone; she was now trying to find a maid to take care of the elevator man's unmade bed. Just then, I spotted another man walking from the wings toward the front desk. Another unmade-up room?

By now it was well after 11pm. Although I had no proof, by now I had a feeling no employees were left in the entire hotel except for this young woman at the desk. In a small motel, that wouldn't seem odd, but here it did. Don't hotels always have a manager and staff - bellboys, people hidden away in basements, kitchens, offices, back rooms, all quietly present to keep the place functioning? But Kingman is a desert town, a place where nature has been stripped down to the bare bones. Nevertheless, standing there in the Marriott lobby, my sense that the single young woman behind the desk constituted the entire hotel staff produced an oddly surreal feeling. A hotel shouldn't be that stripped down, even in a desert town.

Now I was secretly rooting for her even as I imagined an unknown number of night travelers converging on the building at any minute. They would shove through the door and crowd towards the front desk. In fact, two new parties had already come in and were now standing in line behind me. So far, however, conventional etiquette was holding in spite of the cracks beginning to show.

The desk clerk finally hung up one of the phones. No one had answered. "I'll take care of this in a few minutes, sir, if you can wait," she said to the elevator man. Then she turned her attention to the young Asian man. The second man from the wings had now made his way to the desk and was waiting impatiently. She glanced at him. "The room you gave me hasn't been made up!" he says.

The phones were still ringing away non-stop. "Give me a couple of minutes, and

"I'll take care of it," she says, now with the first hint of quaver in her voice.

"How can I help you?" She asks the Asian man with a note of strain.

Here, for the first time in this drama, everything went smoothly. Card cleared. Registration signed, license number written down, keys transferred. Young Asian man heads for his room. My turn to step up.

At this point, a young, well-dressed man enters the lobby from outside and walks purposefully around behind the front desk. He goes directly to an employee door, presses some buttons and disappears into another room. Could help have arrived? A moment later, he re-appears and exchanges a quick glance with the young woman. It's amazing how subtly she conveys "just barely holding on here."

Taking the situation in, he steps up to me. "Can I help you?"

I can hear the young woman saying something about sheets to the two men with unmade beds.

Turns out the room my wife and I get is the last one. It's more than I'd hoped to pay, but who's arguing? Meanwhile more people have crowded into the lobby, hungry for rooms.

"We're sold out!" The young woman nearly shouts with a sudden new energy. Some problems are settled, at least.

My wife and I head for the third floor where I slide the card into the lock. The door opens cleanly. This should be the moment of denouement, respite.

And it would have been if, in seeing the clean lines and fresh amenities as we scanned across the room, we'd found the bed a neat and tidy resting place. Instead we beheld the vivid signature of its former tenant, rumpled sheets and tossed back covers. I quickly walked to the bathroom - used towels were scattered on the floor.

Partly, I was prepared for this. Still, it was the first time I'd paid for a room in a hotel and found it untouched by maid service. My wife sunk down on the couch, too tired to deal with it. I joined her and we sat there in silence. By now it was heading towards midnight.

Maybe because this was a first in my experience, there was something interesting about it. How much of a problem is it, really, to share the used sheets and pillowcases of a stranger? Is it dangerous? Are there diseases to worry about? Maybe. But realistically, aren't such fears exaggerated? Nevertheless, when I really considered climbing into the unmade bed, something said "No way." But the rest of the room looked quite pristine. I could see that my wife was not letting the situation bother her. Instead, she began checking out the fine points of the new Marriott accommodations. "They've really done a nice job here," she said. "I like this room."

For a few minutes I continued pondering. I didn't want to be another complainant, but the cards had been dealt. I would add room 309 to their list of rooms with unmade beds.

Going back to the lobby, I found both of the desk clerks were still there. "It's been quite a night, hasn't it?" I said to the young woman, who nodded. "I appreciated how you dealt with all that," I added, and then explained that our room, too, had been overlooked.

The young man stepped up. "We'll take care of that, sir. Can you possibly give us ten minutes? We'll bring up new sheets and towels and we'll make an adjustment to the room rate."

"Yes, of course. Thank you. And what's your name?"

"Andy."

Walking back up the stairs, I found myself liking both of these young people.

The minutes ticked by. I studied the stylish drawing over the couch, a blue grid, loosely

handled with warm highlights. Corporate art, true, but not bad. My wife had gotten up and was inspecting a few other things. "This is a great place!" she said. It was definitely a big step up from the Motel 6s where I often stayed. Andy and the young woman must have been busy making up beds, I thought. More than ten minutes had gone, I was sure, and I stepped out into the hall. It was empty. I walked toward the elevator where the hallway opened off to the left. And there was the young woman from the front desk sitting alone on a bench. The professional look was gone. She had taken her tailored jacket off and looked even younger.

"We're going to get to your room right away," she said quickly, looking up at me with an open face. She was quite vulnerable. Just a child.

"That's okay." I said. "You guys are doing a great job."

Strangers meet in all kinds of circumstances, but sometimes that separation disappears and is replaced by something else - what to call it? An impersonal intimacy? She could have been my daughter. I went back to the room. After a few more minutes there was a knock and Andy stood at the door with a stack of clean sheets and towels.

Maybe it was at this point I realized that something basic had shifted. When I'd first stepped into the lobby of the Marriott the young woman was just part of the world out there. I was intent on finding my way through that world. But Andy and the young woman were no longer just staff persons working for a hotel chain. And my wife and I were no longer just customers.

Andy stepped in carrying his load of linens and towels. We walked over to the bed together and I started stripping off the bed sheets. He set the linens down quickly and joined me. Soon we had the bed clear and he picked out a sheet. "Is this okay?" he asked apologetically. It wasn't a fitted sheet.

"It'll be fine."

We stretched it across the bed together. He looked through his stack and pulled out another piece of linen. "Do you think this one is okay?" He held it out for me to feel. "Maybe it's too rough?"

This was nothing to fuss about, not even close.

"It's fine," I said. And we set about stretching it across the bed. My wife joined us. Now the three of us were making up a hotel bed together. The awkward sense inherent in this was more than offset by a surplus of good will all around.

From the outside it could be described this way: hotel staffer, Andy, wanting only to be helpful, to resolve a problem and to carry out his responsibilities likely had ambitions in hotel management and was willing to do what needed to be done whether or not it fit his job description. The same was likely true for the young woman, as well. My wife and I, tired travelers, wanted nothing more than a peaceful night's sleep along with a modicum of self-respect.

All true, but there was another level in play, too. As the evening had unfolded, I had become progressively more willing to let the unexpected scenario unfold as it might. As Andy and I worked together, not only was I starting to feel cheerful, but I was aware of a complete shift in my feeling of relationship with Andy and the young woman. It was time I learned her name.

"Amber," Andy replied.

"Well, Amber really did a fine job!" I told him. Andy nodded.

I was already taking on the role of the well-meaning uncle. It was a fine new role to take, a family role. Why couldn't such things happen in a desert town late one night?

"I'll put new towels in the bathroom. Is two enough?"

As Andy headed for the door there was one little detail we needed to settle. "Now you mentioned an adjustment on the room rate?"

"Yes." Andy said. "We're giving you half off."

"Thank you. That's great."

"Can we get you anything else?"

"We're fine. Thanks."

We shook hands and Andy left. As I stood there surprised at how good I felt, I noticed Andy had left his cell phone on the table. I spotted him through an open door in a room down the hall where he was busy taking care of another unmade bed. Funny how little reciprocations can be so satisfying.

Back in the room, my wife and I sat on the bed. A window with a delicate fabric scrim allowed us to see the lights of Kingman. The cars were still rolling by on I-40, travelers in the night. It was quite beautiful.

In the morning, my wife was up first and found the sheet of paper that had been slipped under the door. By the time we were leaving both Andy and Amber were gone. I walked up to the clerk and held out the sheet of paper. "Would you check on room 309? It looks like we're not being charged. Is that right?"

"309," she said, and looked at her computer screen. "That's right," she said. "No charge."