

## THE HOTEL

On Monday, February 16, 1981, I was hired as temporary chambermaid for three weeks in a Venetian hotel. I was assigned twelve bedrooms on the fourth floor. In the course of my cleaning duties, I examined the personal belongings of the hotel guests and observed through details lives which remained unknown to me. On Friday, March 6, the job came to an end.

beyond that she was free to do whatever she wanted. Doggedly and dispassionately, never questioning the absurdity of her task, Maria stuck it out to the end. She was just nineteen when she started, a young girl entirely on her own, and yet she managed to fend for herself and avoid major catastrophes, living the sort of adventure that boys her age only dream of. At one point in her travels, a co-worker gave her an old thirty-five millimeter camera, and without any prior training or experience, she began taking photographs. When she saw her father in Chicago a few months after that, she told him that she had finally found something she liked doing. She showed him some of her photographs, and on the strength of those early attempts, he offered to make a bargain with her. If she went on taking photographs, he said, he would cover her expenses until she was in a position to support herself. It didn't matter how long it took, but she wasn't allowed to quit. That was the story she told me in any case, and I never had grounds to disbelieve it. All during the years of our affair, a deposit of one thousand dollars showed up in Maria's account on the first of every month, wired directly from a bank in Chicago.

She returned to New York, sold her van, and moved into the loft on Duane Street, a large empty room located on the floor above a wholesale egg and butter business. The first months were lonely and disorienting for her. She had no friends, no life to speak of, and the city seemed menacing and unfamiliar, as if she had never been there before. Without any conscious motives, she began following strangers around the streets, choosing someone at random when she left her house in the morning and allowing that choice to determine where she went for the rest of the day. It became a method of acquiring new thoughts, of filling up the emptiness that seemed to have engulfed her. Eventually, she began going out with her camera and taking pictures of the people she followed. When she returned home in the evening, she would sit down and write about where she had been and what she had done, using the strangers' itineraries to speculate about their lives and, in some cases, to compose brief, imaginary biographies. That was more or less how Maria stumbled into her

career as an artist. Other works followed, all of them driven by the same spirit of investigation, the same passion for taking risks. Her subject was the eye, the drama of watching and being watched, and her pieces exhibited the same qualities one found in Maria herself: meticulous attention to detail, a reliance on arbitrary structures, patience bordering on the unendurable. In one work, she hired a private detective to follow her around the city. For several days, this man took pictures of her as she went about her rounds, recording her movements in a small notebook, omitting nothing from the account, not even the most banal and transitory events: crossing the street, buying a newspaper, stopping for a cup of coffee. It was a completely artificial exercise, and yet Maria found it thrilling that anyone should take such an active interest in her. Microscopic actions became fraught with new meaning, the driest routines were charged with uncommon emotion. After several hours, she grew so attached to the detective that she almost forgot she was paying him. When he handed in his report at the end of the week and she studied the photographs of herself and read the exhaustive chronologies of her movements, she felt as if she had become a stranger, as if she had been turned into an imaginary being.

For her next project, Maria took a temporary job as a chambermaid in a large midtown hotel. The point was to gather information about the guests, but not in any intrusive or compromising way. She intentionally avoided them in fact, restricting herself to what could be learned from the objects scattered about their rooms. Again she took photographs; again she invented life stories for them based on the evidence that was available to her. It was an archeology of the present, so to speak, an attempt to reconstitute the essence of something from only the barest fragments: a ticket stub, a torn stocking, a blood stain on the collar of a shirt. (Some time after that, a man tried to pick up Maria on the street. She found him distinctly unattractive and rebuffed him. That same evening, by pure coincidence, she ran into him at a gallery opening in SoHo. They talked once again, and this time she learned from the man that he was leaving the next morning





Sophie Calle - Double Game - "The Hotel"



## ROOM 25



Monday, February 16, 9 A.M. I go into Room 25. The only room on the floor with a single bed, and the first one I enter. The sight of the crumpled navy pajamas with the light blue piping left on the bed and the brown leather slippers does something to me. The occupant is a man. There are a few clues by the washbasin: a dirty comb with missing teeth, a toothbrush, toothpaste, and Mennen deodorant. On the table: *Time*, the *International Herald Tribune*, and a book, *The Moon and Sixpence*, by W Somerset Maugham, with a marker at page 198. On the windowsill outside are apples and oranges in two paper bags. On the night table I find a hardcover notebook, his travel log. I go through it. "Friday: Rome ... Tuesday: Florence ..." and under yesterday's date, these lines: "... arrived in Venice this

morning... up to my room, had a bath, a couple of oranges + apples + will crash. I have told the desk to wake me up at 8:30 + will go to the market which Rob says is ex...". I also find two Paris addresses: Count and Countess M, and Ambassador O. I stop reading. I don't want to take it all in today. I make the bed and leave. It is 9:15 A.M.

Tuesday 17, 9:30 A.M. Today I open the closet. Few clothes. But good-quality ones: tweeds, woollens... subdued colors: gray, navy, brown. A pair of large white underpants lines the bottom of the drawer. In the corner of the closet, a nearly empty toilet kit: it contains some night cream for pimples, needles, and thread inside a lipstick case—I see there is no razor—and a list of clothes he is traveling with.

By elimination, that tells me that today he is wearing blue trousers, a blue T-shirt, and a windbreaker. I clean the room and start to read his diary. His handwriting is poor, heavy, irregular. I re-read his remarks about Venice: "Sunday, February 15, 1981. We arrived in Venice this morning. We took the train. It is really spectacular. No cars, just pretty little streets and small bridges over the canals. We sat outside and had drinks of various strange things. We went back to the hotel. I am in a tiny room by myself. Ran out and bought a kilo of oranges and apples and put them on my windowsill. We went out and had a very good walk. I ate a good soup, noodles with tomato sauce, and drank a lot of white wine. Went to Piazza San Marco, had a grappa. Made me feel not too good. Went back to Hotel C.

## Room 25, February 16-19

I slept a bit. Rob and I went strolling. Stayed at a bar and had a beer. Came back. Rob went up. Got a postcard from the desk and went to hotel bar and had a beer + cig. I wrote a long postcard to Ol. Up to my room, had a bath, ate some oranges and apples, and will crash. I have told the desk to wake me up at 8:30...". Sounds in the hallway. I close the diary. As I put it down, someone enters the room. I pick up my rags, my bucket (where my camera and tape recorder are hidden), lower my gaze and leave. He is dressed the way I thought; he is about twenty-eight, with a weak face. I will try to forget him.

Wednesday 18, 9:40 A.M. He has finished the apples and oranges. The wastebasket is full of peel. He's still on page 198 of Somerset Maugham's book. Nothing has



changed in the room. So I have a look inside the bag of dirty laundry hanging on the door, and empty it on the bed. I go back to the diary. Nothing for the 16th. But for the 17th there are these lines: "Yesterday I walked around. Went to restaurant. Had excellent lasagne. Today we went and had lunch at Harry's Bar which is supposed to be the best restaurant in the world. And it was good. I had good green noodles with excellent sauce. In the afternoon, went to see Steve McQueen in Italian. I had a beer in a square. Then some guy tried to pick me up. I think I will have a bad dream about it tonight."

And that's it. I also find a postcard addressed to someone named Olivier R (no address). In it the occupant of Room 25 describes in detail the menu of his latest meal.

Thursday 19, noon. He is gone. He has left his orange peel in the wastebasket, three fresh eggs on the windowsill and the remains of a croissant which I polish off. I shall miss him.





## ROOM 28



Monday, February 16, 9:30 A.M. I go into Room 28. Only one bed has been slept in. I find an impressive pile of luggage on the right along the wall. Four Vuitton suitcases stacked on top of each other, three traveling bags, a row of shoes; eight pairs for the woman (size 38) and five pairs for the man (size 42). I open the wardrobes. On the right, some men's clothes including three new pairs of shoes in felt covers, a hat, two pairs of white underpants, and one pair of pants with thick braces. All of them of a fine quality. I imagine some older well-off people. In the bathroom, nothing special except a pink flannelette nightgown. I put on some of their Chanel No. 5 perfume. I hastily open one of their suitcases. I catch a glimpse

of *The Economist* magazine, some bananas in a plastic bag. Once the room is made up, I leave.

Tuesday 17, 9:10 A.M. The twin beds have been slept in. In the wastebasket, the banana peels, a bottle of water, and a pair of hardly worn black flat heels (they fit me; I take them). On the chair, a thick white cotton pajama bottom. To the left, some mints, a crossword on a bedside table, an alarm clock, a torch, a roll of Scotch tape, three pairs of glasses, a book, *Games with Love and Death* by Arthur Schnitzler. In the chest upper drawer, I find two handbags, some pearl necklaces in a plastic bag, and ten small identical boxes full of white pills wrapped in a Fitzgerald shoe cover. The two lower drawers contain some women's clothes, silk blouses, pastel color scarves.

Wednesday 18, 9 A.M. The two beds have been slept in. There is some progress on the crossword grid started yesterday. The pajama bottom is still in the same place. I lift the suitcases: three of them seem to be full. I open them. In the first one I find a toilet kit, in the second a set of identical Brooks Brothers shirts with blue-and-white stripes. In the third one, a book, *Artists in Crime* by Ngaio Marsh, a Minox camera, a denture (lower jaw), a 7" x 9 1/2" photograph of a sailing boat on the sea, a reservation at the Milan Carlton for February 19, a portrait of the Pope, an envelope addressed to Mrs H, Baltimore, with the following notations on the back: "Jean Paul Belmondo, rue de la Paix, Paris 5e" (the street number is not mentioned, the

arrondissement number is wrong, the post-office cancellation has been written over in ball-point), a series of index cards with columns of numbers (stock exchange quotations?). I hear some noise, hastily close the suitcase, and make the bed.

Thursday 19, noon. They have gone. They have left nothing behind. I take a last photograph of the unmade beds. The memory I will keep of them is the obscene image of the pajama bottom, lying stupidly on the chair.

Room 28, February 16-19





## ROOM 46



Monday, February 16, 11 A.M.  
I hear a woman's laugh coming from Room 46. A quarter of an hour later, the bellboy knocks on the door, brings in breakfast for two and leaves. I go up to the room to listen.

She says, "Oh! This is lovely."  
He replies, "But anybody can make that."

She says, "This is chocolate the way I like it." He laughs throatily.

My services are wanted elsewhere. When I come back ten minutes later, the subject of conversation is still the same. She says, "I really don't know how they make that."

12:30 A.M. The bellboy knocks on their door, takes the tray, and leaves.

She says, "Oh! Those Italians!" and "Oh! no, don't do that! I've got problems. I swear! You're too much!"

I hear them kiss.

She says, "You shouldn't do that! I haven't been to the loo this morning," whereupon she shrieks, "Oh, I forgot to lock the door!" The key turns in the lock. It's 1 P.M. They're loudly making love and I go off my shift.

Tuesday 17, 11:20 A.M.

I pass by Room 46. I hear the woman say, "I told you when we left ..." followed by silence. By 12:40 P.M. they have gone out. I go in. The first thing to catch the eye is the mind-bogglingly huge pair of shoes, under the table, that blocks out everything else. I then find the following items scattered about the room: a carton of Camel cigarettes, a pair of Ray-Ban glasses, a Sony Walkman with two sets of earphones, tapes (Bernard

Lavilliers, The Doors), books: *Eurocar, Retour à Brooklyn* by Hubert Selby Jr, *Le complot du Caire* by Gerard de Villiers, *La grande chasse au requin* by Hunter S Thompson, and three comic books: *Les Celtiques* and *Fables de Venise* by Hugo Pratt, and *A Suivre*, special John Lennon issue. A knife and sheath, a book by M V Stumza on aerospace medicine, notes on the same subject, and stationery with the letterhead of Carcassonne's City Hall. One of them wears striped pajamas at night, the other a black silk slip and pink bed jacket. All the clothes are hanging in the wardrobe. In the suitcase are two pairs of women's panties, tampons, a pair of men's underpants, a tube, and a jar of vaseline. The bathroom is a mess.

Room 46, February 16-18



Wednesday 18, 10 A.M.

The room is empty. They have checked out. On a piece of paper in the wastebasket is the following text, scribbled in pencil: "Ghetto, Court of Malta and gilded mouth. Court of Malta, wooden staircase, street of love, of friends, the bridge of wonders.

On the way back, old ghetto. Crazy staircase. Turk sewer rats. No longer exists. House bricked-up windows. Secret courtyard of mysteries. Candelabras. Huntress. Arrow. Bow. Cows. Six-pointed stars. A circle. Naked young girl. Ground. Names of fallen angels: Samael, Satael, Amabel. Narrow

passage of nostalgia. Hebrews' seraglio, fine ideas. Bat in alabaster niche." They have forgotten a pair of panties and socks that are drying on the bathroom radiator. The towels are all over the place and the water is still running in the washbasin.