

Death Toll

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I WISH I COULD TELL YOU WHO HE WAS...

It's totally bizarre, really. Who would have thought that what she ate would lead them to me?

Oh, science, these days; it's almost miraculous.

I mean, I made sure that the table I chose was one of the two that is not covered by security cameras. Remember, I had worked as a Manager at the Hotel, so I knew all the insider information.

But surely you knew that there would be an autopsy?

I did suspect that Bernice would smell a rat. As a forensic analyst, the case would interest her, but never in a million years would I have expected her to ask to be present...

Well, she was Donatella's friend, so...

Yes. She was in the right place at the right time, apparently. When I saw her being interviewed on television, I knew my goose was cooked... erm...

Quite. I saw her, too, and I remember saying how she gagged when she smelled the contents of Bernice's stomach.

I couldn't understand how the food was not digested. I mean, we'd had our... last supper... hours before, and then we went for a drive, and watched a film...

Nothing strenuous. Just sitting around.

Yes. If only I'd suggested we go swimming instead. If only we'd had sex. If only we'd taken a bike ride...

Or, to put it more plainly... if only you hadn't taken her to lunch at a place where the signature dish is octopus cooked in whiskey and served over bucatini...octopus is hard to digest... and the carbs... well...

Yes. That put the final nail in my coffin.

I find this stuff really, really interesting.

As you can imagine, so do I. Did you know that forensic autopsies began as a way to determine whether a person was poisoned, or had died of a heart attack?

Really?

Yes. I've had plenty of time to read up on it. Sometimes, you read stuff in the papers like "...the victim had his last meal five hours before he was found hanging from a tree, stabbed sixteen times in the stomach..." as if that's relevant to the case. They'd know this because a meal is usually fully digested after six hours. This was one of the things that was mentioned in that series, *Forensic Files*.

You never know, with all the odd things that happen nowadays... it might be a clue to what happened to him in the interim. But I would have thought that rigor mortis, decomposition, insect activity and the environs, would have been more important than the contents of the stomach.

That's what I thought. Until this. Speaking of odd things...if you want odd things, I can tell you hundreds of stories that happened when I was working in the hotel.

Apart from the Mr and Mrs Smith type of trysts, I take it.

Oh, those were a dime a dozen. But I was alluding to the strange type of guests that turn up every so often. I could write a book. Correction – I could have written a book, had I been so inclined.

Yes.

Yes, what?

I mean – I'm sure you have plenty of stories to tell. Are you going to spill the beans?

Ha! Funny you should use that expression, speaking as we were, of the contents of the stomach.

Ugh!

Well, once there was this guest, a Very Important Person who used to be a Member of Parliament in his home country, who turned up with an expensive suitcase and matching hand luggage. How would not allow the bellhop to handle the large baggage, but tipped him handsomely for carrying the smaller one (which was very heavy, according to the boy) up to his

room. When he checked in, he paid for a month's stay in cash, in advance. We rarely saw his face, except sometimes when he went down to the garden, walked six times, methodically and rhythmically and obsessively around the swan pond, and then went back upstairs.

You don't say! Who was he?

I wish I could tell you – but I can't. We all had to sign an NDA... He had all his meals delivered by room service, and left his laundry in a heap outside the room.

How strange... But seriously, an NDA, at this juncture... are you serious?

Yes. Even as a child, I was always the 'cross my heart and know' I'll die if I tell'.

Funny. Do tell me more.

There was always a 'Do Not Disturb' sign hanging on the doorknob, so the cleaners could not go in and clean... not even when he went for his constitutional.

...probably so that he would not have had to tip the minor staff.

Au contraire – they did. And nice, juicy tips they got, too. He left envelopes with descriptions of personnel he would have noticed on the way up and down the garden. Stuff like “the tall girl with the fringe”, or “the woman with the red hair and glasses”, or “the short thin girl with the tattoo on her wrist” or “the Asian man with the ponytail”, or “the fat man with buck teeth”.

Oh, come on. You're having me on!

I'm serious.

He had O.C.D. for certain.

Could be. It became a kind of in-house game to see who'd get the next red envelope. He used those Chinese gift envelopes with ideographs and a golden tower etched on the front.

I bet they haunted his corridor, just so that he'd see them and remunerate them!

It didn't quite work that way. The persons who got the envelopes sometimes would not even remember seeing him, and they would have been on duty in another part of the hotel.

Maybe he used binoculars to suss them out?

That's what I thought. He would write the date, and time, and place where the persons were, to prove that he had really seen them.

Curiouser and curiouser.

At any rate, when his month was over, it was as if he simply disappeared into thin air. The "Do Not Disturb" sign was gone. The Night Receptionist swore that he had not seen him leave, and the Night Staff said that the room had been in darkness all night. The door was locked, and they had to force it open when they knocked and he did not answer, because the Master Key would not work, for some reason.

Maybe he jumped off the balcony.

That's what they thought, but the shrubs underneath it were intact, and the soil was not disturbed.

Oh, come on! He didn't fly away!

Who knows? Let me finish, will you!

So, there's more?

Oh, yes. As soon as they smashed the lock and flung the door open, they smelled this horrendous odour.

He had used the room as a toilet?

It was far, far, worse. They traced the stench to a wardrobe, and there, in an open suitcase, was the ever-so-neatly dismembered body of a woman. The little baggage that the boy had been allowed to carry contained surgical instruments and a portable drill... and more.

What kind of 'more'?

Well... make-up, and hair ornaments, and about a hundred gold rings, all of which had sapphires.

I shudder to think what he had been doing during his stay. No wonder he did not want anyone to step into the room.

Oh, there's more 'more'. The inside of the wardrobe was crawling with those huge winged ants, and... and... maggots.

Heavens above!

Yes. One of the chambermaids fainted. As it happened, she had been the last one to receive his bonus, and the envelope was still in her apron pocket.

Wow.

To cut a long story short, the Police were called.

And?

It turned out that the victim was a twenty-something who had gone missing some three months before. She had been working as a waitress and going to night classes, with a view to taking the 'A' Levels she had missed out on when she fell in with bad company and

ditched school. She had turned her life around, poor girl, only to...

But there was nothing about it in the Press.

Of course not. It would have been bad business for the hotel. And the man had Connections – we all knew that. We valued our lives too much to tattle.

Was it... [redacted]?

No.

Was it... [redacted]?

You're not going to get his name out of me. No paparazzi, or internet, and no tell-all books, in those days.

As I said, we were all sworn to secrecy by the Management.

Ah!

What's more, guests who were in that room often complained about nasty smells or noises. So, the Management made it into a storage room, but some of the housekeepers would not go in, even if they were newly employed and did not know of the story, because they said the room had bad vibes.

Ouch.

And although the telephone was disconnected, every so often the Front of the House Desk would get a call from that room, but nobody would speak when they picked up.

Mesmerising story. I wish we had more time to speak of these things.

Alas, we don't. My Lethal Injection happens in just under 30 minutes. I told them I am allergic to midazolam, but did they listen...?