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The Somnambulists' Hotel

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THE SOMNAMBULISTS' HOTEL

Only sleepwalkers stay there. When they get to town, something draws them to the place, even if they already have reservations somewhere else. Checking in, smiling shyly, they glance about the lobby. Yet they give no sign they are in any way special. And, like everyone else, they see the sights or do business by day and spend their evenings in restaurants or theatres.

But late at night all return to their rooms at the very same time and almost in unison switch off their lights and climb into bed. Their hearts beat faster in happy expectation, yet they cannot say why. Soon, sleep comes to them all.

Then in each room, as the moonlight pours in, a sudden wind lifts the sheets off the beds and sets them swirling. The guests rise up, too. Still deep in sleep, they step out of bed while the sheets drop behind them like swaddling bands or shrouds.

Some leap to the window ledges and teeter above the street. Others climb the fire escape to the roof where they race back and forth, holding their heads high and throwing their arms wide in the glimmering starlight.

Some—after opening their closets and finding strange apparel there—put on those garments and venture into the corridors. Clinging to the walls, some struggle in the wind that has now become a great gale. Yet in other corridors only a gentle breeze blows. Women in white nightgowns float through these halls, skimming along in toe shoes, lighted candles in their hands, their long hair streaming loose behind them.

Other guests take the elevator down to the lobby. Fluttering aigrette fans, women in century-old evening dresses glide past the night clerk (who never looks up from his paperback novel) and waltz around the ballroom to music only they can hear. Whirling deliriously and breathing harder, they pelt each other with lilies, then stagger as if ready to fall in a swoon.

Yet when City Hall clock strikes the first hour of dawning and the garbage men come banging along, the guests quiet down and, after fumbling their way back to their rooms, lock the doors and sink into bed.

You can find them the next morning at breakfast in the coffee shop: quiet, all of them, and very reserved. Each sits alone. No one speaks. Yet each looks rested and curiously content.

All at that moment are trying to remember something that happened to them in the night, something their minds cannot quite piece together, but something they know was strangely nice. This hotel is distinctly nice, they decide. They smile their shy smiles and glance about at all the nice people. Surely there must be some secret they share. Buttered toast is chewed in meditation. And all vow to stay here should fate ever lead them this way again.