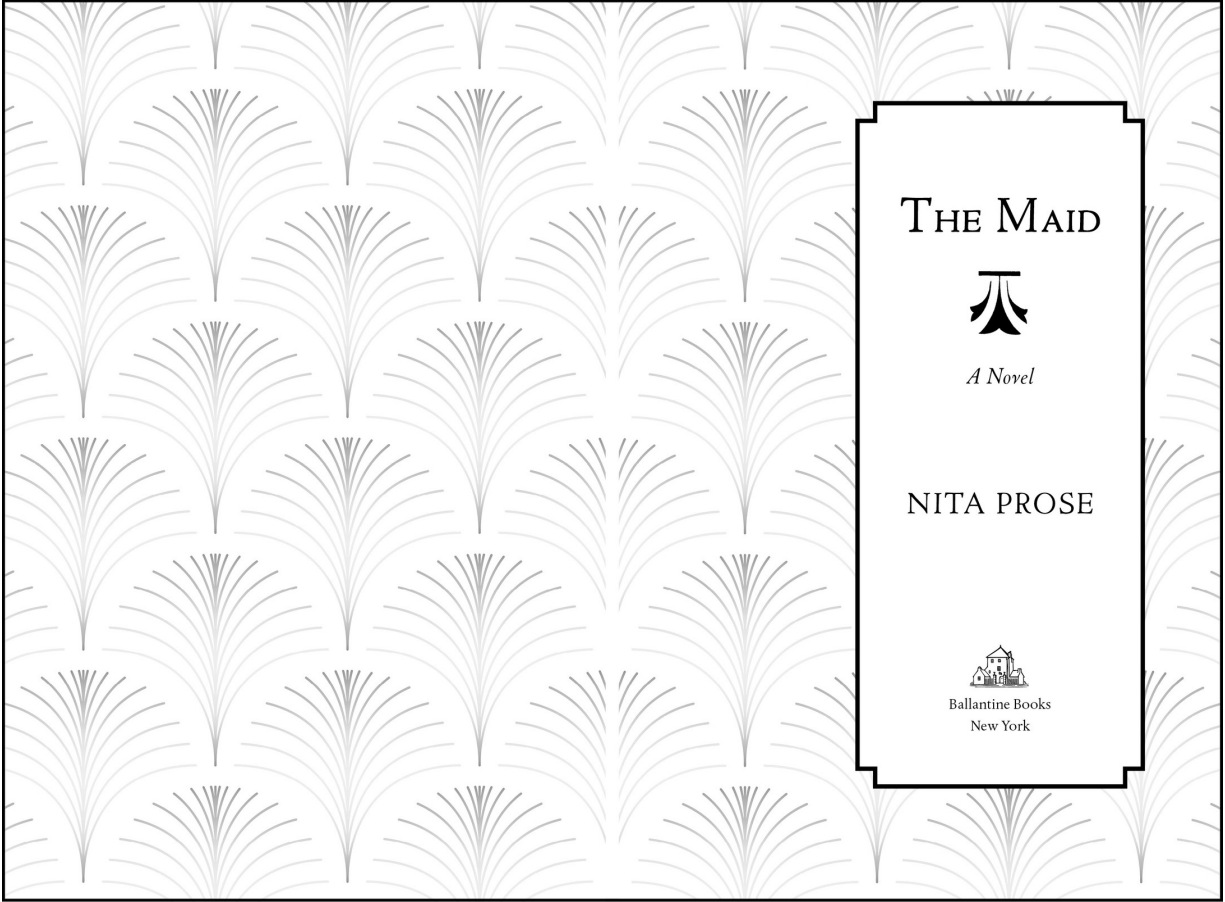


THE
MAID

A Novel



NITA PROSE



THE MAID



A Novel

NITA PROSE



Ballantine Books
New York

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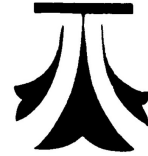
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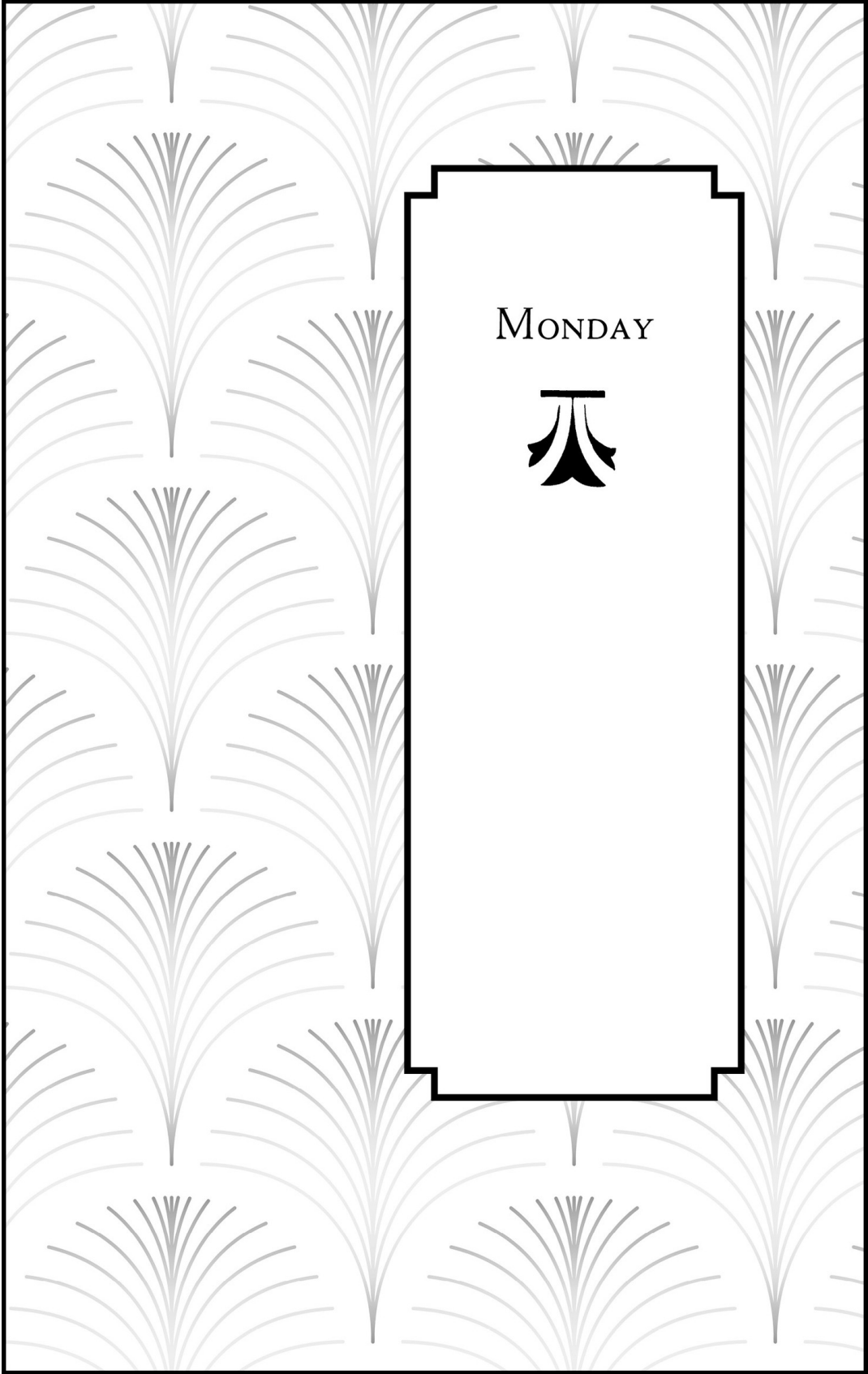


I am your maid. I'm the one who cleans your hotel room, who enters like a phantom when you're out gallivanting for the day, no care at all about what you've left behind, the mess, or what I might see when you're gone.

I'm the one who empties your trash, tossing out the receipts you don't want anyone to discover. I'm the one who changes your sheets, who can tell if you slept in them and if you were alone last night or not. I'm the one who straightens your shoes by the door, who puffs up your pillows and finds stray hairs on them. Yours? Not likely. I'm the one who cleans up after you drink too much and soil the toilet seat, or worse.

When I'm done with my work, I leave your room pristine. Your bed is made perfectly, with four plump pillows, as though no one had ever lain there. The dust and grime you left behind has been vacuumed into oblivion. Your polished mirror reflects your face of innocence back at you. It's as though you were never here. It's as though all of your filth, all of your lies and deceits, have been erased.

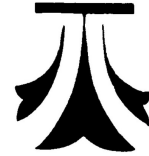
I am your maid. I know so much about you. But when it comes down to it: what is it that you know about me?



MONDAY



CHAPTER I



I am well aware that my name is ridiculous. It was not ridiculous before I took this job four years ago. I'm a maid at the Regency Grand Hotel, and my name is Molly. Molly Maid. A joke. Before I took the job, Molly was just a name, given to me by my estranged mother, who left me so long ago that I have no memory of her, just a few photos and the stories Gran has told me. Gran said my mother thought Molly was a cute name for a girl, that it conjured apple cheeks and pigtails, neither of which I have, as it turns out. I've got simple, dark hair that I maintain in a sharp, neat bob. I part my hair in the middle—the exact middle. I comb it flat and straight. I like things simple and neat.

I have pointed cheekbones and pale skin that people sometimes marvel at, and I don't know why. I'm as white as the sheets that I take off and put on, take off and put on, all day long in the twenty-plus rooms that I make up for the esteemed guests at the Regency Grand, a five-star boutique hotel that prides itself on "sophisticated elegance and proper decorum for the modern age."

Never in my life did I think I'd hold such a lofty position in a grand hotel. I know others think differently, that a maid is a lowly nobody. I know we're all supposed to aspire to become doctors and lawyers and rich real-

estate tycoons. But not me. I'm so thankful for my job that I pinch myself every day. I really do. Especially now, without Gran. Without her, home isn't home. It's as though all the color has been drained from the apartment we shared. But the moment I enter the Regency Grand, the world turns Technicolor bright.

As I place a hand on the shining brass railing and walk up the scarlet steps that lead to the hotel's majestic portico, I'm Dorothy entering Oz. I push through the gleaming revolving doors and I see my true self reflected in the glass—my dark hair and pale complexion are omnipresent, but a blush returns to my cheeks, my *raison d'être* restored once more.

Once I'm through the doors, I often pause to take in the grandeur of the lobby. It never tarnishes. It never grows drab or dusty. It never dulls or fades. It is blessedly the same each and every day. There's the reception and concierge to the left, with its midnight-obsidian counter and smart-looking receptionists in black and white, like penguins. And there's the ample lobby itself, laid out in a horseshoe, with its fine Italian marble floors that radiate pristine white, drawing the eye up, up to the second-floor terrace. There are the ornate Art Deco features of the terrace and the grand marble staircase that brings you there, balustrades glowing and opulent, serpents twisting up to golden knobs held static in brass jaws. Guests will often stand at the rails, hands resting on a glowing post, as they survey the glorious scene below—porters marching crisscross, dragging suitcases behind them, guests lounging in sumptuous armchairs or couples tucked into emerald love seats, their secrets absorbed into the deep, plush velvet.

But perhaps my favorite part of the lobby is the olfactory sensation, that first redolent breath as I take in the scent of the hotel itself at the start of every shift—the *mélange* of ladies' fine perfumes, the dark musk of the leather armchairs, the tangy zing of lemon polish that's used twice daily on the gleaming marble floors. It is the very scent of animus. It is the fragrance of life itself.

Every day, when I arrive to work at the Regency Grand, I feel alive again, part of the fabric of things, the splendor and the color. I am part of the design, a bright, unique square, integral to the tapestry.

Gran used to say, “If you love your job, you’ll never work a day in your life.” And she’s right. Every day of work is a joy to me. I was born to do this job. I love cleaning, I love my maid’s trolley, and I love my uniform.

There’s nothing quite like a perfectly stocked maid’s trolley early in the morning. It is, in my humble opinion, a cornucopia of bounty and beauty. The crisp little packages of delicately wrapped soaps that smell of orange blossom, the tiny Crabtree & Evelyn shampoo bottles, the squat tissue boxes, the toilet-paper rolls wrapped in hygienic film, the bleached white towels in three sizes—bath, hand, and washcloth—and the stacks of doilies for the tea-and-coffee service tray. And last but not least, the cleaning kit, which includes a feather duster, lemon furniture polish, lightly scented antiseptic garbage bags, as well as an impressive array of spray bottles of solvents and disinfectants, all lined up and ready to combat any stain, be it coffee rings, vomit—or even blood. A well-stocked housekeeping trolley is a portable sanitation miracle; it is a clean machine on wheels. And as I said, it is beautiful.

And my uniform. If I had to choose between my uniform and my trolley, I don’t think I could. My uniform is my freedom. It is the ultimate invisibility cloak. At the Regency Grand, it’s dry cleaned daily in the hotel laundry, which is located in the dank bowels of the hotel down the hall from our housekeeping change rooms. Every day before I arrive at work, my uniform is hooked on my locker door. It comes wrapped in clingy plastic, with a little Post-it note that has my name scrawled on it in black marker. What a joy it is to see it there in the morning, my second skin—clean, disinfected, newly pressed, smelling like a mixture of fresh paper, an indoor pool, and nothingness. A new beginning. It’s as though the day before and the many days before that have all been erased.

When I don my maid uniform—not the frumpy *Downton Abbey* style or even the Playboy-bunny cliché, but the blinding-white starched dress shirt and the slim-fit black pencil skirt (made from stretchy fabric for easy bending)—I am whole. Once I’m dressed for my workday, I feel more confident, like I know just what to say and do—at least, most of the time.

And once I take off my uniform at the end of the day, I feel naked, unprotected, undone.

The truth is, I often have trouble with social situations; it's as though everyone is playing an elaborate game with complex rules they all know, but I'm always playing for the first time. I make etiquette mistakes with alarming regularity, offend when I mean to compliment, misread body language, say the wrong thing at the wrong time. It's only because of my gran that I know a smile doesn't necessarily mean someone is happy. Sometimes, people smile when they're laughing at you. Or they'll thank you when they really want to slap you across the face. Gran used to say my reading of behaviors was improving—*every day in every way, my dear*—but now, without her, I struggle. Before, when I rushed home after work, I'd throw open the door to our apartment and ask her questions I'd saved up over the day. "I'm home! Gran, does ketchup really work on brass, or should I stick to salt and vinegar? Is it true that some people drink tea with cream? Gran, why did they call me Rumba at work today?"

But now, when the door to home opens, there's no "Oh, Molly dear, I can explain" or "Let me make you a proper cuppa and I'll answer all of that." Now our cozy two-bedroom feels hollow and lifeless and empty, like a cave. Or a coffin. Or a grave.

I think it's because I have difficulty interpreting expressions that I'm the last person anyone invites to a party, even though I really like parties. Apparently, I make awkward conversation, and if you believe the whispers, I have no friends my age. To be fair, this is one hundred percent accurate. I have no friends my age, few friends of any age, for that matter.

But at work, when I'm wearing my uniform, I blend in. I become part of the hotel's décor, like the black-and-white-striped wallpaper that adorns many a hallway and room. In my uniform, as long as I keep my mouth shut, I can be anyone. You could see me in a police lineup and fail to pick me out even though you walked by me ten times in one day.

Recently, I turned twenty-five, "a quarter of a century" my gran would proclaim to me now if she could say anything to me. Which she can't, because she is dead.

Yes, dead. Why call it anything other than what it is? She did not pass away, like some sweet breeze tickling the heather. She did not go gently. She died. About nine months ago.

The day after her death was a lovely, balmy day, and I went to work, as usual. Mr. Alexander Snow, the hotel manager, was surprised to see me. He reminds me of an owl. He has tortoiseshell glasses that are very large for his squat face. His thinning hair is slicked back, with a widow's peak. No one else at the hotel likes him much. Gran used to say, *Never mind what others think; it's what you think that matters.* And I agree. One must live by her own moral code, not follow like a sheep, blindly.

"Molly, what are you doing here?" Mr. Snow asked when I showed up for work the day after Gran died. "I'm so sorry for your loss. Mr. Preston told me that your grandmother passed away yesterday. I already called in a replacement for your shift. I assumed you'd take today off."

"Mr. Snow, why did you assume?" I asked. "As Gran used to say, when you assume, you make an A-S-S out of U and ME."

Mr. Snow looked like he was going to regurgitate a mouse. "Please accept my condolences. And are you sure you don't want the day off?"

"It was Gran who died, not me," I replied. "The show must go on, you know."

His eyes widened, which perhaps suggests shock? I'll never understand it—why people find the truth more shocking than lies.

Still, Mr. Snow relented. "As you wish, Molly."

A few minutes later, I was downstairs in one of the housekeeping change rooms donning my maid's uniform as I do every day, as I did just this morning, as I'll do tomorrow even though someone else—not my gran—died today. And not at home but at the hotel.

Yes. That's right. Today at work, I found a guest very dead in his bed. Mr. Black. *The* Mr. Black. Other than that, my workday was as normal as ever.

Isn't it interesting how one seismic event can change your memory of what occurred? Workdays usually slide together, the daily tasks blending into one another. The trash bins I empty on the fourth floor meld into those

on the third. I would swear I'm cleaning Suite 410, the corner room that overlooks the west side of the street, but actually I'm at the other end of the hotel, in Room 430, the east-side corner room, which is the mirror inverse of Suite 410. But then something out of the ordinary occurs—such as finding Mr. Black very dead in his bed—and suddenly the day crystalizes, turns from gas to solid in an instant. Every moment becomes memorable, unique from all the other days of work that came before.

It was today, around three in the afternoon, nearing the end of my shift, when the seismic event occurred. I'd cleaned all of my assigned rooms already, including the Blacks' penthouse on the fourth floor, but I needed to return to the suite to finish cleaning their bathroom.

Don't think for a moment that I'm sloppy or disorganized in my work just because I cleaned the Black penthouse twice. When I clean a room, I attack it from top to bottom. I leave it spotless and pristine—no surface left unwiped, no grime left behind. *Cleanliness is next to godliness*, my gran used to say, and I believe that's a better tenet to live by than most. I don't cut corners, I shine them. No fingerprint left to erase, no smear left to clear.

So it's not that I simply got lazy and decided *not* to clean the Blacks' bathroom when I scoured the rest of their suite this morning. *Au contraire*, the bathroom was guest-occupied at the time of my first sanitation visit. Giselle, Mr. Black's current wife, hopped in the shower soon after I arrived. And while she granted me permission (more or less) to clean the rest of the penthouse while she bathed, she lingered for rather a long time in the shower, so much so that steam began to snake and billow out of the crack at the bottom of the bathroom door.

—

Mr. Charles Black and his second wife, Giselle Black, are longtime repeat guests at the Regency Grand. Everyone in the hotel knows them; everyone in the whole country knows of them. Mr. Black stays—or rather, stayed—with us for at least a week every month while he oversaw his real-estate affairs in the city. Mr. Black is—was—a famous impresario, a magnate, a

tycoon. He and Giselle often graced the society pages. He'd be described as "a middle-aged silver fox," though, to be clear, he is neither silver nor a fox. Giselle, meanwhile, was oft described as "a young, lithe trophy socialite."

I found this description complimentary, but when Gran read it, she disagreed. When I asked why, she said, *It's what's between the lines, not on them.*

Mr. and Mrs. Black have been married a short time, about two years. We at the Regency Grand have been fortunate that this esteemed couple regularly grace our hotel. It gives us prestige. Which in turn means more guests. Which in turn means I have a job.

Once, over twenty-three months ago, when we were walking in the Financial District, Gran pointed out all the buildings owned by Mr. Black. I hadn't realized he owned about a quarter of the city, but alas, he does. Or did. As it turns out, you can't own property when you're a corpse.

"He does not own the Regency Grand," Mr. Snow once said about Mr. Black when Mr. Black was still very much alive. Mr. Snow punctuated his comment with a funny little sniff. I have no idea what that sniff was supposed to mean. One of the reasons why I've become fond of Mr. Black's second wife, Giselle, is because she tells me things plainly. And she uses her words.

This morning, the first time I entered the Blacks' penthouse, I cleaned it from top to bottom—minus the occupied bathroom because Giselle was in it. She did not seem herself at all. I noted upon my arrival that her eyes were red and puffy. Allergies? I wondered. Or could it be sadness? Giselle did not dally. Rather, soon upon my arrival, she ran off to the bathroom and slammed the door shut behind her.

I did not allow her behavior to interfere with the task at hand. On the contrary, I got to work immediately and cleaned the suite vigorously. When it was in perfect order, I stood outside the closed bathroom door with a box of tissues and called out to Giselle the way Mr. Snow had taught me. "Your rooms have been restored to a state of perfection! I'll return later to clean the bathroom!"

“Okay!” Giselle replied. “No need to yell! Jeez!” When she eventually emerged from the bathroom, I handed her a tissue in case she was indeed allergic or upset. I expected a bit of a conversation, because she is often quite talkative, but she quickly whisked herself away to the bedroom to get dressed.

I left the suite then and worked through the fourth floor, room after room. I fluffed pillows and polished gilt mirrors. I spritzed smudges and stains from wallpaper and walls. I bundled soiled sheets and moist towels. I disinfected porcelain toilets and sinks.

Halfway through my work on that floor, I took a brief respite to deliver my trolley to the basement, where I dropped off two large, heavy bags of sullied sheets and towels at the laundry. Despite the airlessness of the basement quarters, conditions aggravated by the bright fluorescent lights and very low ceilings, it was a relief to leave those bags behind. As I headed back to the corridors, I felt a great deal lighter, if a tad dewy.

I decided to pay a visit to Juan Manuel, a dishwasher in the kitchen. I zoomed through the labyrinthine halls, making the familiar turns—left, right, left, left, right—rather like a clever trained mouse in a maze. When I reached the wide kitchen doors and pushed through, Juan Manuel stopped everything and immediately got me a large drink of cold water with ice, which I appreciated greatly.

After a short and agreeable chat, I left him. I then replenished my clean towels and sheets in the housekeeping quarters. Next, up I went to the fresher air of the second floor to begin cleaning a new set of rooms, which suspiciously yielded only small change in tips, but more on that later.

By the time I checked my watch, it was around three o’clock. It was time to circle back to the fourth floor and clean Mr. and Mrs. Black’s bathroom. I paused outside their door to listen for evidence of occupancy. I knocked, as per protocol. “Housekeeping!” I said in a loud but politely authoritative voice. No reply. I took my master keycard and buzzed into their suite, dragging my trolley behind me.

“Mr. and Mrs. Black? May I complete my sanitation visit? I would very much like to return your room to a state of perfection.”

Nothing. Clearly, or so I thought, husband and wife were out. All the better for me. I could do my work thoroughly and without disturbance. I let the heavy door close behind me. I surveyed their sitting room. It was not as I'd left it a few hours earlier, neat and clean. The curtains had been drawn against the impressive floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the street below, and there were several small minibar bottles of scotch knocked over on the glass table, a tumbler beside it half-empty, an unsmoked cigar beside that, a crumpled napkin on the floor, and a divot on the divan where the drinker's bottom had left its mark. Giselle's yellow purse was no longer where I'd seen it in the morning, on the bureau by the entrance, which meant she was traversing the town.

A maid's work is never done, I thought to myself as I pulled the pillow off the divan, plumped it, returned it to its spot, and smoothed any lingering divan imperfections. Before cleaning up the table, I decided to check the state of the other rooms. It was looking very much like I'd have to clean the entire suite from scratch.

I headed to the bedroom at the back of the suite. The door was open, and one of the hotel's plush, white bathrobes was strewn on the floor just outside the threshold. From my vantage point, I could see the bedroom closet, with one door still open, exactly as I'd left it in the morning because the safe inside was also open and was preventing the closet door from closing properly. Some of the safe's contents were still intact—I could see that much immediately—but the objects that had caused me some consternation in the morning were notably missing. In some ways, this was a relief. I turned my attention away from the closet, stepped carefully over the bathrobe on the floor, and entered the bedroom.

And only then did I see him. Mr. Black. He was wearing the same double-breasted suit he had on earlier when he bowled me over in the hallway, only the paper in his breast pocket was gone. He was lying down, flat on his back on the bed. The bed was creased and disheveled, as though he'd tossed and turned a lot before settling on his back. His head was resting on one pillow, not two, and the other two pillows were askew beside him. I would have to locate the mandatory fourth pillow, which I most

certainly put on the bed this morning when I made it, because the devil is, as they say, in the details.

Mr. Black's shoes were off, on the other side of the room. I remember that distinctly because one shoe pointed south and the other east, and immediately I knew it was my professional duty to point both shoes in the same direction, and smooth out the nasty tangle of laces before I left the room.

Of course, my first thought upon beholding this scene was not that Mr. Black was dead. It was that he was napping soundly after having enjoyed more than one afternoon tippie in the sitting room. But upon further observation I noted some other oddities in the room. On the bedside table to the left of Mr. Black was an open bottle of medication, a bottle I recognized as Giselle's. Various small blue pills had cascaded out of the bottle, some landing on the bedside table and others on the floor. A couple of pills had been trampled, reduced to a fine powder that was now ground into the carpet. This would require high vacuum suction, followed by a spot of carpet deodorizer to return the carpet pile to a state of perfection.

It isn't often that I enter a suite to find a guest sound asleep in bed. If anything, much to my dismay, it's more common that I stumble across guests in another state entirely—in flagrante, as they say in Latin. Most guests who decide to sleep or to engage in private activities are courteous enough to employ the "Do Not Disturb: Zzzing" door hanger I always leave on the front bureau for such eventualities. And most guests call out immediately if I inadvertently catch them at an inopportune moment. But not so with Mr. Black; he did not call out and order me to "bugger off," which is how he would normally dismiss me if I arrived at the wrong time. Instead, he remained soundly asleep.

It was then that I realized I had not heard him breathe during the ten seconds or more I'd been standing at his bedroom door. I do know something about sound sleepers, because my gran happened to be one, but no sleeper rests so deeply that he gives up breathing entirely.

I thought it prudent to check on Mr. Black and ensure that he was quite all right. This, too, is a maid's professional duty. I took a small step forward

to scrutinize his face. That's when I noticed how gray he appeared, how puffy and how...distinctly unwell. I gingerly moved even closer, right to his bedside, where I loomed over him. His wrinkles were entrenched, his mouth drawn down in a scowl, though for Mr. Black that can hardly be considered unusual. There were strange little marks around his eyes, like red and purple pinpricks. Only then did my mind suddenly ring alarm bells. It was at that moment that I fully cued to the disturbing fact that there was more wrong with this situation than I'd realized at the outset.

I eased a hand forward and tapped Mr. Black's shoulder. It felt rigid and cold, like a piece of furniture. I put my hand in front of his mouth in the desperate hope that I'd feel some breath come out of him, but to no avail.

"No, no, no," I said as I put two fingers to his neck, checking for a pulse, which I did not find. I took him by the shoulders and shook. "Sir! Sir! Wake up!" It was a silly thing to do, now that I think about it, but at the time it still seemed largely impossible that Mr. Black could actually be dead.

When I let him go, he plunked down, his head banging ever so slightly against the headboard. I backed away from the bed then, my own arms rigid by my sides.

I shuffled to the other bedside table, where there was a phone, and I called down to the front desk.

"Regency Grand, Reception. How can I help you?"

"Good afternoon," I said. "I'm not a guest. I don't usually call for help. This is Molly, the maid. I'm in the penthouse suite, Suite 401, and I'm dealing with a rather unusual situation. An uncommon mess, of sorts."

"Why are you calling Reception? Call Housekeeping."

"I *am* Housekeeping," I said, my voice rising. "Please, if you could alert Mr. Snow that there's a guest who is...permanently indisposed."

"Permanently indisposed?"

This is why it's always best to be direct and clear at all times, but in that moment, I can admit that I'd lost my head, temporarily.

"He is very dead," I said. "*Dead* in his *bed*. Call Mr. Snow. And please dial emergency services. Immediately!"

I hung up after that. To be honest, what happened next all feels surreal and dreamlike. I recall my heart clanging in my chest, the room tilting like a Hitchcock film, my hands going clammy and the receiver almost slipping from my grasp as I put it back in its place.

It was then that I looked up. On the wall in front of me was a gilt-framed mirror, reflecting not only my terrified face back at me but everything I'd failed to notice before.

The vertigo got worse then, the floor tilting like a funhouse. I put a hand to my chest, a futile attempt to still my trembling heart.

It's easier than you'd ever think—existing in plain sight while remaining largely invisible. That's what I've learned from being a maid. You can be so important, so crucial to the fabric of things and yet be entirely overlooked. It's a truth that applies to maids, and to others as well, so it seems. It's a truth that cuts close to the bone.

I fainted not long after that. The room went dark and I simply crumpled, as I sometimes do when consciousness becomes overwhelming.

Now, as I sit here in Mr. Snow's luxurious office, my hands are shaking. My nerves are frayed. What's right is right. What's done is done. But still, I tremble.

I employ Gran's mental trick to steady myself. Whenever the tension got unbearable in a film, she'd grab the remote control and fast-forward. "There," she'd say. "No point jangling our nerves when the ending's inevitable. What will be will be." That is true of the movies, but less true in real life. In real life, the actions you take can change the results, from sad to happy, from disappointing to satisfactory, from wrong to right.

Gran's trick serves me well. I fast-forward and pick up my mental replay at just the right spot. My trembling immediately subsides. I was still in the suite but not in the bedroom. I was by the front door. I rushed back into the bedroom, grabbed the phone receiver for the second time, and called down to Reception. This time, I demanded to speak with Mr. Snow. When I heard his voice on the line saying, "Hello? What is it?" I made sure to be very clear.

“This is Molly. Mr. Black is dead. I am *in his room*. Please call emergency services immediately.”

Approximately thirteen minutes later, Mr. Snow entered the room with a small army of medical personnel and police officers filing in behind him. He led me away, guiding me by the elbow like a small child.

And now, here I sit in his office just off the main lobby in a firm and squeaky maroon leather high-backed chair. Mr. Snow left some time ago—perhaps an hour, maybe more? He told me to stay put until he returned. I have a lovely cup of tea in one hand and a shortbread biscuit in the other. I can’t remember who brought them to me. I take the cup to my lips—it’s warm but not scalding, an ideal temperature. My hands are still trembling slightly. Who made me such a perfect cup of tea? Was it Mr. Snow? Or someone else in the kitchen? Perhaps Juan Manuel? Maybe it was Rodney at the bar, a lovely thought—Rodney brewing me a perfect cup of tea.

As I gaze down at the teacup—a proper porcelain one, decorated with pink roses and green thorns—I suddenly miss my gran. Terribly.

I put the shortbread biscuit to my lips. It crunches nicely between my teeth. The texture is crisp, the flavor delicate and buttery. Overall, it is a delightful biscuit. It tastes sweet, oh so very sweet.