

Jenny Swing, old and fat, scrubbed the pine-wood floor with deliberation. Each morning, after boiling water for the tenants' coffee, she began her daily cleaning. Monday: kitchen and tiled surfaces. Tuesday: windows and doors (entrances and exits). Today was a Wednesday, which meant scrubbing the pine-wood floors and hallways. Thursday, she cleaned the tenants' rooms. Friday was the bathroom at the end of the hallway that all the tenants shared. That was the worst day of the week. Saturday was easier because all she had to clean was her own little bedroom or do any other chore that needed attention. Sunday was her day of rest, and she went to church, prayed hard, and put whatever tips she had collected during the week (usually not much more than a quarter or two) into the collection box.

Each morning when Jenny awoke, as the sun slept on the hazy horizon, she prepared her little breakfast in a little one-egg pan in her little one-room. She cracked the single dark-yolk egg carefully and watched its white creep out of the brown shell onto the pan that had long since lost its teflon. On the few occasions when the yolk appeared first, Jenny would throw it away as if it were a bad sign and grab the next egg in the carton. It was important to start her day the same way, each day. After all, the evils we know are less terrible to us than the evils we don't know.

Jenny was as good at her job as any one person can be. She gave it as much attention as any one person can give, and she respected the privacies of the tenants. It was a small place, just ten rooms, and tenants usually stayed for weeks at a time, so she got to know their habits. The walls were as thin as a coat of paint. Listening to a neighbor's activities and schedule became reassuring through its consistent mundanity.

The tenants were comprised of both long- term and short-term residents. There was Father Left in Room 2, who was a Jesuit doing research at the university. He was kind, and would play cards with Jenny on weekend nights. They didn't talk much, but then again, they didn't need to. Jenny Swing's favorite tenant was in Room 1, a young man who did his own laundry and who mostly kept to himself. She admired his pressed pants and checkered shirts and that he sometimes smelled of bay laurel. Jenny always tried to say hello to him when they ran into each other in the hallway. "How's it going?" "Busiest time of the year," he would respond, no matter what time of year it was, and smiled and keyed his lock.

Room 10 housed a young Mexican woman named Donacella Derecho, who was trying to live in the city as an artist but never left her room. All day she painted washed-out watercolors of what she could see from her window. There was only so much to see and the watercolors reflected this. At any one time, there were dozens of these facsimile paintings hanging to dry in her room. Since the backside of each of the hotel's rooms faced the gray waters of Lake Pontchartrain, most of these watercolors weren't very colorful either. Her window was small and shaped like an almond which was also reflected in her work. Most of her watercolors were as devoid of detail or definition as the lake (which was in fact an estuary) and had little in the way of wildlife or marshes. Only soggy cardboard boxes, ramshackle houses, and brown grass lined the lake's shore.

Unfortunately, Jenny's life wasn't always simple. There were ten rooms, and seven of them were full of men and women who spoke to her little more than, "Where is breakfast?" or "Hey, when are you gonna clean my room?" They weren't very kind to Jenny. Some of them took the failings of their day out on her at night. To her credit, she responded with kindness when she could. To her debit, sometimes she didn't feel all that kind. She tried to be more understanding. "They have hard jobs," she would think and pray. "Lord, give me patience with these folks," she would smile at the floor as she scrubbed the pine-wood floor.

The hotel was built on the shores facing the lake where ships came and went each day and night—big ships, small boats, black, white, and muted. Jenny watched these come and go from her small little room in the attic above the hotel. She had a little round window like a porthole, which faced the harbor, and she loved to watch them steam in and out, delivering all kinds of things she could imagine. "Sugar, maybe. That big one probably has oil." The fog horns of these ships comforted her at night and reminded her of her grandfather's snores—colossal noises that taught her to be cordial to the cold in the house.

In Room 6, there lived an old French Quarter prostitute. She wasn't very kind to Jenny, but she wasn't all that mean, either. Jenny seemed not to exist to her, but then again, not much did. The other patrons called her *La Femelle* or *La Balançoire* (which was a reference to a particular act she advertised). The other men who stayed in the hotel often visited her room,

except, as Jenny noticed, for Father Left and the youngish man in Room 1. Jenny had even seen Donacella quietly close the door to Room 6 behind her before sprinting on the balls of her feet back to her room.

Rooms 3 and 4 were occupied by two brothers who had been in town on business for about seven years. One was noticeably older than the other and went by Hargreaves, and the other went by Oswald. Hargreaves' hair was graying and thinning, and Oswald had no visible hair on his body whatsoever. Hargreaves was a big man and Oswald was a little man. Hargreaves filled his suit like a balloon and Oswald filled his like a coat hanger. Jenny never saw them in anything but those cheap wool suits. They weren't what Jenny called "mean," but they were "blind." They never said anything to Jenny except in the imperative. Commands. No greetings. No wishes. Demands. They never addressed her, nor had she ever noticed them addressing anyone else by name. They seemed to come and go together, never apart, except when one waited outside of the prostitute's room for the other to finish before going in himself. They never cleaned up after themselves. Neither ever said anything to his brother, but they moved in a fluidity rarely achieved even with words.

Rooms 7 and 8 were reserved for more temporary tenants. They would come and go, their voices fading into the grime and the fog; their faces blown smooth by the wind and the rain. Even though Jenny knew that different people stayed in these rooms, she couldn't help but think they were the same people checking in under a succession of names, blending together with the chatter and noise from the busy street. Jenny sometimes woke up in the middle of the night, breathing heavily and sweating, to the indistinguishable chatter of these people. Luckily for Jenny, exhaustion always won out in short order and sleep took her again somewhere quiet and dark. Sometimes these tenants even looked like people she knew. Once, she thought, *she knew* it was her mother who had checked in under an alias. If Jenny hadn't been the one to bury her she would have said something. Even then, she wasn't sure. "I put her in the ground. *I put her in the ground.*"

Room 9 was empty.

There was one tenant who was particularly hateful to Jenny. She was able to ignore people who didn't see her at all, but she wasn't able to ignore the man in Room 5. His name was Mr. Swing (of no relation), but that nominal coincidence didn't ameliorate his tone to her in anyway. He demanded meals and cleaning at all hours, and when she finally surrendered each night, he would stare at her, hungry, but not for the plain food she had prepared. When she cleaned the hallway once a week, a dirty rag under her scraped and skinned knees, he would come out of his room and watch her work. Once, as she cleaned the hall he spit on the ground next to him, saying, "You're worthless and you know it. You ain't even worthless, Jenny, you're nothingness." She continued cleaning with her bucket and sponge and felt his eyes on her broken back as she moved down the hallway. Since he was in the middle of the hall, it didn't matter which side she started on; he could always watch her come and go.

Jenny didn't know what Mr. Swing did for a living, but he seemed to have enough money to never have to leave his room except to visit *La Femelle* each afternoon at 3:30 exactly. "We are creatures of habit" Jenny knew. When Jenny walked by she would listen at the door. She never heard anything more than the usual rats in the walls, who went on living their own lives in a remarkably similar way to that of the paying tenants.

When she cleaned the tenants' rooms each week on Thursday, Mr. Swing's room was always the most putrid and nauseating. She had to breathe through her mouth and hold her breath as she scraped dried, rolled mucus off the floor boards. She pictured him in the room each night thinking up new ways to torture her, which in truth, he did. Picking and flicking. Each night, he sat up late, skulking, his bare lightbulb hanging from the ceiling (he insisted it be bare), and he rolled his boogers between his fingers like Sisyphus and picked at and ate his perpetual scabs. Bleeding a little bit from his neck, and his face, and his arm, he would think up new ways to torture dear Jenny.

She tried to excuse his excesses "His life is probably harder than mine," but she couldn't help but hold anger in her heart. "Jesus, help me not hate this mean man," she would plead, and He would, as exhaustion took her each night, just as it had the night before and the night before that. But every night while in her flaking, pastel-pink tub, Jenny could feel the hatred creep up on

her. Responses would bubble up like little farts in the tub as she lay in repose in that tepid water. Jenny floated until she was still.

One Saturday, while playing cards with Father Left (they played whatever games they wanted which awarded themselves a single, small trophy of autonomy), she asked him a question. “Father,” she said, “I know I’m not a Catholic, but can I ask you a question?”

“Of course,” he smiled, gold glinting in his teeth. “What’s on your mind?”

“If someone is real mean to you, and you don’t deserve it, what do you do?”

“Well, Jesus teaches us to turn the other cheek, does he not?”

“Sure, sure. But then you turn the other cheek so many times that they both start to sting.”

“Christ teaches us that the body does not matter. It is the soul that matters. And the soul doesn’t feel bodily pain.”

“So I shouldn’t hit back?”

“Will it make you feel better or worse?”

“Worse.”

“Well, Miss Jenny, I think that’s your answer.”

“But why, Father, are there bad people in the world if God created them?”

“I don’t know Jenny. I guess it’s the workings of the Devil. And we gotta fight the Devil with Christ’s goodness.”

“But how do we fight the devil if we always turn our cheeks? Doesn’t someone gotta take a stand?”

“We fight the devil with God’s love. I encourage you to plan ahead in your day. Try to avoid evil and seek out only the goodness in people. Pray every morning and every night before bed, and God will protect you.”

Jenny nodded but thought, “Plan ahead. Rich. More like plan a head stone.”

It was September and the hotel was hot as an oven. That morning, she had been forced to skip breakfast and she was having one of those days where nothing she did was an accomplishment. She was treading water. Partially reinforced by those worldly words of those wordy Jesuits, she continued to withstand baseness. That night, in the heat of late summer, the air

stagnant and thick, she heard Mr. Swing calling her name from his room. She got up, said a prayer, and went downstairs to see what he wanted. It was usually food, and Jenny was prepared to cook whatever he asked for just so she could get back into bed.

Jenny walked down the hallway, imagining what the tenants were up to in their beds. From right to left, the waves along the hotel's shore rolled on irrevocably. Donacella slept soundly, her dreams and thoughts with her mediocre watercolors, the waves in their frames lapping and overlapping soundlessly, lip lap, lip, lap. Room 9 was empty, which was just as well, and Jenny wondered if the rodents and the roaches played house and held court for themselves in there. The temporary tenants in 7 and 8 were probably doing what we all do each night—routines of teeth and hair and sleeping clothes. They were likely saying their prayers, and Jenny thought she heard them as she buckled down the hallway.

As she looked down the hall, she wondered what Father Left and the young man who smelled of bay laurel were doing. Father usually fell asleep early but the young man never made any noise, so Jenny didn't know what he did with his time. *La Femelle* alone was awake; she worked most nights except Sundays, because Sunday was, as she put it, "the Lord's Day."

Mr. Swing was waiting in the doorway in his pajama bottoms without a shirt. His chest was caved in and pale. His waist was thin and seemed to wrap around his back, and he looked more contentious than usual. She said, "What can I do for you, sir?" "I need you to clean my room, it's dirty and I won't sleep if it's dirty," he replied.

She looked at him. "Room cleaning day isn't until tomorrow. Today is Wednesday. You'll have to wait until tomorrow."

"Clean my room or else I will tell the police that you killed your mother and stole her heirloom watch and pawned it you ingrate, you slime, you silly, worthless, girl."

This was one of his usual threats and she wasn't all that frightened he would run to the police. But she decided it would only take her twenty minutes to clean his room, and that that was a better alternative to waking up the rest of the tenants.

“Okay. Let me get my bucket.”

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She awoke in her room.

Everything hurt and didn't hurt simultaneously. Her mouth made a sound: “syzygy.” Her head was disconnected from her body and her body from her soul. She struggled to move. She was on the floor, the knotted pine-wood floor that smelled like pennies. She found her hands, which found her face, and more blood. Her tongue filled her mouth, and her teeth were soft and loose. She knew what had happened. She knew what had happened. It was... it was... She tried to roll over and get up, but as soon as she was on her knees, she collapsed onto the knotted pine-wood floor again. A series of still images flooded her mind now as she tried to block what had happened. His face, his wicked grin, his boogers on the floor, on her cheeks, as he slammed her face into the ground. Her blood. Draining. Initial anger and pain was replaced by an overwhelming sense of nothing. No feeling within her— no rage, no pain, no thing. She didn't feel the pain in her stomach anymore. Everything that had happened seemed insignificant, compared to what was beginning. Her mind cracked and her will reeled. She felt nothing anymore. She was severed from God, and she knew it. She had fallen, and she would not get back up.

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In October of that year the rains arrived, as they always do, and with them came the floods. Jenny waited ever so patiently for those rains. She knew what needed to be done. She watched the ships in the harbor steam in and out. Black and white and muted. She waited for the sign that it was time to act. As she cleaned each day, thoughtless, mindless, she smiled idiotically at the people as they walked in from wherever they had been. She no longer played cards with Father Left, but she did all the rest that her duty required. She counted the money each week and

handed it to the nameless and invisible owner who had never been bothered to find more help. But she didn't care anymore. She made beds every day and cleaned a room every day of the week. Every night she stayed up. No longer overwhelmed by exhaustion, she stared through the knotted pine-wood floor boards at her little tenants and watched them in their evening routines, the whites of her eyes illuminating whatever they looked on.

One morning, when looking out from her second floor window at the pouring rain and the flooded avenues, she saw a black freighter drift into the harbor. It had three masts but they were bare of sails. The rigging hung loosely and made them look like abandoned telephone poles. She could see no men on the deck and, although it was at a distance, she saw the freighter and the freighter saw her. They each bore the same black pain and bore it around the world. They acted in collusion. Jenny opened the hatch in her attic apartment and let the rain in.

New Orleans is poorly elevated and even more poorly drained. During the flood seasons of late summer, hurricanes blow ships from the harbor into the now canal-like streets. Jenny knew this, having been a resident her whole life. She climbed up onto her bed and, as the rain came down, walked back and forth as she began to sing sharply: "Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me! I once was lost, but now am found; was blind but now I see. 'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved; How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed."

The rain came down harder now and the puddle on her floor grew into a pool. She was soaked, and with each step on her little bed, water oozed out. She hopped off her bed and onto the floor and waddled across to lock and barricade her door with the few pieces of furniture she possessed. Chest of drawers, table with two replacement legs, and the narrow and stained bed. They would be coming soon, she knew. And sure enough, there were knocks and yells at her door. "Jenny! It's flooding downstairs! What're you gonna do about it? We won't be able to sleep in this shit-hole tonight if its flooded!"

She smiled big and long at the oak door and said aloud, "Nobody going to sleep. Nobody." White foam danced upon brackish water and bubbles floated from between the pine-wood floorboards.



The rain clouds had kept the sky dark all morning, and it was a darker day than most as the wind curdled the water. There was now about a foot of the holy water, and the churlish wind screamed and whipped through the hotel. People were hammering at the door trying to break it down. Jenny watched with her mindless eyes knowing they would get through soon, but by then it would be too late. The old pine-wood building was buckling under the weight of the water, which had now ruined the belongings of the tenants in their rooms.

Suddenly, a steel-tipped axe-blade smashed through the door. Splinters flew into the room where they floated like little fishing boats. The axe pulled out, and eyes replaced it. "JENNY, WE KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE! CLOSE THE GODDAMN ROOF!" Mr. Swing swung the axe splintering the door.

She could hear Father Left say, "Jenny! What's going on? Can't you see the water?" Jenny looked out the porthole-shaped window and saw the young man in the checkered shirt fleeing down the street with his rubber rain coat over his head. Behind him, the prostitute dragged a suitcase through the salivating streets, followed closely by Oswald and Hargreaves careening baldly, their footsteps displacing water as they went. Donacella, too, abandoned her watercolors and the hotel to its fate.

Jenny watched the door with her toothless grin. She looked to the round little window as the great black hull of the freighter grew bigger and bigger before filling it entirely. As it loomed she could see the ship's name: *Jenny*. It was Sunday morning and she was ready for her day of rest.