



The Little Apocrypha

C. A. Wynn

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An Antique for Antiques

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*For Cozy and Aidan, who remind me every day that life matters,
and for Curt, a lover of science fiction, who never gave up.*

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Turndown Service

Have you ever wondered how running a hotel has changed over the course of human civilization? You might if you actually ran one. Having managed a hotel for most of my adult life, such things often cross my mind.

If you think about it, cultures and technologies continually evolve. Human life, on the other hand, largely remains the same. Travel to the stars hasn't changed how we put on our trousers. We eat more synthetic foods, but the jaw still grinds down both protein and fiber. As for hygiene, we may have to recycle the bath water on an ice moon, but that doesn't keep us from bathing. Then there are politics and religion. We still argue over both, even when most of us can't tell which is which.

These are the thoughts that arise while I'm preparing my hotel for a big event, addressing a guest complaint, or navigating a tear in the space-time continuum. One's mind should always be engaged.

The original owners chose to call this place the Europa Arms. It's a name that may have sounded welcoming on a dusty highway in Kansas. In space, the title implies less luxury and more practicality, less Ritz Carlton and more Motel 6.

One peculiarity of my hotel is that we continue to use carpeting on the floors. This anachronism adds to the ambiance but does little for some of our more exotic visitors. That's where this story begins, with the hallway carpet on the sixth floor.

On that day, I was watching an exchange between a mother and daughter. The bellhop was unloading their luggage into room 623 while they spoke. The mother had just compared our establishment with those on Earth.

“What’s a Motel 6?” the little girl asked. Her hair was in pigtails. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d seen pigtails.

“Motel 6 was the place poor people stayed on Earth, dear,” her mother said.

“Madam, use of the term ‘poor’ is still frowned upon,” I said. As someone who grew up impoverished, I had a particular perspective on that subject. When they began calling us disadvantaged, it somehow didn’t change how hungry I was. However, this wasn’t a vendetta for me. Instead, I made such observations to inspire guilt. The tactic often increased the gratuity my staff received.

The woman looked at me with an uncertain expression. She was likely calculating whether my comment amounted to insolence. “The gentleman’s right, dear. The ‘less advantaged’ used to stay at Motel 6.”

Patting the young girl directly between her pigtails, I smiled. “We might also call them frugal, young lady.”

On my return to the elevator, I spotted an unpleasant smear. To use the term ‘unpleasant’ is to understate things considerably. It was a mixture of colors and scents that challenged the best anti-nausea treatment.

Some of our guests are more prone to ooze than others. We reserve the rooms closest to the elevators for this reason. Since these guests usually lack a skeletal structure, proximity is convenient for them. The benefits for our housekeeping staff need no further elaboration.

The discovery of the smear triggered my call to housekeeping. “I don’t know when it first appeared, Ms. Bistra. I’ve been here several minutes, and no guests have been in the hall. Please send someone quickly and determine why the AI did not anticipate the need for cleanup.”

Such trials were ultimately why I accepted the management position. Identifying problems is easy. Solving them remains a

challenge, but one readily overcome by leveraging the skill of delegation.

“I’ll send someone up right away,” said Taimi Bistra, the new head of housekeeping.

“Promise me it will not be that disagreeable Madam Duibhne,” I said.

Ms. Bistra had only been with the hotel for a short time before rising to her managerial position. Her brief tenure did not afford me much opportunity to appreciate her management skills or lack thereof.

One of her first official acts had been to hire Rhona Duibhne, the most ill-tempered and fastidious person I had ever met. Had I been involved in the decision, I would not have offered Madam Duibhne any position. I might not even have accepted her as a guest.

When the elevator doors opened, I discovered the source of the slime. Within the elevator was a being of unknown origin. Unfortunately, the guest was no longer breathing. I assumed breathing was a sign of life, though this species might not require oxygen. Regardless, their lifeless body was wedged—or had drooped—into the back corner of the car.

I activated my comm device. “Ms. Bistra, I’ve discovered the source of our unsavory deposit. It appears we have a dead guest. The species is as yet undetermined.” A sound like a gasp escaped from my comm. “Ms. Bistra?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Have you sent someone to clean up... remove... attend to the mess?”

“Yes, sir, we are on our way.”

Without thinking, I attempted to lift the body from its resting place. As I stood with the creature in my arms, goo dripped from its lifeless

form. The body's tendency to ooze should have dissuaded me from proceeding further. I failed to heed that warning.

Nothing could prepare me for the sudden, nauseating collapse of the lifeless body. The audible volume of the splash was remarkable in itself. The shock of this sound was exceeded only by the extent to which the body erupted across the floor of the car. Except for the ceiling, no area of the elevator escaped the splatter.

"You really should have left things undisturbed," said Officer Akimasa upon arriving. "Not sure if we can rule out foul play now."

I'd come to the same conclusion myself an hour prior. That would have been less than a minute after I allowed my guest to dribble through my arms. "Is there any way to use camera footage?"

Officer Akimasa's analytron chirped as he typed a note. "Sure, but we're not gonna get as much information that way."

Ms. Bistra tugged on my jacket sleeve. "Foul play?"

I looked at her young, innocent face. "He means perhaps our guest was murdered," I said.

"You really should have waited to tell her that," said the officer as he caught the young woman. He was right, of course. It was the third time she'd fainted since arriving on the sixth floor. Had Madam Duibhne not accompanied Ms. Bistra, we never would have gotten the area ready to accept guests.

It occurred to me that I had ridden up in this very elevator shortly before the discovery of our guest. Had the smear been on the carpet then, I could not say. As for the elevator, only the bellhop and I accompanied the people from room 623.

"You really have a head scratcher here," said the officer, reviewing his notes. "Would make a great true-crime holo-cast." He lifted his analytron toward the goo. "Mind if I get some vid?"

The woman and her child from room 623 approached. "I'm sorry, madam," I said, trying to avoid implying that my following

statement was painfully obvious. “The elevator is out of service at the moment. You will have to use the stairs.”

Ms. Bistra had begun to recover from her most recent swoon. As she rose, she raised her hand like a child asking a teacher for permission to speak. “I can take her downstairs.”

“I trust we can rely on Madam Duibhne in your absence,” I said.

Ms. Bistra nodded and took the woman’s hand from room 623. They made their way down the hall to the stairwell, the young girl’s pigtailed dancing along behind them.

Cleaning the elevator proved even more difficult than I expected. As the officer repeatedly reminded me, “Genetic material is evidence. We’ll need to keep that.” This mantra accompanied several hours of scrubbing and scraping.

“I can be quick, or I can be thorough, sir,” insisted Madam Duibhne. The only thing missing from her sneer was a wart near the crease of her cheek. I imagined it with several hairs protruding as she collected the genetic goo.

I was no closer to completing my other daily tasks, and we had yet to discuss the investigation. When we’d gotten the elevator into a satisfactory state, I rode down with the officer and Madam Duibhne.

The woman from room 623 was waiting for me at the desk. “I really don’t think we can stay at the hotel of a murderer.”

“Madam, we do not yet know if this was a crime or an untimely expiration.”

“Whatever you call it, I’m packing my bags.”

“As you wish.”

We had managed to limit the event’s exposure to this guest, so I counted her displeasure as a win. After all, I had a hotel to run.

For me, a day spent managing a hotel often passes almost unnoticed. As you move from one task to the next, the clock seems to advance at an unrelenting pace. By the end of the day, it isn't easy to appreciate all that was accomplished.

Such were the days that followed the discovery of our deceased, amorphous guest. I had hardly thought of the incident myself as I righted the ship that is the Europa Arms.

Ms. Bistra recovered from her fainting spells as well as might be expected. The woman from room 623 left an unfortunate review of our hotel, which I had framed and hung in my office. It would be three days before we heard anything from Officer Akimasa. Even that was only to remind us that he was on the case. By then, I had already lapsed into indifference. It may have been a mystery, but I had little time for such things.

My attitude changed when Madam Duibhne discovered another splash of genetic material in the main lobby. How it evaded the hotel's AI was beyond me. Once again, we were unable to rely on technology to help us.

During this time, I'd begun to recognize the limited capacity of my housekeeping manager. Time did not help her come to terms with our previous incident. "Ms. Bistra, I must risk bringing up more unpleasantness. I fear we need someone from your staff to assist Madam Duibhne with more genetic material found in the main lobby."

"Mr. Galen, you can't expect me to handle another murder."

"Ms. Bistra, what you witnessed was a dead creature of uncertain origin. There is no proof that a murder occurred."

At the time, I was unaware of the accuracy of that statement. I would later learn that Officer Akimasa had yet to uncover any new details pertaining to the case. Nor had our AI recorded any creature remotely resembling the deceased. Despite my encroaching indifference, I would have preferred to know these things earlier.

Before news of the latest discovery made the rounds, Ms. Bistra departed. She wheezed the words as she thrust her resignation into my hand, "I can still smell it in my sleep, sir."

Two others in her department also resigned, leaving Madam Duibhne to inherit the entire housekeeping workload. By then, I had learned the value of the disagreeable old crone. While my initial impression was unfavorable, she'd proven herself more than capable. I doubt very much that anyone was more competent, including myself. I even briefly questioned the need to hire additional staff. Our human resources representative dissuaded me from this course.

While Madam Duibhne proved capable of shouldering all housekeeping challenges, our mystery remained. Officer Akimasa was remarkably unhelpful in this regard. Two weeks removed from the first discovery, he had yet to identify the species of the deceased. "Back on Earth, things happened a lot quicker," he told me frequently. I began to doubt that the officer had ever moved with much haste.

His point about Earth was not wrong. Life in the vicinity of the outer planets tended to slow down considerably. It was the distance between destinations. Hotel guests often required weeks or months of travel to spend a few days dining in the vicinity of Jupiter's Great Red Spot.

However, it did not appear that this distance curbed the spread of rumors. In the ensuing weeks, the hotel would experience a sizable increase in curiosity seekers. In short order, we had acquired the nickname "murder house," this without any evidence of a homicide. The growing fervor led to several early departures of long-term guests. Within a month, we were booking fewer young couples and elderly sightseers. The arrival of sensationalism peddlers helped mitigate some of the decline, but not enough.

While this was troubling, what vexed me more was the absence of any progress on the case. Officer Akimasa offered nothing but a nameless puddle of genetic material. It was a death without

narrative despite the growing myth surrounding it. That would be the case until the cancellation of a significant wedding event. No longer able to contain my impatience, I summoned the officer and his superiors.

“The Chief never gets involved in cases like this,” said Officer Akimasa when he arrived alone.

I could hardly disguise my incredulity. “He never gets involved in murder investigations?”

“There’s no evidence of a murder, Mr. Galen.”

“If only that would deter people from calling this ‘murder house.’”

“Yep, an unfortunate name, alright.”

“It is a moniker we might shed, officer, if you can provide some closure to your investigation.”

“Well, sir, it’s a real head scratcher.”

“Yes, we’ve established that much. What about the second incident, the one in the lobby?”

“As I said before, same genetic material. Might have been from the same person.”

“I think it’s safe to say it was not a human person, at least,” I offered.

“Yeah, true. Safe to say. Might have been the same being. Should we call it a being?”

“But how would that be possible? The two events occurred days apart. The second was discovered long after the death of the person... creature... being.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” said the officer with a shrug.

“What—if anything—have you thought of?”

“Well, like I said, it’s a real head scratcher.”

Meanwhile, Madam Duibhne proved most useful. Like a whirlwind, she darted about the hotel from one end to the other, cleaning

and inspecting. Despite being over a month removed from the incident, she made a most remarkable discovery in the hallway of the sixth floor. Even having observed it myself, I remain at a loss to describe it.

What Madam Duibhne detected appears to be a tear in the fabric of space and time. This summary is not something I arrive at without hesitation. When I say it was almost imperceptible, I am grossly understating that point.

“Hold still,” she told me as I leaned toward it.

The tear was not unlike a thread dangling from an unfinished hemline, and just as difficult to see. “That’s it?” I asked.

“Like a stitch in time,” she said.

My credulity remained weak until she found comparable tears in the elevator and the lobby. While the tear in the lobby was similar to that in the hallway, this was not the case for the elevator. That tear only appeared while the elevator sat on the sixth floor. On any other floor, it did not exist.

Armed with this information, we invited Officer Akimasa back. To ensure he understood the connection, we brought him to the sixth-floor landing in the elevator.

“I don’t know what you think this proves,” he said.

“Surely there is some connection to our dead guest,” I insisted.

“These things aren’t even visible without a microscope.”

“So you’re saying they don’t exist?”

“No, I’m saying they’re not evidence of anything.”

This last statement provided me with a moment of clarity. It was the point where I realized Officer Akimasa was not being forthcoming with us. I would later discover that the notoriety of the Europa Arms wasn’t a mere coincidence. Our police liaison was its origin. Officer Akimasa had been stonewalling the case to

capitalize on its prestige. He'd even convinced his superiors to give him a leave of absence so that he could promote his book on the subject. At that time, I didn't think people read books any longer, much less wrote them.

"Surely, it's evidence of something," I insisted.

"Of what?" he asked.

I looked at Madam Duibhne, desperation in my eyes.

She gave a single nod and lowered one meaty shoulder. As she charged, Officer Akimasa's boots left the carpet. The tear gaped like a ripped seam, anticipating the tumbling officer. A flash marked his exit to the other side of forever. His departure left the smell of ozone in the air.

Madam Duibhne bent toward the officer's analytron, lifting it from the carpet. She offered it to me with a crooked smile.

On the device's screen, I found an open document entitled: Officer Akimasa - Live From the Murder House.

I deleted the file. After all, I had a hotel to run.

Filling in the Gaps

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