

## UPGRADE

A young man has an eye-opening experience with things he'd rather not see.

“Good morning, Mr. Crenshaw. Welcome back to the Driskill.”

“Hi Matt.” He remembered Matt well because Matt was a great kid. Always in a suit. Tall with dark features. Great smile with deep dimples.

“How was your flight from Chicago?” he asked with a sweet southern drawl as his long fingers worked the keyboard before him. Eyes down, he glared at the screen tucked beneath the counter.

“Never better.” Peter Crenshaw answered, smiling politely. His flight was always the same. First class. First row starboard side. Window seat 1D. Two hours and forty-five minutes from ORD to ATX. Twelve-ish minutes in a cab to the hotel.

“Mr. Crenshaw, I’m sorry but there’s a problem with your reservation.” Matt said, repeatedly tapping the same key on the keyboard. In six months of weekly check-ins at the Driskill Hotel, this was the first time he’d heard those words.

“Really? What sort of problem?”

“Your usual room isn’t available, so we’ve upgraded you to a suite on the fifth floor.”

That’s a problem?

“Of course,” his sparkling blue eyes looked up directly into Peter’s “for a guest as loyal as you, there’s no charge.” The gesture was great, but he didn’t foot the bill anyway. It was all on the company dime.

When a client like Samsung launches a new flagship device, their digital agency of record spares no expense, up to and including flying him in to create computer generated renders. The Next Big Thing was launching in the US with a several hundred-million-dollar budget, a chunk of which had covered his last six months of first-class flights and five-star living.

The agency wanted him to stay at the ‘W’ because of some negotiated rate. But with its modern lines, it had a coldness Pete didn’t like. If he was going to have to live in Texas—even temporarily—he wanted a taste of the old west. That meant bunking at the Driskill.

It was an elegant place, a palace on the prairie built in 1886 by cattle baron Coronal Jesse Driskill, who secured his fortune by supplying meat to the Confederate Army. Senators, ambassadors, kings and presidents had all stayed under its roof. LBJ and Ladybird kept a suite on the second floor as their second home.

Every time Peter walked the marbled lobby, with its many two-story columns, grand staircase, and stained-glass ceiling, he imagined this was how it felt to walk the decks of the Titanic.

“A suite? That sounds sweet.” Peter joked. Matt smiled. He had perfect teeth.

“Yes sir.” He magnetized key cards and picked out a bar key. “The Yellow Rose Landmark Suite. It’s our bridal. Apparently, this is a slow week for nuptials.” He handed Peter the key. “524.” Matt continued. “Take this elevator to—“ he stopped himself. “I’m sorry Mr. Crenshaw. You know the way.”

“Actually Matt, I have to head straight to the office this morning. Can you have my bags brought up to the room?” he asked, knowing full well Matt would be delighted to.

“Of course, Mr. Crenshaw. I’d be delighted to.” He rang for a bellhop.

Peter slipped a twenty to the handsome young man.

“Thank you as always, Matt.”

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Having a client in South Korea meant being expected to keep South Korean hours, even if working at an ad agency in Texas. 13-hour days were common. Even still, Peter had to bring work back to his room to finish, like he was doing now. Through the night he’d continue work his task, probably only catching a couple short naps as yesterday slowly slipped into today. But that’s why he made the big bucks.

Thankfully, it was a short four block walk from office to hotel. His stomach growled. Soon enough he'd be back in his sweet upgrade enjoying the two perks of travel he loved most; fresh sheets and room service.

Up Sixth Street live music spilled from at least a dozen open bar fronts. As one band faded another came into earshot to take its place. Yet walking through the heavy oak and etched glass doors of the Driskill was entering a time capsule sealed off from the outside world.

Soft classical music filled the air, like clouds of wafting cigar smoke that had once filled the grand lobby. That was when the main entrance was for MEN ONLY and ladies—to protect their standing among decent society—entered through a secluded side door.

At 1:20 am the lobby was empty.

A night attendant stood at Matt's station. She took no notice of Peter as he passed and climbed the grand staircase under the watchful gaze of Colonel Driskill himself. In the 1890 portrait modeled from life, he stands with his hand resting on a chair dressed in a black suit, his face wearing a white beard customary for the time. From between two fingers sticks a thick cigar.

As Peter reached the landing in front of the larger-than-life portrait, he was struck full in the face with the sweet smell of a fine cigar -- so pungent he could almost taste it. He stopped and looked around, confirming that the lobby was indeed empty. So where was the smell coming from?

He surmised someone in the hotel's bar must be smoking. He continued up the stairs to the lounge. It was dimly lit, but being closed since midnight, it too was devoid of humanity. He turned back and looked at Colonel. The only cigar around was in that portrait.

Too exhausted to think on it further, he made his way to the elevator as he'd done dozens of times before. It dated to when elevators were a new thing, so it was painfully slow. At the fifth floor, the door opened to a long narrow hallway. It was lined with paintings running the gamut from portraits to still life.

At the end of the hall, the last painting caught his eye. It was a little girl in a green dress standing in a field of flowers, a red ball at her feet. According to his art degree it was no masterpiece, yet there was something oddly compelling about the composition.

He reached in his pocket for his room key. It fell to the floor. "Dammit."

He bent to pick it up, then glanced back at the little girl again.

The red ball had moved.

He was swept with disbelief, dread and nausea.

The red ball had moved.

It was on her right side and now it's on her left. Or had it been on the right? He swallowed hard.

*No*, his brain whispered, *that fucking ball moved. You know it or you wouldn't be feeling so—(don't say afraid)—afraid.* Oil paintings don't move. Balls don't flip sides when you look away. Not without some kind of help. The kind that no one ever wants.

"Dude, get a grip. That presentation deck isn't going to finish itself." He moved on.

From the hall, the suite looked enormous. There was a single set of French doors on the entire length of the east wall of the floor, embossed with gold letters: THE YELLOW ROSE LANDMARK SUITE. It had a door bell.

He inserted his key and entered. The suite looked out over a dark, quiet Brazos Street. He was in a luxurious sitting room with wet bar and antique dining table, which connected to a make-up and dressing anteroom room containing floor length mirrors. Beyond it was a bedroom with four poster bed and a separate lavatory. The lovely space was created especially for brides-to-be so had an overtly feminine feel which didn't bother him.

What did bother him was the layout of the suite. The space itself made feel him anxious, like he was being watched from the other rooms. Maybe it was the various bride portraits decorating the suite, like the large one that hung in the sitting room. A woman dressed in her 19<sup>th</sup> century wedding gown, wearing a single string of white pearls around her neck.

“Just what I need. More creepy paintings eyeballing me.” The sound of his own voice didn’t comfort him. It sounded shaky. Overwrought.

“God dammit Pete, get a grip.”

Low blood sugar, that was the problem. He grabbed the phone. It was past midnight so his choices were limited, but he could still get something.

“Room service. This is Carlos. How can I help you Mr. Crenshaw?” It was so good to hear another voice, especially one that knew his name.

As he talked he opened his bag, pulled out his computer and placed it on the table.

“I need a cheddar cheeseburger and a chocolate shake, as fast as you can get it here.”

“Yes, Mr. Crenshaw. A cheeseburger and a milk shake. Is that all?”

“Yup, that’s all. Fast as you can.”

“Very good sir. Is there something else I can do for you at this time?”

“No Carlos, that’s it.”

“Okay, sir. I’ll see you shortly Mr. Crenshaw.” Click.

Instantly he felt more alone than ever.

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With sleep now a distant possibility, Peter settled in to pushing pixels, making headway on his latest images due in a few hours. Once his mind was back on the familiar ground of making pretty pictures, his discomfort subsided slightly. He had the TV on. The sound kept him company. Still, that feeling of being watched remained. He kept thinking he saw movement in the corner of his eyes.

The doorbell chimed, startling him. His heart skipped.

“Just a minute.” He leapt from his chair, quickly pulling on the jeans he’d removed earlier. “So glad you’re here. I’m starving.” Smiling, he opened the door.

The hallway was empty. No food cart. No Carlos. His smile faded.

He stuck his head out the door, looking left, then back right. Nothing.

“Hello?” into the hallway.

That’s when he saw it.

On the floor in front of the portrait of the little girl was a red ball.

He slammed the door, suddenly unable to control his trembling hands.

The pale woman with pearls stared out from her gilded frame. Her head tilted in his direction. Her eyes turned black and ran from their painted sockets. Panic overwhelmed him. Peter Crenshaw slipped away to blackness.

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Chimes. The doorbell. He hadn’t dreamt it. He’d passed out after the pale woman’s eyes melted. He sat slumped against the door. He kept his own eyes squeezed shut. The bell chimed again. He wouldn’t open it. He couldn’t. He started to cry.

A rapping on the door. They were coming for him. He screamed.

“Mr. Crenshaw, it’s Carlos. Is everything okay?”

Peter sprang to his feet and flung the door open, never more elated to see another person. When Carlos laid eyes on him, he instantly recognized the look. “I heard screaming. I have your meal, sir. Let me in and I can help you.”

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Peter never believed what they said about the Driskill. When he told locals it was his hotel of choice their reply usually started with something like “You know, that place is haunted.” Even after hearing it repeatedly, he refused to believe it. That was before.

“It’s because you saw for yourself.” Carlos explained. “I’ve seen people like you many times. They don’t believe. Until they do. Some have seen Coronal Driskill or smell his cigar. Others have seen the little girl. She was chasing a ball when she fell down the grand staircase and broke her neck.”

“It was red. The ball.” Peter said. Carlos nodded. Others guests had reported seeing the red ball on the fifth floor.

“She wanted you to play with her. That’s all.” Carlos said with no hint of ridicule, judgment or fear.

“Do you believe there are ghosts here?” Peter asked.

“I have not seen one, but I do believe what my eyes see. And my eyes see that your eyes have been opened. And that I believe.”