

Thirteen

“And you can have your choice of room sir,” the desk clerk said with a smile. “Use this key to open any door in the hotel to check it out. Pick the one you like.” The man took the key with a frown, not sure of what he heard.

“Did you say I could pick my room?”

“Yes, sir,” said the clerk. “It’s hotel practice.” The clerk pointed again to the key in the visitor’s hand. “That’s a master key and you can head up to the rooms and check each of them out. Rooms with a yellow tag on them are occupied.” He smiled again. “I’ll be here once you pick the room for your stay.” With that, the clerk turned back toward his computer and the guest pocketed the key.

The man had little luggage, just a rolling bag and small duffel. Not much from fifteen years of marriage, but he wasn’t complaining. He could have ended up like his divorced friends who’d been taken to the cleaners. His wife just wanted out and to have a nice, clean split.

Of course, this meant that he wasn’t able to have the fun vacation he originally planned. But he felt coming to the city to enjoy a little culture, eat better food and see a few off-Broadway shows would be good enough. At least he still had his job.

He took the elevator to the top floor and figured he’d take the first room he saw and stay there. Picking your own room seemed an odd custom, but then again, if he could find the best room available, that would be to his advantage. This was only a two star hotel, but for four nights, who cared?

The guest left the elevator, walking to the end of the hallway. It was only then he noticed the number on the room: 1322. He looked at the other rooms on the floor: 1348, 1363 and others, all beginning with 13. *That can't be right*, he thought, as he looked at even more doors. Shrugging, he put the key into the door of 1322 and opened it. The room was striking, as the furniture had to be almost a hundred years old, though it was in excellent condition. More fascinated than repelled, he walked into the room and sat on the bed. It felt good. He advanced toward the window, noting the radiator beneath it, and a newspaper on the chair. He picked it up and read *New York Amsterdam News, May 20, 1922*. Dropping the paper in shock, he opened the curtain and saw a large building in front of him with the marquee reading “Harlem Opera House.” The guest remembered that the Harlem Opera House was demolished before he was born. He sat in the chair and thought “What have I gotten myself into?”

After thinking for a few minutes, he left his bag in 1322 and approached another room. Closing the door behind him, he opened the door to 1354. The furniture in this room was as clean and fresh looking as the furniture in 1322, but clearly of a different era, with plain primary colors. He walked straight to the window this time and looked out. He was no longer in Harlem, but somewhere else in Manhattan, closer to Times Square? The *New York New Amsterdam News* lay on the bed, this time announcing the Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education*. Another headline reported on the McCarthy hearings going on in Washington. The man thought back to what else was happening in 1954; it was before the Montgomery bus boycott, but still an interesting time for Black folk in America. He left 1354 and decided to check out at least one more room.

He stopped when he got to 1369 and tried to remember what was happening in America at that time. The only thing that came to mind was the moon landing. When he entered 1369, he looked for the newspaper, ignoring the pop art on the walls. The newspaper didn't talk about the moon landing, instead focusing on Black students at Cornell University taking over a building and demanding Black Studies courses. *When did this happen?* he wondered. *They don't teach enough about our history anymore.* He looked outside and saw nothing of particular interest, but turned on the TV out of curiosity. The TV took over a minute to warm up and he wondered if something was wrong with it. Finally, a black and white picture came on the round screen featuring Walter Cronkite, a man who had been a famous broadcaster on CBS a long, long time ago. The man watched the report for a few minutes before turning off the TV and feeling the heat that came from the console. I guess I won't have Wi-Fi here, he thought.

He left the room, looking up and down the hallway at the other room numbers: 1368, 1396, and so on, but nothing called to him. He looked back at the three rooms he had entered, nodded, then returned to the front desk.

"I've made my selection," the guest told the clerk, "But I have to tell you, this is the strangest hotel I've ever visited."

"We get that all the time," said the clerk. "Which room did you decide on?"

"1322," said the man.

"The Harlem Renaissance. Excellent choice, sir," the clerk said. "It's one of my favorites, too."

"Thanks," said the man. "But how," the clerk raised his hand.

“The rooms in this hotel come from the thirteenth floors of other hotels.” The guest stared. “You see, sir,” the clerk continued, “we know that no one comes to a hotel like ours because of the ambience or the neighborhood. So we felt we needed to do something extra to make the experience ‘special.’”

“Well, it is that,” the man said. “This could be a very interesting visit.”

“And you don’t know the half of it, sir.”

“Oh?”

“You need only head down the fire escape.” The man frowned.

“Is there something wrong with,” he began,

“Not at all, sir,” the clerk replied. “But if you want to visit the Harlem Opera House, for example, you can do that by heading down the fire escape.” The clerk pointed to the front door.

“Through the front door is our current year but out of the fire escape, you’re, well, just go try it. I think you’re in for a very nice visit.” The clerk smiled and handed the guest the key to 1322. The guest pocketed the key and smiled back.

“I believe you’re right.”

The man took his key and then the elevator back to the top floor, opening the door to his room. He had always wanted to meet Zora Neale Hurston, and maybe this was the time. He turned on the radio in the corner and sat as the sounds of 1920s jazz filled the room.

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