

## At the Hotel Swinburne

*by Cath Barton*

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WHEN WE RETURNED TO OUR ROOM after breakfast on the fourth day of our holiday, Arnold told me he didn't like the mirrors in the hotel.

'Really? We can cover that up if it bothers you,' I said, pointing at the full-length one opposite the end of our bed. 'I suppose some people get a kick out of looking at themselves performing.'

'For goodness sake, Marie,' he said.

I tugged down my jumper, shrugged my shoulders and turned towards the window. 'The cloud's clearing from the top of the mountain. Shall we go up in the funicular? That man I was talking to at breakfast said there's a café up there. Sells good hot chocolate, glühwein as well, apparently. Worth going for the views, he said.'

I turned back. My husband was sitting on the end of the bed, frowning at his reflection in the mirror.

'Wrap up, Arnold, could be chilly.'

I walked into the bathroom before he could argue or say anything

about drinking alcohol in the mornings. When I came out he had his coat on and was standing with his back to me, looking out of the window.

‘I think I might shave my beard off,’ he said, without turning round. ‘It makes me look old.’

The funicular certainly looked old, but if we both felt trepidatious as we stood in line neither of us said anything about it. We squeezed in with four others, an attendant with rosy cheeks and a brusque manner slammed the doors closed and the car set off in erratic swings and jerks. I linked my arm through Arnold’s as we rose perilously close to the face of the mountain. For a moment it looked as if we would actually hit the rocks but, with an extra-strong jerk and a groan from the mechanism, the car cleared the overhang. The young couple opposite looked pale. One of them sneezed and said something in German that sounded apologetic. I shook my head and made a face, feeling foolish for not understanding. She laughed then, in a friendly way.

‘I thought you’d learned German,’ Arnold said, when the funicular had clunked to a stop and the other passengers had got out.

‘Yes, but I couldn’t understand what she said. It might have been Swiss-German.’

‘Bit of a waste of time going to those classes, then,’ he said, stroking his beard and pouting slightly.

The beard was greying. Perhaps it did make him look old, I thought, but I said nothing.

I had enough German to ask for hot chocolate in the wooden chalet that served as a café. Arnold was sitting over a radiant heater when I took it to him.

‘Don’t hog the heat,’ I said.

He swung round, nearly knocking over one of the glasses I had just set down on the table between us. He glared at me. I bit my lip.

There was alcohol in the brew. Arnold didn’t comment on it. Afterwards we stood and looked at the sun striking the snow on the peaks across the valley. I shivered and we took the next funicular down.

We’d got through the dark days of the winter, Arnold with a constant supply of crosswords and me out most days doing what he called my ‘duty calls’. I didn’t regard the visits I made to old ladies in our village as duty, though I was glad to be away from Arnold’s niggling at me. Taking a holiday in Switzerland had been our son Jonty’s suggestion.

‘Spring’s coming; it’ll perk you both up. Dad likes trains and you like

the mountains, Mum, I know you do. You told me once you went there when you were courting. I remember you saying how much you enjoyed it. And it's not as if you can't afford to go.'

The Hotel Swinburne was in the centre of a small town in the Bernese Oberland, a region popular with tourists but not too crowded at that season out of the school holidays. From our bedroom window we had fine views of the mountains to the west. And for the first few days of the trip we'd coped with one another's company. Arnold was even willing to go out and spend money on lunch so long as we had it at the railway station buffet, which was only a short walk away. And I had the swimming pool.

The pool had been mentioned but not pictured on the hotel's website. I had packed my swimming costume without any great expectation. I was halfway along the corridor on the ground floor on the day we arrived, after I'd inspected the restaurant and was heading for the lift, when I caught sight of the small sign to the left of a glazed door: *No outdoor shoes in pool area*. I slipped off my shoes and walked in. There were ripples on the water and splashes on the tile surround where someone must have been just moments before. A door was closing on the right of the pool; I caught the after-image of two people going through to the changing room area. I could hear faint voices and snatches of laughter. As I stood there the water

stilled and everything fell silent. There were underwater lights and I could see a mosaic of dolphins glittering on the bottom of the pool. The surrounding windows were misted from the heat of the water and the light was going out of the afternoon, so I couldn't see what was outside.

When I got back to our room Arnold was drinking tea. He didn't ask where I had been and I didn't tell him about the pool, just made myself a cup of something herbal and sat in one of the two easy chairs. Arnold had already started on a crossword, and I picked up one of the books I had brought to read, but I must have quickly dozed off because, when he shook my arm saying it was time for dinner, I couldn't tell him the first thing about the story.

I think we ate schnitzel that night; Arnold would have considered it a safe choice. I remember he asked about the local wines and had a bit of a discussion with the wine waiter which embarrassed me because my husband was showing off and I could see that the waiter despised him for it. What we actually drank I don't remember.

Next morning I left Arnold snoring quietly in bed and was at the swimming pool just after the advertised opening time of 7am. The water was undisturbed. I left my robe on one of the recliners, sat on the edge of the pool and slipped into the water. I felt immediately as if I was returning

to somewhere I had been long before. The water was warm and the feeling of comfort it gave me surprised me; I was neither a regular nor a particularly confident swimmer. Outside the sun was rising behind the mountains and striking into this little oasis of calm.

I swam ten lengths of the pool; in one direction the sun blinded me and it was only when I pulled myself out of the water that I saw the man sitting in the lifeguard's chair. I felt simultaneously relieved and annoyed. I returned his wave of acknowledgement, scooped up my robe and room key and went to shower. When I walked back into the swimming pool area there was nobody there. Perhaps, I thought, they had CCTV in the reception area and the lifeguard only went to the pool when they saw someone go in there to swim. It made some sense. The Hotel Swinburne was a three-star establishment, clean and decent rather than high-end; they surely couldn't afford to have people supervising an empty pool.

I had dried my hair in the changing room but it would still have quickly become apparent to Arnold where I had been, my wet swimsuit hanging in the bathroom for one thing. He did not, though, remark on my absence. At breakfast he helped himself to his usual muesli and fruit, while I took sweet buns – the swim had given me an appetite. The English newspapers were a day old so we were forced into conversation.

‘I dreamt we were on a plane,’ said Arnold.

‘You mean the flying thing or the landscape?’ I asked, for he did not elaborate.

‘The flying thing.’ He seemed irritated by my question. ‘I was being propositioned by a woman.’

I stared at him. If he had ever had such a dream before he had never told me of it.

‘Were you enjoying it?’ I did not really want to ask him that, but I’d been caught off guard.

‘Not much,’ he said, his cheeks reddening under his beard.

A waiter appeared at my elbow asking if we would like more coffee and we had no more conversation about dreams, but this exchange, together with my morning swim, left me with a feeling – a frisson – that this could be the start of something different in my relationship with my husband. However the rest of the day went by as many others had on previous holidays he and I had spent together – a walk, lunch, the beginnings of a movement towards one another, falling back into a postprandial doze and then reading before our evening meal.

The next morning I went down to the pool again at 7am. My swim was as pleasurable as the one on the previous day, the lifeguard present –



and then absent – as before. No-one else swam at that time. I thought fleetingly of the couple I had glimpsed on the first evening, but they were evidently not early-morning swimmers. The day passed without incident or any mention by Arnold of his dreams. I thought that evening that if the holiday settled into this pattern I would be content enough for the next week.

There were never many people in the hotel dining room when we were there, and I assumed from that and the absence of anyone else in the swimming pool that there were few guests. I would discover, in the fullness of time, that my assumption was wrong, but for now I merely observed this, shared my observation with Arnold and thought no more of it.

Until the morning of the fourth day I had spoken to no-one other than my husband and the hotel receptionist, and her only to ask for our room key. At the breakfast buffet that morning I found myself standing next to a man who, like me, was helping himself to sweet buns.

‘These are delicious, no?’ he said. He had a strong accent, but I could not tell whether he was Swiss or of some other nationality. He was a full foot taller than me and I had to look up to meet his eyes. It gave me a jolt, the unaccustomed connection I felt in that moment, and I dropped my eyes

again immediately.

‘If you want more sweet things I can take you to a nice place I know on the alp,’ he continued.

‘Thank you, but –’ I said, gesturing to my husband, who had his head in one of the previous day’s English newspapers.

‘Ah, that is a pity,’ said the man, and winked at me. He went on to recommend the café which I would tell Arnold about after breakfast. I would not mention the man’s proposition. A game of tit for tat with my husband was, I knew, unlikely to end in anything other than bad feeling.

After our trip up the alp we had a large lunch at the railway station buffet and returned to the hotel for a siesta. I was woken by someone knocking on the door. Arnold was snoring, wheezing a little as he always did. At first I could not think what time of day it was, and then the realisation that there might be a fire shocked me into alertness. I shook my husband’s arm.

‘Just a minute,’ I shouted out to the person who was now knocking more loudly.

I smoothed down my skirt, pulled a brush through my hair and unlocked the door. A young man dressed in the hotel uniform handed me an envelope without speaking, turned and walked quickly back down the

corridor. As I watched him go I was struck by how quiet it was out there; his footsteps made no sound. I frowned, wondering what was so urgent that he couldn't have slipped the envelope under the door, where we would certainly have seen it by the time we were ready to go downstairs for dinner.

In the envelope was a letter addressed to 'All residents of the hotel'. I read it three times.

'It doesn't make sense,' I said.

Arnold sat up on the bed.

'What doesn't make sense?' he said through a yawn. 'Is it in German? What do you mean? Give it to me, Marie.' He stood up and snatched the piece of paper from my hand.

'Be careful,' I said. 'You'll tear it.' I bit my lip and rubbed my thumbnails with my forefingers as I watched him reading the letter.

'If this is someone's idea of a joke –' he started. 'And please stop doing that, Marie. Your fidgeting is no help. No help at all.'

'Okay, calm down,' he said, after he too had read it several times. 'They can't do this. It's just not on. They can't ruin our holiday like this. We simply won't allow it. We'll move to another hotel.'

I didn't know what to say, just sat down and let Arnold sound off

about the situation until he had run out of steam. Then he turned on the TV. We learned from the news that there was some kind of international crisis. There were shots of crowds on the streets in unidentifiable cities, helicopters and hospitals that could be anywhere, but the commentary was all in German and the odd words that I understood added up to nothing more specific than the worry written on the faces of those interviewed.

‘I need a drink,’ said Arnold, going to the mini-bar. ‘This doesn’t look good.’

‘Aren’t you going to ring reception?’ I said. ‘Ring someone at least. I told you we should have got a smartphone. We need to contact Jonty.’ I knew I sounded shrill.

Arnold just stared ahead of him blankly as he sipped his beer.

Later, he did ring our son, on the hotel phone. ‘Looks like we’re going to be here a bit longer than we expected,’ Arnold said to him. ‘Can you fill us in on the news? It’s all in German here and your mother’s fretting.’

I could hear Jonty talking on the other end but I couldn’t make out the words.

‘He says all that stuff we saw on the TV is a long way away,’ Arnold said, after he’d put the receiver down. ‘That we’re not to worry about it.’ He swallowed, hard. Just like times in the past when we’d received bad

news, I wanted him to hug me, but he didn't.

That night, we ate the meal delivered to our room, without any appetite. I drank wine without really tasting it. When we were ready for bed Arnold turned to me and, for the first time in years, he opened his arms to me. His beard brushed my cheek and I was grateful for the contact, rough as it was.

I slept badly; next to me Arnold snored as peacefully as ever. In the morning I put on my robe to go to the swimming pool before I remembered that this was no longer possible. '*No excursions outside your room*', the letter had said. '*The authorities require all guests to be quarantined for 14 days.*' I sat down heavily in one of the easy chairs and wondered why we call them that; there was nothing easy for us in this situation.

I picked up the hotel phone and rang reception. 'Breakfast in room 222 at 8am, please,' I said to the receptionist, giving her the details of our order.

We ate together in silence, until I spoke the words hanging between us. 'What are we going to do now?'

We both knew the answer. There was no question of moving to another hotel. Arnold had his book of crossword puzzles and I had more novels than I'd thought I'd need. Outside the sky was grey and flakes of

snow were swirling in odd patterns; it was no weather for walking even if we'd been able to. The day passed as it was bound to. Food and drink arrived at our door at the expected intervals. There were no more letters and no phone calls either.

In the evening we turned on the TV again and understood from the maps shown that the epidemic had now spread to all the countries of Europe. There were pictures labelled London, Paris and Geneva that showed all the people on the streets wearing face masks. We didn't talk about what we saw. I went to the window; the snow had turned to sleet and it was impossible to see clearly the few people who were walking down the street two floors below us. I pulled the curtains closed and told Arnold I was going to bed. He said he wasn't ready for sleep and would do a bit more of his crossword.

I had always known that Arnold looked up some of the answers to crossword clues. That night, as I came out of the bathroom, I caught him flicking back the pages of his book.

'You're cheating,' I said. The words jumped out of my mouth without my meaning them to.

'For goodness sake, Marie,' he said. 'I don't cheat.'

‘If you say so,’ I said. ‘But there’s no need to sound so sanctimonious about it.’

He huffed at me and I scowled at him. They say you should never go to sleep on a quarrel. But we did, and so it was still there the next day, like an itch. I started getting at Arnold merely for stroking his beard or clearing his throat; he chided me for getting up to look out of the window every ten minutes or singing under my breath. Little things. But we didn’t talk about the situation in which we found ourselves.

In a decent hotel, rooms are well insulated and you hear nothing of your neighbours. We did not even know if we had neighbours; during the first few days we had seen only the odd person on our corridor, disappearing silently round a corner or into a lift. On the fourth or fifth day of our period of confinement – I had lost count – there was a change. We heard rapid footsteps in the corridor, raised voices and, then, a clunking noise as of something heavy being pushed in a hurry and knocking into walls on the way. This happened not just once, but three times over the course of the day.

Arnold was all for opening the door; I told him in no uncertain terms that that would be foolish. I rang reception.

‘Has something happened?’ I asked.

‘Please do not worry, Madame,’ said the girl. ‘Stay in your room and all will be well.’

Those words made me think of the poetry of T S Eliot, which just shows how my mind was working during those days, flitting from one thing to another, holding onto nothing. Arnold appeared to spend all his time doing his crosswords but one afternoon, after lunch, when he had dozed off, I noticed a small black notebook secured with an elastic band under his puzzle book.

I have always believed that everyone has a right to privacy, within a marriage as much – perhaps even more – than in other circumstances. I would even ask Arnold for permission to look in his diary to check on an innocuous appointment, such as the dentist or podiatrist. What I found in the black notebook was something I wished I had not seen, but could not, afterwards, forget. Neither could I speak to him about it. I did, however, ask him if he had had more dreams.

‘Like the one you told me about at the beginning of the holiday,’ I said, with a nervous laugh. Not surprisingly, he refused to be drawn.

I retaliated rather childishly with snippets of information I had found



online about the poet Swinburne, after whom the hotel had unaccountably been named.

‘He wrote about things that were taboo in his day,’ I said to Arnold. ‘Like sado-masochism.’

Arnold turned away when I said that and it seemed to me that he shuddered, but I took no pleasure in his reaction.

What more fertile ground for suspicions to multiply is there than a situation of confinement? In other circumstances I would have gone for a swim or a walk to clear my head. I wished we had paid extra for a suite; at the time we’d booked the holiday it had seemed like a waste of money, a luxury we did not need.

‘Do you suppose we could ask for an upgrade?’ I asked Arnold. ‘The hotel seems half-empty.’

He merely indicated the telephone.

‘I am suffering, Madame,’ said the receptionist, when I rang. Her English was good but not perfect, and no doubt she was under stress like everyone else. ‘It is impossible for you to move and, in any case, the hotel is out-booked.’

‘All booked?’

‘Yes, Madame, we have no rooms vacant.’

This surprised us hugely, given how few people we had seen in the days before we were quarantined. But there was nothing to be done about it; we had to stay in our room.

As the next best thing to going out to escape the monotony of our days in the hotel, I took to sitting by the window, looking out onto the street and across to the mountain where we had taken the funicular before all this had happened. I was now hyper-sensitive to the changes through the hours – in the weather, the light and the numbers of people on the streets. Arnold continued to do his crosswords and, I supposed, write his fantasies in his little black book. Perhaps it was inevitable, in the charged atmosphere of that room, that I began to have fantasies of my own. In my case concerning the man I had met in the dining room that day, the one I had known to be attracted to me in ways I had almost forgotten were possible.

We spent much time with our own thoughts during those days together in the hotel room, but at mealtimes we conversed. In the absence of anything else to discuss and wishing to avoid the topic of the spread of the epidemic and whatever we each felt about that, we fell to talking, Arnold and I, about

fears we had never before voiced.

‘I have wondered sometimes,’ he said to me one evening, ‘whether you would meet someone you would prefer to me.’

‘And for why would you think that?’

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘because I am ageing,’

‘But so,’ I told him, ‘am I.’

I had looked at my sagging body in that full-length mirror in our room. I liked it no more than Arnold liked his beard. But he could shave that off; I was stuck with my wrinkles and the rolls round my midriff. Dieting would not make me look younger, in fact it would most probably accentuate my lines.

‘And another thing,’ he said. ‘Who will look after us when we are incapable?’

‘For God's sake, Arnold.’ He had a point though. Our son Jonty had made it clear that he was not, as he put it, ‘carer material’ and I shuddered because it didn't bear thinking about.

‘We have to hope,’ I said, ‘that we are still able to express our wishes when the time comes.’

It frightened us both, the thought of a future in which we might be at the mercy of those who were both underpaid and more concerned about

what they might be doing later that evening than the elderly bodies with whose care they were entrusted. Imaginary worlds were, for both of us, more attractive places to visit. And as Arnold and I retreated into our separate fantasies I missed the first signs of the illness in him.

‘Something just got in my throat,’ he said, after a sustained bout of coughing in the bathroom. ‘Don’t fuss, Marie. It’s not serious.’

We didn’t know whether either of us had ever encountered the man whose illness had led to our incarceration. It could have been the lifeguard in the pool, or the man in the dining room who seemed to have been attracted to me. Or someone else we had met in passing but didn’t remember. It was immaterial. The point was that we were still in the quarantine period and Arnold was unwell. When he woke in the night in a sweat I tried to persuade myself that it was normal, but I knew it was not.

It was the eleventh day, or possibly the twelfth, of our quarantine period when they took Arnold away. I said to him, looking down at his already shrunken face as they lifted him onto the stretcher, that we would be together again soon, but somehow I knew that I would never see him again. Not alive, anyway. What was worse was that part of me felt glad about that.

Of course I did love Arnold. But during the days when I had to stay in that hotel room alone I was unable to think clearly. I telephoned Jonty, as I knew I must. He offered to fly out. I said he should stay safely at home, though I no longer knew what safety was or where it lay.

The man who had been the first to fall ill in the hotel recovered. But he had passed the virus to twelve other people, as we learned later, including Arnold. He, and five others of the twelve, died. When those of us who had survived emerged from our rooms, it was not as butterflies from cocoons, but like those wounded in a war of attrition. We gathered in the dining room, blinking uncertainly at one another before we began, hesitantly and in broken sentences, to share our stories. Someone called for wine, said we must drink a toast, but I, seeing no reason for celebration, made my excuses and returned upstairs, pleading exhaustion. The truth was that one of the survivors was the man I had thought attracted to me; he looked at me now as if at a stranger, and I realised just how far I had gone in my fantasies about him and how they could never be fulfilled.

At the beginning of another day I reached across the bed for my husband and my heart lurched when I felt the cold stiffness of the sheets. Without making a conscious decision to do so I pulled on my robe, went down to

the swimming pool and slipped into the water as if back into the womb. I swam a length under the surface and when I emerged I saw that I was not alone. A young woman was sitting on the lounger. She had her towel over her knees and her head lowered; she seemed to be absorbed in a book. I pulled myself out of the water and sat down beside her. When she looked up I recognised her.

‘Are you waiting for your fiancé?’ I said.

She nodded, and blushed.

It was poignant to see the delight of the young man when he arrived. He was as handsome as I remembered Arnold being in his youth, his eyes sapphire blue. In old age those eyes had faded to the colour of washed-out denim. I looked on as the young couple spoke of plans for the day and then quarrelled. The argument was over something quite trivial and, alarmed, I wanted to intervene. I stopped myself, knowing that it was not in my power to change anything for them. But I could see then, as I had been unable to do before, how in such moments a thread is pulled, the beginning of an unravelling, damage that will be done but not become apparent for years.

‘Please,’ said the young woman, ‘don’t be cross.’

I heard a yearning in her voice and my heart broke for her. And for myself.

I went to shower, leaving the young couple in the pool. When I came out they were gone.

Back in my room I found a message asking me to contact reception.

‘I regret, Madam,’ said the girl when I called, ‘that we are needing your room tomorrow. You may move to another. I am sorry that it is for one person only.’

She told me that the room on offer looked out on the mountains to the east. I would, she said, have fine views of the rising sun. As a consolation, she might have added, had her English been better. What she did not say was that the room also overlooked the swimming pool.

I watched from that room, for the days until I was able to return home, as people came and went from the pool. I hoped I would see the young couple again, hoped to see them smiling and happy with one another. But I did not, and I realised that, even if I had done, it would have been no guarantee.



**Cath Barton** is an English writer who lives in Abergavenny. Her novella *The Plankton Collector* won the New Welsh Writing AmeriCymru Prize for the Novella in 2017, was published by New Welsh Review the following year, and is due to be republished by Parthian Press later in 2024. Subsequent publications are *In the Sweep of the Bay* (2020, Louise Walters Books), *Between the Virgin and the Sea* (2023, Novella Express, Leamington Books) and *The Geography of the Heart* (2023, Arroyo Seco Press). Her most recent publication is a pamphlet of short stories, *Mr Bosch and His Owls* (2024, Atomic Bohemian).