

The Hotel**Christine Lucia***(Botsotso 14, pp. 64-69 (2007). Braamfontein, Johannesburg: Botsotso Publishing)*

The place was not the same any more. Cedar Lodge, his annual hideaway in the Drakensberg, had changed during the past five years. What was it? Horatio threw his suitcase onto the bed and looked around. The room was more or less the same. Over the years he had grown attached to its colour scheme: cream-coloured walls blending with natural wood doors and window frames, soft billowy curtains, an old wash-stand with the green marble top, crisp white linen, two chintz armchairs placed invitingly either side the fireplace.

Room 301 was at the back of the hotel, away from the bar, overlooking a forest of pines and firs. He always booked it in advance. When the receptionist heard his name on the phone she would ask, “same room, Mr Apros?” “Yes please, Cynthia”, he would chuckle in reply, and they would talk about the past year, its ups and downs. But Cynthia was not there to welcome him. There was a temp at Reception who couldn’t find his booking. He felt like an intruder. Then she couldn’t pronounce his name. She had forgotten to ask the hotel porter to help him with his luggage, too, and now he was nowhere to be found. It all took far longer than usual and made him anxious. At last in his room he looked out of the window for reassurance, glancing at the trees that foregrounded his view, the chink of distant hills. He listened for familiar sounds: the faint clang of pots from the direction of the kitchen, a horse whinnying, a stable door banged shut, cars pulling into the drive-way, the bustle of arrivals wafting up from the lobby. By the time he finished unpacking it was almost dinner-time. He took out his bottle of Scotch, poured a large one into the glass tumbler on the bedside table, and settled into the armchair to await the dinner gong.

The sun dropped early behind the great peaks of the mountain. Nestled in the valley the hotel seemed small, shrinking away from the deepening shadows. It began to glow with premature evening light, taking on the hue of late summer roses, the fire of a dying ember. Business continued, but it was the business of small specks of humanity criss-

crossing the parking area, struggling with their bags up the front steps, hurrying back from the tennis court and shouting to each other about drinks before dinner, emerging and disappearing in rapid succession as light fell, until the chill descended and night obliterated all movement, all sound. Only the stars remained, entering the stage of darkness and staring coldly at the distant hotel.

Horatio stepped out of his room a few minutes after seven-thirty. He had not heard the gong and thought he must have dozed off. The carpet on the stairs was a little worn, he noticed. And there were no flowers in the vase on the main desk. But before he could register that the gong, which usually rested on a rack next to the flowers, was also missing, he was drawn into the dining room by an aroma of roast meat, onions, gravy, potatoes. He tucked into the food with relish. At least some things don't change, he thought.

Most of the year Horatio Apros worked on the mines, or to put it more precisely, he sat in the Johannesburg office of LabCor, a mining company that dealt with housing, pensions, insurance, medical aid. His job was to interview workers and plan their pension programmes. Most of them earned less than R5000 a month and he had over the years built up a kind of expertise something like that of a family tailor: advising about the most affordable material and fashioning it economically to make it last. It was a job he neither hated nor loved; but it paid the bills and also, he had to admit, salved some tiny but uncomfortable corner of his conscience. He earned a good salary with generous perks and as much time off as he dare take (no-one noticed, or if they did, they never said so), and yet it was a job in which he was 'helping people'. Those less fortunate than himself, who could hardly afford to have dinner out let alone stay in hotels like this, could look forward to a small but steady income when they retired, wisely invested, matching their needs. He had begun to feel that he knew every worker by name, knew where they lived, how many children they had, what their favourite television programmes were, what they had for supper. He met them only briefly and they were almost – but not quite – anonymous. Yet he somehow thought of them as friends.

Horatio had first come to this hotel one April years before. This was an unsettling month and Horatio always tried to avoid it by travelling abroad or finding a hideaway in the country. In recent years he preferred this early spring retreat, getting away from the brashness of a Jo'burg autumn in the northern suburbs, the brittle choking air that settled around the perimeter of the mine at this time of year. He liked the old-world charm of Cedar Lodge, its quaint clientele (sometimes it felt like an old-age home, he thought wryly). He liked walking in the forest, reading his books, writing, going for little drives in the countryside and on each visit finding another new restaurant for lunch. He promised himself that one day he would go for a ride on one of the horses kept by the hotel. They still had two - the stables clearly once held far more - and they were looked after by Pam, the manager's wife. This would be a novelty, and a way of stilling his childish fear of horses. But it was something still in the future, a treat in store.

Late afternoons often erupted into storms that bent the forest into a sea of floundering branches, making the mountains seem like towering thunderbolts that seemed to threaten the very geology of the valley. When these spasms ended, which always happened as suddenly as they had begun, Horatio would begin his slow advance into the ritual of evening. The after-dinner stroll always took him through a picket fence on the left of the car park, where he could make a mental note of the number of cars, the number of likely tables set for breakfast. The lamps along the road lasted for at least a kilometre, and gave enough light for him to walk across the paddock one way and back along the road the other. He would stop and take in the silence, the coolness. Being slightly short-sighted he liked to gaze at the blur of stars, and try and make out the topmost edge of the forest. He often peered into the shadows, wondering if there were any animals nearby.

Tonight, after dinner, he went further than usual, trying to work out the feeling of change in the air. He walked until he could no longer hear sounds from the hotel, not really looking where he was going. The night was very dark and he got slightly lost coming back across the field, climbed over the fence in the wrong place, and instead of the road he found himself in another field. He tried to walk a little faster but this was impossible because of the long grass and hidden tussocks. There was no sign of the lights from the

hotel. He came on a patch of woodland he seemed to recognise and boldly plunged into it. Almost immediately he heard voices, and some other kind of sound, some movement among the bracken. Perhaps other people were also taking an evening stroll. The sounds stopped. He went on, rather nervously now, carefully circuiting the place where the sounds were coming from. Suddenly he heard a shout, and a man came lunging towards him, waving his arms. Horatio blindly rushed onwards past the man, stumbling in his panic and thrashing out to grasp stems and branches as he lurched forward and headed for the road. He could not dismiss from his mind the man's angry shout, and something even more disturbing, the glimpse of another person, a pair of legs on the ground, a skirt hastily pulled down. He could just make out people coming out of the woods as he ran, faster and faster now and breathing with short gasps, towards the direction of the road.

There will still be people arriving at the hotel, he thought, and I'll be able to hear a car coming. Even as he said this he found something change underfoot and realised he had stumbled onto the tarmac in the dark. He headed quickly left towards the hotel, and after a while he heard a car at some distance behind him, whose lights helped him to walk even faster. He was almost running. The car came closer, and he wondered if people were going to offer him a lift. What would they think of him, dirt clinging to his shoes, hands torn with brambles? The car slowed down and stopped level with him. Should he accept? After the incident in the bushes he was in two minds. Then he noticed that it was a truck, a rather battered one, with two people in the cab and workmen on the back. One of them called out, but in his panic Horatio couldn't tell what they were saying. "No thanks, I'm fine!" he called, waving them on. The two men in front were talking to each other. He couldn't make out the language; perhaps it was Zulu.

Horatio felt slightly sick. All these years in Johannesburg he had managed to avoid muggings and hijacks yet here in this peaceful Drakensberg resort something terrible was about to happen. He was in the middle of nowhere, the hotel was more than a kilometre away, he had a gold watch, quite a bit of money in his pocket – damn, why didn't he leave that in the hotel room? – an expensive coat. The passenger slowly descended from the cab. Horatio was about to run when suddenly the man caught his arm and said,

“Please, here”. Before he knew what was happening Horatio was being swung unto the cab and the truck slowly moved off. The driver was silent. Horatio wondered, shakily, whether to try and make conversation. The truck meandered along the road. It slowly approached the hotel and pulled up outside Reception, stopping with a shudder of gears. Horatio could hardly move. He felt so foolish that he could barely mumble goodbye, let alone *ngiyabonga*. The other men in the truck began to talk loudly, and he heard to his chagrin some laughter as they pulled away down the road that led to the staff quarters.

The temp was watching him as he staggered through the door. He noticed her eyeing him with interest.

“Evening, Mr Aprozé”.

He mumbled something. No doubt he looked as if he’d seen a ghost.

“You okay?” she asked, as he leaned on the counter breathing heavily, waiting for his key.

“Fine. Fine. I was, ya, I was, er, just taking a stroll. Thank you”.

“Perhaps you’d like a night-cap?”

Horatio had sudden visions of wee willy winkie, pyjamas, hot chocolate. But he was also a man of the world. He sighed, feeling calmer.

“I think I’d better just get along to bed, thanks all the same”. She tilted her head on one side, ignoring his remark.

“You look like you could do with a warm Scotch”.

“A *what!*?”

“You know, when you warm the glass by running it under very hot water for about a minute and then you pour a single tot. And add a small piece of lemon rind. It really works wonders when you’re stressed”.

She came back to Reception bearing two glasses.

“I have to stay here case someone comes”, she whispered. Horatio learnt that she was a student, doing medicine, and she had a holiday job at the hotel. They chinked, and for the first time she smiled at him. He noticed her face, oval in shape, warm apricot skin, a splash of red on her lips. God, I mustn’t stare, he thought, but she really is rather pretty.

And she seems so nice. They talked about the hotel, and he told her how he'd been coming here for years, and all about his favourite room.

“Yes, I know, 301. It was me who checked you in this afternoon”.

Of course. He looked at her again. There was something different about her. Maybe she'd changed her clothes, maybe it was the make-up.

“I was feeling pretty tired when I arrived. And then after dinner I went on a walk”. He found himself telling her all about his experience – getting lost, the couple in the bushes, the lorry, his embarrassment. She laughed, and told him to be more careful in future. As he went off they introduced themselves briefly.

“Horatio Apros”.

“Yes, I know. I'm Nontsi, Nontsi Mbulawo. Pleased to meet you. And you know something: watch out for sunburn. Up here it gets really hot here during the day. Put lots of lotion on when you go out”.

“Right! Okay, well, um, goodnight Nancy”. He felt her watching him go up the stairs.

Later that night Horatio was kept awake by very loud music coming from the bar. Even here at the back of the hotel he could hear it. Damn, there must be a party. He thought of complaining, but then again, perhaps that was normal, perhaps he was the odd one out. The early mornings were just as peaceful, although when he went down to breakfast the next day he saw that his usual place by the window had been taken by a burly man and his wife. The man was talking loudly on his cell-phone: a business call because there were words like “financial incentives”, “imali”, “accountant”. Normally the rules were very strict about cell-phones. The woman raised her voice to talk to her children outside the window; he noticed that too. It just seemed a bit too much, so early in the morning. The next thing that upset him was that there was no real coffee, only Nescafe. This was outrageous. He was a reasonable man. He was a good citizen. He was glad more Africans were coming to stay at the hotel. After all, this was their country too. It put him in mind of his pensioners, made him feel that his work was somehow becoming tangible, the people he was helping save for their retirement were made visible, somehow, in front of him. Why should the new order, though, mean cell-phones, loud music all night, loud voices over breakfast, and Nescafe?

Horatio hurried through his breakfast and went out into the cool morning. The stable doors were open and a truck was parked outside. He sauntered over to investigate, thinking that now, maybe, was the right time for that horse ride. He was horrified to discover that that not only were there no horses, but alas – and this had obviously happened since his last visit – the stables were being converted into a games room, complete with lurid décor and fruit machines. A sign over the door read CEDAR'S PALACE in garish blue. Now it occurred to him that he imagined them the other night, the horses: there had been no hooves, no gentle whinnying. A faded notice, "Horse rides R120 an hour", lay discarded in the bushes.

By the time he reached his room Horatio was aware that he was trembling. Yes, his hand actually shook as he put the key into the door. It was only much later that he ventured out again. This time he went right round the hotel in a big circle, past the swimming pool (full of shouting children; he had never noticed how small it was), past the rose garden (they could do with a bit of pruning), round the back of what used to be the paddock. It was a beautiful late morning with a cloudless sky that lifted his spirits. The walk helped him work up an appetite after his small breakfast. Arriving back at the hotel for lunch, he heard a commotion going on in the lounge. Someone was demanding to see the manager, a request that was hardly ever heard in this quiet, orderly place. An elderly white man was shouting at the young temp, the one who had been so nice to him the first evening – what was her name? Yes, Nancy, or Nonsi. The shouting man was using foul language, bordering on racial obscenities.

Horrified, Horatio tried to walk briskly past the reception desk and off into the side-room, from where he could take a detour past the kitchen and get to the safety of his room via the other entrance. But someone blocked his way, a maid trundling across the lobby with a bag of laundry, in no hurry, as if shouting were normal in this quiet country hotel. "Eeish", was all she said. Another man appeared and went over to the receptionist, who, Horatio noticed, was looking tense. It took almost a minute before he finally made it to the other side of the lobby. Almost panting, he ran up the first flight of stairs towards the

lift that took him up two more floors. Below him he could still hear the old man ranting, but the other man, the new manager, was dealing with him, and gradually the voices became lower, then stopped.

They barely greeted each other when he went to hand in his key the next morning. The day after that another woman took over and he didn't see Nancy again. In the few days that followed, he tried to put the incident out of his mind. He knew that he'd failed her, that he should have tried to intervene, tried to say something to that stupid old man, that appalling racist. But he had done nothing and now it was too late. He felt awful. It was as if the hotel had changed him. He couldn't quite put his finger on it but there was a feeling that it was he who was changing, not the hotel. He was about to find out why; the hotel was trying to teach him something.

He checked out a week earlier than intended, and while settling up he learnt that Cynthia had left months before, when the hotel had changed hands. He also found out that Nancy's father now ran the hotel. Then he recognised the surname: something about a local municipality in Johannesburg, some scam involving rent increases that had been investigated by the Scorpions.

The hotel seemed more forlorn than usual as he drove out of the car park. One by one people left, the cars trailed their sound along the road for a long way, but finally the branches swayed again, closing in with a rustling of dry leaves in the emptiness. The day was bright yet the sun held no warmth, it merely held up a light to the loneliness of the woods, the abandoned rooms, clean and waiting for the next occupants. Unoccupied spaces filled the air, held the morning in a dead embrace.

The following year Horatio booked in December, high season. Annoyingly this meant that he had to pay more but somehow it seemed as if by shunning early autumn he could avoid the repetition of the previous year's unpleasantness. It had occurred to him, naturally, to try another hotel, but he found after a few tries – surfing the web with its

desultory hype from resorts all over the northern Drakensberg – that he could not drag himself away. There was a pattern in his life that this hotel was part of, for better or worse. He had developed a relationship; it was a marriage, almost (he smiled ruefully at the analogy), and he would remain loyal to the place just as he remained loyal to his employers, to his pensioners, the unseen friends who relied on him for a secure future. I must not be put off by a slight disturbance, he told himself. That seems like a weakness on my part, a betrayal of trust, when so many people are looking to me for their security. I must stand firm.

It took several tries to get through by phone. His light-voiced request sounded like patter, casual, as if he had never done this before. Horatio explained at length what he wanted and for a while there was no response. Then a small voice cut him off.

“Fool”.

It was abrupt, almost unkind. Was this Nancy playing a practical joke, some kind of revenge? How stupid of me, he thought, she doesn't even know who it is, and come to that I don't recognise her voice, either. Had he got a wrong number? He'd redialled so many times.

“Oh but... I'd like to book a room for...”

“ We fool. Because of the school holidays.”

“Umm.” he tried to slow down the pace, it was all happening much too fast. It was unthinkable he couldn't get the booking he wanted. He would have to change tack.

“Well, can I book a single room for the week beginning Friday 28th of November” he said carefully, listening to the steady pace of his own words. “301 would be nice, if it's free.” He was surprised that he had made this request for only one week instead of the usual three.

“I'll see what I can do”, the voice snapped. “Name?”

It was already past five-thirty when he arrived. It was raining, almost dark, and the journey had been more fraught than usual because of delays getting away from work, then the heavy traffic. The hotel seemed tense with a sense of foreboding; the trees heavy with rain did not rustle their branches in greeting, the sky was almost blue-black, and

sombre. No-one else arrived, no-one left. Three cars were parked, abandoned by their owners; mute, implacable witnesses to the deepening night.

Nancy wasn't at the desk. Horatio noticed this with a shot of relief. But there was disappointment too. He had wanted to explain everything to her, right from the beginning, going right back over it all again, and further back, to his job, his failed marriage, his childhood. Something in him wanted her to understand what had happened that day. More than anything else this is what he now wanted. This, he acknowledged to himself, this I suppose is why I had to come back here. He reached room 301 - it took him a while to figure out how to use the plastic card that served as a key - and entered. The first thing he noticed was that the room was all white; even the woodwork had been painted, and this made the bed and armchairs seem lacklustre, old. He wondered for a moment if it was the right room. The fireplace looked the same. The view was the same. After he had unpacked he looked for the tumbler but all he could find was a tooth-mug wrapped in plastic. Looks like it's wearing a condom, he thought. Sign of the times. He had two whiskies to stave off the sinking feeling in his stomach.

Despite the drizzle a brisk walk before dinner would blow away the cobwebs he thought, settle his mood. After all, no-one could alter the forest. Surely? As he left the hotel he almost ran into someone leaving from another direction, struggling into her anorak and striding off down the road. He recognised her small form. "Nancy...". He quickly caught up with her. "It's not 'Nancy', it's Nontsi, she said, abstractedly. Short for Nontsikelelo. How are you? She held her hand out to him, without smiling, and he shook it.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

"No, I was wondering the same thing."

"Shall we walk together?" It took Horatio a few moments to recover from meeting her like this, and from her frank uncomplicated way of talking to him as if nothing had happened and as if they'd last seen each other the day before.

They were silent for several minutes, walking slowly along the road, until it was pitch black. She stopped, looking into the woods, and he had just plucked up the courage to

talk to her, to ask her forgiveness, to explain everything that had happened, to try and make her understand his fear of coming to grips with something he didn't understand, when she suddenly swung out along a small track in the direction of an old building that he had only vaguely noticed before. He quickly followed her, more out of concern that she might get lost.

"It's an old cottage", she told him, as he caught up. "Belonged to the hotel many years ago, the game-keeper or something Laurentian like that. Used as an annexe for a few years, apparently, but then they kind of let it go downhill. Now it's being renovated. It's going to be done up, Victorian style, because it is kind of quaint. I come here and read sometimes. But it's still a bit unsafe: the walls and roof need fixing up in places.

Nontsi was waiting for a response. Her words stunned him into silence. He could not find a place for her in his experience.

"Want to have a quick look?"

Horatio stumbled after her through the wet grass. She found a door that wasn't locked, and lead him through the cottage. Although it was almost pitch dark, he could just make out her eyes wandering over the woodwork, the stripped and sealed pine floors, the old stove, the stained glass in some of the windows.

"I told you", she said triumphantly, "it's going to be really great when it's finished. A Victorian relic! Do you like it?" Horatio mumbled something, and turned to leave. He could not bear it: her cheerfulness, her lightness, her optimism, when he felt weighed down with it all. The way his room had been ruined, the desolate look of the hotel, the new games room, all the horses gone, the changes all around. Even the food might be different. And here was a cottage being 'done up' like a relic. The past was a fashion, an ephemera, just like everything else. She seemed to be able to manage it all, but he couldn't. Was it his age? He wasn't that old. Was it that he was longing for something lost, something that, in fact, he had never really owned?

He and Nancy took a slightly longer route back, getting lost a couple of times. Now the rain had come on again, worse than before, and although they kept avoiding it by choosing paths that wove between the trees, this evasive route had gradually led them

into deeper and more tangled grass. Before long he realised that they were way off the track and battling to walk. He recognised nothing. The whole landscape looked different because of the gusting wind and rain – all he could see were branches twisted about into weird shapes. He had lost his bearings. What used to be an idyllic landscape now appeared brutalised by this extraordinarily violent storm. Without retracing their steps all the way back to the cottage, now a good half-mile away, there would probably be nothing for it but to plunge on across the fields ahead, treeless and exposed to the lightning and the rain that was now bucketing down.

“Oh dear, I think...” began to form on Horatio’s lips but she was already striding out in front of him beyond reach of his words. There was nothing for it. He plunged after her, all his energy concentrated in keeping up her pace, in keeping water out of his upturned collar, keeping his balance among the twisted roots and long wet ropes of grass and heading for something she’d seen that he obviously hadn’t. They went on for several minutes. In his chaotic state he heard Nancy say something.

“Sorry?” he stammered.

“Nearly there.” He felt totally forlorn. He had hardly responded to her friendly chatter, hardly said a word about the cottage. He had just been absorbed in his own misery.

“Nancy,” he began.

“Nontsi!” she laughed, “Come on, it’s not that difficult to say!”

“I’m sorry. I’m so terribly sorry... For what happened... last year. I... I just couldn’t bear it, the way things happened, the way that man spoke to you... I felt helpless... I felt... it was my fault somehow, that I should have prevented it, that I should have protected you... And I couldn’t. I should have said something to that awful man, and I didn’t. I was a total coward, an idiot, an absolute idiot. I just ran away. It was stupid, utterly, utterly stupid and cowardly.”

He stopped, panting. She did not respond. He looked around and saw that they were standing in the car park, in front of the hotel steps. She was staring at him, uncomprehending.

“Look”, she said, “I’m not sure what you’re talking about, but right now, all *I* want to do is get warm. I’m absolutely bloody freezing and my clothes are soaked through. And I dunno about you, but I need a drink”. Horatio felt as if he’d been slapped in the face. She held a hand out to him; he seemed determined to spend the night there in the car park. She looked at his damp, cold face.

“Come on. You need to get out of those wet things.” Horatio took a deep breath. This was the moment, something he had only vaguely wished for. But she spoke before he could answer.

“Buy you a whisky? You can stand me dinner if you like.”

Night settled over the hotel. Its lights threw a circle over the entrance, marched down the road, and then gradually disappeared, shrinking into a blackness of trees. The world stood still, listening. The rain ceased and a moon emerged between the parting clouds, cradled in a halo against the frosty sky. The lights of the dining room and bar, then one by one all the windows of the hotel, gradually joined the darkness. Only one pinpoint of light was left, somewhere to the back of the hotel, glowing for a long, long time, until it, too, finally went out.