

The magnificent Hotel Neversink is the crown jewel of the Catskills, a sprawling resort of unparalleled luxury that hosts athletes, actors, and even presidents. Owned and operated by the immigrant Sikorsky family, the hotel is a realization of their wildest American dream. But then a young boy disappears.

This mysterious vanishing—and the ones that follow—will brand the lives of three generations. At the root of it all is Asher Sikorsky, the ambitious and ruthless patriarch whose founding of the hotel in 1931 sets a fearful legacy in motion. His daughter Jeanie Sikorsky sees the Hotel Neversink into its most lucrative era, but also its darkest. Decades later, Asher's descendants grapple with the family's heritage in their own ways: grandson Len fights to keep the failing hotel alive, and great-granddaughter Alice sets out to finally uncover the identity of a killer who has haunted the hotel and family for decades.

Told by an unforgettable chorus of Sikorsky family members—a matriarch, a hotel maid, a traveling comedian, the hotel detective, and many others—*The Hotel Neversink* is the gripping portrait of a Jewish family in the Catskills over the course of a century. With an unerring eye and prose both comic and tragic, Adam O'Fallon Price details one man's struggle for greatness no matter the cost, and a long-held family secret that threatens to undo it all.

“Thoroughly absorbing. . . . Spanning almost a century, *The Hotel Neversink* is a multilayered tale of family, fortune, and fate that grows more eerily compelling with every passing page.”

—LING MA, author of *Severance*

“A gripping, atmospheric, heartbreaking, almost-ghost story. Not since Stephen King’s *Overlook* has a hotel hiding a secret been brought to such vivid life.”

—LYDIA KIESLING, author of *The Golden State*

“*The Hotel Neversink* is an astounding literary feat—a murder mystery, a ghost story, a century-spanning family history, and a stand-up routine all in one, with dramatic variety to rival any Catskills floor show. Adam O’Fallon Price writes with the blackly comic energy of Philip Roth or Lorrie Moore, packing ten novels’ worth of narrative into this compact knish of a book. I wolfed it down in a couple of bites.”

—J. ROBERT LENNON, author of *Broken River*

“Like a heyday hotel, this vibrant novel teems with lives, stories, and dark secrets. With its large cast of characters, chilling crime, and haunted locale, *The Hotel Neversink* is a compelling and spooky mystery, but readers will also find it to be a perceptive and exceptionally well-written novel about the transmission of family trauma.”

—CHRIS BACHELDER, author of *The Throwback Special*

“Adam O’Fallon Price’s *The Hotel Neversink*, like its namesake, contains many rooms: behind this door, a tragic family saga; behind that one, a comic love story. And behind it all, a mystery that keeps you guessing until the very end. Book your stay soon.”

—DANIEL WALLACE, author of *Extraordinary Adventures*

THE HOTEL NEVERSINK

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THE HOTEL NEVERSINK

ADAM O'FALLON PRICE



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For Elizabeth, for everything

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A History

An article in the *Liberty Leader*, dated January 8, 1931, announced, in the breathless style of the times, “Local Tycoon Dies in Penniless Despair, Foley House to Be Pawned at Auction.” The local tycoon was George B. Foley, and Foley House was a symbol of his fortune and misfortune, in equal parts. Foley, born an orphan after killing his destitute mother in childbirth, went on to possess one of those uniquely American success stories, both wildly improbable and somehow preordained by his intelligence and cunning. Starting in the 1880s with a single horse-drawn carriage, he amassed a small fortune in livery and turned that into a large fortune in lumber and construction, personally hiring urchins like himself out of local orphanages and homes like the one he’d run away from at fourteen.

They were put to work building some of the grand homes beginning to dot the Catskills and the Hudson River Valley around the turn of the century, including Foley’s own. A cadre of builders was devoted solely to this project, with the ground broken in 1900 and a two-year project timeline. Foley House was situated on the highest

point in Liberty—Neversink Hill—a jutting thumb of granite named after the river that wound around its base. It overlooked the town and surrounding environs, and from its apex you could see the distant Suffolk County Boy's Home, where Foley had been instructed in how to suffer and survive.

The mansion was designed to accommodate a sprawling future clan—eight, ten children, perhaps more in his grandest imaginings—with dozens of bedrooms apportioned over three stories. At the time of Foley's architectural design, he was engaged to a local girl, so these plans were not mere fancy. Shortly after their marriage, however, she contracted typhus and died. Construction was paused from 1901 to 1907, during which time Foley mourned and, for both emotional and financial reasons, moved a great deal of his business to New York City. Putting up many of the tenements in what is now the Lower East Side and Chinatown, Foley accrued a vault of lucre and built Foley Two, so-called, this time on Long Island's Gold Coast, with easements and tumbling garden walls shared with families named Vanderbilt and Gould.

That was all they shared with him, this grubby provincial who sullied their parlors and dance floors. Finding himself as lonely rich as he'd been poor, he sold Foley Two and returned to Liberty; but having grown accustomed to the scale of Gold Coast homes, Foley One now seemed paltry, unbecoming his original vision. Despite now being in his forties, he imagined himself the sire of more and more children—twenty, thirty, a biblical number! He put his team back to work, as he too went to work finding a mother for these spectral offspring. It would have been easy enough to scour the poor local towns for a girl, blank-eyed and high-foreheaded and wide-hipped, of a regional type he used to rut around with in his younger years.

But being rich, and—crucially—exposed to the snobbery of the even richer, he had in mind a woman with blood pure enough to cut his own rough sludge.

On a tour of England in 1910, he found her, a woman named Anna Katheridge, the daughter of a baron in arrears, a perplexed gentleman with a country manor coming down around his great red whiskers. These financial woes made it surprisingly easy for the baron to overlook a rich American's lack of pedigree and table manners, and on a third visit, in 1911, the baron granted Foley his daughter's hand in marriage. The wedding date was set, the house neared completion, and Anna was booked for the States in lavish style on the RMS *Titanic*, which set sail from Southampton in April of 1912.

Over the next ten years, building continued with unabated, even accelerated, vigor and urgency. Rooms were added monthly. In 1920, a fourth floor. Turrets and parapets. The building team, many of whom had worked on the house for two decades, were mostly of the opinion that Foley had lost his mind.

Whatever the case, Foley's behavior became increasingly erratic, and he sequestered himself in a large corner bedroom on the third floor, sometimes for days on end. When he emerged, it was usually with a bottle of wine in one hand and a clutch of further plans in the other, instructions to the shrugging foreman and his crew of orphan boys, most of whom now had families and houses of their own. By the 1920s, some of their teenage sons were on payroll, working beside their fathers. And while the crew felt a certain shame in the manifest pointlessness of the house's endless construction . . . well, the usual excuse went that it was Foley's money, and he had plenty of it.

And would forever, so it seemed. Like a wagon released on a slight decline, Foley's business trundled along without guidance, its speed

increasing under the weight of its own inexorable success, until it hurtled off the edge of the financial cliff in October 1929. His inability to pay his workers finally brought construction on Foley House to a halt, with a final count of ninety-three individual bedrooms (most with bathrooms en suite), four floors, a fifth subterranean level, three ballrooms, two dining halls, two kitchens, an auditorium, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, an elevator, and countless nooks and crannies—spaces of no discernible use, though that could be said of the entire house, the entire property, for that matter, a craggy sprawl of shadowy pines tumbling down to the river below.

On January 1, 1931, a leap from the roof brought George Foley's dissolution to a halt. With its deceased owner's assets intestate and in massive debt, Foley's Folly, as townspeople referred to it, was put up for auction; to the dismay of many of these same townspeople, it was purchased by a local Jewish innkeeper named Asher Levem Sikorsky. Sikorsky had been looking to expand his hotel, and though the mansion far outstripped his relatively humble ambitions, as well as his available credit, he saw in the sprawling grounds an equally sprawling opportunity. Borrowing and leveraging every penny he could, Sikorsky signed the deed on Foley House in June of 1931. He renamed it after the hill on which it perched, after the river that wound by its base, and after his fondest dream of continued, continuous prosperity: *May Your Fortunes Never Sink!* read the plaque over the front door. In July of that same year, the first guests arrived at the Hotel Neversink, and finally, after three decades, its rooms were filled with children.

1. Jeanie

1950

Yesterday, a boy disappeared from the hotel. Jonah Schoenberg, eight years old. Today, we assembled in the Great Room—dozens of local people, staff, and guests volunteered to help the police search for him. An outpouring of support for the family that eased, a little, the worry everyone in the room felt. The boy's mother and father had asked me to speak, to direct the crowd as usefully as possible. The father was in conference with the police; the mother, white and shaking. I had personally moved them into our Presidential Suite for privacy and comfort, though what, truly, could be of comfort to her at this time?

“Please,” I said, “anything you need.”

“Find my boy,” she said, looking up at me as though I possessed some mystical power to make things right. “Find my boy.”

The search party walked down the road to the base of the hill. With the hot sun rising high above us, we spread out and scaled the

hill again, slowly dragging the woods in a long, grim line. I had not been in this region since we first bought the hotel many years ago. But the trees bent over us as they did in my memory, thick and shadowy, swaying together as though in secret conference with each other. After an hour, we regained the Neversink, and on the north lawn I stopped at my father's grave—a small plot at the tree line, barely noticeable. The headstone's marble was cool under my hand: *Asher Levem Sikorsky, b. 1882–d. 1948*. No inscription, because none was needed: the Neversink was inscription enough. As we pressed on into the northern woods, calling for the boy, I felt myself somehow calling for my father, calling for myself. I thought of the long, arduous journey he had made to wind up here. The success he had at last achieved, and in doing so the price he—all of us—had paid.

My father was not an easy man. But why should people be easy? It is a cherished lie of the modern world, of America, that everything should be good and easy, as though comfort were a moral condition rather than a historical fluke. I already see in my children an abiding, soft sweetness, as though the country of their birth was, while they slept, piping them with cream. They cannot know, and should not, the feeling of true cold, true hunger—hunger so complete and total that one's mind becomes like a dying candle cupped in a blizzard. They do not and should not know, yet I silently resent them this privilege they will never know they possess.

When we still lived on the farm, in Silesia, our father nearly starved us to death. This was in the midst of the drought that came as a treble curse so close after the Great War and the subsequent uprisings. It was as though God, in his wisdom, had heard the prayers of our people and answered them with a further test to prove that things,

truly, could always be worse. Three years with scarcely a single rain shower had winnowed our farm down to the four of us—my father, my mother, me, and my little brother—and a mule we'd named Zsolt. During planting season my father would trudge out in the blue morning, side by side with Zsolt, and they seemed a single creature, a two-headed beast of burden going about its senseless labor.

For we knew that, even should the rain have come again during the summer, the ground was so parched that the topsoil, and my father's seedlings, would be washed away. And so the rain came at last, and so it was. And in our barren harvest, we knew the winter would kill us at last. Anything but moving from the farm was hopeless. My mother pleaded almost daily with my father, behind the heavy closed door of their bedroom, to let us leave.

"And go where," he might have said, in a version of this conversation I must have overheard dozens of times.

"Wrocław. You know that. We have family there."

"They have a home here that is theirs. They have pride."

"Pride will not feed them."

"But loss of it will starve them." Then the sound of crying and my father's murmurings. "Tut, little chick. I will see us through this. One day, we will have everything anyone could ever want."

For my father had long carried an image in his head, a vision of himself as a figure of importance—someone who would become Someone—if fate would serve him a turn. His mother, my grandmother Perla, had spoiled him, her only son—though their family was poor, he was first to eat, and he ate well. She bought him books and sent him to school, telling him "Asher, work hard and you will bring us great honor and great fortune." How this promise must have nourished him as we bent to our empty bowls, warmed him like the

small fire we huddled around after supper, thin as bundles of dry sticks.

It is difficult to explain to someone who has never gone hungry what it is like to not eat for days on end, a week; rather than simply a state of discomfort, the hunger becomes something active, the thing you fill your time with. You can think of nothing else. Joseph and I would play a game called “Restaurant,” in which we would pretend it was our birthday and we could have any dinner we wanted. With my brother playing the white-shirted waiter, I would order my feast: piles of roast beef with gravy, potato pancakes, paprika cabbage in the sauce my grandmother used to make, green beans, and kolachkes for dessert. My brother, when it was his turn, simply wanted bread, buttered bread, endless trays of it. This was in the good times, when we had the energy to play. In the bad times, we simply lay in our beds.

I cannot remember when, but at some point, my mother began to obtain our meager sustenance. Once a week, Monday mornings, she would put on her walking boots and heaviest jacket. She disappeared down the path that led to the rutted road, her small figure moving carefully on ground covered by hoarfrost. In the afternoon, she would return with a small bag of game meat and a few vegetables—turnips and carrots, and sometimes potatoes if we were lucky. This bounty she made into the thin, watery stew we ate twice a day. I don't know where she got this food, if it was charity, or if she earned it in some way I refuse to imagine, but I came to realize it was a kind of arrangement between my father and her: if we were to cling to the side of his dusty mountain, she would bring back the sack of food. But it was never discussed. For months this went on, as though my father believed the stew was either arriving through divine providence or

else somehow created from the occasional withered plant he foraged, the skeletal rabbit that collapsed in one of his traps.

One night, eating silently, I noticed our father was watching our mother through slitted lids. Hunched, scowling over his bowl, he finally put down his spoon and said, "Where did you get this food?"

To this day, I have no idea what changed that night. Perhaps he really had, in half-starved derangement, convinced himself he'd been providing the food. Perhaps he had discovered what the transaction in the village was. Perhaps he'd always known and could simply not take it any longer. In any case, he was angry, angrier than I'd ever seen him.

"What do you mean?"

"Tell me, Amshe."

"Asher."

"It is not ours," he yelled. He picked up his bowl and hurled it, half-full, across the room, where it shattered against the stone wall. Around the table he went, doing the same to our bowls. Joseph bawled, but I knew better and sat very still, feeling the white flower of hunger rooted deep in the soil of my stomach. Standing by the pile of broken earthenware, the thin gruel already seeping into the floor, he said, "We cannot eat what is not ours."

He pushed into the pantry and emerged with the paltry sack, holding it with a prosecutorial look, as though it proved something. He went out into the freezing cold and into the stable. A minute later, he emerged with Zsolt, the animal blinking past our windows, muzzle twitching as it followed the smell of the sack. The flickering candlelight played along the accordion of its ribs. My father held a gun over his shoulder, a balky musket from the Crimean War, and old Zsolt seemed resigned to whatever was coming. It was as though my father

had conferred with the beast and convinced it to accept this as its due. Or perhaps, as one twinned creature, he was doing away with the other half, the part of him that had labored so long and for so little.

I put on my mother's heavy coat and went outside. The wind bit into my bare ankles, but I wanted to see what would happen, though I knew. In the field, my father scattered the bag's contents on the frozen ground. The mule worked its handsome head side to side as it bolted our week's sustenance.

My father said, "Go back inside, Jinya."

"I want to watch."

He gave me the slightest nod, a momentary flash of recognition, then returned his attention to the mule. When Zsolt finished eating, he looked up as though just noticing us, steam rising from his flared nostrils. In a single smooth motion, my father raised the gun to the mule's head and fired. Zsolt dropped to his forelegs in a polite, almost graceful curtsy, and fell sideways, dead.

For the next two months—February and March—we ate only mule. First mule tenderloin (not so very tender), then mule rib, mule sausage, mule shank, sliced mule heart. By the end, we were eating another soup prepared by my mother, this one made from boiled mule hooves. The soapy bitterness of it still sometimes rises into my throat, and I gag a little at the memory. But it took us through the winter, and it remains inside me, the long-ago version of myself that was nourished and sustained by that mule, by my father.

On a bright sunny day in April, with ice melting down the roof in rivulets, my father walked down the muddy path toward town. Two days later, he returned with a pellet-filled squab and the news that he was going to America. Until he sent for us, we were to stay with our mother's sister, in Wrocław. And so we did, living there for two drab

years with my aunt Sara and her husband and family. It is strange how gray these days seem in memory—after all, we were no longer constantly hungry and cold—and in contrast, how brightly colored our desolate farm, with its sprays of larkspur, its sprinkles of hollyhock. Despite the best attempts of Sara and her family, their home was not our home, their town not our town, their life not our life. Lying in my cot in the colorless dawn, I stared at the spidery lines of cracked plaster overhead and thought how my father had been right: a proud home that is your own—a person needs this the way they need food, water, air.

I once saw my father make a salesman cry. We were now living in New York, in a Lower East Side tenement filled with other immigrants, many of them Jews, shaken from their European motherlands like water off a soaked dog. No one had any money in our building. No one had any money in Hell's Kitchen. Who knew what the young salesman had done to be assigned this fallow territory? Probably just being young, a crime in itself.

I wasn't so young by then, fifteen or sixteen—barely younger than the spooked boy who stood at the door in a cheap flannel suit, clutching a black display bag.

"Yes?" said my father. I watched from the doorway behind him, fearing for the boy. We had just sat down to dinner, always a sacred time for my father after working his twelve-hour shift, no matter how lean the meals: a little fish, cabbage, a thin-sliced apple drizzled with honey if the week had been a good one.

"Is the lady of the house in?"

"We are dining."

"Sir," said the salesman, "I will make this quick."

"Please."

He launched into a rehearsed speech, barely taking a breath between words, his eyes focused on the wall behind my father's head, where an ornamental plate of my grandmother's hung from a nail. Even at fifteen, I could see the boy was not cut out for this work. "How tired are you, sir, of buying cheap vacuum cleaners for your wife that break after only a few uses? Well, be tired no more, because the Galaxi-CO 900 is here!" The boy clumsily pulled a flailing octopus of tubes out of the case, which he set at his feet. He plugged parts into other parts as he droned his script, no more thinking about the meaning of his words than the dog that barked downstairs day and night. "The Galaxi-CO 900 picks dirt up off any surface: carpet, rug, shag, tile, linoleum, wood, you name it. Its five cleaning attachments will grab particles from even the toughest-to-reach places. Plus, the Galaxi-CO 900 is guaranteed for a lifetime—that's right, a lifetime. Whose lifetime, you ask? Your lifetime. Fifty, sixty, seventy years—it will keep cleaning your carpets. The key is a patented, unbreakable polymer, from which the component pieces are molded—"

"Unbreakable, you say." My father had not moved or said a word throughout the demonstration. I'd shifted to the left, where I could see his face. He was curiously calm, looking at the rowdy machine at his feet, its sweating master bent over it smiling up at him.

"That's right, sir."

"May I?" I looked back at my mother and my brother. It occurs to me now how many of my memories of my father take this form—watching him on a kind of stage in front of me. But perhaps I am seeing him the way he felt—the golden son who'd struggled into his early middle age, forever watched by his family, who still expected him to make good and become rich; though, of course, no one expected this, only himself. And me, secretly. Despite all evidence to

the contrary, I had begun by this point to believe he would do some great thing. Paradoxically—like the wide-eyed disciple of some tent revivalist promising a rapture that never came—the longer I saw him strive and fail, the heavier the bags under his eyes grew, the more I believed in his belief.

My father took the main vacuum attachment in his hands and, never taking his eyes from the poor salesman, flexed the tube. The boy stood in wonder, mouth open but lacking any words for what he was watching. My father was not a large man, but he was tough from a lifetime of brutal work, and he had the hidden strength of anger, a deep, plashing reservoir of it fed daily by the sweat he poured at the dry cleaners. His arms shook with the strain, veins popping out on the sides of his high forehead, until, with a crack like our old musket's report, the advanced polymer snapped into two pieces. He handed them back to the salesman and said, "Not unbreakable."

He walked back inside, but I remained. The boy held the pieces and sobbed lightly to himself. He would have to pay for it, I knew. I told him to stay there, and I went to my bedroom, retrieving a dollar I'd put away from my new job cleaning apartments on the Upper West Side. The money was hidden in a library book I'd borrowed, *Little Women*.

"Thank you," he said. "It's not enough, but thank you."

"It's all I have," I said, closing the door. "Go away."

My parents' third child, Abraham, was unexpected. We were still living in the city at the time, but it was in our last apartment, the sweltering basement of a Ludlow St. tenement. My father was in his forties and my mother must have been close to that. From the start, her pregnancy was not seen as a happy development. My

father's two previous failed business ventures—a restaurant featuring my mother's cooking (burst water pipes), and a neighborhood dairy (anthrax epidemic)—had sapped our savings, but Joseph and I were both finally of an age when we could contribute to the family income. Our meager earnings were beginning to accrue, and our father had just begun again to dream of an opportunity that might be seized—of something beyond our tiny apartment and the dry cleaners, of something besides wracked muscles and a spasming back and nightly chemical headaches. To start over at their ages with a new, pink baby may have been something of a miracle, but it was not a mazel.

I remember my mother pacing around the apartment, heavy with child in the summer heat, sweating and fanning herself with one of Joseph's comic books. She could not get comfortable, and so she walked an endless circle, wearing a flat tread into the already flattened carpeting. At night, I could hear her moaning through the thin partition my father had erected between our rooms.

On a humid evening, June or July, we whispered in the thick air. Where, I asked Joseph, would the baby go?

"There's a garbage chute just down the hall."

"For shame."

"I'm joking."

"Still."

"It's easier for you, Jean. You're sixteen, you can move out now if you want."

"Quit school?"

"I'm just saying, you're going to leave, and the baby will be here, and Papa will be even more tired and angry."

"I'm not leaving, don't worry."

I had thought about leaving, in fact—of quitting school and moving far away. But as it turned out, a few months after my mother delivered Abe, my father delivered us to Liberty. With his scanty savings, a loan from our Uncle Moishe, and a promissory note to the seller set at outlandish interest, he'd bought a farmhouse in Liberty, sight unseen. The city was killing him, and in desperation, he'd thought we could go back to farming, perhaps re-create that winter in Silesia when we nearly starved to death. We packed our belongings into a truck and drove north on Route 17.

As soon as we arrived, it was clear the mistake he'd made. The ground was rocky and ash dry, not farming soil. You might get some potatoes to take, but we knew it would be impossible to grow anything of substance. He was as desolate as the ground, and for three days I thought he might either commit suicide or walk off into the deep woods surrounding the barren farm, never to be seen or heard from again. What would we do? In my parents' bedroom down the long and drafty hall, Abe wailed and sobbed, giving voice to our misery.

It seems impossible, looking back, that a baby could cry without ceasing, but in my memory, he did. His cries were the soundtrack to our struggle that spring, as we sold our remaining possessions and searched high and low for any kind of employment. My mother found work cooking in a diner in Halstead, and my father did manual labor where he could. All the while, Abe bellowed relentlessly, his face a pink, contorted agony.

My mother began to worry there was something wrong with him. *Just colic*, was the terse diagnosis of a local doctor whom I talked into a charity examination (though I believe it was Abe's shrieks in the waiting room that got us into his office). Just colic, I told my mother

with a hopeful smile, though I didn't believe it myself. We put him in the back room of the house, thinking he might cry it out of himself, but he kept on, undeterred.

I knew my parents considered him bad luck. Just when they'd been getting back on their feet again, along he comes, and with him the colossal, howling error of the farm. It wasn't fair, of course—our family had endured ten years of ill fortune before Abe came along—but I still knew they regarded him as a burden and a bad omen. A rabbi was summoned, and he lent credence to this belief. The boy, he said, was *tum'ah*, ritually impure. In his impurity, he'd brought our family to a state of *tumei*, as though we'd jointly contracted a fever.

"What can we do?" asked my mother.

"There is nothing to do," said the rabbi, still in his long coat and fur collar, so deftly had he diagnosed Abe's illness. "Endure it, and be flattered. After all, He does not test those He does not love."

Ironically, it was shortly after this that we had the stroke of luck that changed my family's fortune forever, though it did not seem that Abe was credited with this good turn. It was in early June. A family of five who had come up from the city found themselves in trouble when all of the local hotels were booked. Our farm was visible on a hill near the main road, and they inquired, thinking we might be a summer lodge. We had never considered such a thing, but my parents eagerly agreed, and we worked quickly to make them comfortable—Joseph and I prepared the bedrooms, putting down clean sheets and turning around family photos. My father acted as a sort of impromptu concierge, asking where they were visiting while in Liberty, suggesting the best hiking and swimming spots as though he'd lived there his entire life rather than a few months. My mother turned what must have been the last of our household provisions into a memorable feast,

an act of culinary generosity borne, I knew, of utter desperation. No terms of the stay had been negotiated. No agreement had been drawn up. If they had not felt satisfied, they might have turned and left, or departed the next day without paying us a dime.

But how we ate that night!

Sauerbraten with brown gravy, lokshen kugel, borscht with sour cream, buttery rolls, stuffed peppers and mushrooms, and fried artichokes! And for dessert, apple strudel drizzled with honey! It was as though my most extravagant childhood session of Restaurant had been wished into reality. The guests sat around the main table, stunned. They had never eaten such food, the father said. They would soon return, the mother said. They would tell others of the hospitality they'd stumbled onto here. Please do, said my father, with an anxious look—I knew he was wondering if they planned on paying, and how much. In the postprandial silence, Abe's muffled cries were just audible from the root cellar, where he'd been stashed in a quilted basket. I went down and held him there in the dark. Tut, little chick, I said, perhaps our fortunes are changing.

The next morning, they did pay, and paid well. It was more money than we'd even hoped: ten dollars—enough to last us the month. Not only that, but they returned in July and brought another family with them. And three more groups came in August, curious about the Sikorsky Inn, as it was becoming known.

That was a heady year. My father brimmed with pride as we made improvements to the house, putting in an icebox and modern bathroom. My mother continued cooking and even hired a helper up from Monticello, a Polish émigré named Anja who spoke not a word of English. My brother arranged for various “entertainments,” put on at eight in the large living room, or outside in the barn when the weather

was nice. He was an adequate juggler, very good at telling jokes, and he also had a knack for finding strange local “talent” to perform for free, including a former college gymnast who could twist her body like challah and an older gentleman who’d trained his terriers to somersault over each other’s backs. For my part, I did whatever was needed, whatever my father asked. Often this involved negotiating deals with companies, finding people who would fix things for cheap or for future payment. I came to know almost everyone in the greater Liberty area, developed friendships and trust, always paying our workers as quickly and fairly as possible. I oversaw operations of the Sikorsky Inn, and my father referred to me as the manager, although none of us had official titles. But I did know that I was the one he counted on to make things run as smoothly as possible.

As the business grew larger and larger and our time grew scarcer and scarcer, this responsibility also included looking after Abe. My father had become icy toward him, would leave the boy howling for hours in his crib without paying him the least attention. My mother seemed to lack maternal feeling—she would hold him at times, but only for a few moments before setting him down again. It seemed that to my parents, Abe had gone from being bad luck to being an emblem of our former misery, one that threatened to pull them back to misfortune from a very new and precarious prosperity. The fears had a practical source as well—after all, guests came to the inn for relaxation and pleasure, not to be confronted with a sick, screaming child.

In December, when the house was completely free of guests, I spent most of my money calling a doctor down from Albany. He removed his hat and scarf and spent an hour examining Abe, turning the child over, poking and prodding with a resolute look through the

ever-mounting noise. Finally, he summoned my parents and me into the living room and said, "He has spinal stenosis. It's causing him great pain, hence the crying." He explained the condition over the next few minutes.

"But what shall we do?" said my mother, echoing her question last time.

"There are operations that can be done. But they are expensive and not guaranteed to work. I can refer you to a specialist." He wrote a name and number down on a small sheet of paper he pulled from his black leather satchel.

"How much," said my father.

The doctor looked at him with unmistakable distaste. Or perhaps it seemed unmistakable to me because I felt it as well. It would cost what it cost! The doctor said, "Well, I'm not an expert. But several hundred, certainly. Maybe more, including medication and surgical braces, that kind of thing."

"A thousand? Two?"

The doctor shrugged and closed his satchel. I thanked him at the door, and he nodded gravely, as though acknowledging what Abe was up against. After the doctor left, there was a great deal of crying and consternation, and not just on Abe's part. My mother stared darkly down at the crib. Looking at her, I became frightened. My parents believed in dybbuks, in curses and omens and hauntings. And they grew up in a time when crippled babies were often carried off into the woods. So I was not surprised the next day when my father asked me, over tea, to take the boy to the state hospital a county over and leave him.

"No," I said. I suppose, looking back, that I was—am—soft compared to my parents, just as my children are compared to me.

"Jinya, you must. I cannot, your mother will not."

"Then do not."

"The boy must go. He is a curse."

"He is not a curse," I said loudly, almost yelling. I cannot remember ever raising my voice to my father, before or after. More quietly, I added, "He is a sick little boy."

"Jean. I believe the rabbi's verdict is correct. But, okay, even if the boy is not a curse, he is beyond our helping. Perhaps he is not beyond the state's help."

"Please, Papa. We have money, we can make more. Do not give him up. It is a sin."

"Helping your family can never be a sin. We cannot let Abraham ruin us. It is what must be done."

So I went. In the car—an old Ford my father had recently acquired from a local farmer—Abe lay beside me on a blanket. Out the window, he stared with a dark and level gaze at the pine trees, the gray sky, a burst of swallows rising into the air like smoke. For the first time in weeks he was silent, and it almost seemed that, having been exiled from the family, he was finally satisfied. *At last*, I thought, *at last you shush*. I thought, too, about what my father had not said, could not say—that two thousand dollars was too much to spend on a child he hadn't wanted in the first place. That if Abraham was the price he had to pay to ensure the Sikorsky Inn continued flourishing and expanding, so be it.

I knew it was a sin, but I did as my father asked, leaving the boy in a hamper on the steps of the county hospital. I taped a note to the blanket, explaining his condition. I kissed him once and drove away.

My father bought Foley House three years later, in 1931, and renamed it the Hotel Neversink. Over the next two decades, the

business thrived to a degree that I think surprised even him. Nineteen forty-two marked the first year with a million dollars in profit, and still we continued growing. Professional athletes, entertainers, heads of state have lain their heads on our pillows. The Presidential Suite was renamed as such after Mr. Truman came for a visit. He signed the guestbook, took tea in the library, ate my mother's loshen kugel with gusto. He assured us he would return.

Three years ago, my father told me he was entrusting the Neversink to me. As his health declined, I had taken over daily operations, had even begun making financial decisions with his tacit approval. For instance, I had been the one to recognize the guests' desire for a golf course, to expense the endeavor with our accountant, to determine it was in our long-term benefit, to hire the contractor and oversee the project, which continues today outside my office window. My brother Joseph moved to New York many years ago to pursue his comedy career, though we still often see him, on his tours through the Catskills. Nonetheless, it took me a little by surprise when my father made it official.

"Jinya," he said, "this is yours." We were sitting in the dayroom, an obscure little nook on the far side of the wraparound porch, his favorite place in the hotel. He wore a tartan blanket over his frail legs, which made him look a bit like General Sternwood in *The Big Sleep*, a film that had come out the year before, finally making its way to the Liberty Odeon.

"Not for a long time."

"Don't be a fool."

"I'm not a fool—"

"I know, and this is why I'm entrusting the hotel to you."

We sat in silence and I helplessly observed how the cancer, and the treatments for it, had sapped him. The great arms that had once snapped the vacuum tube were withered and spotted with bruises that did not heal, purple welts beneath the papery skin. In the cold morning light he was oddly translucent, like a jellyfish. If he'd taken off his shirt, could I have seen his heart beating in that thin chest?

"Thank you," I said, finally.

"It is nothing for thanks. You are like me, that is all." I knew I was, but it was strange to hear. "You are tough and proud. And you will do whatever it takes for this business to continue growing, for our family to prosper. Your brother has the far better deal."

"Does he?"

"Oh, yes," my father said. He coughed extensively, leaned forward to open the door, and spat out into the green, manicured expanse. "He is a fool. He is happy."

As we searched for the Schoenberg boy, I was besieged by these memories. And I could not help but wonder if this was divine punishment for giving Abraham up. Perhaps my father was right, and Abe truly was a curse from God. When I returned in last light with the distraught search party, the hotel felt vacant, abandoned. No guests checking in or checking out, no noise from the recreation or dining rooms, no sounds of distant splashing coming through the high walls of the natatorium, no old men drinking tea in the parlor—nothing. Our security man, Saul Javits, tipped his hat gravely at me as we crossed each other's path beneath the grand staircase, his face etched with the fearful sorrow I felt on my own.

I sat on a hall chair to steady myself as I thought again of my father and his dying wish to be buried beside this place he had built, where

he had at last found the success that had eluded him for so long. Would it now be taken from him?

In the empty dining room, I traced a finger on the cool brass rail running its perimeter. Overhead, the enormous iron chandelier my father had salvaged from a distant estate sale hung with fantastic weight. I could see the team of men he assembled—my uncle and three others, Joseph running around their legs—hoisting it on temporary scaffolding, my father below them pointing and nodding at his own good judgment.

A faint and familiar bitter taste had filled my mouth—mule hoof, I realized, brought back by the day's remembrances. I went behind the bar, poured cherry wine into a cup, swished and spat in the sink. Another sip I took and swallowed, raising my cup to the chandelier. No, I thought—all of this will not be for nothing. As Zsolt gave his life for our family, my father gave his life to this place, willing it into existence and doing what was necessary for it to succeed. As will I. The children will grow up here. Soft as cream.