

## CLEANING HOUSE

After the drug pushers moved in, trash began to collect around the edges of the Humphry Hotel. I was one of the cleaning ladies and we were afraid to go near the room that they stayed in.

It was a summer in the 1960's - just before the summer of love. This was a quiet neighborhood. It was out near Ocean Beach and away from the confusion and crowds known in other neighborhoods. The street was lined with rows of similar structured housing - living area on top, garage underneath. It was one of the rare parts of the City that was flat for blocks at a time.

At the first break of dawn, deep yellow lights were turned on here and there until all the kitchens up and down the street were lit up. On careful observation even the curtains on the windows moved with the activity inside. Soon men in suits and men in work clothes headed to the corner to take the same street car to town.

The sky lit up with each new day and street car after street car rumbled and scrapped the tracks as it passed gently rattling the windows of each house. Then the kids left for school. They could be seen noisily bumping into one another - laughing or complaining as they disappeared into the mist around the corner.

"It's a good place to raise kids," Ingrid told me more than once. She was a German war bride. She was 15 when WW II ended. She learned early in life how to get by on very little. When her father was killed by falling bombs and her home was destroyed, She helped her mother re-settle the family in another part of town. The American soldiers marched through town and one took Ingrid back to America with him. Her English was limited to a few nouns and verbs. She learned by watching television and listening to her in-laws. Although she never learned to write English well she spoke it with almost no German accent. She learned English with incredible determination.

The Humphry is a small hotel that at the time was run by Tony and Rita. We, Ingrid and I, were neighbors. We both worked as maids and assistant managers. The Humphry was not so much a job to us as a gathering. It was where all the neighbors congregated throughout the day. It was where stories were told and confidences shared. Dwellers at the hotel ranged from traveling salesmen to truck drivers to tourist to drunken priests - and of course a few quickies.

Many of the dwellers joined with the neighbors at the hotel office so there was constant loud chatter. We wore aprons from our own kitchens and used mops and detergents from our own storerooms to clean the hotel. We sang out "room service" when we knocked on each door. However, we were sometimes so informal that one tenant wanted to know if we were impostors trying to gain access to the rooms, to perhaps steal something. Except the drug pushers.

They had the "Do Not Disturb" sign up all the time. First a hand appeared through the partially opened door then a voice would crack, "Hey, give us some clean sheets and towels." I tried to

look in once, when exchanging the dirty sheets and towels for clean ones but what I saw was like the back ground on a photo of a close up shot. Only the extended hand was clear.

No one knew they were drug pushers in the very beginning. Ingrid was managing the front desk when they came in. She gave them Room 6. There were two people, a tall skinny man with bulging eyes and long straggly hair. The woman was rather nondescript, and almost well groomed. Ingrid, who was always curious about the people renting rooms, ask the two, "So you visiting San Francisco for the first time?" "Yes" said one "No" said the other. Tony the manager, hid in the doorway and shook his head violently. Ingrid ignored him thinking she was not suppose to ask personal questions.

It was not long before crowds of trashy folks began to gather at Room 6. They gathered by the dozens around the window and even more passed back and forth through the door. Cars pulled up and parked right in the middle of the street without regard to the waiting street car and they'd leave their radios blasting.

We, the neighbors, felt the unfriendliness of these strangers and watched the goings on from curtained windows. Neighbors began to comment as they rode on the street cars and long conversations took place over the phone about the weirdos at the hotel. "The least they could do is pull their cars into a driveway so's the street car could pass," Ingrid said to me over the phone. She lived directly across the street and we looked at one another though the kitchen windows as we spoke. "I counted at least twenty people back an forth to that back window just this morning."

One morning Ingrid and I were cleaning the rooms when she realized she could hear the tenants in Room 6 through the wall of Room 5. At first we were silent, as sometimes happened, each in our own thoughts. Ingrid was rubbing the mirror clean and I was damp mopping, slapping the floor. "Shhh" Ingrid hissed at me, "What do you mean shhh!" I remember snapping back. Ingrid, very agitated, threw her left hand up and shook it at the wall and with the other hand pressed her finger to her lips. Then I also heard. We both stood with eyes wide, mouths agape, plastered as close to the wall as nature would allow, each with an ear pressed to the stucco wall. New meanings for words like "snow" and "weed" crept into the conversation.

After cleaning the rooms, we joined Tony and Rita in the little kitchen behind the office for some weak coffee. Ingrid told them what we'd heard in a loud clear voice. I still think she could have spoken in more of a whisper, especially when we were talking about listening at the wall. I know I felt a little hysterical and shaky. Tony yawned, affected by Rita who had yawned just before.

It was only months before this that the local police precinct invited members of the neighborhood to join in a discussion at a nearby school gym about crime. At Ingrid's urging nearly everyone on the block went. Tony, didn't go and neither did Rita. My teeth were slightly clicking together when I told the story the policeman told at the meeting, "He told us of a twelve year old boy who was at Golden Gate park with his parents."

"Is this the story of the kid who jumped in the ocean and drowned?" Tony asked stretching and scratching the tight curly hair on his barrel chest.

"Why'd he jump into the ocean?" Rita asked pouring everyone more coffee colored water.

"Because" Ingrid said, clutching the handle of the cup and thrusting her chin forward, "someone put drugs in his soda."

"MAA-om! MAA-om!" could be heard along with the pounding of growing feet. "MomMom those guys got guns!"

Our children barged in through the door.

"Yeah," another growing person shouted in his higher than soprano voice, "they got guns on, on, on their belts."

"Who?" the adults chorused, deeply disturbed by this information..

"The men in Room 6", a child said, then asked for a glass of milk. Neighbors up and down the street talked about the fear we had for our children. We were certain our children would be lured into the tempting underground of the empty looking people with eyelids at half mast.

We all agreed that something had to be done. No one was sure what. With the guns there was an added fear. It was after this incident that our children were walked to and from school and kept indoors or in their own back yards. We never had a moment's rest. And forget any help from the fathers - they refused to "baby-sit" their own children after "working all day".

Needless to say everyone was getting on everyone else's nerves. Something HAD to be done. Ingrid called the police because Tony wouldn't, saying, "They probably won't do anything". Ingrid told the police she was at the community meeting, "If you come, you will see for yourself. You MUST arrest them!"

When Ingrid saw the cop car pull up in front of the hotel, she rushed it and told the two men inside to park the car out of sight. They obeyed her as they would have the mayor himself. Ingrid led the men, and I followed into the room next to Room 6. Ingrid held her finger to her mouth and tiptoed to the wall. She even instructed the men to leave the light off, forcing them to use a flash light, although I don't know what difference it made. Both cops stood ear to the wall and one hand on his pistol. It was when I knocked over a lamp that a clear voice could be heard from the next room, "What was that?" the voice said.

Before this there were muffled sounds of words like "weed" and "snow". The two policemen left the room tugging at their belts and adjusting their hats. "Well - well?" Ingrid said taking a deep breath each time. "Well ma'm, I'm afraid there is nothing we can do!"

"What? What do you mean - you" heard them - they're drug pushers."

"Yeah, well they could be writers too. They could be making this whole thing up cause they're writin' a book." By this time the cops did not sound solicitous as much as annoyed. "Look lady, if we got a warrant and burst in, they could have already flushed it down the toilet then where's our case?"

They told us that the best thing to do is to have the manager evict them. Then they left. Just got into the car and drove away. We were stunned. "What good 'er they if they don't get the bad guys?" I remember Ingrid saying, disappointed. This disappointment did not last long. Soon I noticed a rage well up in Ingrid. "Come on" she said to me and we marched to the office. "You have to evict these criminals!" she shouted.

"I ain't doin' nothing to make them mad - they got guns remember?" Tony said emphatically.

"Then I will," Ingrid grabbed my arm and we went to Room 6. I can still feel my feet hitting the floor in the long hallway and wondering if I couldn't just run - go home - persuade my husband to move us to another city, another state... Ingrid did not knock - she pounded the door with her detergent-reddened fists, and in a loud voice with a suddenly returned German accent shouted, "Hey, somevon open dis door."

The door opened a crack and I moved away, sure we'd be wiped out by their arsenal. "Yes?", a woman's voice said. She sounded so gentle. "This room was reserved. You must leave tomorrow."

Not "would you please", "would you mind" - just leave!

"Just a minute," the women said. Ingrid was beyond fear. She was right" and that was that. I was still plotting my escape but was frozen to the hall carpet.

"Okay, fine, we'll be out by tomorrow" the woman said.

And they were. Just like that. No kidding. The next morning the door was open and the room emptied of its tenants, leaving behind strange smells and a mysterious ambience. Ingrid didn't change the world, but what she did changed me. I was somehow stronger. Her bravery affected not only me but everyone she came in contact with. Tony and Rita later mustered enough courage to evict more than one tenant for pushing drugs on our quiet street.