

Bourne
toWrite...
creative writing
workshops

In times of crisis, we must all decide
again and again whom we love

by Gill Hilton

“Welcome Mr and Mrs Jessop. Welcome to the Choice Hotel. My name is George. We are truly delighted that you have chosen to stay with us. And how was your journey?”

“Very good, thank you. One of the smoothest helicopter flights I've had”

“Ah, I'm glad you enjoyed it. Of course, the landscape is not what it once was. Not many years ago we were surrounded by a lush forest.”

“Ah well,” said Jessop, “having no trees makes it easier to land a helicopter.”

George smiled patiently.

“And was that a train station I could see as we came in to land?” went on Jessop.

“Yes sir. Our guests are often surprised that we have a station in such a remote spot, but it is well-used by the local people.”

“Ah,” said Mr Jessop. “That would account for all those people we could see walking outside. More than I expected. And so many looked ill,” he said with distaste. “Falling over. Looked as if they were dying.”

“Yes, sir,” said George, “The heat and the pollution is a rather overwhelming out there, even for the local people. But you've no need to worry, sir: in here we have high-power air conditioning, with a specialised carbon-oxygen exchange filter. It sucks up whatever clean air it can from the outside and spews out our excess carbon dioxide.” George smiled again. “What can I get you to drink: coffee or orange juice?”

“Coffee, for both of us. And can we have a look at the dinner menu?”

“Oh, I can tell you what it is sir. You can have beef smothered in egg and cheese, or lentil with tomato?”

“Ah, I think we'll both have the beef, won't we darling? And I believe there are some activities we can do tomorrow.”

“Ah yes, sir. Tomorrow you can take a trip in our spacious SUV to a vast indoor shopping mall, where you will have three hours to browse around a huge number of shops and purchase a wide range of inexpensive goods. Or you can join our yoga class.”

“Oh, the shopping mall,” said Mr and Mrs Jessop in unison.

That night, Carl Jessop lay in the queen sized waterbed, thinking about the excellent, if rather sickly, beef he had just eaten.

“Darling,” said his wife, “Did you notice as we walked past that fire door that had been propped open; all those people, rummaging in the hotel bins?”

“Yes, I did spot them. Disgusting.”

Sylvia wanted to believe that Carl's disgust was brought on by the fact that there are people in the world who have a need to raid hotel bins, but she wasn't sure about that.

*

The Jessops spent a pleasant weekend shopping, eating the best of the food they were offered and using the hotel pool and spa. Before they knew it, Monday morning had arrived, and they went to check out.

“Your bill, sir,” said George.

Carl Jessop scanned the bill. He turned white. His wife looked over his shoulder.

“What the hell does this mean? 'Cost of stay includes two weeks off the average life expectancy of the local people, a significant contribution to seasonal flooding and an almost certain food shortage.' What the bloody hell is this?”

“Well sir, this is the true cost of everything you have consumed during your trip. Every choice you have made this weekend, your arrival by helicopter, your food and drink choices, your trip out and your purchases, not to mention the air conditioning, the heated pool, etcetera, etcetera; well, it is all at the expense of our environment and our fellow human beings.”

Carl Jessop's complexion had turned from white, to grey to a fiery red. George held up his hand in kindly appeasement.

“Don't worry,” he said, “you don't have to pay sir. The cost will be born by others.”

Sylvia Jessop was by now weeping.

“Damn you and your damned hotel,” said Carl Jessop, “and don't think you'll be getting a tip.”