

UVic Diversity Writing Contest 2016, Second-Place Fiction Winner

By Adrian Southin

Before We Made The Beds

Before we made the beds, Luka would say he loved me. He told me that one day he would buy us a mansion, and that we'd never drive ourselves anywhere, even though we'd finally own a car. That one day, we would have a bed twice as large as the ones we changed.

Before we made the beds, Luka would check the rooms for money. Dresser drawers, tucked under a mattress, or between the pages of the Gideon's Bible. Luka said that any money not in their bags had been left as tips. But he still checked luggage when he thought I wasn't looking. For our kids, he would say. Most often he would find American dollars, but Yuan, Pounds and Euros also found a way into the pockets of his red scrubs. Small amounts, enough that the guest would think they had spent it on a coffee or tipped their cab driver.

While we stripped the sheets and fit on new ones, I would tell Luka that he couldn't love me, that he hardly knew me. Luka would sing in Romanian. He said it was the language of love, and that one day the songs would convince me of his affections. I asked him once why he flirted with the other housekeeping girls if he loved me.

His smile was stained from the quarter pack of cigarettes he burned through each break. 'A man needs company to mend his broken heart, Sasha.' He called me Sasha because he thought Sachpreet was too hard to pronounce—Sasha, he said, made me sound more like a Romanian bride. 'Or would you not let me have that either?'

When the beds were done that day and I began to wipe down the bathroom mirror, Luka stared out the window. Blond hair pushed away from his eyes and scrubs pressed to the glass, he watched the freighters thread through Georgia Strait.

I had not worked long at the Fairmont before we were paired. Maybe two weeks before his last partner quit and Charmaine, our supervisor, put us together. Luka had been at the hotel at least four months before me, and though Charmaine had no trust in him, he was

technically my senior. Even if I wanted to report him for harassment or stealing, management would probably side with him. But he was harmless. Despite his flirtations, he never touched me. I got worse waiting tables at Denny's: drunk high-school kids wagging their tongues through the 'V' of their fingers, or men with shaved heads who'd slap my ass then refuse to tip because I wouldn't give out my number.

Luka's thievery wasn't uncommon, though I don't think anyone else at the Hotel filed through belongings the way he did. When the Fairmont gives away bathrobes to businessmen who can afford a four hundred dollar room, most staff don't feel too bad about sneaking a swig of single-malt or retrieving a near-full bottle of *Aveda* shampoo left behind because it wouldn't make it through airport security.

When we made the beds, we tossed open the sheets in undulations and placed stiff bed scarves of the same tapestry as the antique chairs across the foot of the beds. We stacked pillows with purple velvet cushions. I wiped the surfaces and Luka vacuumed. We repeated this thirty times a day.

When our shifts were over, I stuffed my backpack with half-used rolls of toilet paper and individually packaged soaps retrieved from the waste bins. If I didn't get my things and leave fast enough, Luka caught up and insisted on walking me to the SkyTrain station, already changed into a pair of sweatpants and slinging his athletic bag over his shoulder. I don't know where he went after he watched the train pull away. He always answered with some faraway destination whenever I asked: Paris, New York, the Taj Mahal. It was thirty minutes on the train and an hour on the bus to my family's house in Surrey. I would make dinner for my three younger brothers and change into the black branded Denny's t-shirt while they ate.

Before we made the beds, Luka was caught stealing. The room had a single queen bed and as Luka sorted through the side pocket of a suitcase, the lock clicked and the door opened. A woman in a grey pantsuit and pumps entered. Her hair hung in wet strands and dripped onto her shoulders; an out-of-towner caught unaware by the unpredictable Vancouver downpour.

I froze, spray bottle pump half depressed in front of the mirror. Luka froze, his hand straddled on the suitcase's zipper.

'What are you doing?' The woman took a step forward.

Luka said nothing, then blurted, 'Hotel policy. Checking for weapons.'

'I didn't sign anything for that.' The woman drew a phone from her jacket pocket.

'I'm calling the desk.'

'Please don't.' Luka's voice was faint.

The woman paused. Her thumb ran in circles on the screen of her phone. 'Why not?'

'Because I'm supposed to.' Luka's answer had the indignation of a three year old caught with a handful of chocolate chips.

'You're supposed to go through people's belongings?' She pushed a lock of wet hair clinging to her cheek behind her ear. Rainwater dribbled onto her collar.

'Of course. Every hotel does it.' Luka remained squatted by the suitcase, his hand still on the zipper.

'No hotel in the world would get away with that.' She raised phone again.

'They have to. Terrorists could be anywhere.' Luka finally stood up. 'They say it's only a matter of time before they come here too and start blowing things up.'

'Terrorists.' The woman cocked her eyebrow. 'I'm calling your manager.'

Luka took a quick glance at me. 'I'll take you there. You'll see that everything's fine.'

The woman waited for Luka to leave first before taking a collapsible umbrella from the top of the dresser and following him. She didn't acknowledge me. I'm not sure she even

noticed I was there, or she probably would have dragged me down to the ground floor with her. I hadn't even moved, the spray bottle still half-pumped and the window cleaner streaking the mirror.

I finished the room by myself, fast, in case the guest realized she forgot me. I tucked in sheets so soft that my hands, rough from handling detergents and disinfectant, snagged like a burr. I replaced the lip-marked glasses with ones wrapped in plastic and hung new towels from the rack.

Two hours and five rooms later, the slide and click of a key card at the door forced the top sheet from my hands. Caught on the air as I shook it out, the linen drifted to the carpet. Another customer? I was doing nothing wrong but I froze, as if this was my turn to pay for some transgression I didn't know about. I tried to come up with a line better than 'terrorists,' but once that was in my head I couldn't think of any other excuse.

It was Luka who slid in through the half open doorway, and pressed the door shut with a sigh of the closing mechanism. He made no sound except for the soft scrunch of his sneakers on the carpet as he picked up the sheet.

'What happened?' I grabbed the sheet's other end and we shook it out.

'Nothing.' Luka took the top and set it four-fifths of the way up the bed.

'Nothing?' I lifted the foot of the mattress and slipped in the ends.

Luka shook his head and stripped a pillowcase.

I fit on a fresh case to the pillow. 'What did she say?'

Luka took off the other three pillowcases.

'Well, what'd you say?' I replaced each one and propped them against the headboard.

Luka positioned the ornamental cushions.

'Luka, are you okay?' I took a fresh duvet from the trolley, but held onto it.

‘Of course.’ Luka took the duvet from my hands and spread it over the bed. ‘I’m fine.’

Luka did not sing that afternoon. Nor did he tell me that he would make me his wife. He didn’t sort through any suitcases or laugh at the contents of the waste bins, not even the one with half a dozen unrolled but empty condoms. It might have been the hardest I had ever seen him work. But it was like watching him through a layer of gossamer: without his smile, his complexion seemed to fade.

The next day Luka did not come in to work. After it was clear that he was a no-show, Charmaine stopped by throughout the day to help with a room here and there, but otherwise the shift was long and quiet. I didn’t ask about Luka; I feared my job might be at risk if I called attention to it. The day after, I was paired with Sandra; she had worked at the Fairmount for a few years.

When we made the beds, she opened the sheets one fold at a time and smoothed them out on the mattress. While I vacuumed, she fluffed the pillows and readjusted the bed scarves. She polished the mirrors and left the toilets for me to scrub.

Sandra was kind enough and knew what she was doing, but she did not sing. Sandra did not make jokes about the guests’ sex lives when she stuffed sheets into the hamper of our trolley. She did not look inside shoes to find a five-dollar bill pushed to the toe. She did not watch the cars on Georgia Street or the water taxis buzzing between the piers and the North Shore, face pressed to the cool glass.