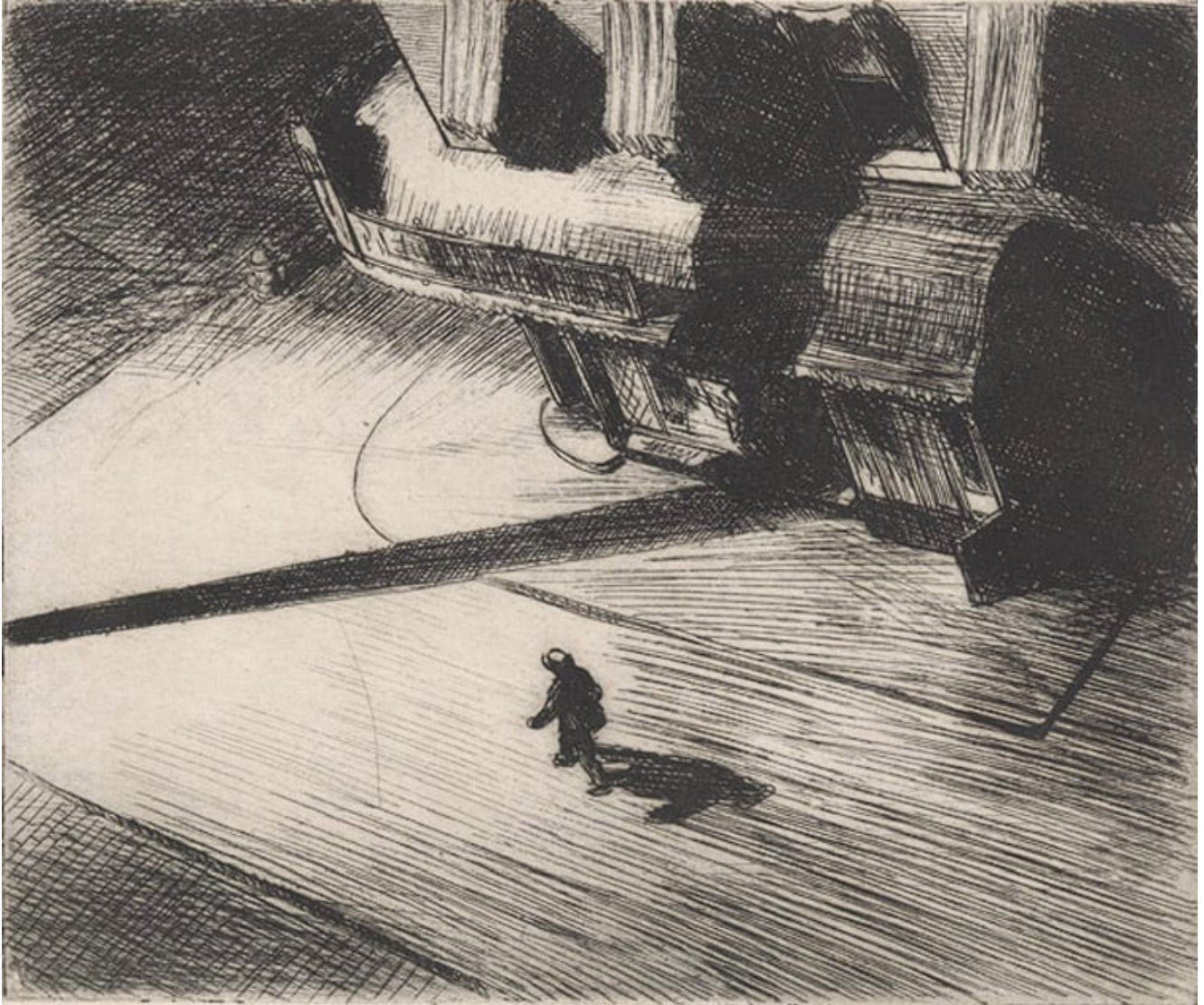


Overnight Stay

by [Armando Simón](#) (November 2024)



Night Shadows (Edward Hopper, 1921)

“Here he comes,” the mother, Lucy, told her teenage children in the back seat, on seeing Elijah exiting the motel lobby and heading for the car.

The family had been driving the whole day and night. They had started at the lengthy Florida panhandle, but a pileup at the interstate had stopped traffic for hours until it was finally cleared up enough to allow eastbound passage in one lane.

There was nothing but pine forest on either side of the highway, so there was no way anyone could bypass the point of stoppage. Most of the morning had been wasted.

Once the mess was cleared up enough to allow passage, the family drove on to Lake City, where they took another interstate highway, this time running longitudinally, and they headed south.

If one takes a national map and looks at Florida, one is subject to an optical illusion: it appears small, smaller than Texas, Alberta, or Pennsylvania. And it is true. It is not as wide as those provinces, but it comes close lengthwise, being a gigantic peninsula. Just like Italy or Korea.

"No vacancy," Elijah announced on entering the car. Somehow, the family's fatigue seemed to increase when he said it.

"Why didn't they light up the No Vacancy sign?" his son asked in a tone that expressed everyone's irritation.

"She said the sign's not working."

"How many does that make?" Stormy asked.

"Sixteen, so far," her mother responded. The other fifteen motels had had their No Vacancy signs lit. "You did call them to hold our reservations even though we won't get to Sanibel tonight?"

"Oh, for crying out loud! Yes! I already told you! Yes! I did!"

"Ok, all right."

"All these blasted snowbirds. I wish they'd go back up north and stay there and freeze," Elijah muttered. "Can't find any vacancies because of them."

Earlier in the day, the family had joked about the old geezers

moving down to Florida to die, just like the mythical journey African elephants supposedly undertook to The Elephant Graveyard to die. And to pass the time while traveling they had been on the lookout for cars' license plates from the north: Ontario, New York, Ohio, Vermont, even Nova Scotia and even one from—of all places—St. Edward Island.

But now, the snowbirds' presence in Florida only irritated them, not amused them.

They drove on in the darkness.

Tired.

Irritated.

Sleepy.

In traveling long distances by car one is met at intervals with towns, cities. Otherwise, it is empty spaces, even at crossroads.

The family now came upon just such a crossroads. A motel sign could be seen a bit off on the right. It read, "Vacancy."

"Finally," Elijah muttered. "Just the same, cross your fingers."

"Dad, can we come with you? Stretch our legs."

"OK."

"Doesn't it look a little odd?" Lucy asked.

It was true. In the dim yellow light coming from a couple of poles on opposite sides of the building, the motel looked ... tilted.

They parked at the well-lit entrance. The motel was made of wood, and it did seem tilted lengthwise.

"Look, I don't care if the motel is upside down. I just want a room. I'm sure it'll look better in the morning."

The three went into the office, leaving Lucy in the car. The floor inside was slightly inclined. Elijah rang the bell on the front desk and from a dark room perpendicular to the front desk out came a man limping. He needed a shave.

"Do you have a room with two beds, preferably king sized beds?"

"Yes, we do."

"Great!"

"How many nights?"

"Just tonight."

Business transacted, they returned to the car, parked, and unloaded their baggage. They had to reenter and cross the lobby to access their room.

Inside the hallway, they were surprised. While the lobby's floor was slightly inclined, the hallway was sharply tilted at a 20° angle, so that they themselves walked, or rather stumbled, at an angle. For the first time, they laughed as they stumbled to their room.

"Hey, this is just like *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*," Ezekiel pointed out.

"It's probably because of a sinkhole nearby," his father explained. "You know how it is in Florida: you can't walk ten feet outside a city without falling into a sinkhole."

They entered the room and flipped on the lights. The light was a weak yellow, but that was not as noticeable as the bad smell. The furniture, bedspread and carpet were clean, but old. It was dismal.

Stormy pointed to a large spot on the carpet, darker than the carpet itself. It was hard to tell what color each was. "Is that dried blood?"

"Way to go, Dad." Ezekiel said. "You booked us at Bates Motel."

That did it. They burst out laughing and from then on, the jokes flowed.

"Hey, honey, check for bedbugs. And roaches. And mice. And rats."

"Shouldn't we see if anybody's hiding under the bed?"

They began to settle in, opening the luggage and relaxing and joking about the smell. At one point, Lucy exclaimed, "Oh, we left the drinks in the car! Zeke, get your Dad's keys and go bring the drinks. I'm thirsty and I don't want to drink the water from this tap. It might come out solid like from a toothpaste, and with a dark color."

"Here you go," he said, handing over the keys.

"Honey, why don't you go with him?"

"If he's late getting back, I'll go look for the body."

"Why don't you give him some bread?" Stormy suggested. "That way, he can lay a trail of breadcrumbs behind him so he can find his way back."

Keys in hand, Ezekiel went out into the corridor. He noticed how quiet it was. Not many guests, it seemed like. He started singing "Hotel California" until he reached the car. He saw the back seat was full of trash: soda cans and wrappers from snacks, and he grabbed one of the disposable plastic bags his mother kept in front for trash. He put the detritus into the bag, tied the top, and went over to the dumpster to put it in. He lifted the dumpster's rectangular cover. Inside the

dumpster, a face jerked up and looked at him wide eyed, the pole's yellow light giving the face a spooky hue.

The teenage boy jumped back, alarmed.

"There's no more room here," the man said. The second cover slowly lifted up, and two more heads stuck out and stared at him.

"O ... K ... " said the youngster. He dropped the bag on the ground and walked back to the car, forcing himself not to run, while realizing that there were no other cars parked and no one else around. Quickly taking out the drinks from the car, he made sure that the doors to the car were locked before returning to the room. He told them what he had seen.

At first shocked, they resumed their humor.

"That's probably where hotel guests end up after they have overstayed past checkout time," his father teased.

"Nah, that's where the cleaning staff live. It saves money," Lucy joked.

"I have to use the toilet," the father announced. "I can't hold it any longer. Brace yourselves." And he did.

Loudly.

When he came out of the bathroom, he was followed by the smell, whereupon his wife declared. "That's a first. The bathroom smells better than this room."

Ezekiel braced a chair against the door while everyone got ready for bed. All but Lucy, who insisted on showering first.

"Let me know if Norman Bates interrupts your shower," her husband told her with a wicked smile.

As she showered, he rolled up a newspaper he had brought with him from home. Silently opening the bathroom door a crack, he

peered in. When her back was turned to him, he rushed in, flipped the transparent curtain to one side and with a maniacal look on his face, raised the roll of newspaper, as if it was a knife, to stab her.

Lucy shrieked and slipped. She would have landed on her rear. Having an ample rear end, she might have bounced back up, but he held on to her while she hit him again and again in half anger half laughter. For his part, he was almost doubled over from laughing.

They all slept soundly. If anybody tried to enter the room that night, no one noticed. In the morning, they woke to the alarm bell.

And while Lucy packed, the others showered.

It was a beautiful day, and as the family left they looked back at the motel and thought that, in a way, it looked quaint. Which it was, of course.

Once on the road, they did not see the three men who had been in the dumpster the previous night carrying a dead body and tossing it into the dumpster before closing the lid.

[Table of Contents](#)

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