SPOTLIGHT

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It is a relief to wake up in the morning at the Chelsea Hotel not stabbed to death in one of its bathrooms like The Sex Pistols' Sid Vicious' girlfriend.

I decided to stay at the Chelsea Hotel one summer for my first-ever writer's conference, a workshop sponsored by a literary magazine of personal writing and socio-political ideas. The famous hotel, located in its namesake neighborhood of New York, is advertised on its web site as a "rest stop for rare individuals." As the city's first cooperative apartments, in the 1800s, it "began its life as a home to writers, artists, and urban transients of every variety" in 1905.

It was early in my writing career—the point at which you think you are a good writer, but you have no evidence. You have not yet put in your time, have not yet collected that pile of rejection letters, have not yet left your job to pursue your compulsion to write, have not yet began to teach, to become a mentor to others. I had no bio, no platform, no clips. I came to the Chelsea Hotel hoping to be anointed with the magic wand of inspiration like so many other writers and artists seemingly had over the past century—Mark Twain and O. Henry, Thomas Wolfe and Dylan Thomas, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Tennessee Williams, and Robert Crumb. And Bob Dylan, who wrote about "Stayin' up for days in the Chelsea Hotel."

"There's hardly been an artist who has lived in the Chelsea that was not in some way captured by its flair," musician Patti Smith once said.

I could have stayed at the Holiday Inn in Soho/Chinatown. It was closer to my workshop, the rates were about the same, and both neighborhoods equally bordered on sketchy. The Holiday Inn would be reliable and familiar, I had reasoned on the one hand. But it would be sterile and uninspiring, I decided, on the other. The Chelsea would be an unknown landscape, one that might appeal more to the way I like to see myself than the way I oftentimes really am. The lure of its

history and promise was strong, and after a long debate with myself about which kind of person I wanted to be, I chose the Chelsea.

When I arrived to check in, scaffolding obscured its historic red brick façade, plywood concealed the entrance doorway, and I walked a plank over the worn stone front step into the lobby. A leather-clad biker with a pink bandana on his head sat in a velvety-plush, antique upholstered chair near a marble fireplace as a faux-redheaded mom traipsed through the lobby with her kids, all adorned in a patchwork of thrift-shop fashions. Threadbare couches sat side by side with stone statues; modern and baroque paintings in gilded frames covered the walls from baseboard to crown molding, and the ceiling dangled cobwebs and chandeliers. After some haggling over the room and the rate, I headed upstairs.

Layer upon layer of paint adorned the tiny white cell: paint painted on peeling paint, paint painted on rough plaster spackling, paint painted on dust. The room was furnished with a double bed with a faded, old comforter and a collection of yard sale specials: a beat-up night table, two dressers from someone else's life, and a lumpy easy chair. The air conditioner and mini-refrigerator hummed like lawnmowers and mosquitoes. This was my $205-a-night upgrade.

At the writer's workshop that night, when I learned that the magazine staff and a large number of the participants were staying at the Holiday Inn, I felt a pang of remorse. Why didn't I just stay where I knew I'd feel more comfortable? I chided myself. But when I stood up in front of the group, as we each did in turn, to say why we had come to the workshop, I said, "To find myself, and to let myself out." And when I headed back to the Chelsea in a cab at midnight, speed-walked through the shadowy halls that reeked of weed, brushed a bug off my pillow, threw off the pilled woolen blankets that smelled like pea soup, and stuffed earplugs in my ears to ward off the wannabe musicians down the hall, I prayed to the spirits of the Chelsea that the weekend there would indeed pay off.

I had debated signing up for the writer's workshop for months. The magazine, with its intensely personal revelations, its unabashed presentation of the human condition, was the journal I'd drop my groceries and mail at the front door to read. I'd submitted a few pieces to it over the years: all rejected. I ached to emulate its writers, to be able to dive so deeply into myself as to unearth the sunken ships I never even knew were there and then surface with a treasure trove

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of words. But the cost of the workshop seemed too high. I had never gone to New York alone. I had never attended a writer's retreat. I'd have to take a day off work. I didn't know if it would be worth it.

I was a writer-vagabond, lost in that dark forest of doubt and possibility. But the idea of it gnawed on me for weeks: What if I learn something revolutionary? What if my interactions with the workshop leaders led to something in my writing career? In a gathering of fellow readers, maybe I would meet some kindred souls and make lifelong friends. Maybe meeting the editor would give me a better chance of getting something published. With a couple weeks to spare, I signed myself up online at the New York Open Center: "An oasis of learning, world culture, and transformation."

Rotating workshops began, in an old row house, sitting in a circle of uncomfortable folding chairs in a steamy room with a wheezing window unit. I became the wind, moving through the woods; I doodled with magic markers like a first-grader; I mapped out a blueprint of my childhood apartment. I became my eight-year old voice; I wrote my anger. I wrote little sentences, on little ideas, with ten-second meditations and minute-long lectures in between. I discussed the nature of truth, and then I penned my first three paragraphs of fiction, which is not my genre. And in the evening I sat in a brick room in golden light with fifty other writers and listened to a reading of workshop leaders, telling us their stories.

I knew at the time that the words traveling through the ether and landing in my cerebral cortex were ultra-charged words. They were the words of fear, lament, joy, and wonder, scenes painstakingly painted like an Impressionist canvas. There I was as a young man in the 1960s scheming to be kept out of Vietnam, a father coming to terms with the fact that my daughter had been kidnapped in Mexico, a drug-addled ex-con inventing a new life, a child hopping through a park in a daily ritual to buy a newspaper for my father. They were words that immobilized us listeners, who just a day before had debated the power of personal stories. I knew that these words, already immortalized on a page, were to be handled carefully, caressed; that having heard them there was no way now I could deny the forces that had moved me to come here.

The hotel desk clerk who had checked me in would tell me months later, "Staying at the Chelsea Hotel is like a Rorschach test. People get out of it what they think they get, what they want to get." Though the muse of the Chelsea did not inspire me to put pen to paper

or fingertips to keyboard that night of the readings in the creation of prose, I jotted down in my notebook, "I have felt very blissfully content (mentally, spiritually) and serene this weekend, here with writers."

An e-mail would cross my desk long after the fog of the weekend of the Chelsea had cleared: "You will recognize your own path when you come upon it because you will suddenly have all the energy and imagination you will ever need." And I would remember back to a week far away from New York City, a week I spent in Maine with my husband, just before the Chelsea, at a cabin on a lake on the Schoodic Peninsula. We had come to escape our workaday lives, to make no plans, have no expectations.

When the mood struck, we hiked up a granite mountain, canoed to an island in the middle of the lake, and hopped from rock to rock on the wave-battered coast. But mostly we spent the week in separate contemplative worlds, Neil relaxing against a rock in the shade; I in the sun on a small dock jutting out into Flanders Pond, rotating among tree pose and mountain pose and sitting in my beach chair, writing and observing. I also happened to be reading The Writing Life: Writers on How They Think and Work, A Collection from The Washington Post. The breeze across the lake whisked away the bugs, the sun tamed the otherwise shivery wind, and the water lapped against rock with a lulling gulp-gulp-gulp as the lovely, trilling hoo-o-o of the loons echoed through the cove of yellow birch, sugar maple, and hemlock.

We fixed meals and washed dishes, tended to the monastic necessities of living. And all the while Francine Du Plessix Gray and Joyce Carol Oats whispered in my ear about Becoming a Writer. Wendy Wasserstein and Ray Bradbury seduced me with stories of Hunkering Down. On our last night, we abandoned our bed and slept outside on the dock. It was said that in the southeastern sky in the middle of that night, Mars would grace the heavens with the closest visit it's paid to Earth since the days of the woolly mammoth. But I saw moonglow. The moon was a spotlight that night, full and large, harassing and exposing me, drilling into me a penetrating beam so that I could see shadows and light through my eyelids and my own vessels pumping lifeblood through that thin tissue; revealing the north woods landscape around me that had been there all the time but whose elemental shape had gone unnoticed during the day. By dawn, the sunlit orb had hidden itself from view.

It was there, I recognized later, my writing life had begun.

The final morning of the workshop was a wrap-up of the previous days; we penned what we got out of the weekend. My scribbles included numerous failed beginnings, most of which offered descriptions of my split pea soup-smelling bed covers, and I left the workshop stumped, headed to the train with a twinge of longing.

Notes in my journal about the workshop would read, "Not really quite as satisfying as I had thought. Didn't really do a lot of writing; thought we'd do more in-depth work." I had not written anything in the mornings or evenings in my room full of potential. Nothing scribbled on a page during lunches or dinners, nothing noted on the way home on the train. No lasting friendships. And I never got up the nerve to chat up the editor. I came home a thousand dollars poorer, with nothing to show.

I had not interacted with anyone at the hotel except the desk clerk. I had not spoken a word to another resident or guest, had not connected with any of the other writers or artists. I had not explored the lurid halls of the hotel, and I had not dared to venture into its dungeon lounge.

A colleague at work winced when I told her I had stayed at the Chelsea Hotel. "That's a welfare hotel," she said scornfully. The hotel is not even listed on Fodors' or Frommers' web sites, and a review on Trip Advisor warned, "I have traveled to many third-world countries and would say that, for the price, this was the worst place I have ever stayed."

At home, though, I would continue to write—stories of mountains and adventures and the soul. Within the month, I would prepare an application for a master's program in writing, reduce my hours at work to spend more time at the craft, and commit myself to a writer's life, committing to writing over even children. I would find myself hunched over my computer preparing my statement of purpose for the university, a description of what moved me to apply for the degree and what I wanted for my future. I didn't know that attending that program would become the fulcrum upon which my entire future writing life would balance. And I would find myself returning to New York, those stomach-churning nights at the Chelsea Hotel.

I would see more than the rusty wrought-iron banisters and the seductive miasma of fame and romance. A raw, limp-muscled vessel of vulnerability I was in that bed each night at the Chelsea; my brain absorbing, processing, filtering, sorting, and affirming the path I didn't

even really know I had begun to walk. Would I have been as open to the forces of the world of discovery if I had stayed in the comfortable cocoon of the good-value Holiday Inn? Would I have begun to see myself as part of a writing community—or, as one workshop member said, "connecting to other fireflies out there in the night"? Would I have later realized that what I sought inside those crumbling walls had been within me all along?

A practitioner of experiential education once wrote, "I can tell you that there's something you need to know, and I can tell you that with my help you can probably learn it. But I cannot tell you what it is in a way that you can now understand. You must be willing therefore to undergo certain experiences as I direct you to undergo them, so that you can learn what it is that you need to know."

I didn't think I'd learned it by staying at the Chelsea Hotel.

But maybe I did.