

On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair
Warm smell of colitas rising up through the air
Up ahead in the distance, I saw a shimmering light
My head grew heavy, and my sight grew dimmer
I had to stop for the night

There she stood in the doorway;
I heard the mission bell
And I was thinking to myself,
'This could be Heaven or this could be Hell'
Then she lit up a candle and she showed me the way
There were voices down the corridor, I thought I heard them say...

(D. Felder, D. Henley, G. Frey)

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Welcome To The Hotel California

Frank Malone was on the run. Not from the police, that problem had been settled. Not from his wife, she already had everything he owned. Not even from the media, they had already moved on to the next 30-second sound byte. No, Frank was running away from his life, a life that had been ruined beyond repair. He lit up a joint, drew the smoke deeply into his lungs, and reflected on the past few weeks.

It all started with a teary eyed ten-year-old girl. She had been late getting home from school and her parents had given her hell for it. Obviously she didn't want to be blamed for going to a friend's place or wasting all her money on video games or whatever it was she was doing, so she decided to blame the nearest adult, and that just happened to be Frank Malone. Frank was her teacher, the only adult to spend more time with her than anyone aside from her parents, and a figure of authority in little Betsy Flint's life. Thinking back Frank remembered calling little Betsy in front of the class to read out her homework, homework he knew damn well she hadn't done. He didn't like reducing her to tears but sometimes kids needed this sort of thing to motivate them to do better. It looked like the only thing it motivated little Betsy Flint to do was drop Frank in the deepest shit of his life.

Betsy told her parents about how Mr. Malone kept her after school for not doing her homework, and when the school was completely empty he tried to touch her. It was not nice touching either. It was the sort of touching that got teachers in a whole heap of trouble. She told them how he made her get undressed and how he made her kiss things she had never seen before. Of course she managed to escape her dire predicament, though she couldn't remember how. Frank thought that little bit of memory loss was convenient. Then she had run home to the safety of mummy and daddy.

Unfortunately for Frank, daddy just happened to be the chief of police. He immediately had Frank arrested, and then started talking to Betsy's friends. He got all sorts of tales about Mr. Malone, the teacher from hell. About how he was always keeping kids after school, about how he touched them inappropriately, about how he made them get undressed and do naughty things with him and each other. The shit Frank was in was getting deeper by the minute.

Then the police chief launched an investigation into some of the kids in town who had run away. A hick town like Black Rock always had runaways, kids who were tired of small town life and dying to see what the big city was like. And of course some of these runaways had been from Frank's class, so there had to be something in that, didn't there? Frank was up to his neck in the shit now, and it was just getting deeper. Chief Flint launched a search of the

surrounding desert, looking for shallow graves. The whole town got behind him and spent the next week searching through the scrubland. Special dogs trained to find bodies were called in to help with the search while Frank rotted away in his prison cell.

Ten days after he was arrested, the chief of police came into his cell and demanded that Frank tell him where the bodies were. He was not pleased with Frank's silence, not pleased at all. When he left, Frank was lying on the cell floor bloodied and bruised. It was actually the best thing that could have happened to him. There were no bodies, no evidence at all aside from the word of several ten-year-old kids, and these kids had been allowed to talk to each other before giving their statements. What little proof there was had been tainted, and with Frank needing medical attention after the police chief "interviewed" him, the case was looking very shaky indeed. So the D.A. had refused to charge him. There was no point.

When Frank left the hospital he was a free man. But the damage to his reputation had been overwhelming. His wife had filed for divorce while he was in jail, he had been fired from his job, and everyone in town wanted his head on a stick. Life in Black Rock was over for Frank Malone.

So now he was driving down the dark desert highway in his battered old mustang, toking on some fine Mexican bud, running from a life turned sour and looking for a place to spend the night. Up ahead he saw a light by the side of the road that slowly transformed into an old neon sign as he got closer. It was a vacancy sign for what looked like the world's oldest hotel.

"Better than nothing," mumbled Frank as he pulled into the dirt driveway in front of the hotel.

The building itself was a two-story affair, with dark paint peeling from the walls in strips, no doubt caused by the dry desert winds. As Frank got out of his car he noticed that the hotel seemed to lean over him, examining him, peering into his soul. He repressed a shiver and dropped the used joint to the dusty ground of the car park. He placed the heel of his boot on the glowing ember and snuffed it out, then strode up to the front doors. They were huge, heavy doors made of oak or some other sturdy wood. He was reaching for the doorknob when the door swung inward before him. In the doorway stood a girl in a long flowing nightgown. She carried a candle that cast shadows over her young face. Frank thought it made her look beautiful and haunted all at once. She also looked vaguely familiar.

"I'm looking for a room," said Frank. He thought the girl couldn't possibly be older than fourteen.

"Come in," she invited and stepped back from the doorway.

Frank entered the building and noticed how empty it looked. A thin film of desert dust covered everything, and cobwebs hung from the far corners of the high ceilings. "Nice place you got here. Do you ever clean it?"

The girl ignored his sarcasm and led him towards the front desk.

"What's with the candle?" asked Frank.

"I'm afraid the power is out," responded the girl. "It won't be back on tonight."

"Great," said Frank, his sarcasm still in high gear. "Do you actually have rooms here, or will I have to build one myself?"

"We have rooms," said the girl as she moved behind the desk and pulled out a large guest ledger. She placed it on top of the desk, raising a puff of dust from the desk as she opened it to a blank page. "Please sign here."

Frank looked down at the blank page before him. "Am I the only guest?"

"No, Mr. Malone, we have lots of guests here."

"How did you know my name was Malone?" asked Frank.

"You told me your name when you came in," responded the girl, not missing a beat.

"I did?"

"Yes, you did. Now please sign the register."

Frank signed his name as he tried to remember just when he had told the girl his name, then fished out his wallet. "How much for the night?" he asked.

"Five dollars," replied the girl, reaching for a room key.

"That's pretty cheap," said Frank as he slid a five-dollar bill across the desk. "Does that include dinner?"

"Yes," said the girl. "Dinner will be served in the main dining room in half an hour. I'll show you to your room."

"Just a second," said Frank, "I have to get my bag out of the car."

"It's been taken care of, Mr. Malone," replied the girl as she walked towards the stairs.

"Taken care of?" asked Frank. "What do you mean taken care of? Who took care of it?" He noticed that the only light in the hotel was now moving up the stairs with the girl so he hurried to catch up with her. "I didn't see anyone else, so who took care of my bag?"

The girl quietly ignored him and continued up the stairs. When she reached the top she turned left and moved down to the end of the hallway, with Frank Malone in tow. She stopped before a door and slid the key that she held into the lock. The door swung open with a creak caused by hinges that had not been oiled in the past twenty years. Without looking at Frank she moved into the room.

Frank followed her and was surprised to see that the room was clean, much cleaner than the rest of the hotel. On the bed sat his suitcase, just like the girl had promised.

"Welcome to the Hotel California," said the girl.

"Hotel California? You mean like the song?" asked Frank.

"Song?" asked the girl.

"Never mind, it's a bit before your time," said Frank.

"Oh, okay," replied the girl. She lit a bedside candle with her own before moving back to the door. "Dinner will be in half an hour in the main dining room," she said.

“Yes, I heard you the first time,” said Frank. He turned towards her but discovered that she had already left. “Strange,” he said to himself. “I could swear I’ve seen that girl somewhere before. And why is a girl that young at the front desk of a hotel?” He decided it must be a family business, and that her parents were busy preparing dinner for their “many” guests.

After cleaning up, and quietly smoking another joint, he made his way downstairs. He had found himself smoking a lot of pot lately. At first he thought it was just a way of relaxing but then he came to understand he needed it just to function. He knew it wasn’t supposed to be possible to get hooked on marijuana but he couldn’t imagine going through a day without a hit. He used the candle from his bedside to find his way to the dining room, trying vainly to chase away the shadows with the meagre light. As he passed by the front desk he thought he saw something move out of the corner of his eye. He whirled around quickly, so quick he extinguished the flame of the candle. He saw something big and dark move just as the light vanished.

“Who’s there?” he asked, a faint tremble in his voice. There was no reply, though he could swear he heard breathing in the darkness. He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his trusty old Zippo. He flicked it open, then spun the wheel, his eyes dilating in the sudden burst of light. As they adjusted to the brightness he touched the flame to the wick of the candle. Just as the candle lit, something with yellow glowing eyes and sharp teeth leaned in out of the darkness and blew out the flame.

“Jesus!” screamed Frank as he dropped the candle, lighter, and ten years off his life.

“There’s nothing there,” he told himself. “I’m just hallucinating, that’s all it is. Too much dope and not enough sleep.” He reached out one trembling hand and felt the darkness in front of him. He was relieved when nothing tore his arm out at the socket.

“See?” he asked himself, “Nothing but illusions.” He bent down and searched for the candle and lighter. After a bit of scrabbling he found them, then relit the candle. He lifted it up and turned slowly, making sure he was alone in the room. After reassuring himself that nothing was coming for him he made his way to the door marked Dining Room.

Opening the door revealed a long table covered with a white lace tablecloth and adorned with silverware and candles. Every place but one was taken, the one at the foot of the table. Frank walked to the empty seat and sat down, eyeing the other guests suspiciously. He looked to the head of the table and saw the girl from the front desk.

“Is this some sort of joke?” he asked. He gestured at the others seated at the table. Not one of them was older than twelve.

“No, there is no joke, Mr. Malone,” said the girl. “These people are all guests of the hotel.”

“They’re all kids, every last one of them,” said Frank. He had noticed something else about the guests. Even in the gloom of candlelight he had the feeling he knew them all.

“They’re still guests, Mr. Malone. If you prefer we can delay your dinner until after they have finished.”

“No, that’s okay.” Frank had discovered he was very hungry, ravenous in fact. “What are we having?”

The girl leaned forward to lift the cover off a large serving dish. Frank couldn't help but notice she wore nothing underneath her nightgown. She lifted the lid to reveal a large roast, barely cooked and oozing blood.

"Bit raw isn't it?" asked Frank.

"It's how we like it," replied the girl, and then nodded to the surrounding guests. They picked up large, wicked looking knives and attacked the meat, stabbing it with a fury that shocked Frank. He watched as blood and bits of flesh flew like rain over the table, covering all who sat around it. Frank looked at the girl sitting at the head of the table and watched as a big droplet of blood struck her forehead and slowly ran down her face. Realization struck him like a hammer blow.

"I know you," he whispered.

"Yes, Frank," said the girl, "you know us all."

"But..." Frank suddenly realised the fury had ended, and now all eyes were on him. He looked around wildly, searching for an escape. He was back in the shit again, and this time he was floundering. "I'm hallucinating, this whole thing is a dream. I've crashed my car out on the highway and this is all just a shock induced dream." Suddenly a small hand lashed out with a knife and Frank Malone felt searing pain across his forearm. He looked down and saw a red line on his arm. As he watched, blood welled up from the gash and spilled out in small rivulets, running down his arm to the tablecloth beneath, staining it a bright crimson.

"You cut me," he said, hardly believing it himself. He looked at their flat, staring eyes and realised they intended to do more than just cut him. He picked up his own knife and slowly backed away from the table. Frank turned for the door, only to find the girl standing in front of him. "Out of my way," he warned.

"You can't leave, Frank," she replied.

"Wanna bet?" he asked and slashed the knife at her. It was meant to intimidate her, make her move away from the door. Instead she moved forward, into the path of the knife. The blade caught her in the side of the neck and kept going with surprising ease. Her head separated from her body and bounced to the floor, coming to rest in a corner. Frank watched horrified as her body slumped to the floor, splashing blood over the wall behind it. Sharp pain on the back of his calf brought him back to his senses, and he turned around to see a young child holding a blood soaked knife and smiling up at him.

"Fuck off," said Frank and kicked the child as hard as he could. He watched as the body went flying into the table, almost tipping it over. He reached for the door again.

"I told you, Frank, you can check out any time you like, but you can never leave."

Frank Malone looked down at the girl's head resting in the corner. It was looking up at him, its eyes alert and alive. "But I killed you," he said.

"You can't kill what's already dead," said the girl.

"Oh my God," said Frank. "You're Mary Sue."

"That's right, Frank. I'm Mary Sue, your first victim," replied the head. "We're all your victims. Our bodies are buried out in the desert around Black Rock. That's where you left us isn't it, Frank, after you raped and tortured us."

“I’m not seeing this,” said Frank, grabbing his head and squeezing tightly. “You’re not real, none of you are real.”

“You stole our innocence, Frank.”

“Nooooo!” cried Frank and fled into the darkness of the lobby.

It was pitch black out there. He tried to stop, to let his eyes adjust to the darkness, but it was useless. He ran to where he thought the front door was, but tripped over something and fell heavily to the floor.

“Oh Christ, I’m so dead,” he whimpered. He was panicking, he knew that, but he was powerless to stop. “If only I had a light,” he said. And then he remembered his Zippo. He got to his feet and shoved his hand into his breast pocket.

It was empty.

“Shit!” Tears were flowing down his cheeks now as panic threatened to overwhelm him. Then he remembered he had put his lighter in his jeans pocket. He slid his fingers inside and felt them brush against metal. “Yes,” he whispered and pulled out the lighter. He opened it and flicked the wheel inside. A flame shot up before his eyes, illuminating the small area around him. As his eyes adjusted he realised he wasn’t alone. The beast with yellow eyes and wickedly sharp teeth stood before him.

“Hello, Sweetmeat,” it growled.

Frank Malone, husband, teacher, killer of children, screamed for his life.

“Welcome home, Frank,” said Mary Sue.

Frank opened his eyes to find himself back in the dining room, only this time lying on his back. He tried to sit up but something held him down. As he focused on his surroundings he realised he was tied to the dining room table. “Let me go, you fucking bitch” he yelled.

“Tsk tsk, is that any way to talk to your host?” Mary Sue moved around to where he could see her. Her head was back in place, with no marks at all to indicate what had happened to her earlier. She was also completely naked.

Frank watched as she got up onto the table and straddled his thighs. “What are you doing?” he asked.

“Come now, Frank,” cooed Mary Sue, “you didn’t mind me doing this to you last time. In fact, I remember you insisting on it.” She bent down and kissed his flaccid penis.

“Stop it!” demanded Frank. He desperately wanted this to end. He would rather be dying beside the highway in his crumpled mustang than where he was right now. He moaned in horror as he watched his cock start to rise before Mary Sue’s lips.

“I knew you had it in you,” smiled the girl. She wrapped her lips around his member, making it harder and harder.

“Please,” pleaded Frank. “I really didn’t mean to hurt you, any of you.” He looked around to see the other children now surrounding the table. The room seemed filled with hundreds of them, thousands. He felt cold air on his dick so he looked down. The girl was no longer sucking on him, instead she was crouched over his groin and grinning up at him. A drop of saliva dripped from her open mouth and splashed over the head of his cock.

“You really are a big boy, Frank, much too big for me, for any of us,” said the girl. “Do you have any idea how much pain you caused us?”

“Yes, and I’m really sorry.” He looked around at the sea of unsympathetic faces. “Really, I am.”

“Somehow I don’t believe that, Frank,” said Mary Sue, “but you soon will be. Very, very sorry.” She reached behind her back and pulled out a large, gleaming carving knife.

“No!” pleaded Frank.

“Yes,” said the girl and swung the knife in a low broad arc, severing Frank’s penis at the base.

Frank screamed as blood pumped from his body in a fountain.

Mary Sue leaned forward and let the blood splash over her breasts, then rubbed the crimson flow all over her body. When she was covered in gore she leaned back and looked at the surrounding crowd. “Ready?” she asked.

In one motion a sea of knives were lifted above tiny heads. They surrounded Frank completely, but he was beyond caring.

“Begin,” whispered the girl.

The knives fell.

Terence Brody was dog tired. He had been on the run for days now, slipping past a police cordon in Barstow and high-tailing it into the desert. He didn’t know how they found out about all the things he had done to those kids in San Jose, but it wasn’t worth worrying about now. All he had to do was get as far away from there as he could, start a new life, maybe begin his hobby again. Yes, that was all he had to do, start again in a different state. It was getting dark now - night seemed to fall quickly in the desert - and his sight was growing dimmer. He would have to find a place to stop for the night. Up in the distance he saw a shimmering light.

The End.