

## **The Tip**

By David Hughes (UK)

You never know – when they move out – what you’re going to find.

Mister Q’s key turned up Tuesday morning in the housekeepers’ ice cream box. He’d been there a long time; longer than anyone could remember exactly, and certainly all the three years I’d been looking after Charles Hall.

He was from Mexico, a heart surgeon with an improbable name: Ramón Quaxaqtatl. As I loaded up what I’d need to clean the room, I thought about the few times I’d met the mysterious doctor.

Once, I’d run into him in the kitchen down that corridor, drinking a brand of beer I wasn’t familiar with.

“Mexican beer?” I asked

“Yes,” he smiled. “You like beer?”

“Very much.” It’s true – it’s about my favourite thing. I could read the label as he turned it towards me: Moctezuma Gold. I’ve looked out for it ever since but never found it.

“I’ll leave you some,” he promised. That was early on, but I had a funny feeling he was a man who remembered things.

His fluent English had a strange quality to it, like no accent I’ve ever come across. You could mistake it for a Spanish speaker who’s learned American, but there was something else underneath. I’d overheard him on a mobile later, speaking a language with sounds and rhythms unlike English or Spanish.

And then there was the time I’d been in late one Friday night, only to see him sweeping downstairs wearing a massive head-dress of colourful feathers and gems.

I don’t know if he saw me – he never gave any sign that he did – and something about him stopped me from uttering a word. But I would never forget it – magnificent, regal, and somehow terrifying.

I knock lightly, then try the handle. Open. A quick look tells me everything’s very much in order – always a relief. I can’t see any beer and I’m slightly disappointed, remembering our

conversation. But then, they almost never leave a tip. One of my colleagues says if they did, it would probably be: wear rubber gloves.

It is clean though, and it only takes a minute to dust. I run the Hoover over the desktop, open the drawers to whizz the head round inside. Top: empty, couple of hairs. Middle: empty, paperclip. Whip that out with my fingers. Bottom: wow!

Before it's even fully out, what's inside bursts out like a physical thing and lights – suffuses – the whole room with a deep, ancient glow.

There inside the drawer, like an egg in a nest, is an ingot.

It doesn't actually fill the drawer, but it seems to. I gape for about a minute, then look out of the window – no one around – and pick it up. It's heavy. Very heavy, like the most expensive block of chocolate you'll ever find. I slip it in my pocket and the bedside phone startles me.

After two rings I think I'd better answer.

"Hello?"

Nothing at first, just the sound of a connexion from far away, then a man's voice – Spanish.

"¿Está?...¿Está el oro?" Is the gold there?

I don't speak

Another voice in the background, agitated, insistent. "Preguntelo si está" Ask him if it's there.

"I'm sorry. This is a room in one of the accommodation blocks. I'm just the cleaner I'm afraid."

Silence. That empty, long-distance noise.

"Oh." Unhappy, sceptical, not catching the English. "Lo siento." I'm sorry. The connexion breaks with a click.

I put the phone down too; finish up quickly, have a last check round, and leave. I think I know just the place for the ingot.