



On a snow-swept January evening of 1991, Jonathan Pine, the English night manager of the Hotel Meister Palace in Zurich, forsook his office behind the reception desk and, in the grip of feelings he had not known before, took up his position in the lobby as a prelude to extending his hotel's welcome to a distinguished late arrival. The Gulf war had just begun. Throughout the day news of the Allied bombings, discreetly relayed by the staff, had caused consternation on the Zurich stock exchange. Hotel bookings, which in any January were low, had sunk to crisis levels. Once more in her long history Switzerland was under siege.

But the Meister Palace was equal to the challenge. Over all Zurich, Meister's, as the hotel was affectionately known to taxi-drivers and habitués, presided physically and traditionally alone, a staid Edwardian aunt perched on her own hilltop, gazing down on the folly of hectic urban life. The more things changed in the valley, the more Meister's stayed herself, unbending in her standards, a bastion of civilised style in a world intent on going to the devil.

Jonathan's point of vantage was a small recess between the hotel's two elegant showcases, both of them displaying ladies' fashions. Adèle of the Bahnhofstrasse was offering a sable stole over a female dummy whose only other protection was a gold

bikini bottom and a pair of coral earrings, price on application to the concierge. The clamour against the use of animal furs these days is as vocal in Zurich as in other cities of the Western world, but the Meister Palace paid it not a blind bit of notice. The second showcase – by César, likewise of the Bahnhofstrasse – preferred to cater for the Arab taste with a tableau of lusciously embroidered gowns and diamanté turbans and jewelled wristwatches at sixty thousand francs a shot. Flanked by these wayside shrines to luxury, Jonathan was able to keep a crisp eye on the swing doors.

He was a compact man but tentative, with a smile of apologetic self-protection. Even his Englishness was a well-kept secret. He was nimble and in his prime of life. If you were a sailor you might have spotted him for another, recognised the deliberate economy of his movements, the caged placing of the feet, one hand always for the boat. He had trim curled hair and a pugilist's thick brow. The pallor of his eyes caught you by surprise. You expected more challenge from him, heavier shadows.

And this mildness of manner within a fighter's frame gave him a troubling intensity. You would never during your stay in the hotel confuse him with anybody else: not with Herr Strippli, the creamy-haired front-of-house manager, not with one of Herr Meister's superior young Germans who strode through the place like gods on their way to stardom somewhere else. As a hotelier Jonathan was complete. You did not wonder who his parents were or whether he listened to music or kept a wife and children or a dog. His gaze as he watched the door was steady as a marksman's. He wore a carnation. At night he always did.

The snow even for the time of year was formidable. Fat billows swept across the lighted forecourt like white waves in a

tempest. The chasseurs, alerted for a grand arrival, stared expectantly into the blizzard. Roper will never make it, Jonathan thought. Even if they let his plane take off it can never have landed in this weather. Herr Kaspar has got it wrong.

But Herr Kaspar, the head concierge, had never got anything wrong in his life. When Herr Kaspar breathed 'arrival imminent' over the internal speaker, only a congenital optimist could imagine that the client's plane had been diverted. Besides, why else would Herr Kaspar be presiding at this hour except for a big spender? There was a time, Frau Loring had told Jonathan, when Herr Kaspar would maim for two francs and strangle for five. But old age is a different state. These days, only the richest pickings were able to lure Herr Kaspar from the pleasures of his evening television.

*Hotel's full up, I'm afraid, Mr Roper*, Jonathan rehearsed in another last-ditch effort to fend off the inevitable. *Herr Meister is desolated. A temporary clerk has made an unpardonable error. However, we have managed to obtain rooms for you at the Baur au Lac, et cetera.* But that wishful fantasy too was stillborn. There was not a great hotel in Europe tonight that boasted more than fifty guests. The wealthiest of the earth were bravely hugging the ground with the one exception of Richard Onslow Roper, trader, of Nassau, the Bahamas.

Jonathan's hands stiffened and he instinctively flicked his elbows as if to ready them for combat. A car, a Mercedes by its radiator, had entered the forecourt, the beams of its headlights choked with swirling snowflakes. He saw Herr Kaspar's senatorial head lift, and the chandelier glint on its pomaded rivers. But the car had parked on the far side of the forecourt. A taxi, a mere city cab, a no one. Herr Kaspar's head, now glowing with acrylic light, sank forward as he resumed his study of the closing stock prices. In his relief, Jonathan allowed himself a ghostly

smile of recognition. The wig, the immortal wig: Herr Kaspar's one-hundred-and-forty-thousand-franc crown, the pride of every classic concierge in Switzerland. Herr Kaspar's William Tell of a wig, Frau Loring called it; the wig that had dared to raise itself in revolt against the millionaire despot, Madame Archetti.

Perhaps to concentrate his mind while it was tearing him in so many directions, or perhaps because he found in the story some hidden relevance to his predicament, Jonathan recounted it to himself yet again exactly as Frau Loring, the head housekeeper, had recounted it the first time she made him cheese fondue in her attic. Frau Loring was seventy-five and came from Hamburg. She had been Herr Meister's nanny and, as rumour had it, Herr Meister's father's mistress. She was the keeper of the legend of the wig, its living witness.

'Madame Archetti was the richest woman in Europe in those days, *young* Herr Jonathan,' Frau Loring declared, as if she had slept with Jonathan's father too. 'Every hotel in the world was after her. But Meister's was her favourite until Kaspar made his stand. After that, well, she still came but it was only to be seen.'

Madame Archetti had inherited the Archetti supermarket fortune, Frau Loring explained. Madame Archetti lived off the interest on the interest. And what she liked at the age of fifty-something was to tour the great hotels of Europe in her open English sports car followed by her staff and wardrobe in a van. She knew the names of every concierge and head waiter from the Four Seasons in Hamburg to the Cipriani in Venice to the Villa d'Este on Lake Como. She prescribed them diets and herbal remedies and acquainted them with their horoscopes. And she tipped them on a scale scarcely to be imagined, provided they found favour.

And favour was what Herr Kaspar found in bucketloads, said Frau Loring. He found it to the tune of twenty thousand Swiss francs each annual visit, not to mention quack hair remedies, magic stones to put beneath his pillow to cure his sciatica, and half kilos of Beluga caviar on Christmas and saint's days, which Herr Kaspar discreetly converted to cash by means of an understanding with a famous food hall in the town. All this for obtaining a few theatre tickets and booking a few dinner-tables on which of course he exacted his customary commission. And for bestowing those pious signals of devotion that Madame Archetti required for her rôle as chatelaine of the servant kingdom.

Until the day Herr Kaspar bought his wig.

He did not buy it rashly, said Frau Loring. He bought land in Texas first, thanks to a Meister's client in the oil business. The investment flourished and he took his profit. Only then did he decide that like his patroness he had reached a stage in life where he was entitled to shed a few of his advancing years. After months of measuring and debate, the thing was ready – a wonder-wig, a miracle of artful simulation. To try it out he availed himself of his annual holiday on Mykonos, and one Monday morning in September he reappeared behind his desk, bronzed and fifteen years younger as long as you didn't look at him from the top.

And no one did, said Frau Loring. Or if they did they didn't mention it. The amazing truth was, no one mentioned the wig at all. Not Frau Loring, not André who was the pianist in those days, not Brandt who was the predecessor of Maître Berri in the dining-room, not Herr Meister senior who kept a beady eye for deviations in the appearance of his staff. The whole hotel had tacitly decided to share in the glow of Herr Kaspar's rejuvenation. Frau Loring herself risked her all with a plunging

summer frock and a pair of stockings with fern-pattern seams. And things continued happily this way until the evening Madame Archetti arrived for her customary month's stay, and as usual her hotel family lined up to greet her in the lobby: Frau Loring, Maître Brandt, André and Herr Meister senior, who was waiting to conduct her personally to the Tower Suite.

And at his desk Herr Kaspar in his wig.

To begin with, said Frau Loring, Madame Archetti did not permit herself to notice the addition to her favourite's appearance. She smiled at him as she swept past but it was the smile of a princess at her first ball, bestowed on everyone at once. She permitted Herr Meister to kiss her on both cheeks, Maître Brandt on one. She smiled at Frau Loring. She placed her arms circumspectly round the undeveloped shoulders of André the pianist, who purred 'Madame.' Only then did she approach Herr Kaspar.

'What are we wearing on our head, Kaspar?'

'Hair, Madame.'

'Whose hair, Kaspar?'

'It is mine,' Herr Kaspar replied with bearing.

'Take it off,' Madame Archetti ordered. 'Or you will never have another penny from me.'

'I cannot take it off, Madame. My hair is part of my personality. It is integrated.'

'Then dis-integrate it, Kaspar. Not now, it is too complicated, but for tomorrow morning. Otherwise nothing. What have you got at the theatre for me?'

'*Othello*, Madame.'

'I shall look at you again in the morning. Who is playing him?'

'Leiser, Madame. The greatest Moor we have.'

'We shall see.'

Next morning at eight o'clock to the minute Herr Kaspar re-appeared for duty, his crossed keys of office glinting like campaign medals from his lapels. And on his head, triumphantly, the emblem of his insurrection. All morning long a precarious hush prevailed in the lobby. The hotel guests, like the famous geese of Freiburg, said Frau Loring, were aware of the imminent explosion even if they did not know its cause. At mid-day, which was her hour, Madame Archetti emerged from the Tower Suite and descended the staircase on the arm of her prevailing swain, a promising young barber from Graz.

'But where is Herr Kaspar this morning?' she asked in Herr Kaspar's vague direction.

'He is behind his desk and at your service as ever, Madame,' Herr Kaspar replied in a voice that, to those who heard it, echoed for all time in the halls of freedom. 'He has the tickets for the Moor.'

'I see no Herr Kaspar,' Madame Archetti informed her escort. 'I see hair. Tell him, please, we shall miss him in his obscurity.'

'It was his trumpet blast,' Frau Loring liked to end. 'From the moment that woman entered the hotel Herr Kaspar could not escape his destiny.'

And tonight is my trumpet blast, thought Jonathan, waiting to receive the worst man in the world.

Jonathan was worrying about his hands, which as usual were immaculate and had been so ever since he had been the subject of spot fingernail inspections at his army school. At first he had kept them curled at the embroidered seams of his trousers in the posture drummed into him on the parade ground. But now, without his noticing, they had linked themselves behind his back with a handkerchief twisted between them, for



he was painfully conscious of the sweat that kept forming in his palms.

Transferring his worries to his smile, Jonathan checked it for faults in the mirrors either side of him. It was the Smile of Gracious Welcome that he had worked up during his years in the profession: a sympathetic smile but a prudently restrained one, for he had learned by experience that guests, particularly very rich ones, could be tetchy after a demanding journey, and the last thing they needed on arrival was a night manager grinning at them like a chimpanzee.

His smile, he established, was still in place. His feeling of nausea had not dislodged it. His tie, self-tied as a signal to the better guests, was pleasingly insouciant. His hair, though nothing to match Herr Kaspar's, was his own, and as usual in the sleekest order.

*It's a different Roper*, he announced inside his head. *Complete misunderstanding, whole thing. Nothing whatever to do with her. There are two, both traders, both living in Nassau.* But Jonathan had been going back and forth through that hoop ever since half past five this afternoon when, arriving in his office for duty, he had heedlessly picked up Herr Strippli's list of the evening's arrivals and seen the name Roper in electronic capitals screaming at him from the computer printout.

Roper R. O., party of sixteen, arriving from Athens by private jet, expected 21.30 hours, followed by Herr Strippli's hysterical annotation: 'VVIP!' Jonathan called up the public-relations file on his screen: Roper R. O. and the letters OBG after him, which was the coy house code for bodyguard, O standing for official and official meaning licensed by the Swiss Federal authorities to bear a sidearm. Roper, OBG, business address Ironbrand Land, Ore & Precious Metals Company of Nassau, home address a box number in Nassau, credit assured by the

Zurich Bank of Somebody. So how many Ropers were there in the world with the initial R and firms called Ironbrand? How many more coincidences had God got up His sleeve?

‘Who on earth is Roper R. O. when he’s at home?’ Jonathan asked of Herr Strippli in German while he affected to busy himself with other things.

‘He’s a British, like you.’

It was Strippli’s maddening habit to reply in English though Jonathan’s German was better.

‘Not like me at all, actually. Lives in Nassau, trades in precious metals, banks in Switzerland, why’s that like me?’ After their months of incarceration together, their quarrels had acquired a marital pettiness.

‘Mr Roper is actually a very important guest,’ Strippli replied in his slow singsong as he buckled his leather overcoat in preparation for the snow. ‘From our private sector he is number five for spending and chief of all English. Last time his group was here, he was average twenty-one thousand seven hundred Swiss francs a day, *plus service*.’

Jonathan heard the soggy chatter of Herr Strippli’s motor-bike as, snow notwithstanding, he pattered down the hill to his mother. He sat at his desk for a while, his head hidden in his small hands, like someone waiting for an air attack. Easy, he told himself, Roper has taken his time, you can do the same. So he sat upright again and, with the composed expression of someone taking his time, gave his attention to the letters on his desk. A soft goods manufacturer in Stuttgart was objecting to the bill for his Christmas party. Jonathan drafted a stinging response for signature by Herr Meister. A public-relations company in Nigeria was enquiring about conference facilities. Jonathan replied regretting there were no vacancies.

A beautiful and stately French girl named Sybille who had

stayed at the hotel with her mother complained yet again of his treatment of her. 'You take me sailing. We walk in the mountains. We have beautiful days. Are you so very English that we cannot also be more than friends? You look at me, I see a shadow fall across your face, I am disgusting to you.'

Feeling a need to move, he launched himself on a tour of the construction work in the north wing where Herr Meister was building a grill-room out of old Arolla pine rescued from the roof of a condemned treasure in the city. No one knew why Herr Meister wanted a grill-room, no one could recall when he had started it. The numbered panels were stacked in rows against the unrendered wall. Jonathan caught their musky smell and remembered Sophie's hair on the night she walked into his office at the Queen Nefertiti Hotel in Cairo, smelling of vanilla.

Herr Meister's building works could not be held to blame for this. Ever since seeing Roper's name at half past five that afternoon, Jonathan had been on his way to Cairo.

He had glimpsed her often but never spoken to her: a languid dark-haired beauty of forty, long-waisted, elegant and remote. He had spotted her on her expeditions through the Nefertiti's boutiques or being ushered into a maroon Rolls-Royce by a muscular chauffeur. When she toured the lobby the chauffeur doubled as her bodyguard, hovering behind her with his hands crossed over his balls. When she took a *menthe frappé* in Le Pavillon restaurant, dark glasses shoved into her hair like driving goggles and her French newspaper at arm's length, the chauffeur would sip a soda at the next table. The staff called her Madame Sophie and Madame Sophie belonged to Freddie Hamid, and Freddie was the baby of the three unlovely Hamid brothers who between them owned a lot of Cairo, including

the Queen Nefertiti Hotel. Freddie's most celebrated accomplishment at twenty-five was to have lost half a million dollars at baccarat in ten minutes.

'You are Mr Pine,' she said in a French-flavoured voice, perching herself on the armchair on the other side of his desk. And tilting her head back and viewing him on the slant: 'The flower of England.'

It was three in the morning. She was wearing a silk trouser suit and a topaz amulet at her throat. Could be legless, he decided: proceed with caution.

'Well, thank you,' he said handsomely. 'No one's told me that for a long time. What can I do for you?'

But when he discreetly sniffed the air around her all he could smell was her hair. And the mystery was that though it was glistening black it smelled blond: a vanilla smell and warm.

'And I am Madame Sophie from penthouse number 3,' she continued, as if to remind herself. 'I have seen you often, Mr Pine. Very often. You have steadfast eyes.'

The rings on her fingers antique. Clusters of clouded diamonds set in pale gold.

'And I have seen *you*,' he rejoined with his ever-ready smile.

'You also *sail*,' she said, as if accusing him of an amusing deviation. The *also* was a mystery she did not explain. 'My protector took me to the Cairo yacht club last Sunday. Your ship came in while we were drinking champagne cocktails. Freddie recognised you and waved but you were too busy being nautical to bother with us.'

'I expect we were afraid of ramming the jetty,' said Jonathan, recalling a rowdy bunch of rich Egyptians swilling champagne on the club verandah.

'It was a pretty blue boat with an English flag. Is it yours? It looked so royal.'

'Oh my goodness, no! It's the Minister's.'

'You mean you sail with a priest?'

'I mean I sail with the second man at the British Embassy.'

'He looked so young. You both did. I was impressed. Somehow I had imagined that people who work at night are unhealthy. When do you sleep?'

'It was my weekend off,' Jonathan replied nimbly, since he did not feel inclined, at this early stage in their relationship, to discuss his sleeping habits.

'Do you always sail on your weekends off?'

'When I'm invited.'

'What else do you do on your weekends off?'

'Play a little tennis. Run a little. Consider my immortal soul.'

'Is it immortal?'

'I hope so.'

'Do you believe so?'

'When I'm happy.'

'And when you are unhappy, you doubt it. No wonder that God is so fickle. Why should He be constant when we are so faithless?'

She was frowning in rebuke at her gold sandals, as if they too had misbehaved. Jonathan wondered whether after all she was sober and merely maintained a different rhythm from the world around her. Or perhaps she does a little of Freddie's drugs, he thought: for there were rumours that the Hamids traded in Lebanese hash oil.

'Do you ride horseback?' she asked.

'I'm afraid not.'

'Freddie has horses.'

'So I hear.'

'Arabs. Magnificent Arabs. People who breed Arab horses are an international elite, you know that?'

‘So I have heard.’

She allowed herself a pause for meditation. Jonathan availed himself of it:

‘Is there something I can do for you, Madame Sophie?’

‘And this Minister, this Mr –’

‘Ogilvey.’

‘Sir Something Ogilvey?’

‘Just Mister.’

‘He is a friend of yours?’

‘A sailing friend.’

‘You were at school together?’

‘No, I wasn’t at that kind of school.’

‘But you are of the same class or whatever the expression is? You may not breed Arab horses but you are both – well, my God, what does one say? – both gentlemen?’

‘Mr Ogilvey and I are sailing companions,’ he replied with his most evasive smile.

‘Freddie also has a yacht. A floating bordello. Isn’t that what they are called?’

‘I’m sure not.’

‘I’m sure yes.’

She made another pause while she reached out a silk-clad arm and studied the underside of the bracelets on her wrist. ‘I would like a cup of coffee, please, Mr Pine. Egyptian. Then I shall ask a favour of you.’

Mahmoud the night waiter brought coffee in a copper pot and poured two cups with ceremony. Before Freddie came along, she had belonged to a rich Armenian, Jonathan remembered, and before that an Alexandrian Greek who owned dubious concessions along the Nile. Freddie had laid siege to her, bombarding her with bouquets of orchids at impossible moments, sleeping in his Ferrari outside her apartment. The

gossip writers had printed what they dared. The Armenian had left town.

She was trying to light a cigarette but her hand was shaking. He struck the lighter for her. She closed her eyes and drew on the cigarette. Lines of age appeared on her neck. And Freddie Hamid all of twenty-five, Jonathan thought. He put the lighter on the desk.

'I too am British, Mr Pine,' she remarked as if this were a grief they shared. 'When I was young and unprincipled I married one of your countrymen for his passport. It turned out he loved me deeply. He was a straight arrow. There is no one better than a good Englishman and no one worse than a bad one. I have observed you. I think you are a good one. Mr Pine, do you know Richard Roper?'

'I'm afraid not.'

'But you must. He is famous. He is beautiful. A fifty-year-old Apollo. He breeds horses, exactly as Freddie does. They even talk of opening a stud farm together. Mr Richard Onslow Roper, one of your famous international entrepreneurs. Come.'

'Not a name to me, I'm sorry.'

'But Dicky Roper does a lot of business in Cairo! He is English, like you, very charming, rich, glamorous, persuasive. For us simple Arabs, almost too persuasive. He owns a splendid motor yacht, *twice* the size of Freddie's! How come you do not know him, since you are also a sailor? Of course you do. You are pretending, I can see.'

'Perhaps if he has a splendid motor yacht he doesn't have to bother with hotels. I don't read the newspapers enough. I'm out of touch. I'm sorry.'

But Madame Sophie was not sorry. She was reassured. Her relief was in her face as it cleared and in the decisiveness with which she now reached for her handbag.

‘I would like you to copy some personal documents for me, please.’

‘Well, now, we do have an executive services bureau directly across the lobby, Madame Sophie,’ Jonathan said. ‘Mr Ahmadi usually presides at night.’ He made to pick up the telephone, but her voice stopped him.

‘They are confidential documents, Mr Pine.’

‘I’m sure Mr Ahmadi is perfectly dependable.’

‘Thank you, I would prefer that we use our own facilities,’ she retorted, with a glance at the copier standing on its trolley in the corner. And he knew she had marked it on her journeys through the lobby, just as she had marked him. From the hand-bag she drew a wad of white paper, bundled but not folded. She slid it across the desk to him, her ringed fingers splayed and rigid.

‘It’s only a very *small* copier, I’m afraid, Madame Sophie,’ Jonathan warned, rising to his feet. ‘You’ll have to hand-feed it. May I show you how, then leave you to yourself?’

‘We shall hand-feed it together, please,’ she said with an inuendo born of tension.

‘But if the papers are confidential –’

‘You must please attend me. I am a technical idiot. I am not myself.’ She picked up her cigarette from the ashtray and drew on it. Her eyes, stretched wide, seemed shocked by her own actions. ‘You do it, please,’ she ordered him.

So he did it.

He switched on the machine, inserted them – all eighteen of them – and skim-read them as they reappeared. He made no conscious effort to do this. Also he made no conscious effort to resist. The watcher’s skills had never abandoned him.

From the Ironbrand Land, Ore & Precious Metals Company of Nassau to the Hamid InterArab Hotels and Trading



Company of Cairo, incoming dated August 12th. Hamid Inter-Arab to Ironbrand, outgoing, assurances of personal regard.

Ironbrand to Hamid InterArab again, talk of merchandise and items four to seven on our stock list, end-user to be Hamid InterArab's responsibility and let's have dinner together on the yacht.

The letters from Ironbrand signed with a tight flourish, like a monogram on a shirt pocket. The InterArab copies not signed at all, but the name Said Abu Hamid in oversized capitals below the empty space.

Then Jonathan saw the stock list and his blood did whatever blood does when it sets the surface of your back tingling and makes you worry how your voice will sound when you next speak: one plain sheet of paper, no signature, no provenance, headed 'Stock available as of October 1st 1990.' The items a devil's lexicon from Jonathan's unsleeping past.

'Are you sure one copy will be enough?' he enquired with that extra lightness that came to him in crisis, like a clarity of vision under fire.

She was standing with her forearm across her stomach and her elbow cupped in her hand while she smoked and watched him.

'You are adept,' she said. She did not say what in.

'Well, it's not exactly complicated once you get the hang of it. As long as the paper doesn't jam.'

He laid the original documents in one pile, the photocopies in another. He had suspended thought. If he had been laying out a dead body he would have blocked his mind in the same way. He turned to her and said, 'Done,' over-casually, a boldness he in no way felt.

'Of a good hotel one asks everything,' she commented. 'You have a suitable envelope? Of course you have.'

Envelopes were in the third drawer of his desk, left side. He selected a yellow one, A4 size, and guided it across the desk, but she let it lie there.

‘Please put the copies inside the envelope. Then seal the envelope very effectively and put it in your safe. Perhaps you should use some sticky tape. Yes, tape it. A receipt is unnecessary, thank you.’

Jonathan had a specially warm smile for refusal. ‘Alas, we are forbidden to accept guests’ packages for safekeeping, Madame Sophie. Even yours. I can give you a deposit box and your own key. That’s the most I can do, I’m afraid.’

She was already stuffing the original letters back into her bag as he said this. She snapped the bag shut and hoisted it over her shoulder.

‘Do not be bureaucratic with me, Mr Pine. You have seen the contents of the envelope. You have sealed it. Put your own name on it. The letters are now yours.’

Never surprised by his own obedience, Jonathan selected a red felt-tipped pen from the silver desk-stand and wrote PINE in capitals on the envelope.

On your own head be it, he was telling her silently. I never asked for this. I never encouraged it.

‘How long do you expect them to remain here, Madame Sophie?’ he enquired.

‘Perhaps for ever, perhaps a night. It is not known. It is like a love affair.’ Her coquettishness deserted her and she became the supplicant. ‘In confidence. Yes? That is understood. Yes?’

He said yes. He said of course. He gave her a smile that suggested he was a tiny bit surprised that the question needed to be raised.

‘Mr Pine.’

‘Madame Sophie.’

*John le Carré*

'Concerning your immortal soul.'

'Concerning it.'

'We are all immortal, naturally. But if it should turn out that I am not, you will please give those documents to your friend Mr Ogilvey. May I trust you to do that?'

'If that is what you want, of course.'

She was still smiling, still mysteriously out of rhythm with him. 'Are you a permanent night manager, Mr Pine? Always? Every night?'

'It's my profession.'

'Chosen?'

'Of course.'

'By you?'

'Who else?'

'But you look so well by daylight.'

'Thank you.'

'I shall telephone you from time to time.'

'I shall be honoured.'

'Like you, I grow a little tired of sleeping. Please do not escort me.'

And the smell of vanilla again as he opened the door for her and longed to follow her to bed.

Standing to attention in the gloom of Herr Meister's permanently unfinished grill-room Jonathan watched himself, a mere walk-on character in his overcrowded secret theatre, as he goes methodically to work on Madame Sophie's papers. For the trained soldier, trained however long ago, there is nothing startling about the call to duty. There is only the automaton's drill-movement from one side of the head to the other:

Pine standing in the doorway of his office at the Queen Nefertiti, staring across the empty marble hall at the liquid

crystal digits above the lift as they stammer out its ascent to the penthouses.

The lift returning empty to the ground floor.

Pine's palms tingling and dry, Pine's shoulders light.

Pine reopening the safe. The combination has been set – by the hotel's sycophantic general manager – at Freddie Hamid's date of birth.

Pine extracting the photocopies, folding the yellow envelope small and slipping it into an inside pocket of his dinner-jacket for later destruction.

The copier still warm.

Pine copying the copies, first adjusting the density button a shade darker for improved definition. Names of missiles. Names of guidance systems. Techno-babble that Pine cannot understand. Names of chemicals Pine cannot pronounce, yet knows the use of. Other names that are as deadly but more pronounceable. Names like Sarin, Soman and Tabun.

Pine sliding the new copies inside tonight's dinner menu, then folding the menu longways and slipping it into his other inside pocket. The copies still warm inside the menu.

Pine placing the old copies in a fresh envelope indistinguishable from its predecessor. Pine writing PINE on the new envelope and replacing it in the same spot on the same shelf, the same way up.

Pine re-closing the safe and locking it. The overt world restored.

Pine eight hours later, a different kind of servant, seated buttock to buttock with Mark Ogilvey in the cramped cabin of the Minister's yacht while Mrs Ogilvey in the galley, wearing designer jeans, runs up smoked-salmon sandwiches.

'Freddie Hamid buying dirty toys from Dicky Onslow Roper?' Ogilvey repeats incredulously, leafing through the

documents a second time. 'What the hell's that about? Little swine would be safer sticking to baccarat. The Ambassador's going to be absolutely furious. Darling, wait till you hear this one.'

But Mrs Ogilvey has heard this one already. The Ogilveys are a husband-and-wife team. They spy in preference to having children.

*I loved you*, thought Jonathan uselessly. Meet your past-tense lover.

*I loved you*, but betrayed you instead, to a pompous British spy I didn't even like.

Because I was on his little list of people who would always do their bit when the bugle went.

Because I was One of Us – Us being Englishmen of self-evident loyalty and discretion. Us being Good Chaps.

I loved you, but never quite got around to saying so at the time.

Sybille's letter rang in his ears: I see a shadow fall across your face. I am disgusting to you.

No, no, not disgusting at all, Sybille, the hotelier hastened to assure his unwelcome correspondent. Just irrelevant. The disgust is all my own work.

Herr Kaspar again lifted his famous head. The throb of a powerful motor became discreetly audible above the beating of the wind. He rolled up his bulletins from the beleaguered Zurich stock exchange and slipped an elastic band over them. He dropped the roll into his investment drawer, locked it and nodded to Mario the head chasseur. He eased a comb from his back pocket and skimmed it through his wig. Mario scowled at Pablo, who in turn simpered to Benito, the ridiculously pretty apprentice from Lugano who was probably favouring both of them. All three had clustered inside the lobby for shelter, but now, with Latin bravado, they breasted the storm, buttoning their capes at the neck as they grabbed their umbrellas and trolleys, and vanished, swallowed by the snow.

It never happened, Jonathan thought, watching each signal of the car's approach. There is only the snow, racing over the forecourt. It's a dream.

But Jonathan was not dreaming. The limousine was real, even if it was floating on a white void. A stretch limousine, longer than the hotel, was berthing at the front entrance like a black liner nosing into dock, while the chasseurs in their capes scurried and pranced to make it fast, all but the impertinent Pablo, who in a moment of inspiration had unearthed a curling-broom and was delicately picking the snowflakes from

the red carpet. For one last blessed moment, it was true, a gust of snow did blank everything out, and Jonathan was able to imagine that a tidal wave had swept the liner back to sea, to founder against the crags of the surrounding hilltops, so that Mr Richard Onslow Roper and his officially licensed bodyguards, and whoever else made up the party of sixteen, had perished to a man in their private *Titanic* in the memorable Great Storm of January 1991, God rest their souls.

But the limousine had returned. Furs, well-grown men, a beautiful long-legged young woman, diamonds and gold wristbands and castles of matching black luggage, were emerging like plundered booty from its plush interior. A second limousine had joined it, now a third. A whole convoy of limousines. Already Herr Kaspar was propelling the swing doors at the speed best suited to the party's progress. First an untidy brown coat of camel-hair loomed into the glass and was cautiously rotated into focus, a grimy silk muffler dangling over its collar, surmounted by a soggy cigarette and the pouchy stare of a scion of the English upper classes. No fifty-year-old Apollo he.

After the camel-hair came a navy-blue blazer in his twenties, the blazer single-breasted for the cross-draw, and eyes shallow as paint. One OBG, thought Jonathan, trying not to answer their malign stare: one more to follow, and a third if Roper's scared.

The beautiful woman had chestnut hair and wore a quilted coat of many colours that reached almost to her feet, yet she managed to appear slightly underdressed. She had Sophie's comic slant to her, and her hair, like Sophie's, fell to either side of her face. Someone's wife? Mistress? Anyone's? For the first time in six months, Jonathan felt the devastating, irrational impact of a woman he instantaneously desired. Like Sophie she had a jewelled brilliance and a kind of dressed nakedness. Two

strings of splendid pearls set off her neck. Diamond bracelets peeked from her quilted sleeves. But it was the vague air of shambles, the raggedy smile and unselfconscious carriage, that appointed her an instant citizen of Paradise. The doors swung open again, disgorging everyone at once, so that suddenly an entire leftover delegation of the English affluent society was ranged under the chandelier, each of its members so sleekly groomed, so sun-rich, that together they seemed to share a corporate morality that outlawed sickness, poverty, pale faces, age and manual labour. Only the camel-hair coat, with his disgracefully battered suède boots, remained a voluntary outcast from their ranks.

And at their centre yet apart from them, The Man, as only The Man could be after Sophie's furious descriptions of him. Tall, slender, and at first glance noble. Fair hair stirred with grey, swept back and flicked into little horns above the ears. A face to play cards against and lose. The stance that arrogant Englishmen do the best, one knee cocked, one hand backed against the colonial arse. *Freddie is so weak*, Sophie had explained. *And Roper is so English*.

Like all deft men, Roper was doing several things at once: shaking hands with Kaspar then clapping him with the same hand on the upper arm, then using it to blow a kiss to Fräulein Eberhardt, who went pink and waved at him like a menopausal groupie. Then finally fixing his overlord's eye on Jonathan, who must have been strolling towards him, though Jonathan himself had no direct evidence of this except that Adèle's dummy had been replaced first by the news-stand, then by the flushed features of Fräulein Eberhardt at the reception desk, and now by The Man himself. *He has no qualms*, Sophie had said. *He is the worst man in the world*.

He's recognised me, thought Jonathan, waiting for the



denunciation. He's seen my photograph, listened to my description. In a minute he'll stop smiling.

'I'm Dicky Roper,' a lazy voice announced as the hand closed round Jonathan's, and briefly owned it. 'My chaps booked some rooms here. Rather a lot of 'em. How d'you do?' Belgravia slur, the proletarian accent of the vastly rich. They had entered each other's private space.

'How very good to see you, Mr Roper,' Jonathan murmured, English voice to English voice. 'Welcome back, sir, and poor you, what a perfectly ghastly journey you must have had. Wasn't it rather heroic to venture aloft at all? No one else has, I can tell you. My name's Pine, I'm the night manager.'

He's heard of me, he thought, waiting. Freddie Hamid told him my name.

'What's old Meister up to these days?' Roper asked, his eyes slipping away to the beautiful woman. She was at the newsstand, helping herself to fashion magazines. Her bracelets kept falling over her hand, while with the other she continually pushed back her hair. 'Tucked up with his Ovaltine and a book, is he? *Hope* it's a book, must say. Jeds, how you doing, darling? Adores magazines. Addict. Hate the things m'self.'

It took Jonathan a moment to realise that Jeds was the woman. Not Jed a single man, but Jeds a single woman in all her varieties. Her chestnut head turned far enough to let them see her smile. It was puckish and good-humoured.

'I'm just *fine*, darling,' she said bravely, as if she were recovering from a knock.

'Herr Meister is unavoidably tied up tonight, I'm afraid, sir,' said Jonathan, 'but he does enormously look forward to seeing you in the morning when you're rested.'

'You English, Pine? Sound it.'

'To the core, sir.'

‘Wise man.’ The pale gaze wanders away again, this time to the reception desk, where the camel-hair coat is filling in forms for Fräulein Eberhardt. ‘You proposing marriage to that young lady, Corky?’ Roper calls. ‘That’ll be the day,’ he adds to Jonathan in a lower tone. ‘Major Corkoran, my assistant,’ he confides with innuendo.

‘Nearly there, Chief!’ Corky drawls, and lifts a camel-hair arm. He has squared his legs and pushed out his rump like somebody about to play a croquet shot, and there is a tilt to his haunches that, by nature or intent, suggests a certain femininity. A heap of passports lies at his elbow.

‘Only got to copy a few names, God’s sake. Not a fifty-page contract, Corks.’

‘It’s the new security, I’m afraid, sir,’ Jonathan explains. ‘The Swiss police insist. There seems to be nothing we can do.’

The beautiful Jeds has chosen three magazines but needs more. She has perched one slightly scuffed boot pensively on its long heel, with the toe pointing in the air. Sophie used to do the same. Mid-twenties, Jonathan thinks. Always will be.

‘Been here long then, Pine? Wasn’t here last time round, was he, Frisky? We’d have noticed a stray young Brit.’

‘No way,’ said the blazer, eyeing Jonathan through an imaginary gun slit. Cauliflower ears, Jonathan noticed. Blond hair, going on white. Hands like axeheads.

‘I make it six months, Mr Roper, almost to the day.’

‘Where were you before that?’

‘Cairo,’ Jonathan replied, light as a spark. ‘The Queen Nefertiti.’

Time passes, like time before a detonation. But the carved mirrors of the lobby do not shatter at the mention of the Queen Nefertiti Hotel, the pilasters and chandeliers hold still.

‘Likee, did you? Cairo?’

'Loved it.'

'What made you leave the place then, if you were so high on it?'

*Well, you did, actually*, Jonathan thinks. But he said instead: 'Oh, wanderlust, I suppose, sir. You know how it is. The drifting life is one of the attractions of the trade.'

Suddenly everything was in motion. Corkoran had detached himself from the reception desk and, cigarette held wide, was advancing on them with high steps. The woman Jeds had chosen her magazines and was waiting, Sophie-like, for someone to do something about paying for them. Corkoran said, 'On the room bill, heart.' Herr Kaspar was unloading a wad of mail into the arms of the second blazer who ostentatiously explored the bulkier packages with his fingertips.

'High bloody time, Corks. Hell's happened to your signing hand?'

'Wanker's colic, I should think, Chief,' said Major Corkoran. 'Could be limp wrist,' he added, with a special smile for Jonathan.

'Oh, *Corks*,' said the woman Jeds, giggling.

Out of the corner of his eye Jonathan spotted Mario the head doorman wheeling a stack of matching luggage to the service lift, using the paddling gait with which porters hope to imprint their images on the fickle minds of clients. Then he saw his own fragmented reflection passing him in the mirrors, and Corkoran's beside him carrying his cigarette in one hand and the magazines in the other, and he allowed himself a moment of officious panic because he couldn't see Jeds. He turned and saw her and caught her eye and she smiled at him, which in his startling resurgence of desire was what he craved. He caught Roper's eye also, because she was hanging from Roper's arm, holding it in both her long hands while she almost trod on his feet. The

bodyguards and the affluent society trailed behind them. Jonathan noticed a blond male beauty with his hair tied at the nape, a plain wife scowling beside him.

‘Pilots’ll be along later,’ Corkoran was saying. ‘Some crap about the compass. If it’s not the compass, it’s the bogs won’t flush. You a permanency here, darling, or just a one-night stand?’

His breath smelled of the day’s good things: the martinis before lunch, the wines with it and the brandies afterwards, washed down by his foul French cigarettes.

‘Oh, I think as permanent as one can be, in this profession, Major,’ Jonathan replied, altering his manner a little for an underling.

‘Goes for us all, heart, believe me,’ said the Major fervently. ‘Permanently temporary, Jesus.’

Another film cut and they were traversing the great hall to the tune of ‘When I Take My Sugar To Tea’, played by Maxie the pianist to two old ladies in grey silk. Roper and the woman were still entwined. You’re new to each other, Jonathan told them sourly, out of the corner of his eye. Or else you’re making up after a quarrel. *Jeds*, he repeated to himself. He needed the safety of his single bed.

Yet another cut and they were standing three deep before the ornate doors of Herr Meister’s new Tower Suite lift, the affluent society twittering in the background.

‘Hell happened to the *old* lift, Pine?’ Roper was demanding. ‘Thought Meister was a sucker for old things. Bloody Swiss would modernise Stonehenge if they got a chance. Wouldn’t they, Jeds?’

‘Roper, you can’t make a scene about a *lift*,’ she said in awe. ‘Try me.’

From far away, Jonathan hears a voice not unlike his own,

enumerating the advantages of the new lift: a security measure, Mr Roper, but also an attractive extra feature, installed last autumn for the sole convenience of our Tower Suite guests . . . And as Jonathan talks, he dangles between his fingers the golden master-key created to Herr Meister's personal design, decked with a golden tassel and capped with this rather amusing golden crown.

'I mean, doesn't it remind you of the Pharaohs? It's *quite* outrageous really, but I can assure you that our less sophisticated guests *adore* it,' he confides, with a camp little smile that he has never vouchsafed to anyone before.

'Well, *I* adore it,' says the Major, offscreen. 'And I'm *bloody* sophisticated.'

Roper balances the key in his palm as if to cost its melt-weight. He studies both sides, then the crown, then the tassel.

'Taiwan,' he pronounces and, to Jonathan's alarm, slings it at the blond blazer with cauliflower ears, who catches it low down and fast on his left side, shouting 'Mine!' as he dives.

Beretta 9mm automatic with safety catch at the *on*, Jonathan records. Ebony finish, holster-carried under the right armpit. A left-handed OBG, with a spare magazine in his belt-bag.

'Oh, well *played*, Frisky, heart. Good *catch*,' Corkoran drawls, and there is relieved laughter from the affluent outfield, led by the woman, who squeezes Roper's arm and says *honestly, darling*, though in Jonathan's clouded ear it at first sounds like *policy, darling*.

Now everything is in slow motion, everything is happening under water. The lift takes five at a time, the rest must wait. Roper strides in, drawing the woman after him. Roedean and model school, Jonathan is thinking. Plus a special course that Sophie had also taken in how to do that with your hips when you walk. Then Frisky, then Major Corkoran without his cigarette,

finally Jonathan. Her hair is soft as well as chestnut. She is also nude. That is to say, she has slipped off her quilted coat and slung it over her arm like an army greatcoat. She wears a man's white shirt with Sophie's puffy sleeves rolled to the elbows. Jonathan starts the lift. Corkoran stares disapprovingly upward like a man peeing. The girl's hip rides carelessly against Jonathan's flank in cheerful friendship. *Get off*, he wants to tell her irritably. *If you're flirting, don't. If you're not flirting, keep your hip to yourself.* She smells not of vanilla but of white carnations on Commemoration Day at cadet school. Roper stands behind her, wide hands resting possessively on her shoulders. Frisky gazes blankly downward at the faded bite-mark on her neck, at her unsupported breasts inside the expensive shirt. Like Frisky, no doubt, Jonathan has a disgraceful urge to scoop one out.

'Now why don't I go ahead and show you all the new goodies Herr Meister's put in for you since your last visit?' he suggests.

*Perhaps it's time you gave up manners as a way of life*, Sophie had said to him as she walked beside him in the dawn.

He went ahead, indicating the suite's priceless advantages: the amazing low-flush bar . . . the thousand-year-old fruit . . . the very *latest* in super-hygienic jetstream loos, does everything for you except clean your teeth . . . all his whimsical little jokes, whisked out and polished for the delectation of Mr Richard Onslow Roper, and this long-waisted, funny-faced, unparadoxically attractive woman. How dare she be so beautiful at a time like this?

Meister's legendary Tower hovers like an inflated dovecot over the magic peaks and valleys of the hotel's Edwardian roof. The three-bedroom palace inside it is built on two floors, a pastel experience in what Jonathan confidently calls Swiss Franc

Quatorze. The luggage has arrived, the chasseurs have received their largesse, Jeds has retired to the master bedroom from which issue the far sounds of female singing and running water. The singing is indistinct but provocative, if not downright bawdy. Frisky the blazer has stationed himself at a telephone on the landing and is murmuring orders to someone he disdains. Major Corkoran, armed with a fresh cigarette but minus his camel-hair, is in the dining-room talking slow French on another line for the benefit of somebody whose French is worse than his. His cheeks are fluid as a baby's, the dabs of colour very high. And his French is French French, no question. He has slipped into it as naturally as if it were his mother tongue, which perhaps it is, for nothing about Corkoran suggests an uncomplicated provenance.

Elsewhere in the suite other lives and conversations are unfolding. The tall man with the ponytail is called Sandy, we learn, and Sandy is talking English on another telephone to somebody in Prague called Gregory while Mrs Sandy sits in a chair with her overcoat on, glowering at the wall. But Jonathan has banished these secondary players from his immediate consciousness. They exist, they are elegant, they revolve in their far periphery around the central light of Mr Richard Onslow Roper of Nassau, the Bahamas. But they are chorus. Jonathan's guided tour of the splendours of the palace is complete. It is time he took his leave. A graceful wave of the hand, an endearing exhortation 'please to be sure to enjoy every *bit* of it,' and in the normal way he would have descended smoothly to ground level, leaving his wards to enjoy their pleasures by themselves as best they could at fifteen thousand francs a night including tax, service and continental breakfast.

But tonight is not the normal way, tonight is Roper's night, it is Sophie's night, and Sophie in some bizarre way is played

for us tonight by Roper's woman, whose name to everyone but Roper turns out to be not Jeds but Jed – Mr Onslow Roper likes to multiply his assets. The snow is still falling and the worst man in the world is drawn towards it like a man who is contemplating his childhood in the dancing flakes. He stands cavalry-backed at the centre of the room, facing the French windows and the snow-clad balcony. He holds a green Sotheby's catalogue open before him like a hymnal from which he is about to sing, and his other arm is raised to bring in some silent instrument from the edge of the orchestra. He sports a learned judge's half-lens reading spectacles.

'Soldier Boris and his chum say okay Monday lunch-time,' Corkoran calls from the dining-room. 'Okay Monday lunchtime?'

'Fix,' says Roper, turning a page of the catalogue and watching the snow over his spectacles at the same time. 'Look at that. Glimpse of the infinite.'

'I adore it every time it happens,' says Jonathan earnestly.

'Your friend Appetites from Miami says why not make it the Kronenhalle – food's better.' Corkoran again.

'Too public. Lunch here or bring his sandwiches. Sandy, what does a decent Stubbs horse make these days?'

The pretty male head with the ponytail pokes round the door. 'Size?'

'Thirty by fifty inches.'

The pretty face barely puckers. 'There was a good'un went at Sotheby's last June. *Protector in a Landscape*. Signed and dated, 1779. A lulu.'

'*Quanta costa?*'

'You sitting comfortably?'

'Come off it, Sands!'

'A million two. Plus commish.'



‘Pounds or bucks?’

‘Bucks.’

From the opposite doorway, Major Corkoran is complaining. ‘The Brussels boys want half in cash, Chief. Bloody liberty, if you ask me.’

‘Tell ‘em you won’t sign,’ Roper retorts, with an extra gruffness that he apparently uses for keeping Corkoran at arm’s length. ‘That a hotel up there, Pine?’

Roper’s gaze is fixed on the black window panes where the childhood snowflakes pursue their dance.

‘A beacon, actually, Mr Roper. Some sort of navigational aid, I gather.’

Herr Meister’s treasured ormolu clock is chiming the hour, but Jonathan for all his customary nimbleness is unable to move his feet in the direction of escape. His patent evening shoes remain embedded in the deep pile of the drawing-room carpet as solidly as if they were set in cement. His mild gaze, so at odds with the pugilistic brow, remains fixed on Roper’s back. But Jonathan sees him in only a part of his mind. Otherwise, he is not in the Tower Suite at all, but in Sophie’s penthouse apartment at the top of the Queen Nefertiti Hotel in Cairo.

Sophie too has her back to him, and it is as beautiful as he always knew it was, white against the whiteness of her evening gown. She is gazing, not at the snow but at the huge wet stars of the Cairene night, at the quarter-moon that hangs from its points above the soundless city. The doors to her roof-garden are open, she grows nothing but white flowers – oleander, bougainvillea, agapanthus. The scent of Arabian jasmine drifts past her into the room. A bottle of vodka stands beside her on a table, and it is definitely half-empty, not half-full.

‘You rang,’ Jonathan reminded her with a smile in his voice,

playing the humble servant. Perhaps this is our night, he was thinking.

‘Yes, I rang. And you answered. You are kind. I am sure you are always kind.’

He knew at once that it was not their night.

‘I need to ask you a question,’ she said. ‘Will you answer it truthfully?’

‘If I can. Of course.’

‘You mean there could be circumstances in which you would not?’

‘I mean I might not know the answer.’

‘Oh, you will know the answer. Where are the papers that I entrusted to your care?’

‘In the safe. In their envelope. With my name on.’

‘Has anybody seen them except myself?’

‘The safe is used by several members of the staff, mostly for storing cash until it goes to the bank. So far as I know the envelope is still sealed.’

She allowed her shoulders to slump in a gesture of impatience, but did not turn her head. ‘Did you show them to anyone? Yes or no, please? I am not judgmental. I came to you on an impulse. It would not be your fault if I made a mistake. I had some sentimental vision of you as a clean Englishman.’

So did I, thought Jonathan. Yet it did not occur to him that he had a choice. In the world that mysteriously owned his allegiance, there was only one answer to her question.

‘No,’ he said. And he said again, ‘No, no one.’

‘If you tell me it is the truth, I shall believe you. I wish very much to believe there is one last gentleman on earth.’

‘It’s the truth. I gave you my word. No.’

Again she seemed to disregard his denial or find it premature. ‘Freddie insists I have betrayed him. He entrusted the

papers to my care. He did not want them kept in his office or at home. Dicky Roper is encouraging Freddie in his suspicions of me.'

'Why should he do that?'

'Roper is the other party to the correspondence. Until today, Roper and Freddie Hamid were proposing to become business partners. I was present at some of their discussions on Roper's yacht. Roper was not comfortable to have me as a witness but since Freddie insisted on showing me off to him, he had no choice.'

She seemed to expect him to speak, but he kept his silence.

'Freddie visited me this evening. It was later than his usual hour. When he is in town, it is his custom to visit me before dinner. He uses the car-park lift out of respect for his wife, he stays two hours, then he returns to dine in the bosom of his family. It is my somewhat pathetic boast that I have helped to keep his marriage intact. Tonight he was late. He had been talking on the telephone. It appears that Roper has received a warning.'

'A warning from whom?'

'From good friends in London.' A spurt of bitterness. 'Good for Roper. That is understood.'

'Saying what?'

'Saying that his business arrangements with Freddie are known to the authorities. Roper was careful on the telephone, saying only that he had counted on Freddie's discretion. Freddie's brothers were not so delicate. Freddie had not informed them of the deal. He was wishing to prove himself to them. He had gone so far as to set aside a fleet of Hamid trucks under a pretext in order to transport the merchandise through Jordan. His brothers were not pleased about that either. Now, because Freddie is frightened, he has told them everything. He is also

furious to be losing the esteem of his precious Mr Roper. So *no?*' she rehearsed, still staring into the night. 'Definitely *no*. Mr Pine has no suggestions about how this information could have reached London or come to the ears of Mr Roper's friends. The safe, the papers – he has no suggestions.'

'No. He hasn't. I'm sorry.'

Until then she had not looked at him. Now at last she turned and let him see her face. One eye was closed entirely. Both sides were bloated out of recognition.

'I would like you to take me for a drive, please, Mr Pine. Freddie is not rational when his pride is threatened.'

No time has passed. Roper is still absorbed in the Sotheby's catalogue. Nobody has smashed *his* face into a pulp. The ormolu clock is still chiming the hour. Absurdly, Jonathan checks its accuracy against his wristwatch and, finding himself able to move his feet at last, opens the glass and advances the large hand until the two agree. Run for cover, he tells himself. Flatten. The invisible radio is playing Alfred Brendel playing Mozart. Offstage, Corkoran is once more talking, this time in Italian, which is less assured than his French.

But Jonathan cannot run for cover. The enraging woman is coming down the ornamental staircase. He does not hear her at first, because she is barefoot and dressed in Herr Meister's complimentary bathrobe, and when he does, he can hardly bear to look at her. Her long legs are baby-pink from the bath, her chestnut hair is brushed out like a good girl's over her shoulders. A smell of warm *mousse de bain* has replaced the Commemoration Day carnations. Jonathan is nearly ill with desire.

'And for additional refreshment, allow me to recommend your private bar,' he advises Roper's back. 'Malt whisky,

personally selected by Herr Meister, the vodkas of six nations.’ What else? ‘Oh, and twenty-four-hour room service for you and yours, naturally.’

‘Well, I’m *ravenous*,’ says the girl, refusing to be ignored.

Jonathan allows her his hotelier’s passionless smile. ‘Well, now, do please ask them for *anything* you want. The menu is merely a compass and they *adore* being made to work.’ He returns to Roper and a devil drives him one step further. ‘And English-language cable news in case you want to watch the war. Just touch the green knob on the little box, then nine.’

‘Been there, seen the movie, thanks. Know anything about statuary?’

‘Not much.’

‘Me neither. Makes two of us. Hullo, darling. Good bath?’

‘Gorgeous.’

Crossing the room to a low armchair, the woman Jed folds herself into it, picks up the room-service menu and pulls on a pair of completely circular, very small and, Jonathan is angrily convinced, totally unnecessary gold-framed reading spectacles. Sophie would have worn them in her hair. Brendel’s perfect river has reached the sea. The hidden quadraphonic radio is announcing that Fischer-Dieskau will sing a selection of songs by Schubert. Roper’s shoulder is nudging against him. Out of focus, Jed crosses her baby-pink legs and absentmindedly pulls the skirt of her bathrobe over them while she continues to study the menu. Whore! screams a voice inside Jonathan. Tramp! Angel! Why am I suddenly prey to these adolescent fantasies? Roper’s sculpted index finger is resting on a full-page illustration.

*Lot 236, Venus and Adonis in marble, seventy inches high excluding pediment. Venus with her fingers touching Adonis’s face in adoration, contemporary copy of Canova, unsigned, original at the Villa La Grange, Geneva, estimated price £60,000–£100,000.*

A fifty-year-old Apollo wishes to buy Venus and Adonis.

‘What’s *roasty* anyway?’ says Jed.

‘I think you’re looking at *rösti*,’ Jonathan replies in a tone laced with superior knowledge. ‘It’s a Swiss potato delicacy. Sort of bubble-and-squeak without the squeak, made with lots of butter and fried. If one’s ravenous, perfectly delicious. And they do it *awfully* well.’

‘How do they grab you?’ Roper demands. ‘Likee? No likee? Don’t be lukewarm. No good to anyone – hash browns, darling, had ’em in Miami – what do you say, Mr Pine?’

‘I think it would *rather* depend where they were going to live,’ Jonathan replies cautiously.

‘End of a floral walk. Pergola over the top, view of the sea at the end. West facing, so you get the sunset.’

‘Most beautiful place on earth,’ says Jed.

Jonathan is at once furious with her. Why don’t you shut up? Why is your blah-blah voice so near when you are speaking from across the room? Why does she have to interrupt all the time instead of reading the bloody menu?

‘Sunshine guaranteed?’ asks Jonathan, with his most patronising smile.

‘Three hundred and sixty days a year,’ says Jed proudly.

‘Go on,’ Roper urges. ‘Not made of glass. What’s your verdict?’

‘I’m afraid they’re not me at all,’ Jonathan replies tautly, before he has given himself time to think.

Why on earth does he say this? Probably it is Jed’s fault. Jonathan himself would be the last to know. He has no opinion of statues, he has never bought one, sold one, scarcely paused to consider one, unless it was the awful bronze of Earl Haig looking at God through binoculars from the side of the saluting base on one of the parade grounds of his military childhood. All he was trying to do was tell Jed to keep her distance.

Roper's fine features do not alter, but for a moment Jonathan does wonder whether after all he is made of glass. 'You laughing at me, Jemima?' he asks, with a perfectly pleasant smile.

The menu descends and the puckish, totally undamaged face peers comically over the top of it. 'Why on *earth* should I be?'

'Seem to remember you didn't much care for them either, when I showed 'em to you in the plane.'

She sets the menu on her lap and with both hands removes her useless glasses. As she does so, the short sleeve of Herr Meister's bathrobe gapes, and Jonathan to his total outrage is offered a view of one perfect breast, its slightly erect nipple lifted to him by the action of her arms, the upper half golden-lit by the reading lamp above her.

'Darling,' she says sweetly. 'That's utter, total, unadulterated balls. I said her *bum* was too big. If you like big bums, have her. Your money. Your bum.'

Roper grins, reaches out and grabs hold of the neck of Herr Meister's complimentary bottle of Dom Pérignon, and wrenches.

'Corky!'

'Right here, Chief!'

The moment's hesitation. The corrected voice. 'Give Danby and MacArthur a bell. Shampoo.'

'Will do, Chief.'

'Sandy! Caroline! Shampoo! Hell *are* those two? Fighting again. Bores. Give me the queers every time,' he adds, in an aside to Jonathan. 'Don't go, Pine – party's just warming up. Corks, order up another couple of bottles!'

But Jonathan goes. Somehow semaphoring his regrets, he gains the landing, and as he looks back Jed is flapping a zany

goodbye at him over her champagne glass. He responds with his most glacial smile.

‘Night night, old love,’ Corkoran murmurs as they brush past each other on their separate ways. ‘Thanks for the tender loving care.’

‘Goodnight, Major.’

Frisky the ash-blond OBG has installed himself on a tapestried throne beside the lift, and is studying a paperback of Victorian erotica. ‘Play golf, do we, sweetheart?’ he asks as Jonathan flits by.

‘No.’

‘Me neither.’

*I shoot the snipe with ease*, Fischer-Dieskau is singing. *I shoot the snipe with ease*.

The half-dozen dinner guests sat bowed over their candlelit tables like worshippers in a cathedral. Jonathan sat among them, basking in a determined euphoria. This is what I live for, he told himself: this half-bottle of Pommard, this *foie de veau glacé* with vegetables of three colours, this hotel silver with its bruised old face, twinkling wisely up at me from the damask cloth.

Dining alone had always been his particular pleasure, and tonight, in deference to the war’s depletion, Maître Berri had promoted him from his single-seater by the service door to one of the high altars at the window. Gazing down over the snow-clad golf links to the city lights prickling along the lakeside, Jonathan doggedly congratulated himself on the satisfying completeness of his life till now, the early uglinesses he had left behind.

*That wasn’t easy for you up there with the egregious Roper, Jonathan my boy*, the school’s grey-jawed commandant told his



best cadet approvingly. *And that Major Corkoran is a real piece of work. So was the girl, in my opinion. Never mind. You were firm, you fought your corner. Well played.* And Jonathan actually managed to bestow a congratulatory smile on his reflection in the candlelit window as he recalled his every fawning phrase and lustful thought in the order of its shameful appearance.

Suddenly the *foie de veau* turned to ash in his mouth and the Pommard tasted of gunmetal. His bowels writhed, his vision blurred. Rising from the table in a flurry, he mumbled something to Maître Berri about a forgotten duty, and made it just in time to the men's room.

Jonathan Pine, orphaned only son of a cancer-ridden German beauty and a British sergeant of infantry killed in one of his country's many post-colonial wars, graduate of a rainy archipelago of orphanages, foster homes, half-mothers, cadet units and training camps, sometime army wolfchild with a special unit in even rainier Northern Ireland, caterer, chef, itinerant hotelier, perpetual escapee from emotional entanglements, volunteer, collector of other people's languages, self-exiled creature of the night and sailor without a destination, sat in his sanitary Swiss office behind reception smoking his third unusual cigarette and pondering the sage words of the hotel's revered founder that hung framed alongside his imposing sepia photograph.

Several times in the last months Jonathan had taken up his pen in an effort to free the great man's wisdom from its tortuous German syntax but his efforts had always foundered against some immovable dependent clause. 'True hospitality gives to life what true cooking gives to eating,' he began, believing for a moment that he had it. 'It is the expression of our respect for the essential basic value of every individual creature entrusted to our care in the course of his travail through life, regardless of his condition, of mutual responsibility in the spirit of humanity invested in the –' Then he lost it again as he always did. Some things were best left in the original.

His eye returned to Herr Strippli's tarty television set squatting before him like a man's handbag. It had been playing the same electronic game for the last fifteen minutes. The aerial bomber's sights centre on a grey fleck of building far below. The camera zooms closer. A missile speeds towards the target, enters and descends several floors. The base of the building pops like a paper bag to the unctuous satisfaction of the newscaster. A bull's-eye. Two more shots for no extra money. Nobody talks about the casualties. From that height there aren't any. Iraq is not Belfast.

The image changed. Sophie and Jonathan are taking their drive.

Jonathan is driving and Sophie's pulped face is partly hidden by a headscarf and dark glasses. Cairo is not yet awake. The red of dawn is colouring the dusty sky. To smuggle her out of the hotel and into his car, the undercover soldier had taken every precaution. He set out for the pyramids, not knowing she had a different spectacle in mind. 'No,' she says. 'Go that way.' A fetid oozing pillow of filth hangs over the crumbling tombs of Cairo's city cemetery. On a moonscape of smoking cinders amid shanties of plastic bags and tin cans, the wretched of the earth are crouched like technicolour vultures picking through the garbage. He parks the car on a sand verge. Lorries thunder past them on their way to and from the rubbish dump, leaving stink in their wake.

'This is where I brought him,' she says. One side of her mouth is ridiculously swollen. She speaks through a hole in the other side.

'Why?' says Jonathan – meaning, why are you now bringing me?

"Look at these people, Freddie," I told him. "Each time

someone sells weapons to another tinpot Arab tyrant, these people starve a little more. Do you know the reason? Listen to me, Freddie. Because it is more fun to have a pretty army than to feed the starving. You are an Arab, Freddie. Never mind that we Egyptians say we are not Arabs. We are Arabs. Is it right that your Arab brothers should be the flesh to pay for your dreams?"

'I see,' says Jonathan, with the embarrassment of an Englishman when faced with political emotion.

"We do not *need* leaders," I said. "The next great Arab will be a humble craftsman. He will make things work, and give the people dignity instead of war. He will be an administrator, not a warrior. He will be like you, Freddie, as you could be if you grew up."

'What did Freddie say?' says Jonathan. Her smashed features accuse him every time he looks at them. The bruises round her eyes are turning to blue and yellow.

'He told me to mind my own business.' He catches the choke of fury in her voice and his heart sinks further. 'I told him it *was* my business! *Life and death* are my business! *Arabs* are my business! *He* was my business!'

And you warned him, he thinks, sickened. You let him know you were a force to be reckoned with, not a weak woman to be discarded at his whim. You let him guess that you too had your secret weapon and you threatened to do what I did, without knowing I'd done it already.

'The Egyptian authorities will not touch him,' she says. 'He bribes them and they keep their distance.'

'Leave town,' Jonathan tells her. 'You know what the Hamids are like. Get out.'

'The Hamids can have me killed as easily in Paris as in Cairo.'

‘Tell Freddie he must help you. Make him stick up for you against his brothers.’

‘Freddie is frightened of me. When he is not being brave he is a coward. Why are you staring at the traffic?’

Because it’s all there is to stare at apart from you and the wretched of the earth.

But she does not wait for an answer. Perhaps deep down this student of male weakness understands his shame.

‘I should like some coffee, please. Egyptian.’ And the brave smile that hurts him more than all the recrimination in the world.

He gives her coffee in a street market and drives her back to the hotel car park. He telephones the Ogilveys’ house and gets the maid. ‘Him out,’ she shouts. What about Mrs Ogilvey? ‘Him not there.’ He telephones the Embassy. Him not there either. Him gone to Alexandria for regatta.

He telephones the yacht club to leave a message. A drugged male voice says there is no regatta today.

Jonathan telephones an American friend named Larry Kermody in Luxor – Larry, is that guest suite of yours empty?

He telephones Sophie. ‘An archaeologist friend of mine in Luxor has a spare flat,’ he says. ‘It’s in a place called the Chicago House. You’re welcome to use it for a week or two.’ He searches for humour in the silence. ‘It’s a kind of monk’s cell for visiting academics, stuck onto the back of the house, with its own bit of rooftop. Nobody need even know you’re there.’

‘Will you come also, Mr Pine?’

Jonathan does not allow himself a moment’s hesitation. ‘Can you dump your bodyguard?’

‘He has already dumped himself. Freddie has apparently decided I am not worth protecting.’

He telephones a travel agent who does business with the hotel, a beery-voiced Englishwoman called Stella. ‘Stella, listen.

Two VIP guests, incognito, want to fly to Luxor tonight, expense no object. I know the whole place is shut up. I know there are no planes. What can you do?’

A long silence. Stella is psychic. Stella has been in Cairo too long: ‘Well, I know *you’re* very important, darling, but who’s the girl?’ And she gives a foul, wheezing laugh that chokes and whistles in Jonathan’s ear long after he has rung off.

Jonathan and Sophie sit side by side on the flat roof of the Chicago House, drinking vodka and staring at the stars. On the flight she has barely spoken. He has offered her food but she wants none. He has put a shawl over her shoulders.

‘Roper is the worst man in the world,’ she announces.

Jonathan’s experience of the world’s villains is limited. His instinct is to blame himself first, and others afterwards.

‘I guess anyone in his business is pretty frightful,’ he says.

‘He has no excuse,’ she retorts, unappeased by his moderation. ‘He is healthy. He is white. He is rich. He is well-born, well-educated. He has grace.’ Roper’s enormity grows as she contemplates his virtues. ‘He is at ease with the world. He is amusing. Confident. Yet he destroys it. What is missing in him?’ She waits for him to say something, but in vain. ‘How does he come to be like this? He was not dragged up in the back streets. He is blessed. You are a man. Perhaps you know.’

But Jonathan doesn’t know anything any more. He is watching the outline of her battered face against the night sky. *What will you do?* he was asking her in his mind. *What will I?*

He switched off Herr Strippli’s television set. The war ended. I loved you. I loved you with your smashed face as we walked at arm’s length among the temples of Karnak. *Mr Pine*, you said, *it is time to make the rivers flow uphill.*

It was two a.m., the hour at which Herr Meister required Jonathan to make his rounds. He began in the lobby where he always began. He stood at the centre of the carpet where Roper had stood, and listened to the restless night sounds of the hotel which by day were lost in the hubbub: the throb of the furnace, the growl of a vacuum cleaner, the clink of plates from the room-service kitchen, the footfall of a waiter on the back stair. He stood where he stood every night, imagining her stepping from the lift, her face repaired, her dark glasses shoved into her black hair, crossing the lobby and pulling up before him while she quizzically examines him for flaws. 'You are Mr Pine. The flower of England. And you betrayed me.' Old Horwitz the night concierge was sleeping at his counter. He had laid his cropped head in the crook of his arm. You're still a refugee, Horwitz, thought Jonathan. March and sleep. March and sleep. He set the old man's empty coffee cup safely outside his reach.

At the reception desk, Fräulein Eberhardt had been relieved by Fräulein Vipp, a greyed, obliging woman with a brittle smile.

'Can I see tonight's late arrivals, please, Fräulein Vipp?'

She handed him the Tower Suite registration forms. Alexander, Lord Langbourne, alias no doubt Sandy. Address: Tortola, British Virgin Islands. Profession – according to Corkoran – peer of the realm. Accompanied by wife, Caroline. No reference to the long hair tied at the nape, or to what a peer of the realm might do apart from being a peer. Onslow Roper, Richard, profession company director. Jonathan leafed briskly through the rest of the forms. Frobisher, Cyril, pilot. MacArthur, Somebody, and Danby, Somebody Else, company executives. Other assistants, other pilots, bodyguards. Inglis, Francis, from Perth, Australia – Francis hence Frisky, presumably – physical-training

instructor. Jones, Tobias, from South Africa – Tobias hence Tabby – athlete. He had left her till last deliberately, like the one good photograph in a batch of misses. Marshall, Jemima W., address, like Roper's, a numbered box in Nassau. British. Occupation – rendered with a particular flourish by the Major – equestrienne.

'Can you do me copies of these, Fräulein Vipp? We're conducting a survey of Tower Suite guests.'

'Naturally, Mr Pine,' said Fräulein Vipp, taking the forms to the back office.

'Thank you, Fräulein Vipp,' said Jonathan.

But in his imagination it is himself that Jonathan sees, labouring over the photocopier in the Queen Nefertiti Hotel while Sophie smokes and watches him: *You are adept*, she says. Yes, I am adept. I spy. I betray. I love when it is too late.

Frau Merthan was the telephone operator, another soldier of the night, whose sentry-box was an airless cubicle beside reception.

'*Guten Abend, Frau Merthan.*'

'Good morning, Mr Jonathan.'

It was their joke.

'Gulf war running nicely, I trust?' Jonathan glanced at the bulletins dangling from the newsprinter. 'Bombing continues unabated. One thousand missions already flown. Safety in numbers, they say.'

'So much money to spend on one Arab,' said Frau Merthan with disapproval.

He began tidying the papers, an instinctive habit that had been with him since his first school dormitory. As he did so his eye caught the faxes. One sleek tray for incoming, contents to be distributed in the morning. One sleek tray for outgoing, waiting to be returned to their senders.



‘Lots of telephone activity, Frau Merthan? Panic selling across the globe? You must be feeling like the hub of the universe.’

‘Princesse du Four must call her cousin in Vladivostok. Every night now that things are better in Russia she calls Vladivostok and speaks to him for one hour. Every night she gets cut off and must be reconnected. I think she is looking for her prince.’

‘How about the princes in the Tower?’ he asked. ‘They seemed to be living on the telephone from the moment they got in there.’

Frau Merthan tapped a couple of keys and peered at the screen through her bifocals. ‘Belgrade, Panama, Brussels, Nairobi, Nassau, Prague, London, Paris, Tortola, England somewhere, Prague again, more Nassau. All direct. Soon it will be only direct and I shall have no job.’

‘One day all of us will be robots,’ Jonathan assured her. Leaning over Frau Merthan’s counter he affected a layman’s curiosity.

‘Does that screen of yours show the actual numbers they ring?’ he asked.

‘Naturally, otherwise the guests complain immediately. It’s normal.’

‘Show me.’

She showed him. Roper knows the wicked people everywhere, Sophie had said.

In the dining-room Bobbi the odd-job man was balanced on an aluminium ladder cleaning the droplets of a chandelier with his spider-mop. Jonathan trod lightly in order not to disturb his concentration. In the bar Herr Kaspar’s nymphet nieces in trembling smocks and stonewashed jeans were replenishing pot-plants. Bouncing up to him, the elder girl displayed a pile of muddy cigarette stubs in her gloved palm.

‘Do men do this in their own homes?’ she demanded, lifting her breasts to him in saucy indignation. ‘Put their fag-ends in the flower-pots?’

‘I should think so, Renate. Men do the most unspeakable things at the drop of a hat.’ Ask Ogilvey, he thought. In his abstraction her pertness annoyed him unreasonably. ‘I’d watch out for that piano if I were you. Herr Meister will kill you if you scratch it.’

In the kitchens the night chefs were preparing a dormitory feast for the German newly-weds on the Bel Etage: steak tartare for him, smoked salmon for her, a bottle of Meursault to revive their ardour. Jonathan watched Alfred the Austrian night waiter give a sensitive tuck with his fine fingers at the napkin rosettes, and add a bowl of camellias for romance. Alfred was a failed ballet dancer and put ‘artist’ in his passport.

‘They’re bombing Baghdad then,’ he said with satisfaction while he worked. ‘That’ll teach them.’

‘Did the Tower Suite eat tonight?’

Alfred took a breath and recited. His smile was becoming a little young for him. ‘Three smoked salmon, one fish and chips English-style, four fillet steak medium and a double dollop of carrot cake and *Schlag* which you call *Rahm*. Carrot cake is what His Highness has for a religion. He told me. And from the Herr Major, on His Highness’s instructions, a fifty-franc tip. You English always tip when you’re in love.’

‘Do we indeed?’ said Jonathan. ‘I must remember that.’ He ascended the great staircase. Roper’s not in love, he’s just rutting. Probably hired her from some tarts’ agency, so much a night. He had arrived at the double doorway to the Grande Suite. The newly-weds were also newly shod, he noticed: he in patent black with buckles, she in gold sandals flung impatiently where they

lay. Impelled by a lifetime of obedience, Jonathan stooped and placed them side by side.

Reaching the top floor, he put his ear to Frau Loring's door and heard the braying of a British military pundit over the hotel's cable network. He knocked. She was wearing her late husband's dressing-gown over her nightdress. Coffee was glugging on a ring. Sixty years of Switzerland had not altered her High German by a single explosive consonant.

'They are children. But they are fighting, so they are men,' she announced in his mother's perfect accents, handing him a cup.

The British television pundit was moving model soldiers round a sandbox with the fervour of a convert.

'So the Tower Suite is full of whom tonight?' asked Frau Loring who knew everything.

'Oh, some English mogul and his cohorts. Roper. Mr Roper and party. And one lady half his age.'

'The staff say she is exquisite.'

'I didn't look.'

'And quite unspoilt. Natural.'

'Well, they should know.'

She was studying him the way she always did when he sounded casual. Sometimes she seemed to know him better than he knew himself.

'You are glowing tonight. You could light a city. What is going on inside you?'

'I expect it's the snow.'

'So nice the Russians are on our side at last. No?'

'It's a great diplomatic achievement.'

'It's a miracle,' Frau Loring corrected him. 'And like most miracles, nobody believes in it.'

She handed him his coffee and sat him firmly in his usual

chair. Her television set was enormous, bigger than the war. Happy troops waving from armoured personnel carriers. More missiles racing prettily to their mark. The sibilant shuffle of tanks. Mr Bush taking another encore from his admiring audience.

'You know what I feel when I watch war?' Frau Loring asked.

'Not yet,' he said tenderly. But she seemed to have forgotten what she had meant to say.

Or perhaps Jonathan does not hear it, for the clarity of her assertions reminds him irresistibly of Sophie. The joyful fruition of his love for her is forgotten. Even Luxor is forgotten. He is back in Cairo for the final awful act.

He is standing in Sophie's penthouse, dressed – what the hell does it matter what I wore? – dressed in this very dinner-jacket while a uniformed Egyptian police inspector and his two plain-clothes assistants eye him with the borrowed stillness of the dead. The blood is everywhere, reeking like old iron. On the walls, on the ceiling and divan. It is spilt like wine across the dressing-table. Clothes, clocks, tapestries, books in French and Arabic and English, gilt mirrors, scents and ladies' paint – all have been trashed by a gigantic infant in a tantrum. Sophie herself is by comparison an insignificant feature of this havoc. Half-crawling, perhaps towards the open French windows leading to her white roof-garden, she lies in what the army first-aid manual used to call the recovery position with her head on her outstretched arm, a counterpane draped across her lower body, and over the upper part the remnants of a blouse or nightdress of which the colour is unlikely ever to be known. Other policemen are doing other things, none with much conviction. One man is leaning over the parapet of the roof-garden, apparently

in search of a culprit. Another is fiddling with the door of Sophie's wall safe, making it plop as he works it back and forth across its smashed hinges. Why do they wear black holsters? Jonathan wonders. Are they night people too?

From the kitchen a man's voice is talking Arabic into the telephone. Two more policemen guard the front door leading to the landing where a bunch of first-class cruise passengers in silk dressing-gowns and face-cream stare indignantly at their protectors. A uniformed boy with a notebook takes a statement. A Frenchman is saying he will call his lawyer.

'Our guests on the floor below are complaining about the disturbance,' Jonathan tells the inspector. He realises he has made a tactical mistake. At a moment of violent death it is neither natural nor polite to explain one's presence.

'You was friends with thisser woman?' the inspector asks. A cigarette hangs from his lips.

Does he know about Luxor?

Does Hamid?

The best lies are told face to face, with a touch of arrogance: 'She liked to make use of the hotel,' Jonathan replies, still fighting for a natural tone. 'Who did this? What happened?'

The inspector shrugs a prolonged, disinterested shrug. *Fred die is not normally troubled by the Egyptian authorities. He bribes them and they keep their distance.*

'You was having sex with thisser woman?' the inspector asks.

Did they see us board the plane?

Follow us to the Chicago House?

Bug the flat?

Jonathan has found his calm. He can do that. The more terrible the occasion, the more certainly can his calm be relied upon. He affects a certain irritation: 'If you call the odd cup