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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 midday, 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 motorbike 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 handbag 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 innuendo 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 InterArab 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.’

‘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.