

I

IN THOSE DAYS the station in Janvilliers had an arched glass roof over the southbound platform as if in imitation of the big domes at St Lazare. When it rained, the impact of the water set up a nervy rattle as the glass echoed and shook against the fancy restraint of its iron framework. There was a more modest rumble emitted by the covered footbridge, while from the gutters there came an awful martyred gurgling as they sought out broken panes and unmended masonry down which to spit the water that was choking them. The thin sound of the locomotive's wheeze as it braced itself for its final three stops up the coast was thus barely audible to the two people who alighted from the train that damp but not untypical Monday night.

One was the driver, who was following the custom of years by climbing down from his cab, hat pulled over his ears, and racing to the side-door of the station buffet where his glass of brandy would be waiting for him. There was no time for conversation – just a quick gulp and he was gone, as usual, scuttling back up the platform, hoisting himself aboard with a word to the fireman and a reinvigorated haul on the levers as the engine hissed and the train set off to arrive, as usual, a minute and a half late at its next stop.

The other was a slight, dark-haired girl with two heavy suitcases, frowning into the rain and trying not to feel frightened. She stood in the doorway of the ticket hall, hoping someone would have been sent to fetch her. 'Be brave, little Anne, be brave,' old Louvet, her guardian, would have said to her if he had been sober, or there, or – for all Anne knew – alive. After a time she did see the long bending approach of headlights, but the car circled the fountains in the middle of the square and disappeared in a spray of water.

Louvet, who thought himself a philosopher, had a theory

that all unhappiness was a version of the same feeling. As Anne felt a tremor of abandonment, gazing over the rainy square, she pictured him explaining to her: 'When the good Lord made this world from the infinite number of possibilities open to him and selected – from another limitless pool – the kind of misery that his creatures should be subject to, he selected only one model. The moment of bereavement. Death, desertion, betrayal – all the same thing. The child sent from its parents, the widow, the lover abandoned – they all feel the same emotion which, in its most extreme form, finds expression in a cry.' Practice had given an almost religious eloquence to Louvet's blasphemous conclusion: 'One cannot, my dear Anne, escape the conviction that the good Lord was, if not unimaginative, then at least rather simple.'

Anne, who was not a philosopher, saw a dripping form, male by the look of it and wrapped in a cape, approach her from the darkness. His voice was rough and grudging. 'Are you the waitress? For the Hotel du Lion d'Or?' His face now appeared in what light spilled over from the yellow lamp in the ticket hall. He was a youth of about nineteen with thick black eyebrows and dark curls stuck against his forehead under a leather cap. He had an extinguished cigarette between his teeth and his cheeks were traumatised by spots.

'Yes, that's right. Who are you?'

'I work there. My name's Roland. I've got the van. The boss said to come and pick you up. It's over here.'

He led the way, shambling in a mixture of embarrassment and in an attempt to keep dry by wrapping his cape around him, which caused his knees to come too close together. Anne followed, struggling to keep up under the handicap of the heavy suitcases. Roland took her round the back of the station yard and gestured to a small van. He unlashed the canvas from the open back and gestured to her to throw in her suitcases. With considerable swearing and violence towards the tinny machine, he succeeded in making it creep, then jerk, then rush across the darkened square as he fought to locate the gears. Nervous at what might be waiting for her, Anne began to talk.

'What do you do at the hotel?'

‘Stuff no one else wants to do. Boots. Washing up. Waiter on Sundays.’

‘Do you come from here?’

‘Yes. Never been away. Don’t really want to. I went to Paris once.’

‘Did you like it?’

‘No.’

‘Why not?’

‘Don’t know.’

‘I’ve come from Paris.’

Roland made no reply but pulled back the window on his side of the van and pushed at the little windscreen-wiper. The rubber had almost worn away on the fragile stick, and its small motor functioned properly only in dry weather. Roland peered forward in an attempt to see through the misty swathe that the wiper cut intermittently across the glass. Anne couldn’t think what to say to him; it seemed rude not to make conversation, but she didn’t want to distract him.

‘Do you often drive this van?’

‘No. Well, yes, it’s not that I’m not used to it, of course. I drive it just as much as anyone else. But petrol, you know.’

‘Is the boss very mean then?’

‘No, it’s Madame. *He* couldn’t care less.’

‘Madame his wife?’

‘No. Madame Bouin, the manageress. The Cow. She thinks we should only go to the market once a week and load up. You know, the big market down the road. The rest of the time we have to get the stuff from here. She sends us on foot.’

‘If you only go to the big market once a week, doesn’t the food get stale?’

Roland’s nose emitted a snort of what might have been laughter. ‘Makes no difference to Bruno. It all tastes like pig-shit, what he does with it.’

They negotiated the perimeter of another square, with the town hall, a curious building beneath a black slate roof in the grand eighteenth-century manner, in one corner. They drove on in silence down a street called the rue des Ecoles, swung

sharply left and found themselves face to face with the Hotel du Lion d'Or.

'I hadn't realised it was so near. I could have walked,' said Anne.

'Easily,' Roland agreed, getting out of the van. 'It was the old man, apparently. The Patron. Said I should come. I was playing cards.'

'I'm sorry, I –'

But Roland had gone, shuffling down a small alley by the hotel and vanishing into the night. Perhaps the other card players had waited for him, their hands concealed face down on some kitchen table. Perhaps they had cut the pack to see who should have the chore of picking up the wretched girl. Anne breathed in deeply.

The hotel was secluded from the square by a courtyard and a grey wall with a pair of rusting iron gates. Anne heaved her cases up to the front doors through whose glass panels she could make out a broad lobby, leading up to a staircase in the crook of which was the concierge's desk. She was aware of a woman behind it watching her as the suitcases dripped gently on to the parquet floor. She put them down on a threadbare mat in front of the counter.

'Mademoiselle?' It was the woman behind the desk who spoke, her voice not so much interrogative as menacing. Mme Bouin, Anne supposed. Her eyes had a calm quality despite the fact that one of them was monstrously enlarged by the thick lens of her spectacles. Her bearing managed to combine world-weariness with a feline state of readiness. Anne had a sense that anything she herself might say would have been anticipated by this woman, and nothing she could devise would please her. Presumably she behaved in the same way with the guests.

'I've come to take the waitress job.'

'Have you now? Then why have you come through the front door? I understood from Monsieur the Patron that you had had previous experience of hotel work. Is this what you were told is normal?'

The woman's voice remained as level as her eyes.

'I'm sorry, I – I didn't know the way in. The young man

who brought me, Roland, he – ’ Anne checked herself, fearing to bring Mme Bouin’s displeasure on to Roland, who had been anxious only to finish his game of cards.

‘Where did he go?’

‘I’m not sure. It was kind of him to come and pick me up on a night like this.’

Mme Bouin said nothing. Instead, she took a card from among a sheaf of papers in front of her. ‘Details. Insurance and so on,’ she said, handing the card across the desk.

‘Do I have to do it now?’

Again the woman said nothing but swivelled on her chair and took the handset from a telephone switchboard which she cranked vigorously by hand. She spoke fast and indistinctly. Anne noticed a pile of needlework on the table beneath the board from which hung the numbered bedroom keys. She took the forms and a pen from the desk.

Surname: Louvet. She had grown used to this lie. The local lawyer had advised her as a child to abandon her family name when it was appearing daily in the newspapers. Forenames: Anne Marie Thérèse. These at least, and the date of her birth, she could give truthfully. Her handwriting was determined and precise. By the space for ‘Previous Place of Employment’ she put the name of a café near the Gare Montparnasse. Next of kin: she wrote down the name of Louvet, her assumed father, blurring with skilled certainty, though not without a qualm, the lines of her identity.

She handed back the completed card to Mme Bouin. ‘When will I meet Monsieur the Patron?’

‘Monsieur the Patron? How should I know? He has the hotel to run and his other duties to attend to. Monsieur the Patron is an extremely busy man. Here now, you had better follow me.’ Mme Bouin stood up and circled the counter. She was much taller than Anne had expected. Her grey dress was inflated by a large bosom on which rested a gold chain and a handful of keys; she walked with an agile bustling movement, pulling a black cardigan about her shoulders as she led Anne to the foot of the stairs.

‘You may use the front stairs tonight. At all other times you will use the back stairs.’

She went ahead up the thinning carpet. Anne watched the black-stockinged legs in their plain black shoes recede before her, briskly mounting the main sweep of the staircase and turning up another narrower set of stairs, then down a corridor lined with wardrobes and out on to a landing with a bare wooden floor.

Mme Bouin indicated a further, twisting and carpetless flight of stairs. 'Your room is at the top. There is a staff bathroom at the end of this passage on the left, though you must ask in advance if you wish to take a bath. Hot water is restricted and staff are not expected to bathe more than twice a week. You will find a jug and bowl in your room which are adequate for daily washing. You will be required in the kitchen at six-thirty tomorrow morning.'

Anne heard the rattle of keys on Mme Bouin's bosom as she returned the way they had come. Alone again, Anne looked around her.

The bedroom she had been allotted was under the eaves of the Hotel du Lion d'Or and its single window overlooked a back yard where she could see only filmy rain tumbling into the dark. There was an iron bedstead, a plain wooden chair, a small writing table and a chest of drawers with, as Mme Bouin had promised, a jug and bowl. A curtain in the corner concealed a hanging area for clothes which contained a black uniform. Although the room was plain and small, the rafters that slanted diagonally from above the window gave it a secure rather than imprisoning feeling; the agonised Christ above the bed could be moved somewhere he would be less visibly tormented; the bed linen, though rough and thinning, was clean; the bare floor, even if it was made only from boards, not parquet, had been scrubbed; and above the writing table hung a picture of a medieval knight.

Everything Anne owned was in her two suitcases. Her favourite possession, a second-hand gramophone with a cracked but sonorous horn attachment, she had had to sell, since it was too heavy to carry and she didn't think the Patron would approve of the sound of dance music coming from a servant's room. The records themselves she had been unable to part with – half a dozen heavy black plates in brown paper

covers which she stowed in the bottom drawer of the chest.

Anne had left her door a few inches ajar so anyone on the landing below could see her light and might then be tempted to come and talk to her. Apart from Roland, Mme Bouin and the Patron, she had no idea who else the staff might comprise, but she hoped there would be at least someone who would be a friend for her – a girl of her own age, perhaps, with a big family in the town where she would be taken at weekends. When alone, Anne constructed fantasies of a kind in which the events were all conceivable but in which the crucial element of luck ran well for her. She didn't want to live in a grand manor with cavernous rooms and wooded lands, but in one of those simple houses behind gates where children could be seen playing on the sandy paths and a dog padded silently across the grass. If once she saw such a place, her fantasy was unstoppable and she would bare its inner rooms to her scanning eye, and reshape, recolour and repeople them until they contained what she wanted.

With her clothes unpacked, she arranged her half dozen books along the top of the writing table and propped her picture – a view of Paris roofs, layered and rainswept – on the chest of drawers. On the writing table, next to the books, she placed a photograph of her mother, taken fifteen years before. She wore a formal, posed expression which did not quite conceal a look of timid puzzlement about the eyes.

The rain had stopped when Anne closed the shutters on the small window, though from outside she could hear the water that had gathered as it dripped from the eaves and rang on the paved courtyard below. She pushed her door a little further open and listened. She could hear the sound of crockery, distantly, and of a door banging, but otherwise nothing. Most people, she guessed, would now be in bed, so it was too late to ask Mme Bouin or anyone else whether it was permissible for her to have a bath. She took her dressing-gown from behind the curtain and went quietly down the twisting staircase and along the corridor to the bathroom. She went in and locked the door, a simple action which caused an eruption of furtive activity backstairs.

*

Roland's scabrous face was boiling with a mixture of anguish and excitement as he bent down and took off his shoes. He tiptoed out of the back pantry and down the corridor. He passed a vast sink which was awash with cold water and the hotel's feebly crested crockery ('Leave it for the new girl in the morning,' Bruno, the chef, had said) and a wall full of unused culinary implements of the more sophisticated kind – peculiar fish-kettles and elaborate double-steamers – which Bruno regarded with robust contempt.

The room next to the servants' bathroom was a linen store, and it had been Roland's aim, planned over many months, to steal the key from Mme Bouin's bunch, copy it and return the original before she should notice. Since the keys seldom left her bosom this operation had not been without problems. The copied key didn't fit very well, but it did turn the lock into the little windowless box whose slatted shelves were heated by the long pipes that ran down the wall. Roland breathed heavily, smelling timber, mice and mothballs, as he lifted the linen from one of the shelves, noting how it had been stored, before he put it to one side.

High on the other side in the bathroom he had removed a tile, and twice a week on bath-nights he had worked away at the plaster, taking away the débris in his washbag at the end of the operation. Once the connection was made, he had concealed the hole in the linen closet with old bedspreads and curtains he knew were unlikely to be required. He ended up standing on one leg on the support of a lower shelf, craning diagonally upwards and drawing the rogue tile through to the linen room on a piece of string.

The reward for his hard work had been the sight of Sophie, Anne's predecessor, taking her twice-weekly bath. She was a sturdy girl from Lyon and not one who had previously attracted much attention from men, but Roland was loyal to her charms. Although the steam sometimes made it hard for him to see as clearly as he would have liked, he never missed an opportunity.

He had waited anxiously for his first view of Sophie's replacement and, when he had first glimpsed her at the station, he had not been disappointed. Now in his hurry he

pulled the tile through with more than the usual noise. He waited for a moment, holding his breath, listening for a sound of protest from the bathroom. He heard nothing, and when he could wait no longer he jammed his bursting face against the opening.

The first thing he saw was a girlish undergarment of whose exact name or purpose he was unaware. It had lace trimmings and hung over a wooden towel horse, irritatingly close to his line of vision. Through the equally frustrating steam that rose from the bath he saw the girl's hair pulled up from her neck by a ribbon and saw where the stray wisps hung dark against the whiteness of her shoulders. There were perhaps some freckles there too, but Roland's eye scorned such detail.

She leant forward to turn on more water and he saw the fall of her breasts, a movement of surprising weight given the slightness of her frame. Then she raised her knee and he could make out the line that traced the distance from calf to mid-thigh; it ran like the outline of the fashion drawings he sometimes saw in newspapers – just a casual sweep that seemed to hint, by slenderness, at unfortold curves. He remembered the sturdy legs of Sophie which, until then, had seemed quite adequate.

Anne herself had little vanity about her body, though sometimes she felt a vague gratitude towards it for what it had taken her through. When she looked at her ankles and feet, so soft they seemed almost unused, or gazed in the mirror at her dark eyes, which were unlined and full of light, she wondered where she carried her experiences. Perhaps they lay stored in microscopic cells in her blood, or perhaps they lay waiting to ambush her in her mind. The body itself seemed full of health and latent energy; the physical contrasts of girl and woman, still not quite resolved, gave it charm.

When she stood up with her back to him, Roland almost made the mistake of closing his eyes in ecstasy. She let the water out of the bath and went to the wash basin where she cleared the steam from the mirror and leaned forward, her feet apart, to look closely at her face. She moved then with a youthful swiftness, her body visible only momentarily as she dried it out of the line of Roland's questing eye.

Anne climbed the stairs after her bath, glad that she had not been interrupted by Mme Bouin hammering on the door. She pulled out the bolster from under the sheets and up-ended it behind the hanging curtain. She lay down in bed and found the ache of carrying heavy baggage, the noise of the train and the fear of newness were all forgotten as she clutched herself tight beneath the eiderdown, sailing out into sleep.

Frequently she dreamed, strange unpleasant dreams relating to the events of her childhood. She never told people about them. She had read in a magazine that it was bad manners to tell others what you dreamed at night. Things which seemed so real to you meant nothing to them. It was hard enough to show an interest in the actual events of other people's lives without being bored by their night-time imaginings.

The trouble was that Anne's dreams weren't really fantasies or exotic figurations. They were prosaic, repetitive and based on fact. Her dream on that first night at the Lion d'Or held all the usual elements, though with the puzzling variation that much of it took place in an old-fashioned inn with straw on the floor, perhaps because Anne had fantasies about rustic inns which the Lion d'Or had not fulfilled.

The end came in what old Louvet termed the only misery, abandonment. She ran into a field and called out some word, some mysterious sound.

Then, that night anyway, she fell away into calmness.