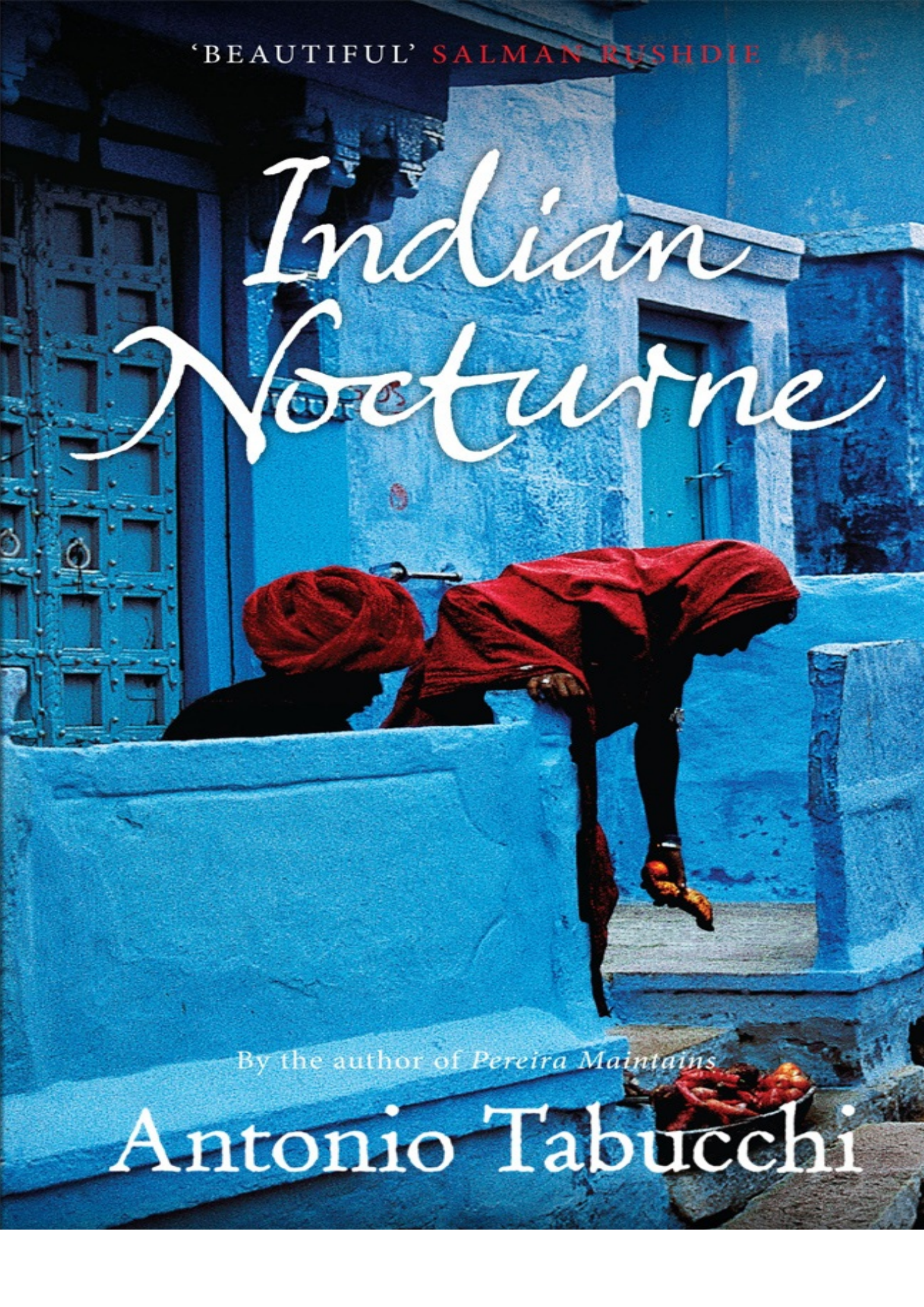


'BEAUTIFUL' SALMAN RUSHDIE

Indian Nocturne

By the author of *Pereira Maintains*

Antonio Tabucchi



Indian Nocturne

Antonio Tabucchi

Translated from the Italian
by Tim Parks



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Those who sleep badly seem to a greater or lesser degree guilty: what do they do? They make the night present.

Maurice Blanchot

Author's Note

As well as being an insomnia, this book is also a journey. The insomnia belongs to the writer of the book, the journey to the person who did the travelling. All the same, given that I too happen to have been through the same places as the protagonist of this story, it seemed fitting to supply a brief index of the various locations. I don't really know whether this idea was prompted by the illusion that a topographical inventory, with the force that the real possesses, might throw some light on this Nocturne in which a Shadow is sought; or whether by the irrational conjecture that some lover of unlikely itineraries might one day use it as a guide.

A.

Index of the Places in this Book

- The Khajuraho Hotel. Suklaji Street, no number, Bombay.
- Breach Candy Hospital. Bhulabai Desai Road, Bombay.
- The Taj Mahal Inter-Continental Hotel. Gateway of India, Bombay.
- Railway Retiring Rooms. Victoria Station, Central Railway, Bombay. Accommodation for the night with valid railway ticket or with an Indrail Pass.
- The Taj Coromandel Hotel. 5 Nungambakkam Road, Madras.
- The Theosophical Society. 12 Adyar Road, Adyar, Madras.
- Bus-stop. The Madras–Mangalore road, about 50 kilometres from Mangalore, place-name unknown.
- Arcebisgado e Colégio de S. Boaventura. Calangute–Panaji road, Velha Goa, Goa.
- The Zuari Hotel. Swatantrya Path, no number, Vasco da Gama, Goa.
- . Calangute Beach. About 20 kilometres from Panaji, Goa.
- . The Mandovi Hotel. 28 Bandodkar Marg, Panaji, Goa.
- . The Oberoi Hotel. Bogmalo Beach, Goa.

INDIAN NOCTURNE

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I

The taxi driver wore a hairnet and had a pointed beard and a short ponytail tied with a white ribbon. I thought he might be a Sikh, since my guidebook described them as looking exactly like that. My guidebook was called *India, a Travel Survival Kit*; I'd bought it in London, more out of curiosity than anything else, since the information it offered about India was fairly bizarre and at first glance superfluous. Only later was I to realise how useful it could be.

The Sikh was driving too fast for my liking and hitting his horn ferociously. I had the impression he was deliberately going as close to the pedestrians as he could, and with an indefinable smile on his face that I didn't like. On his right hand he wore a black glove, and I didn't like that either. When he turned into Marine Drive he seemed to calm down and quietly took his place in one of the lines of traffic on the side nearest the sea. With his gloved hand he pointed to the palm trees along the seafront and the curve of the bay. 'That's Trobay,' he said, 'and opposite us is Elephant Island, only you can't see it. I'm sure you'll be wanting to go there, the ferries leave every hour from the Gateway of India.'

I asked him why he was going down Marine Drive. I didn't know Bombay, but I was trying to follow our route on a map on my knees. My reference points were Malabar Hill and the Chor, the Thieves' Market. My hotel was somewhere between those two points, and there was no need to go along Marine Drive to get to it. We were driving in the opposite direction.

'The hotel you mentioned is in a very poor district,' he said affably, 'and the goods are very poor quality. Tourists on their first trip to Bombay often end up in the wrong sort of place. I'm taking you to a hotel suitable for a gentleman like yourself.' He spat out of the window and winked. 'Where the goods are top quality.' He gave me a sleazy smile of great complicity, and this I liked even less.

'Stop here,' I said, 'at once.'

He turned round and looked at me with a servile expression. 'But I can't stop here,' he said, 'there's the traffic.'

'Then I'll get out anyway,' I said, opening the door and holding it tight.

He braked sharply and began a litany in a language that must have been Marathi. He looked furious and I don't suppose the words he was hissing through his teeth were particularly polite, but I didn't take any notice. I had only the one small suitcase which I had kept beside me, so there wasn't even any need for him to get out and get me my luggage. I left him a hundred-rupee note and climbed out onto the vast pavement of Marine Drive. On the beach there was a religious festival, or fair, one or the other, with a big crowd milling in front of something I couldn't make out. Along the seafront there were bums stretched out on the parapet, children selling knick-knacks, beggars. There was also a line of motorised rickshaws; I jumped into a sort of yellow cubicle hitched up to a moped and shouted the name of the street my hotel was on to the small driver. He stamped on the starter pedal and set off at full speed, slipping into the traffic.

Cage District was much worse than I had imagined. I'd seen it in the photographs of a famous photographer and thought I was prepared for human misery, but photographs enclose the visible in a rectangle. The visible without a frame is always something else. And then here the visible had too strong a smell. Or rather smells, a lot of smells.

It was dusk when we entered the district, and in the time it took to go down a street, quite suddenly as happens in the tropics, night fell. Many of the buildings in Cage District are made of wood and matting. Prostitutes wait in shacks made of ill-fitting boards, their heads sticking out of holes. Some of those shacks were not much larger than sentry-boxes. And then there were hovels and tents of rags, little shops perhaps or other kinds of business, lit by paraffin lamps, with small clusters of people in front. But the Hotel Khajuraho had a small illuminated sign and opened almost on the corner of a street with brick buildings, and the lobby, if you could call it that, was merely ambiguous without being sordid. It was a small dark room with a high counter like the bars in English pubs; at each end of the counter were two lamps with red shades and behind it was an old woman. She wore a gaudy sari and her nails were painted blue; by the looks of her she could have been European, although on her forehead she wore one of the many marks that Indian women do wear. I showed her my passport and told her I'd booked by telegram. She nodded and began to copy from my passport making a great show of how careful she was being, then she turned the paper round for me to sign.

'With bathroom or without?' she asked, and told me the price.

I took a room with a bathroom. I had the impression she spoke with a slight American accent, but I didn't go into it.

She told me the room number and handed me the key. The keyring was made of transparent plastic with a design inside of the kind you might expect in a hotel like this. 'Do you want dinner?' she asked. She looked at me suspiciously. I got the message that the place was not usually used by Westerners. Naturally she was wondering what I was doing there with hardly any luggage after having cabled from the airport.

I said yes. Not that eating in the hotel was a particularly pleasant prospect, but I was very hungry and it didn't seem a good idea to start wandering around the area at this hour.

'The dining room closes at eight,' she said. 'After eight it's room-service only.'

I said I'd prefer to eat downstairs; she led me to a curtain on the other side of the lobby and I went through into a small vaulted room with darkly painted walls and low tables. The tables were almost all free and the light very dim. The menu promised an infinite variety of dishes, but on asking the waiter I discovered that just that particular evening they were all off. Except for number fifteen. I dined swiftly on rice and fish, drank a warm beer and went back to the lobby. The woman was still on her seat and seemed intent on arranging some coloured stones on a kind of mirror. On the small sofa in the corner, near the main door, sat two very dark young men, wearing Western style dress, with flared trousers. They acted as if they hadn't noticed me, but I immediately sensed a certain unease. I went up to the counter and waited for her to speak first. Which she did. She said some numbers in a neutral detached voice; I didn't get exactly what she meant and asked her to repeat. It was a price list. The only figures I understood were the first and the last; from thirteen to fifteen years old, three hundred rupees, over fifty, five rupees.

'The women are in the lounge on the first floor,' she finished.

I took the letter from my pocket and showed her the signature. I had memorized the name, but I preferred to let her see it written so that there would be no misunderstanding. 'Vimala Sar,' I said. 'I want a girl called Vimala Sar.'

She threw a quick glance at the two young men sitting on the sofa. 'Vimala Sar doesn't work here any more,' she said. 'She's left.'

'Where did she go?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she said, 'but we have prettier girls than her.'

The situation didn't look promising. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw the two youths shift a little, but maybe it was just an impression.

'Find her for me,' I said quickly. 'I'll wait in my room.' Fortunately I had two twenty-dollar bills.

my pocket. I laid them among the coloured stones and picked up my suitcase. As I was climbing the stairs I had a small inspiration dictated by fear. ~~‘My embassy knows I’m here,’~~ I said in a loud voice.

The room looked clean. It was painted a light green colour and on the walls were prints showing what looked like the erotic sculptures of Khajuraho, but I didn’t particularly feel like checking. The bed was very low with a tattered armchair next to it and a small mountain of coloured cushions. On the bedside table were various objects whose purpose could not be misunderstood. I undressed and found some clean underwear. The bathroom was a painted cubbyhole with a poster on the door showing a blonde straddling a bottle of Coca-Cola. The poster was yellow with age and smudged by insects, the blonde wore her hair *à la* Marilyn Monroe, fifties style, which made her look even more incongruous. The shower had no shower head, it was simply a pipe sticking out of the wall with a jet of water that gushed out at head height. Still, washing seemed the most voluptuous thing in the world: I had an eight-hour flight behind me, plus three hours in the airport and then the ride across Bombay.

I don’t know how long I slept. Perhaps two hours, perhaps longer. When the knocking on the door woke me I automatically went to answer, not even realising where I was at first. The girl entered with a rustle of clothes. She was small and wore a pretty sari. She was sweating and her make-up was running at the corners of her eyes. She said: ‘Good evening, sir, I am Vimala Sar.’ She stood in the middle of the room, her eyes down and arms at her sides, as if I was supposed to inspect her.

‘I’m a friend of Xavier’s,’ I said.

She lifted her eyes and I saw the total amazement on her face. I had set up her letter on the bedside table. She looked at it and began to cry.

‘How come he ended up in this place?’ I asked. ‘What was he doing here? Where is he now?’

She began to sob softly and I realised I’d asked too many questions.

‘Take it easy,’ I said.

‘When he found out I’d written to you he was very angry,’ she said.

‘And why did you write to me?’

‘Because I found your address in Xavier’s diary,’ she said. ‘I knew you were good friends, once.’

‘Why was he angry?’

She put a hand to her mouth as if to stop herself crying. ‘He’d got to be very hard on me those last months,’ she said. ‘He was ill.’

‘But what was he doing?’

‘He was doing business,’ she said. ‘I don’t know, he didn’t tell me anything, he’d stopped being nice to me.’

‘What kind of business?’

‘I don’t know,’ she repeated, ‘he didn’t tell me anything. Sometimes he wouldn’t say anything for days and days, then all of a sudden he’d get restless and flare up in a furious rage.’

‘When did he arrive here?’

‘Last year,’ she said. ‘He came from Goa. He was doing business with them, then he fell ill.’

‘Them who?’

‘The people in Goa,’ she said, ‘in Goa, I don’t know.’ She sat on the armchair near the bed; she wasn’t crying now, she seemed calmer. ‘Get something to drink,’ she said. ‘There are drinks in the cabinet. A bottle costs fifty rupees.’

I went to the cabinet and took a small bottle full of an orange liquid, a tangerine liqueur. ‘But who were the people in Goa?’ I insisted. ‘Don’t you remember the name, anything?’

She shook her head and began to cry again. ‘The people in Goa,’ she said, ‘in Goa, I don’t know. He was ill,’ she repeated.

She paused and let out a long sigh. ‘Sometimes it seemed he didn’t care about anything,’ she said,

'not even me. The only thing that interested him at all were the letters from Madras, but then the next day he would be the same as before.'

'What letters?'

'The letters from Madras,' she said ingenuously, as if this were information enough.

'But who from?' I pressed her. 'Who wrote to him?'

'I don't know,' she said, 'a society, I don't remember, he never let me read them.'

'And he answered?'

Vimala sat there thinking. 'Yes, he used to answer, I think he did, he spent hours and hours writing'

'Please,' I said, 'try to make an effort. What was this society?'

'I don't know,' she said, 'it was a scholarly society I think, I don't know, sir.' She paused again and

then said: 'He was a good man, he meant well. It was his nature. He had a sad destiny.'

Her hands were clasped together, her fingers long and beautiful. Then she looked at me with an expression of relief, as if something had come back to her. 'The Theosophical Society,' she said. And for the first time she smiled.

'Listen,' I said, 'tell me everything, take your time, everything you remember, everything you can tell me.'

I poured her another glass of the liqueur. She drank and began to tell. It was a long, rambling story full of details. She talked about their affair, about the streets of Bombay, the holiday trips to Bassein and Elephanta. And then about afternoons at the Victoria Gardens, stretched out on the grass, about swimming at Chowpatty Beach under the first rains of the monsoon. I heard how Xavier had learnt to laugh and what he laughed about; and how much he liked the sunsets over the Arabian Sea when they walked along the seafront at dusk. It was a story she had carefully purged of any ugliness or misery. It was a love story.

'Xavier had written a great deal,' she said, 'then one day he burnt everything. Here in this hotel, he got a copper basin and burnt everything.'

'Why?' I asked.

'He was ill,' she said. 'It was his nature. He had a sad destiny.'

By the time Vimala left the night must have been over. I didn't look at my watch. I drew the curtains across the window and lay on the bed. Before falling asleep I heard a distant cry. Perhaps it was a prayer, or an invocation to the new day that was dawning.

II

‘What was his name?’

‘His name was Xavier,’ I answered.

‘Like the missionary?’ he asked. And then he said: ‘It’s not an English name, that’s for sure, is it?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘it’s Portuguese. But he didn’t come as a missionary; he’s a Portuguese who lost his way in India.’

The doctor nodded his head in agreement. He had a gleaming hairpiece that shifted like a rubber skullcap every time he moved his head. ‘A lot of people lose their way in India,’ he said, ‘it’s a country specially made for that.’

I said: ‘Right.’ And then I looked at him and he looked at me without a trace of concern on his face as if he were there by chance and everything else were where it was by chance, because that was how it had to be.

‘Do you know his surname as well?’ he asked. ‘It can be helpful sometimes.’

‘Janata Pinto,’ I said. ‘He had some distant connections with India, I think one of his ancestors was from Goa, or at least so he said.’

The doctor made a gesture as if to say, that’s enough, but that wasn’t what he meant of course.

‘There must be some records,’ I said, ‘or I hope there are.’

He smiled with an unhappy, guilty look. He had very white teeth with a gap in the upper set. ‘Records . . .’ he muttered. Suddenly his expression became hard and tense. He looked at me severely almost contemptuously. ‘This hospital is in Bombay,’ he said abruptly, ‘you can forget your European notions, they are an arrogant luxury.’

I said nothing and he too sat there silent. From his shirt pocket he pulled out a straw cigarette case and took a cigarette. Behind his table, on the wall, was a big clock. It said seven o’clock, it had stopped. I looked at it and he understood what I was thinking. ‘It stopped a long time ago,’ he said, ‘anyhow, it’s midnight.’

‘I know,’ I said, ‘I’ve been waiting for you since eight, the day-doctor told me you were the only one who might be able to help me, he says you have a good memory.’

He smiled again, his sad, guilty smile, and I realised that once again I’d slipped up, that it was not a gift to have a good memory in a place like this.

‘He was a friend of yours?’

‘In a way,’ I said, ‘once.’

‘When was he admitted?’

‘Almost a year ago, I think, at the end of the monsoon.’

‘A year is a long time,’ he said. And then went on: ‘The monsoon is the worst season, so many people come in.’

‘I can imagine,’ I answered.

He put his head in his hands, as if he were thinking, or as if he were very tired. ‘You can’t imagine,’ he said. ‘Do you have a photograph of him?’

It was a simple, practical question, but I hesitated over the answer, for I too felt the weight of

memory, and at the same time I sensed its inadequacy. What does one remember of a face in the end? No, I didn't have a photograph, I only had my memory: and my memory was mine alone, it wasn't describable, it was the look I remembered on Xavier's face. I made an effort and said: 'He's the same height as I am, thin, with straight hair; he's about my age; sometimes he has an expression like yours, Doctor, because if he smiles he looks sad.'

'It's not a very exact description,' he said, 'still, it makes no difference, I don't remember any Janata Pinto, at least not for the moment.'

We were in a very grey, bare room. On the far wall was a large concrete sink, like the kind used for washing clothes. It was full of sheets of paper. Next to the sink was a long rough table and that too was laden with paper. The doctor got up and went to the far end of the room. He seemed to have a limp. He began to rummage through the papers on the table. From where I was I had the impression that they were pages from exercise books and pieces of brown wrapping paper.

'My records,' he said, 'each one is a name.'

I stayed where I was in my seat facing his small work table, looking at the few objects he'd put there. There was a small glass ball with a model of Tower Bridge and a framed photograph showing a house that looked like a Swiss chalet. It struck me as absurd. At a window of the chalet you could see a female face, but the photograph was faded and blurred.

'He isn't an addict, is he?' he asked me from the other end of the room. 'We don't admit addicts.'

I didn't say anything and shook my head. 'Not that I know of,' I said then. 'I don't think so, I'm not sure.'

'But how do you know he came to the hospital, are you sure?'

'A prostitute at the Khajuraho hotel told me. That was where he was staying, last year.'

'And you,' he asked, 'are you staying there too?'

'I slept there last night, but I'll leave tomorrow. I try not to stay more than a night in the same hotel, whenever possible.'

'Why?' he asked, suspicious. He held an armful of papers and looked at me over his glasses.

'Just because,' I said. 'I like to change every night, I've only got this one small suitcase.'

'And have you already decided for tomorrow?'

'Not yet,' I said. 'I think I'd like a very comfortable hotel, maybe a luxury one.'

'You could go to the Taj Mahal,' he said, 'it's the most sumptuous hotel in the whole of Asia.'

'Perhaps that's not a bad idea,' I answered.

He plunged his arms into the sink amongst the pieces of paper. 'So many people,' he said. He had sat down on the rim of the basin and was cleaning his glasses. He rubbed his eyes with a handkerchief as if they were tired or irritated. 'Dust,' he said.

'The paper?' I said.

He lowered his eyes and turned away from me. 'The paper,' he said, 'the people.'

From the distance came a dark boom of iron, as though a bin were rolling down the stairs.

'Anyway, he's not there,' he said, letting all the papers drop. 'I don't think it's worth looking for him amongst these names.'

Instinctively I got up. The moment had come for me to leave, I thought, that was what he was saying, that I should go. But he didn't seem to notice and went to a metal cabinet that once upon a time must have been painted white. He rummaged inside and took out some drugs which he hastily slipped into the pockets of his gown. I had the impression he was picking them up at random almost, without choosing them. 'If he's still here, the only way to find him is to go and look for him,' he said. 'I have to do my round, if you want you can come along.' He headed for the door and opened it. 'I'll be doing a longer round than usual tonight, but perhaps you won't find it convenient to come with me.'

I got up and followed him. 'It's convenient,' I said. 'Can I bring my case with me?'

The door opened onto a hallway, a hexagonal space with a corridor leading off on every side. It was cluttered with cloths, bags and grey sheets. Some had purple or brown stains. We turned into the first corridor on our right; above the entrance was a plaque written in Hindi; some of the letters had fallen off leaving lighter outlines between the red letters.

'Don't touch anything,' he said, 'and don't go near the patients. You Europeans are very delicate.'

The corridor was very long and was painted a melancholy light blue. The floor was black with cockroaches which burst under our shoes, though we were doing our best not to tread on them. 'We kill them off,' said the doctor, 'but after a month they're back. The walls are impregnated with larvae; you'd have to knock down the hospital.'

The corridor ended in another hallway identical to the first, but narrow and light-less, closed off with a curtain.

'What did Mr Janata Pinto do?' he asked, pushing aside the curtain.

I thought of saying: 'Simultaneous interpreter,' which was what I should have said perhaps. Instead I said: 'He wrote stories.'

'Ah,' he said. 'Be careful, there's a step here. What were they about?'

'Oh,' I said, 'I wouldn't know how to explain really. I suppose you could say they were about things that didn't work out, about mistakes; for example, one was about a man who spends his life dreaming about making a trip, and when one day he's finally able to make it, that very day he realises that he doesn't want to go any more.'

'But he did set out on his trip,' said the doctor.

'So it seems,' I said. 'Yes, he did.'

The doctor let the curtains fall behind us. 'There are about a hundred people in here,' he said, 'I'm afraid you won't find it a pleasant sight, they are the ones who have been here for some time. Your friend could be among them, although I think it's unlikely.'

I followed him and we went into the largest room I have ever seen. It was as big as a hangar, almost and along the walls and down three central rows were the beds, or rather mattresses. A few dim lamps hung from the ceiling, and I stopped a moment, because the smell was very strong. Crouching near the door were two men dressed in the barest rags who moved off as we came in.

'They are untouchables,' said the doctor. 'They look after the patients' bodily needs, no one else will do the job. India's like that.'

In the first bed was an old man. He was completely naked and very thin. He looked dead, but kept his eyes wide open and looked at us without any trace of expression. He had an enormous penis curled up on his abdomen. The doctor went to him and touched his forehead. I thought he slipped a pill into his mouth, but I couldn't be sure because I was standing at the foot of the mattress. 'He's a *sādhu*,' said the doctor. 'His genital organs are consecrated to God; once he was worshipped by infertile women, but he has never procreated in his life.'

Then he moved on and I followed him. He stopped at every bed, while I hung back a short distance away looking at the patient's face. With some patients he stayed a while longer, murmuring a few words, distributing drugs. With others he stopped only a moment to touch their foreheads. The walls were stained red from the spittings of chewed betel and the heat was suffocating. Or perhaps it was the overpoweringly strong smell that gave this sensation of suffocation. In any case, the fans on the ceiling weren't working. Then the doctor turned back and I followed him in silence.

'He's not here,' I said. 'He's not one of these.'

He pushed aside the curtain to the hall again with the same politeness as before, letting me lead the way.

'The heat is unbearable,' I said, 'and the fans aren't working. It's incredible.'

‘The voltage is very low at night in Bombay,’ he answered.

‘And yet you have a nuclear reactor at Trobay, I saw the cooling tower from the front.’

He smiled very weakly. ‘Almost all the energy goes to the factories, then to the luxury hotels and the Marine Drive area; here we have to make do.’ He set off along the corridor taking the opposite direction to the one we’d come from. ‘India’s like that,’ he finished.

‘Did you study here?’ I asked.

He stopped to look at me and I had the impression that a flicker of nostalgia lit his eyes. ‘I studied in London,’ he said, ‘and then I did my specialisation in Zürich.’ He brought out his straw cigarette case and took a cigarette. ‘An absurd specialisation for India. I’m a cardiologist, but no one here has heart problems; only you people in Europe die of heart attacks.’

‘What do people die of here?’ I asked.

‘Of everything that has nothing to do with the heart. Syphilis, tuberculosis, leprosy, typhoid, septicaemia, cholera, meningitis, pellagra, diphtheria and other things. But I enjoyed studying the heart, I enjoyed finding out about that muscle that controls our lives, like this.’ He made a gesture, opening and closing his fist. ‘Perhaps I thought I would discover something inside it.’

The corridor opened on to a small covered courtyard in front of a low brick building.

‘Do you believe in God?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said, ‘I’m an atheist. Being an atheist is the worst possible curse, in India.’

We crossed the courtyard and stopped in front of the other building.

‘The terminal cases are in here,’ he said, ‘there’s just a chance your friend is one of them.’

‘What are they suffering from?’ I asked.

‘Everything you can possibly imagine,’ he said, ‘but perhaps it would be better if you went now.’

‘I think so too,’ I said.

‘I’ll show you out,’ he said.

‘No, don’t bother, please, perhaps I can get out through that door in the entrance gate. I think we’re by the road here.’

‘My name’s Ganesh,’ he said, ‘after the merry God with the elephant’s face.’

I told him my name too before setting off. The gate was only a moment away beyond a hedge of jasmin. It was open. When I turned to look back at him he spoke again. ‘If I find him, should I say something?’

‘No thanks,’ I said, ‘don’t say anything.’

He raised his hairpiece as if it were a hat and made a slight bow. I went out into the street. It was getting light and the people on the pavements were waking up. Some were rolling up the mats they slept on at night. The street was full of crows hopping around the cow dung. Near the steps at the entrance was a beat-up old taxi, the driver asleep with his face against the side window.

‘The Taj Mahal,’ I said, getting in.

III

The only inhabitants of Bombay who take no notice of the 'right of admission' regulations in force at the Taj Mahal are the crows. They drop slowly onto the terrace of the Inter-Continental, laze on the Mogul windows of the older building, perch amid the branches of the mango trees in the garden, and hop on the perfect carpet of lawn that surrounds the swimming pool. They would go and drink from the pool itself or peck at the orange peel in your martini, were it not for a very efficient servant in livery who chases them off with a cricket bat, as though in some absurd match orchestrated by a whimsical film director. You have to be careful of the crows, they have very dirty beaks. The Bombay town council has had to arrange for the enormous reservoirs that feed the city's aqueduct to be covered over, because more than once the crows, who themselves arrange for the re-introduction into the 'life cycle' of the corpses the Parsees lay out on the Towers of Silence (there are quite a number of towers in the Malabar Hill area), have dropped the odd mouthful into the water supply. But even with these measures the town council certainly hasn't resolved the hygiene problem, because then there are the problems of the rats, the insects, the seepage from the sewers. It's as well not to drink the water in Bombay. But you can drink it at the Taj Mahal which has its own purifiers and is proud of its water. Because the Taj is not a hotel: with its eight hundred rooms it is a city within a city.

When I arrived in this city I was received by a doorman dressed as an Indian prince with red sash and turban, who led me as far as the lobby, all done out in brass, where there were other employees likewise disguised as maharajas. Probably they imagined that I too was disguised, though in reverse - that I was a tycoon dressed up as a nobody - and they busily set about finding me a room in the noble wing of the building, the part that has the antique furniture and the view of the Gateway of India. For a moment I was tempted to tell them that I wasn't there for aesthetic purposes, but just to sleep in unconscious comfort, and that they could put me anywhere they liked, in a room with shamefully modern furniture, even the skyscraper of the Inter-Continental was okay by me. But then I thought it would be cruel to disappoint them like this. The Peacock Suite, however, I refused. It was too much for one person on his own; but it wasn't a question of price, I explained, to maintain the kind of style I had opted for.

The room was impressive, my case had come along ahead of me by some mysterious route and stood on a wicker stool, the bath was already full of water and foam. I sank into it and then wrapped myself in a linen towel. The windows opened onto the Arabian Sea. The sun was almost up now, and pinkish light tinged the beach; beneath the Taj Mahal the life of India had begun to swarm once again. The heavy curtains of green velvet ran sweetly and softly as a theatre curtain; I drew them across the scene and the room was reduced to half-light and silence. The lazy, comforting hum of the big fan lulled me and I just managed to reflect that this too was a superfluous luxury, since the room temperature was perfect, when suddenly I found myself at an old chapel on a Mediterranean hillside. The chapel was white and it was hot. We were hungry and Xavier, laughing, was pulling out some sandwiches and cool wine from a basket. Isabel was laughing too, while Magda stretched out on a blanket on the grass. Far below us was the blue of the sea and a solitary donkey dawdled in the shade of the chapel. But it wasn't a dream, it was a real memory; I was looking into the dark of the room and

seeing that distant scene which seemed like a dream because I'd slept for a long time; my watch told me it was four in the afternoon. I stayed in bed quite a while, thinking of those times, going back over landscapes, faces, lives. I remembered the trips in the car along the pinewoods by the sea, the nicknames we gave each other, Xavier's guitar and Magda's shrill voice announcing in mock-serious tones, like a fairground showman: 'Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please, we have among us The Italian Nightingale!' And I would play along with her and launch into old Neapolitan songs, mimicking the out-dated warbling of singers in the old days, while everybody laughed and applauded. Amongst ourselves, and I was resigned to it, I was 'Roux', short for Rouxinol, Portuguese for nightingale. But the way they said it it seemed an attractive, even exotic name, so there was no reason to take offence. And then I went back over the following summers. Magda crying – I thought, why? Was it right perhaps? And Isabel, and her illusions. And when those memories took on an unbearable clarity, sharp as if beamed on the wall by a projector, I got up and left the room.

Six o'clock is a bit too late for lunch and a bit too early for dinner. But at the Taj Mahal, said my guidebook, thanks to its four restaurants, you can eat at any time. The Rendez-Vous was on the top floor of the Apollo Bunder, but it was really too intimate. And too expensive. I dropped into the Apollo Bar and chose a table by the big terrace window looking out on the first lights of the evening; the seafront was a garland. I drank two gin-and-tonics which put me in a good mood and wrote a letter to Isabel. I wrote for a long time, in a constant stream, with passion, and told her everything. I wrote about those distant days, about my trip, and about how feelings flower again with time. I also told her things I would never have thought of telling her, and when I re-read the letter, with the reckless amusement of someone who has drunk on an empty stomach, I realised that really that letter was for Magda, it was to her I'd written it, of course it was, even though I'd begun, 'Dear Isabel'; and so I screwed it up and left it in the ashtray, went down to the ground floor, into the Tanjore Restaurant and ordered a slap-up meal, exactly as a prince dressed up as a nobody would have. And then when I'd finished eating it was night-time; the Taj was coming to life and sparkled with lights; on the lawn near the pool the liveried servants stood ready to chase off the crows; I sat myself down on a couch in the middle of that hall, big as a football field, and set about watching luxury. I don't know who it was said that in the pure activity of watching there is always a little sadism. I tried to think who it was, but couldn't, yet I felt that there was some truth in the statement: and so I watched with greater pleasure, with the perfect sensation of being just two eyes watching while I myself was elsewhere, without knowing where. I watched the women and the jewels, the turbans, the fezes, the veils, the trains, the evening dresses, the Moslems and the millionaire Americans, the oil magnates and the spotless, silent servants: I listened to laughter, to phrases comprehensible and incomprehensible, whispers, rustlings. And this went on and on the entire night, till dawn almost. Then, when the voices thinned out and the lights were dimmed, I leant my head on the cushions of the couch and fell asleep. Not for long though because the first boat for Elephanta casts off from right in front of the Taj at seven o'clock; and along with an older Japanese couple, cameras round their necks, I was on that boat.

IV

‘What are we doing inside these bodies,’ said the man who was preparing to stretch out in the bed next to mine.

His voice didn’t have an interrogative tone, perhaps it was not a question, just a statement, made in his way; in any case it would have been a question I couldn’t have answered. The light that came from the station platforms was yellow and traced its thin shadow on the peeling walls, moving lightly across the room, prudently and discreetly I thought, the same way the Indians themselves move. From far away came a slow monotonous voice, a prayer perhaps, or a solitary, hopeless lament, the kind of cry that expresses nothing but itself, asks nothing of anyone. I found it impossible to make out any words. India was this too: a universe of flat sounds, undifferentiated, indistinguishable.

‘Perhaps we’re travelling in them,’ I said.

Some time must have passed since his first comment, I had lost myself in distant thoughts: a few minutes’ sleep maybe. I was very tired.

He said: ‘What did you say?’

‘I was referring to our bodies,’ I said. ‘Perhaps they’re like suitcases; we carry ourselves around.’

Above the door was a blue nightlight, like the ones they have in night trains. Blending with the yellow light that came from the window it gave a pale-green, aquarium-like glow. I looked at him and in the greenish, almost funereal light, I saw the profile of a sharp face with a slightly aquiline nose. He had his hands on his chest.

‘Do you know Mantegna?’ I asked. My question was absurd too, but certainly no less so than his.

‘No,’ he said, ‘is he Indian?’

‘Italian,’ I said.

‘I only know the English,’ he said, ‘the only Europeans I know are English.’

The distant cry picked up again and with greater intensity; it was really shrill now. For a moment I thought it might be a jackal.

‘An animal?’ I said. ‘What do you think?’

‘I thought he might be a friend of yours,’ he replied softly.

‘No, no,’ I said, ‘I meant the voice coming from outside – Mantegna is a painter, but I never knew him, he’s been dead a few hundred years.’

The man breathed deeply. He was dressed in white, but he wasn’t a Moslem, that much I had understood. ‘I’ve been to England,’ he said, ‘but I used to speak French too, if you prefer we can speak French.’ His voice was completely neutral, as if he were making a statement across the counter in a government office; and this, I don’t know why, disturbed me. ‘It’s a Jain,’ he said after a few seconds. ‘he’s lamenting the evil of the world.’

I said: ‘Oh, right,’ because now I’d realised he was talking about the wailing in the distance.

‘There aren’t many Jains in Bombay,’ he said then, with the tone of someone explaining something to a tourist. ‘In the south, yes, there are still a lot. As a religion it’s very beautiful and very stupid.’ He said this without any sign of contempt, still speaking in the neutral tone of someone giving evidence.

‘What are you?’ I asked. ‘If you’ll forgive my indiscretion.’

‘I’m a Jain,’ he said.

The station clock struck midnight. The distant wail suddenly stopped, as if the wailer had been waiting for the hour to strike. ‘Another day has begun,’ said the man, ‘from this moment it’s another day.’

I said nothing, his assertions didn’t exactly encourage conversation. A few minutes went by; I had the impression that the platform lights had grown dimmer. My companion’s breathing had slowed, with pauses between each breath, as if he were sleeping. When he spoke again I started. ‘I’m going to Varanasi,’ he said, ‘what about yourself?’

‘To Madras,’ I said.

‘Madras,’ he repeated, ‘oh yes.’

‘I want to see the place where it’s said the Apostle Thomas was martyred; the Portuguese built a church there in the sixteenth century, I don’t know what’s left of it. And then I have to go to Goa, I’m going to do some work in an old library – that’s why I came to India.’

‘Is it a pilgrimage?’ he asked.

I said no. Or rather, yes, but not in the religious sense of the word. If anything, it was a private journey, how could I put it, I was only looking for clues.

‘You’re a Catholic, I suppose,’ said my companion.

‘All Europeans are Catholics, in a way,’ I said. ‘Or Christians anyway, which is practically the same thing.’

The man repeated the adverb I’d used as if he were savouring it. His English was very elegant, with little pauses and the conjunctions slightly drawled and hesitant, the way people speak in certain universities I realised. ‘Practically . . . Actually,’ he said, ‘what strange words. I heard them so many times in England, you Europeans often use these words.’ He paused a moment longer than usual, but was aware that he hadn’t finished what he was saying. ‘I never managed to establish whether out of pessimism or optimism,’ he went on. ‘What do you think?’

I asked him if he could explain himself better.

‘Oh,’ he said, ‘it’s difficult to explain more clearly. Yes, sometimes I ask myself if it’s a word which indicates arrogance, or whether on the contrary it merely signifies cynicism. And a great deal of fear as well, perhaps. You follow me?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘It isn’t that simple. But perhaps the word “practically” means practically nothing.’

My companion laughed. It was the first time he had laughed. ‘You are very clever,’ he said, ‘you got the better of me and at the same time you proved me right, practically.’

I laughed too, and then said at once: ‘However, in my case it is practically fear.’

We fell silent for a while, then my companion asked if he could smoke. He rummaged in a bag he had near the bed and the room filled with the aroma of one of those small, scented Indian cigarettes made from a single leaf of tobacco.

‘I read the gospels once,’ he said. ‘It’s a very strange book.’

‘Only strange?’ I asked.

He hesitated. ‘Full of arrogance too,’ he said. ‘No offence meant you understand.’

‘I’m afraid I don’t quite see what you mean,’ I said.

‘I was referring to Christ,’ he said.

The station clock struck half-past midnight. I felt sleep getting the better of me. From the park beyond the platforms came the cawing of crows. ‘Varanasi is Benares,’ I said. ‘It’s a holy city. Are you going on a pilgrimage too?’

My companion stubbed out his cigarette and coughed lightly. ‘I’m going there to die,’ he said, ‘I have only a few days left to live.’ He arranged his cushion under his head. ‘But perhaps it would be

wise to sleep,' he went on. 'We don't have many hours to rest – my train leaves at five.'

'Mine leaves just a little later,' I said.

'Oh, don't worry,' he said, 'the attendant will come and wake you up in time. I don't suppose we shall have occasion to see each other again in the form in which we meet today, these present suitcases of ours. I wish you a pleasant journey.'

'A pleasant journey to you too,' I answered.

V

My guidebook maintained that the best restaurant in Madras was the Mysore Restaurant in the Coromandel, and I was most curious to check it out. In the boutique on the ground floor I bought a white shirt, Indian style, and a pair of smart trousers. I went up to my room and took a long bath to wash away the grime of the journey. The rooms in the Coromandel are furnished in imitation colonial style, but in good taste. My room was at the back of the building and looked out over a yellowish clearing surrounded by wild vegetation. It was a huge room, with two large beds covered with two quite beautiful counterpanes. At the far end, near the window, was a writing table with a central drawer and then three drawers at each side. It was by pure chance that I chose the bottom drawer on the right to put my papers in.

I ended up going down much later than I would have liked, but in any case the Mysore stayed open till midnight. The restaurant had French windows opening onto the swimming pool and small round tables in booths of green-lacquered bamboo. The lights on the tables had blue shades and there was a great deal of atmosphere. A musician on a red-upholstered dais entertained the diners with some very discreet music. The waiter led me through the tables and was most helpful when it came to advising me what to eat. I treated myself to three dishes and drank fresh mango juice. The customers were almost all Indians, but at the table nearest mine were two Englishmen who had a professional look about them and talked about Dravidian art. They kept up a very pretentious, knowledgeable conversation, and for the duration of my meal I amused myself by checking in my guidebook to see if the information they were giving each other was correct. Occasionally one of them got a date wrong, but the other didn't seem to notice. Conversations you overhear by chance are curious: I would have said they were old university colleagues, and only when they agreed not to take tomorrow's flight for Colombo did I realise that they had only met that day. Going out I was tempted to stop in the English Bar in the lobby, but then I reflected that my tiredness had no need of alcoholic assistance and I went up to my room.

When the telephone rang I was cleaning my teeth. For a moment I thought it might be the Theosophical Society, since they had promised they would confirm by phone, but moving to pick it up I rejected that hypothesis, given the time. Then it crossed my mind that before dinner I had mentioned in reception that one of the bathroom taps wasn't working properly. And in fact it was reception. 'Excuse me, sir, there's a lady who wishes to speak to you.'

'I beg your pardon,' I answered with my toothbrush between my teeth.

'There's a lady who wishes to speak to you,' the receptionist repeated. I heard the click of a switch and a low, firm female voice said: 'I am the person who had your room before you, I've absolutely got to speak to you. I'm in the lobby.'

'If you give me five minutes I'll meet you in the English Bar,' I said. 'It should still be open.'

'I'd prefer to come up myself,' she said, without giving me time to reply, 'it's a matter of the utmost importance.'

When she knocked I had scarcely finished getting dressed again. I told her the door was unlocked and

she opened it, stopping a moment in the doorway to look at me. The light in the corridor was dim. All I could see was that she was tall and wore a silk scarf round her shoulders. She came in, closing the door after her. I was sitting on an armchair in the full light and I got up. I didn't say anything, waiting. And in fact it was she who spoke first. She spoke without advancing into the room, in the same low, firm voice she'd had on the telephone. 'Please forgive this intrusion. You must think me incredibly rude – unfortunately there are circumstances when one can hardly be otherwise.'

'Listen,' I said, 'India is mysterious by definition, but puzzles are not my forte. Spare me any pointless effort.'

She looked at me with a show of surprise. 'It's simply that I left some things that belong to me in the room,' she said calmly. 'I've come to get them.'

'I thought you'd be back,' I said, 'but frankly I didn't expect you so soon, or rather, so late.'

The woman watched me with increasing amazement. 'What do you mean?' she muttered.

'That you are a thief,' I said.

The woman looked toward the window and took the silk scarf from her shoulders. She was beautiful, I thought, unless perhaps it was the light filtered through the lampshade that gave her face distant, aristocratic look. She wasn't so young any more yet her body was very graceful.

'You are very categoric,' she said. She passed a hand across her face, as if wanting to brush away her tiredness, or a thought. Her shoulders trembled in a brief shiver. 'What does it mean, to steal?' she asked.

The silence fell between us and I caught the exasperating sound of the dripping tap. 'I called before dinner,' I said, 'and they assured me they'd fix it right away. It's a noise I can't stand; I'm afraid it won't help me to get to sleep.'

She smiled. She was leaning on the rattan chest of drawers, an arm hanging down her side as though she were very tired. 'I think you'll have to get used to it,' she said. 'I was here a week and I asked them to fix it dozens of times, then I gave up.' She paused a moment. 'Are you French?'

'No,' I answered.

She looked at me with a defeated air. 'I came in a taxi from Madurai,' she said. 'I've been travelling all day.' She wiped her forehead with her silk scarf as if it were a handkerchief. For a moment her face took on what looked like a desperate expression. 'India is horrible,' she said, 'and the roads are hell.'

'Madurai is a very long way,' I came back. 'Why Madurai?'

'I was going to Trivandrum, then from there I would have gone to Colombo.'

'But Madras has a flight to Colombo too,' I objected.

'I didn't want to take that one,' she said. 'I had my reasons. It won't be difficult for you to work them out.' She made a tired gesture. 'Anyhow, I'll have missed it by now.'

She gave me a questioning look and I said: 'It's all there where you left it in the bottom drawer on the right.'

The writing table was behind her; it was made of bamboo with brass corners and had a large mirror above in which I could see the reflection of her naked shoulders. She opened the drawer and took the bundles of documents held together by an elastic band.

'It's too stupid,' she said. 'One does something like this and then forgets everything in a drawer. I kept it in the hotel safe for a week and then I left it here while I was packing.'

She looked at me as if waiting for me to agree.

'Yes, it is pretty stupid,' I said. 'The transfer of all that money was an operation of high-class fraud and then you go and make such a dumb mistake.'

'Perhaps I was too nervous,' she said.

'Or too busy getting revenge,' I added. 'Your letter was remarkable, a ferocious vendetta, and he

can't do anything about it, if you make it in time. It's just a question of time.'

~~Her eyes flickered, looking at me in the mirror. Then she turned suddenly, quivering, her neck tense. 'You read my letter as well!' she exclaimed with contempt.~~

'I even copied part of it out,' I said.

She looked at me with amazement, or with fear perhaps. 'Copied it,' she muttered. 'Why?'

'Only the last part,' I said, 'I'm sorry, I couldn't help it. And anyway, I don't even know who it was to. All I understood was that he's a man who must have made you suffer a great deal.'

'He was too rich,' she said. 'He thought he could buy everything, people included.' Then she made a nervous gesture, indicating herself, and I understood.

'Listen, I think I see more or less how it was. You didn't exist for years, you were always just an empty name, until one day you decided to give a reality to the name. And that reality is you. But I know only the name you signed with; it's a very common name and I have no desire to know anything else.'

'Right,' she said, 'the world is full of Margarets.'

She moved away from the writing table and went to sit on the stool by the dressing table. She put her elbows on her knees and her face in her hands. She sat a long time like that, without saying anything, hiding her face.

'What do you plan to do?' I asked.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'I'm very frightened. I must get to that bank in Colombo tomorrow, otherwise all that money's going to go down the drain.'

'Listen a moment,' I said, 'it's late. You can't go to Trivandrum now, and anyway you wouldn't get there in time for the plane tomorrow. Tomorrow morning there's a plane for Colombo from here; you're lucky because if you turn up early you'll get a seat, and according to the register you've already left the hotel.'

She looked at me as if she didn't understand. She looked at me a long time, intensely, weighing me up.

'As far as I'm concerned you really have gone,' I added, 'and there are two comfortable beds in the room.'

She seemed to relax. She crossed her legs and sketched a smile. 'Why are you doing this?' she asked.

'I don't know,' I said. 'Perhaps I feel sympathetic toward people on the run. And then, I stole something from you too.'

'I left my case at reception,' she said.

'Perhaps it would be wise to leave it there and pick it up tomorrow morning. I can lend you some pyjamas: we are almost the same size.'

She laughed. 'That only leaves the problem of the tap,' she said.

I laughed too. 'But you're used to it by now, I gather. The problem is all mine.'

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