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M O D E R N C L A S S I C S



Muriel Spark

The Driver's Seat

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THE
DRIVER'S SEAT

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ONE

‘And the material doesn’t stain,’ the salesgirl says.

‘Doesn’t stain?’

‘It’s the new fabric,’ the salesgirl says. ‘Specially treated. Won’t mark. If you spill like a bit of ice-cream or a drop of coffee, like, down the front of this dress it won’t hold the stain.’

The customer, a young woman, is suddenly tearing at the fastener at the neck, pulling at the zip of the dress. She is saying, ‘Get this thing off me. Off me, at once.’

The salesgirl shouts at the customer who, up to now, has been delighted with the bright coloured dress. It is patterned with green and purple squares on a white background, with blue spots within the green squares, cyclamen spots within the purple. This dress has not been a successful line; other dresses in the new stainless fabric have sold, but this, of which three others, identical but for size, hang in the back storeroom awaiting the drastic reductions of next week’s sale, has been too vivid for most customers’ taste. But the customer who now steps speedily out of it, throwing it on the floor with the utmost irritation, had almost smiled with satisfaction when she had tried it on. She had said, ‘That’s my dress.’ The salesgirl had said it needed taking up at the hem. ‘All right,’ the customer had said, ‘but I need it for tomorrow.’ ‘We can’t do it before Friday, I’m sorry,’ the salesgirl had said. ‘Oh, I’ll do it myself, then,’ the customer had said, and turned round to admire it sideways in the long mirror. ‘It’s a good fit. Lovely colours,’ she said.

‘And it doesn’t stain,’ the salesgirl had said, with her eye wandering to another unstainable and equally unsaleable summer dress which evidently she hoped, now, to offer the satisfied customer.

‘Doesn’t stain?’

The customer has flung the dress aside.

The salesgirl shouts, as if to assist her explanation. ‘Specially treated fabric... If you spill like a drop of sherry you just wipe it off. Look, Miss, you’re tearing the neck.’

‘Do you think I spill things on my clothes?’ the customer shrieks. ‘Do I look as if I don’t eat properly?’

‘Miss, I only remarked on the fabric, that when you tell me you’re going abroad for your vacation there is always the marks that you pick up on your journey. Don’t treat our clothes like that if you please. Miss, I only said stain-resisting and then you carry on, after you liked it.’

‘Who asked you for a stain-resisting dress?’ the customer shouts, getting quickly, with absolute purpose, into her own blouse and skirt.

‘You liked the colours, didn’t you?’ shouts the girl. ‘What difference does it make, so it resists stains, if you liked the fabric before you knew?’

The customer picks up her bag and goes to the door almost at a run, while two other salesgirls and two other customers gasp and gape. At the door she turns to look back and says, with a look of satisfaction at her own dominance over the situation with an undoubtable excuse, ‘I won’t be insulted!’

She walks along the broad street, scanning the windows for the dress she needs, the necessary dress. Her lips are slightly parted; she, whose lips are usually pressed together with the daily disapprovals of the accountants’ office where she has worked continually, except for the months of illness, since she was eighteen, that is to say, for sixteen years and some months. Her lips, when she does not speak or eat, are normally pressed together like the ruled line of a balance sheet, marked straight with her old-fashioned lipstick, a final and a judging mouth, a precision instrument, a detail-warden of a mouth. She has five girls under her and two men. Over her are two women and five men. Her immediate superior had given her the afternoon off, in kindness, Friday afternoon. ‘You’ve got your packing to do, Lise. Go home, pack and rest.’ She had resisted. ‘I don’t need a rest. I’ve got all this work to finish. Look — all this.’ The superior, a fat small man, looked at her with frightened eyeglasses. Lise smiled and bent her head over her desk. ‘It can wait till you get back,’ said the man, and when she looked up at him he showed courage and defiance in his rimless spectacles. Then she had begun to laugh hysterically. She finished laughing and started crying all in a flood, while a flurry at the other desks, the jerky backward movements of her little fat superior, conveyed to her that she had done again what she had not done for five years. As she ran to the lavatory she shouted to the whole office who somehow or other were trying to follow or help her. ‘Leave me alone! It doesn’t matter. What does it matter?’ Half an hour later they said, ‘You need a good holiday, Lise. You need your vacation.’ ‘I’m going to have it,’ she said, ‘I’m going to have the time of my life,’ and she had looked at the two men and five girls under her, and at her quivering superior, one by one, with her lips straight as a line which could cancel them all out completely.

Now, as she walks along the street after leaving the shop, her lips are slightly parted as if to receive a secret flavour. In fact her nostrils and eyes are a fragment more open than usual, imperceptibly but thoroughly they accompany her parted lips in one mission, the sensing of the dress that she must get.

She swerves in her course at the door of a department store and enters. Resort Department: she has seen the dress. A lemon-yellow top with a skirt patterned in bright V’s of orange, mauve and blue. ‘Is it made of that stain-resisting material?’ she asks when she has put it on and is looking at herself in the mirror. ‘Stain-resisting? I don’t know, Madam. It’s a washable cotton, but if I were you I’d have it dry-cleaned. It might shrink.’ Lise laughs, and the girl says, ‘I’m afraid we haven’t anything really stain-resisting. I’ve never heard of anything like that.’ Lise makes her mouth into a straight line. Then she says, ‘I’ll have it.’ Meanwhile she is pulling off a hanger a summer coat with narrow stripes, red and white, with a white collar; very quickly she tries it on over the new dress. ‘Of course, the two don’t go well together,’ says the salesgirl. ‘You’d have to see them on separate.’

Lise does not appear to listen. She studies herself. This way and that, in the mirror of the fitting room. She lets the coat hang open over the dress. Her lips part, and her eyes narrow; she breathes for a moment as in a trance.

The salesgirl says, 'You can't really see the coat at its best, Madam, over that frock.'

Lise appears suddenly to hear her, opening her eyes and closing her lips. The girl is saying, 'You won't be able to wear them together, but it's a lovely coat, over a plain dress, white or navy, or for the evenings ...'

'They go very well together,' Lise says, and taking off the coat she hands it carefully to the girl. 'I'll have it; also, the dress. I can take up the hem myself.' She reaches for her blouse and skirt and says to the girl, 'Those colours of the dress and the coat are absolutely right for me. Very natural colours.'

The girl, placating, says, 'Oh, it's how you feel in things yourself, Madam, isn't it? It's you's got to wear them.' Lise buttons her blouse disapprovingly. She follows the girl to the shop-floor, pays the bill, waits for the change and, when the girl hands her first the change then the large bag of heavy paper containing her new purchases, she opens the top of the bag enough to enable her to peep inside to put in her hand and tear a corner of the tissue paper which enfolds each garment. She is obviously making sure she is being handed the right garments. The girl is about to speak, probably to say 'Everything all right?' or 'Thank you, Madam, goodbye,' or even, 'Don't worry; everything's there all right.' But Lise speaks first; she says, 'The colours go together perfectly. People here in the North are ignorant of colours. Conservative; old-fashioned. If only you knew! These colours are a natural blend for me. Absolutely natural.' She does not wait for a reply; she does not turn towards the lift, she turns instead, towards the down escalator, purposefully making her way through a short lane of dresses that hang in their stands.

She stops abruptly at the top of the escalator and looks back, then smiles as if she sees and hears what she had expected. The salesgirl, thinking her customer is already on the escalator out of sight and out of hearing, has turned to another black-frosted salesgirl. 'All those colours together!' she is saying. 'Those incredible colours! She said they were perfectly natural. Natural! Here in the North she said ...' Her voice stops as she sees that Lise is looking and hearing. The girl affects to be fumbling with a dress on the rack and to be saying something else without changing her expression to be noticeably. Lise laughs aloud and descends the escalator.

'Well, enjoy yourself Lise,' says the voice on the telephone. 'Send me a card.'

'Oh, of course,' Lise says, and when she has hung up she laughs heartily. She does not stop. She goes to the wash-basin and fills a glass of water, which she drinks, gurgling, then another, and still nearly choking she drinks another. She has stopped laughing, and now breathing heavily says to the mute telephone, 'Of course. Oh, of course.' Still heaving with exhaustion she pulls out the hard wall seat which adapts to a bed and takes off her shoes, placing them beside the bed. She puts the large carrier-bag containing her new coat and dress in a cupboard beside her suitcase which is already packed. She places her hand-bag on the lamp-shelf beside the bed and lies down.

Her face is solemn as she lies, at first staring at the brown pinewood door as if to see beyond it. Presently her breathing becomes normal. The room is meticulously neat. It is a one-room flat in a modern apartment house. Since it was put up the designer has won prizes for his interiors, he has become known throughout the country and far beyond and is now no longer to be obtained by landlords at a moderate price. The lines of the room are pure; space is used as a pattern in itself, circumscribed by the dexterous pinewood outlines that ensued from the designer's ingenuity and austere taste when he was young, unknown, studious and strict-principled. The company that owns the apartment house

knows the worth of these pinewood interiors. Pinewood alone is now nearly as scarce as the architect himself, but the law, so far, prevents them from raising the rents very much. The tenants have long leases. Lise moved in when the house was new, ten years ago. She has added very little to the room; very little is needed, for the furniture is all fixed, adaptable to various uses, and stackable. Stacked into a panel are six folding chairs, should the tenant decide to entertain six for dinner. The writing desk extends to a dining table, and when the desk is not in use it, too, disappears into the pinewood wall, its bracket-lamp hingeing outward and upward to form a wall-lamp. The bed is by day a narrow seat with overhanging bookcases; by night it swivels out to accommodate the sleeper. Lise has put down a patterned rug from Greece. She has fitted a hopsack covering on the seat of the divan. Unlike the other tenants she has not put unnecessary curtains in the window; her flat is not closely overlooked and in summer she keeps the venetian blinds down over the windows and slightly opened to let in the light. A small pantry-kitchen adjoins this room. Here, too, everything is contrived to fold away into the dignity of unvarnished pinewood. And in the bathroom as well, nothing need be seen, nothing need be left lying about. The bed-supports, the door, the window frame, the hanging cupboard, the storage space, the shelves, the desk that extends, the tables that stack — they are made of such pinewood as one may never see again in a modest bachelor apartment. Lise keeps her flat as clean-lined and clean to return to after her work as if it were uninhabited. The swaying tall pines among the litter of conifers on the forest floor have been subdued into silence and into obedient bulks.

Lise breathes as if sleeping, deeply tired, but her eye-slits open from time to time. Her hand moves to her brown leather bag on the lamp-shelf and she raises herself, pulling the bag towards her. She leans on one elbow and empties the contents on the bed. She lifts them one by one, checking carefully and puts them back; there is a folded envelope from the travel agency containing her air ticket, a powder compact, a lipstick, a comb. There is a bunch of keys. She smiles at them and her lips are parted. There are six keys on the steel ring, two Yale door-keys, a key that might belong to a functional cupboard or drawer, a small silver-metal key of the type commonly belonging to zip-fastened luggage, and two tarnished car-keys. Lise takes the car-keys off the ring and lays them aside; the rest go back in her bag. Her passport, in its transparent plastic envelope, goes back in her bag. With straightened lips she prepares for her departure the next day. She unpacks the new coat and dress and hangs them on hangers.

Next morning she puts them on. When she is ready to leave she dials a number on the telephone and looks at herself in the mirror which has not yet been concealed behind the pinewood panels which close upon it. The voice answers and Lise touches her pale brown hair as she speaks. 'Margot, I'm just off now,' Lise says. 'I'll put your car-keys in an envelope and I'll leave them downstairs with the doorkeeper. All right?'

The voice says, 'Thanks. Have a good holiday. Have a good time. Send me a card.'

'Yes, of course, Margot.'

'Of course,' Lise says when she has replaced the receiver. She takes an envelope from a drawer, writes a name on it, puts the two car-keys in it and seals the envelope. Then she telephones for a taxi, lifts her suitcase out to the landing, fetches her hand-bag and the envelope, and leaves the flat.

When she reaches the street floor, she stops at the windows of the porter's wood-lined cabin. Lise rings the bell and waits. No one appears, but the taxi has pulled up outside. Lise shouts to the driver 'I'm just coming!' and indicates her suitcase which the taxi-driver fetches. While he is stacking it at the front of the cab a woman with a brown overall comes up behind Lise. 'You want me, Miss?'

Lise turns quickly to face the woman. She has the envelope in her hand and is about to speak when

the woman says, 'Well, well, my goodness, what colours!' She is looking at Lise's red and white striped coat, unbuttoned, and the vivid dress beneath, the purple, orange and blue V-patterns of the skirt and the yellow top. The woman laughs hugely as one who has nothing to gain by suppressing her amusement, she laughs and opens the pinewood door into the porter's office; there she slides open the window panel and laughs aloud in Lise's face. She says, 'Are you going to join a circus?' Then again she throws back her head, looking down through half-closed lids at Lise's clothes, and gives out the high, hacking cough-like ancestral laughter of the streets, holding her breasts in her hands to spare them the shake-up. Lise says, with quiet dignity, 'You are insolent.' But the woman laughs again, not no longer spontaneously but with spiteful and deliberate noise, forcing the evident point that Lise habitually is mean with her tips, or perhaps never tips the porter at all.

Lise walks quietly out to the cab, still holding in her hand the envelope which contains the car keys. She looks at this envelope as she goes, but whether she has failed to leave it at the door-keeper's desk by intention, or whether through the distraction of the woman's laughter, one could not tell from her serene face with lips slightly parted. The woman comes to the street door emitting noise like a brown container of laughing-gas until the taxi is out of her scope.

TWO

Lise is thin. Her height is about five-foot-six. Her hair is pale brown, probably tinted, a very light streaked lock sweeping from the middle of her hair-line to the top of her crown; her hair is cut short on the sides and back, and is styled high. She might be as young as twenty-nine or as old as thirty-six, but hardly younger, hardly older. She has arrived at the airport; she has paid the taxi-driver quickly and with an expression of abstract eagerness to be somewhere else. Likewise, with the porter, while he takes her bag and follows her to the desk to have it weighed-in. She seems not to see him.

There are two people in front of her. Lise's eyes are widely spaced, blue-grey and dull. Her lips are a straight line. She is neither good-looking nor bad-looking. Her nose is short and wider than it would look in the likeness constructed partly by the method of identikit, partly by actual photography, so that it is to be published in the newspapers of four languages.

Lise looks at the two people in front of her, first a woman and then a man, swaying to one side and then the other as she does so, either to discern in the half-faces visible to her someone she might possibly know, or else to relieve, by these movements and looks, some impatience she might feel.

When it comes to her turn she heaves her luggage on to the scale and pushes her ticket to the clerk as quickly as possible. While he examines it she turns to look at a couple who are now waiting behind her. She glances at both faces, then looks back to the clerk, regardless of their returning her stares and their unanimous perception of her bright-coloured clothes.

'Any hand-luggage?' says the clerk, peering over the top of the counter.

Lise simpers, placing the tips of her upper teeth over her lower lip, and draws in a little breath.

'Any hand-luggage?' The busy young official looks at her as much as to say, 'What's the matter with you?' And Lise answers in a voice different from the voice in which she yesterday spoke to the shop assistant when buying her lurid outfit, and has used on the telephone, and in which early this morning she spoke to the woman at the porter's desk; she now speaks in a little-girl tone which presumably is taken by those within hearing to be her normal voice even if a nasty one. Lise says, 'I only have my hand-bag with me. I believe in travelling light because I travel a lot and I know how terrible it is for one's neighbours on the plane when you have great huge pieces of hand-luggage taking up everybody's foot-room.'

The clerk, all in one gesture, heaves a sigh, purses his lips, closes his eyes, places his chin in his hands and his elbow on the desk. Lise turns round to address the couple behind her. She says, 'When you travel as much as I do you have to travel light, and I tell you, I nearly didn't bring any luggage at all, because you can get everything you want at the other end, so the only reason I brought the

suitcase there is that the customs get suspicious if you come in and out without luggage. They think you're smuggling dope and diamonds under your blouse, so I packed the usual things for a holiday but it was all quite unnecessary, as you get to understand when you've travelled about as you might say with experience in four languages over the years, and you know what you're doing —'

'Look, Miss,' the clerk says, pulling himself straight and stamping her ticket, 'you're holding up the people behind you. We're busy.'

Lise turns away from the bewildered-looking couple to face the clerk as he pushes her ticket and boarding card towards her. 'Boarding card,' says the clerk. 'Your flight will be called in twenty-five minutes' time. Next please.'

Lise grabs the papers and moves away as if thinking only of the next formality of travel. She puts the ticket in her bag, takes out her passport, slips the boarding card inside it, and makes straight towards the passport boxes. And it is almost as if, satisfied that she has successfully registered the fact of her presence at the airport among the July thousands there, she has fulfilled a small item of a greater purpose. She goes to the emigration official and joins the queue and submits her passport. And now, having received her passport back in her hand, she is pushing through the gate into the departure lounge. She walks to the far end, then turns and walks back. She is neither good-looking nor badly looking. Her lips are slightly parted. She stops to look at the departures chart, then walks on. The people around her are mostly too occupied with their purchases and their flight-numbers to notice her, but some of those who sit beside their hand-luggage and children on the leather seats waiting for their flights to be called look at her as she walks past, noting without comment the lurid colours of her coat — red and white stripes, hanging loose over her dress, yellow-topped, with its skirt of orange, purple and blue. They look, as she passes, as they look also at those girls whose skirts are specially short, or the men whose tight-fitting shirts are patterned with flowers or are transparent. Lise is conspicuous among them only in the particular mixture of her colours, contrasting with the fact that her hem-line has been for some years an old-fashioned length, reaching just below her knees, as do the mild dresses of many other, but dingy, women travellers who teem in the departure lounge. Lise puts her passport into her hand-bag, and holds her boarding card.

She stops at the bookstall, looks at her watch and starts looking at the paperback stands. A white-haired, tall woman who has been looking through the hardback books piled up on a table, turns from them and, pointing to the paperbacks, says to Lise in English, 'Is there anything there predominant pink or green or beige?'

'Excuse me?' says Lise politely, in a foreignly accented English, 'what is that you're looking for?'

'Oh,' the woman says, 'I thought you were American.'

'No, but I can speak four languages enough to make myself understood.'

'I'm from Johannesburg,' says the woman, 'and I have this house in Jo'burg and another at Sea Point on the Cape. Then my son, he's a lawyer, he has a flat in Jo'burg. In all our places we have spare bedrooms, that makes two green, two pink, three beige, and I'm trying to pick up books to match. I don't see any with just those pastel tints.'

'You want English books,' Lise says. 'I think you find English books on the front of the shop over there.'

'Well, I looked there and I don't find my shades. Aren't these English books here?'

Lise says 'No. In any case they're all very bright-coloured.' She smiles then, and with her lips apart starts to look swiftly through the paperbacks. She picks out one with bright green lettering on

white background with the author's name printed to look like blue lightning streaks. In the middle the cover are depicted a brown boy and girl wearing only garlands of sunflowers. Lise pays for while the white-haired woman says, 'Those colours are too bright for me. I don't see anything.'

Lise is holding the book up against her coat, giggling merrily, and looking up to the woman as if see if her purchase is admired.

'You going on holiday?' the woman says.

'Yes. My first after three years.

'You travel much?'

'No. There is so little money. But I'm going to the South now. I went before, three years ago.

'Well, I hope you have a good time. A very good time. You look very gay.

The woman has large breasts, she is clothed in a pink summer coat and dress. She smiles and amiable in this transient intimacy with Lise, and not even sensing in the least that very soon, after day and a half of hesitancy, and after a long midnight call to her son, the lawyer in Johannesburg, who advises her against the action, she nevertheless will come forward and repeat all she remembers and all she does not remember, and all the details she imagines to be true and those that are true, in her conversation with Lise when she sees in the papers that the police are trying to trace who Lise is, and whom, if anyone, she met on her trip and what she had said. 'Very gay,' says this woman to Lise indulgently, smiling all over Lise's vivid clothes.

'I look for a gay time,' Lise is saying.

'You got a young man?'

'Yes, I have my boy-friend!'

'He's not with you, then?'

'No. I'm going to find him. He's waiting for me. Maybe I should get him a gift at the duty-free shop.'

They are walking towards the departures chart. 'I'm going to Stockholm. I have three-quarters an hour wait,' says the woman.

Lise looks at the chart as the amplified voice of the announcer hacks its way through the general din. Lise says, 'That's my flight. Boarding at Gate 14.' She moves off, her eyes in the distance as the woman from Johannesburg had never been there. On her way to Gate 14 Lise stops to glance at a gift-stall. She looks at the dolls in folk-costume and at the corkscrews. Then she lifts up a paper-knife shaped like a scimitar, of brass-coloured metal with inset coloured stones. She removes it from its curved sheath and tests the blade and the point with deep interest. 'How much?' she asks the assistant who is at that moment serving someone else. The girl says impatiently aside to Lise, 'The price is on the ticket.'

'Too much. I can get it cheaper at the other end,' Lise says, putting it down.

'They're all fixed prices at the duty-free,' the girl calls after Lise as she walks away towards Gate 14.

A small crowd has gathered waiting for embarkation. More and more people straggle or palpitate according to temperament, towards the group. Lise surveys her fellow-passengers, one by one, very carefully but not in a manner to provoke their attention. She moves and mingles as if with dreamy feet and legs, but quite plainly, from her eyes, her mind is not dreamy as she absorbs each face, each dress

each suit of clothes, all blouses, blue-jeans, each piece of hand-luggage, each voice which w
accompany her on the flight now boarding at Gate 14.

THREE

She will be found tomorrow morning dead from multiple stab-wounds, her wrists bound with a silk scarf and her ankles bound with a man's necktie, in the grounds of an empty villa, in a park of the foreign city to which she is travelling on the flight now boarding at Gate 14.

Crossing the tarmac to the plane Lise follows, with her quite long stride, closely on the heels of the fellow-passenger whom she appears finally to have chosen to adhere to. This is a rosy-faced, sturdy young man of about thirty; he is dressed in a dark business suit and carries a black briefcase. She follows him purposefully, careful to block the path of any other traveller whose aimless hurry might intervene between Lise and this man. Meanwhile, closely behind Lise, almost at her side, walks a man who in turn seems anxious to be close to her. He tries unsuccessfully to catch her attention. He is bespectacled, half-smiling, young, dark, long-nosed and stooping. He wears a check shirt and beige corduroy trousers. A camera is slung over his shoulders and a coat over his arm.

Up the steps they go, the pink and shiny business man, Lise at his heels, and at hers the hungry-looking man. Up the steps and into the plane. The air-hostess says good morning at the door while the steward farther up the aisle of the economy class blocks the progress of the staggering file and helps the young woman with two young children to bundle their coats up on the rack. The way is clear at last. Lise's business man finds a seat next to the right-hand window in a three-seat row. Lise takes the middle seat next to him, on his left, while the lean hawk swiftly throws his coat and places his camera up on the rack and sits down next to Lise in the end seat.

Lise begins to fumble for her seat-belt. First she reaches down the right-hand side of her seat which adjoins that of the dark-suited man. At the same time she takes the left-hand section. But the right-hand buckle she gets hold of is that of her neighbour. It does not fit in the left-hand buckle as she tries to make it do. The dark-suited neighbour, fumbling also for his seat-belt, frowns as he seems to realize that she has the wrong part, and makes an unintelligible sound. Lise says, 'I think I've got yours.'

He fishes up the buckle that properly belongs to Lise's seat-belt.

She says, 'Oh yes. I'm so sorry.' She giggles and he formally smiles and brings his smile to an end, now fastening his seat-belt intently and then looking out of the window at the wing of the plane, silvery with its rectangular patches.

Lise's left-hand neighbour smiles. The loudspeaker tells the passengers to fasten their seat-belts and refrain from smoking. Her admirer's brown eyes are warm, his smile, as wide as his forehead, seems to take up most of his lean face. Lise says, audibly above the other voices on the plane, 'You'

look like Red Riding-Hood's grandmother. Do you want to eat me up?'

The engines rev up. Her ardent neighbour's widened lips give out deep, satisfied laughter, while Lise slaps her knee in applause. Suddenly her other neighbour looks at Lise in alarm. He stares, as if recognizing her, with his brief-case on his lap, and his hand in the position of pulling out a batch of papers. Something about Lise, about her exchange with the man on her left, has caused a kind of paralysis in his act of fetching out some papers from his brief-case. He opens his mouth, gasping and startled, staring at her as if she is someone he has known and forgotten and now sees again. She smiles at him; it is a smile of relief and delight. His hand moves again, hurriedly putting back the papers that he had half drawn out of his brief-case. He trembles as he unfastens his seat-belt and makes as if to leave his seat, grabbing his brief-case.

On the evening of the following day he will tell the police, quite truthfully, 'The first time I saw her was at the airport. Then on the plane. She sat beside me.'

'You never saw her before at any time? You didn't know her?'

'No, never.'

'What was your conversation on the plane?'

'Nothing. I moved my seat. I was afraid.'

'Afraid?'

'Yes, frightened. I moved to another seat, away from her.'

'What frightened you?'

'I don't know.'

'Why did you move your seat at that time?'

'I don't know. I must have sensed something.'

'What did she say to you?'

'Nothing much. She got her seat-belt mixed with mine. Then she was carrying on a bit with the man at the end seat.'

Now, as the plane taxis along the runway, he gets up. Lise and the man in the aisle seat look up at him, taken by surprise at the abruptness of his movements. Their seat-belts fasten them to their seats and they are unable immediately to make way for him, as he indicates that he wants to pass. Lise looks, for an instant, slightly senile, as if she felt, in addition to bewilderment, a sense of defeat and physical incapacity. She might be about to cry or protest against a pitiless frustration of her will. But an air-hostess, seeing the standing man, has left her post by the exit—door and briskly comes up the aisle to their seat. She says, 'The aircraft is taking off. Will you kindly remain seated and fasten your seat-belt?'

The man says, in a foreign accent, 'Excuse me, please. I wish to change.' He starts to squeeze past Lise and her companion.

The air-hostess, evidently thinking that the man has an urgent need to go to the lavatory, asks the two if they would mind getting up to let him pass and return to their seats as quickly as possible. They unfasten their belts, stand aside in the aisle, and he hurries up the plane with the air-hostess leading the way. But he does not get as far as the toilet cubicles. He stops at an empty middle seat upon which the people on either side, a white-haired fat man and a young girl, have dumped hand-luggage and magazines. He pushes himself past the woman who is seated on the outside seat and asks her

remove the luggage. He himself lifts it, shakily, his solid strength all gone. The air-hostess turns remonstrate, but the two people have obediently made the seat vacant for him. He sits, fastens his seat-belt, ignoring the air-hostess, her reproving, questioning protests, and heaves a deep breath as he had escaped from death by a small margin.

Lise and her companion have watched the performance. Lise smiles bitterly.

The dark man by her side says, 'What's wrong with him?'

'He didn't like us,' Lise says.

'What did we do to him?'

'Nothing. Nothing at all. He must be crazy. He must be nutty.'

The plane now comes to its brief halt before revving up for the takeoff run. The engines roar and the plane is off, is rising and away. Lise says to her neighbour, 'I wonder who he is?'

'Some kind of a nut,' says the man. 'But it's all the better for us, we can get acquainted.' His stringy hand takes hers; he holds it tightly. 'I'm Bill,' he says. 'What's your name?'

'Lise.' She lets him grip her hand as if she hardly knows that he is holding it. She stretches her neck to see above the heads of the people in front, and says, 'He's sitting there reading the paper as if nothing had happened.'

The stewardess is handing out copies of newspapers. A steward who has followed her up the aisle stops at the seat where the dark-suited man has settled and is now tranquilly scanning the front page of his newspaper. The steward inquires if he is all right now, sir?

The man looks up with an embarrassed smile and shyly apologizes.

'Yes, fine. I'm sorry ...'

'Was there anything the matter, sir?'

'No, really. Please. I'm fine here, thanks. Sorry ... it was nothing, nothing.'

The steward goes away with his eyebrows mildly raised in resignation at the chance eccentricity of a passenger. The plane purrs forward. The no-smoking lights go out and the loudspeaker confirms that the passengers may now unfasten their seat-belts and smoke.

Lise unfastens hers and moves to the vacated window seat.

'I knew,' she says. 'In a way I knew there was something wrong with him.'

Bill moves to sit next to her in the middle seat and says, 'Nothing wrong with him at all. Just a touch of puritanism. He was unconsciously jealous when he saw we'd hit it off together, and he made out like he was outraged as if we'd been doing something indecent. Forget him; he's probably a clerk in an insurance brokers' from the looks of him. Nasty little bureaucrat. Limited. He wasn't your type.'

'How do you know?' Lise says immediately as if responding only to Bill's use of the past tense and, as if defying it by a counter-demonstration to the effect that the man continues to exist in the present, she half-stands to catch sight of the stranger's head, eight rows forward in a middle seat, the other side of the aisle, now bent quietly over his reading.

'Sit down,' Bill says. 'You don't want anything to do with that type. He was frightened of your psychedelic clothes. Terrified.'

'Do you think so?'

'Yes. But I'm not.'

The stewardesses advance up the aisle bearing trays of food which they start to place before the passengers. Lise and Bill pull down the table in front of their seats to receive their portions. It is a midmorning compromise snack composed of salami on lettuce, two green olives, a rolled-up piece of boiled ham containing a filling of potato salad and a small pickled something, all laid upon a slice of bread. There is also a round cake, swirled with white and chocolate cream, and a corner of silver-wrapped processed cheese with biscuits wrapped in cellophane. An empty plastic coffee cup stands beside each on each of their trays.

Lise takes from her tray the transparent plastic envelope which contains the sterilized knife, fork and spoon necessary for the meal. She feels the blade of the knife. She presses two of her fingers against the prongs of her fork. 'Not very sharp,' she says.

'Who needs them, anyway?' says Bill. 'This is awful food.'

'Oh, it looks all right. I'm hungry. I only had a cup of coffee for my breakfast. There wasn't time to eat.'

'You can eat mine too,' says Bill. 'I stick as far as possible to a very sensible diet. This stuff is full of poison, full of toxics and chemicals. It's far too Yin.'

'I know,' said Lise. 'But considering it's a snack on a plane —'

'You know what Yin is?' he says.

She says, 'Well, sort of ...' in a vaguely embarrassed way, 'but it's only a snack, isn't it?'

'You understand what Yin is?'

'Well, something sort of like this — all bitty.'

'No, Lise,' he says.

'Well it's a kind of slang, isn't it? You say a thing's a bit too yin ...'; plainly she is groping.

'Yin,' says Bill, 'is the opposite of Yang.'

She giggles and, half-rising, starts searching with her eyes for the man who is still on her mind.

'This is serious,' Bill says, pulling her roughly back into her seat. She laughs and begins to eat.

'Yin and Yang are philosophies,' he says. 'Yin represents space. Its colour is purple. Its element is water. It is external. That salami is Yin and those olives are Yin. They are full of toxics. Have you ever heard of macrobiotic food?'

'No, what is it?' she says cutting into the open salami sandwich.

'You've got a lot to learn. Rice, unpolished rice is the basis of macrobiotics. I'm going to start a centre in Naples next week. It is a cleansing diet. Physically, mentally and spiritually.'

'I hate rice,' she says.

'No, you only think you do. He who hath ears let him hear.' He smiles widely towards her, he breathes into her face and touches her knee. She eats on with composure. 'I'm an Enlightenment Leader in the movement,' he says.

The stewardess comes with two long metal pots. 'Tea or coffee?' 'Coffee,' says Lise, holding up her plastic cup, her arm stretched in front of Bill. When this is done, 'For you, sir?' says the stewardess.

Bill places his hand over his cup and benignly shakes his head.

'Don't you want anything to eat, sir?' says the stewardess, regarding Bill's untouched tray.

‘No, thank you,’ says Bill.

Lise says, ‘I’ll eat it. Or at least, some of it.’

The stewardess passes on to the next row, unconcerned.

‘Coffee is Yin,’ says Bill.

Lise looks towards his tray. ‘Are you sure you don’t want that open sandwich? It’s delicious. I’ll eat it if you don’t want it. After all, it’s paid for, isn’t it?’

‘Help yourself,’ he says. ‘You’ll soon change your eating habits, though, now that we’ve got to know each other.’

‘Whatever do you eat when you travel abroad?’ Lise says, exchanging his tray for hers, retaining only her coffee.

‘I carry my diet with me. I never eat in restaurants and hotels unless I have to. And if I do, I choose very carefully. I go where I can get a little fish, maybe, and rice, and perhaps a bit of goat’s cheese. Which are Yang. Cream cheese — in fact butter, milk, anything that comes from the cow — is too Yin. You become what you eat. Eat cow and you become cow.’

A hand, fluttering a sheet of white paper, intervenes from behind them.

They turn to see what is being offered. Bill grasps the paper. It is the log of the plane’s flight, informing the passengers as to the altitude, speed and present geographical position, and requesting them to read it and pass it on.

Lise continues to look back, having caught sight of the face behind her. In the window seat, next to a comfortably plump woman and a young girl in her teens, is a sick-looking man, his eyes yellowish brown and watery, deep-set in their sockets, his face pale green. It was he who had handed forward the flight chart. Lise stares, her lips parted slightly, and she frowns as if speculating on the man’s identity. He looks away, first out of the window, then down towards the floor, embarrassed. The woman does not change her expression, but the young girl, understanding Lise to be questioning by her stare the man behind, says, ‘It’s only the flight chart.’ But Lise stares on. The sick-looking man looks at his companions and then down at his knees, and Lise’s stare does not appear to be helping his sickness.

A nudge from Bill composes her so far that she turns and faces forward again. He says, ‘It’s on the flight chart. Do you want to see it?’ And since she does not reply he thrusts it forward to bother about the ears of the people in front until they receive it from his hand.

Lise starts to eat her second snack. ‘You know, Bill,’ she says, ‘I think you were right about that crazy man who moved his seat. He wasn’t my type at all and I wasn’t his type. Just as a matter of interest, I mean, because I didn’t take the slightest notice of him and I’m not looking to pick up strangers. But you mentioned that he wasn’t my type and, of course, let me tell you, if he thought I was going to make up to him he made a mistake.’

‘I’m your type,’ Bill says.

She sips her coffee and looks round, glimpsing through the partition of the seats the man behind her. He stares ahead with glazed and quite unbalanced eyes, those eyes far too wide open to signify anything but some sort of mental distance from reality; he does not see Lise now, as she peers at him or, if so, he appears to have taken a quick turn beyond caring and beyond embarrassment.

Bill says, ‘Look at me, not at him.’

She turns back to Bill with an agreeable and indulgent smile. The stewardesses come efficient

collecting the trays, cluttering one upon the other. Bill, when their trays are collected, puts up first Lise's table and then his own. He puts his arm through hers.

'I'm your type,' he says, 'and you're mine. Are you planning to stay with friends?'

'No, but I have to meet somebody.'

'No chance of us meeting some time? How long are you planning to stay in the city?'

'I have no definite plans,' she says. 'But I could meet you for a drink tonight. Just a short drink.'

'I'm staying at the Metropole,' he says. 'Where will you be staying?'

'Oh, just a small place. Hotel Tomson.'

'I don't think I know Hotel Tomson.'

'It's quite small. It's cheap but clean.'

'Well, at the Metropole,' Bill says, 'they don't ask any questions.'

'As far as I'm concerned,' Lise says, 'they can ask any questions they like. I'm an idealist.'

'That's exactly what I am,' Bill says. 'An idealist. You're not offended, are you? I only meant that if we get acquainted, I think, somehow, I'm your type and you're my type.'

'I don't like crank diets,' Lise says. 'I don't need diets. I'm in good form.'

'Now, I can't let that pass, Lise,' Bill says. 'You don't know what you're talking about. The macrobiotic system is not just a diet, it's a way of life.'

She says, 'I have somebody to meet some time this afternoon or this evening.'

'What for?' he says. 'Is it a boy-friend?'

'Mind your own business,' she says.. 'Stick to your yin and your yang.'

'Yin and Yang,' he says, 'is something that you've got to understand. If we could have a little time together, a little peaceful time, in a room, just talking, I could give you some idea of how it works. It's an idealist's way of life. I'm hoping to get the young people of Naples interested in it. I should think there would be many young people of Naples interested. We're opening a macrobiotic restaurant there, you know.'

Lise peers behind her again at the staring, sickly man. 'A strange type,' she says.

'With a room behind the public dining hall, a room for strict observers who are on Regime Seven. Regime Seven is cereals only, very little liquid. You take such a very little liquid that you can pe only three times a day if you're a man, two if you're a woman. Regime Seven is a very elevated regime in macrobiotics. You become like a tree. People become what they eat.'

'Do you become a goat when you eat goat's cheese?'

'Yes, you become lean and stringy like a goat. Look at me, I haven't a spare piece of fat on my body. I'm not an Enlightenment Leader for nothing.'

'You must have been eating goat's cheese,' she says. 'This man back here is like a tree, have you seen him?'

'Behind the private room for observers of Regime Seven,' Bill says, 'there will be another little room for tranquillity and quiet. It should do well in Naples once we get the youth movement started. It's to be called the Yin-Yang Young. It does well in Denmark. But middle-aged people take the diet too. In the States many senior citizens are on macrobiotics.'

‘The men in Naples are sexy.’

‘On this diet the Regional Master for Northern Europe recommends one orgasm a day. At least. In the Mediterranean countries we are still researching that aspect.’

‘He’s afraid of me,’ Lise whispers, indicating with a jerk of her head the man behind her. ‘Why is everybody afraid of me?’

‘What do you mean? I’m not afraid of you.’ Bill looks round, impatiently, and as if only to oblige her. He looks away again. ‘Don’t bother with him,’ he says. ‘He’s a mess.’

Lise gets up. ‘Excuse me,’ she says, ‘I have to go and wash.’

‘See you come back,’ he says.

She passes across him to the aisle, holding in her hand both her hand-bag and the paperback book she bought at the airport, and as she does so she takes the opportunity to look carefully at the three people in the row behind, the ill-looking man, the plump woman and the young girl, who sit without conversing, as it seems unconnected with each other. Lise stands for a moment in the aisle, raising the arm on which the hand-bag is slung from the wrist, so that the paperback, now held between finger and thumb, is visible. She seems to display it deliberately, as if she is one of those spies one reads about who effect recognition by pre-arranged signals and who verify their contact with another agent by holding a certain paper in a special way.

Bill looks up at her and says, ‘What’s the matter?’

She starts moving forward, at the same time answering Bill: ‘The matter?’

‘You won’t need that book,’ Bill says.

She looks at the book in her hand as if wondering where it came from and with a little laugh hesitates by his side long enough to toss it on to her seat before she goes up the plane towards the toilets.

Two people are waiting in line ahead of her. She takes her place abstractedly, standing in fact almost even with the row where her first neighbour, the business man, is sitting. But she does not seem to be aware of him or to care in the slightest that he glances up at her twice, three times, at first apprehensively and then, as she continues to ignore him, less so. He turns a page of his newspaper and folds it conveniently for reading, and reads it without looking at her again, settling further into his seat with the slight sigh of one whose visitor has left and who is at last alone.

It has turned out that the sick-looking man is after all connected with the plump woman and the young girl who sat beside him on the plane. He is coming out of the airport building, now, not infirmly but with an air of serious exhaustion, accompanied by the woman and the girl.

Lise stands a few yards away. By her side is Bill; their luggage is on the pavement beside them. She says, ‘Oh there he is!’ and leaves Bill’s side, running up to the sick-eyed man. ‘Excuse me!’ she says.

He hesitates, and makes an awkward withdrawal: two steps backward, and with the steps he seems to withdraw even more his chest, shoulders, legs and face. The plump woman looks at Lise inquiringly while the girl just stands and looks.

Lise addresses the man in English. She says, ‘Excuse me, but I wondered if you wanted to share

limousine to the centre. It works out cheaper than a taxi, if the passengers agree to share, and it's quicker than the bus, of course.'

The man looks at the pavement as if inwardly going through a ghastly experience. The plump woman says, 'No, thank you. We're being met.' And touching the man on the arm, moves on. He follows, as if bound for the scaffold while the girl stares blankly at Lise before walking round and past her. But Lise quickly moves with the group, and once again confronts the man. 'I'm sure we've met somewhere before,' she says. The man rolls his head slightly as if he has toothache or a headache. 'I would be so grateful,' Lise says, 'for a lift.'

'I'm afraid—' says the woman. And just then a man in a chauffeur's uniform comes up. 'Good morning, m' lord,' he says. 'We're parked over there. Did you have a good trip?'

The man has opened his mouth wide but without making a sound; now he closes his lips tight.

'Come along,' says the plump woman, while the girl turns in an unconcerned way. The plump woman says sweetly to Lise, while brushing past her, 'I'm sorry, we can't stop at the moment. The car's waiting and we have no extra room.'

Lise shouts, 'But your luggage — you've forgotten your luggage.'

The chauffeur turns cheerily and says over his shoulder, 'No luggage, Miss, they don't bring luggage. Got all they need at the villa.' He winks and breezes about his business.

The three follow him across the street to the rows of waiting cars and are followed by other travellers who stream out of the airport building.

Lise runs back to Bill. He says, 'What are you up to?'

'I thought I knew him,' Lise says. She is crying, her tears fall heavily. She says, 'I was sure he was the right one. I've got to meet someone.'

Bill says, 'Don't cry, don't cry, people are looking. What's the matter? I don't get it.' At the same time he grins with his wide mouth as if to affirm that the incomprehensible needs must be a joke. 'I don't get it,' he says, pulling out of his pocket two men's-size paper handkerchiefs, and, selecting one, handing it to Lise. 'Who did you think he was?'

Lise wipes her eyes and blows her nose. She clutches the paper handkerchief in her fist. She says, 'It's a disappointing start to my holidays. I was sure.'

'You've got me for the next few days if you like,' Bill says. 'Don't you want to see me again? Come on, we'll get a taxi, you'll feel better in a taxi. You can't go on the bus, crying like that. I don't get it. I can give you what you want, wait and see.'

On the pavement, further up, among a cluster of people waiting for a taxi is the sturdy young man in his business suit, holding his briefcase. Lise looks listlessly at Bill, then beyond Bill, and just listlessly takes in the man whose rosy face is turned towards her. He lifts his suitcase immediately he catches sight of her and crosses the road amongst the traffic, moving quickly away and away. But Lise is not watching him any more, she does not even seem to have remembered him.

In the taxi she laughs harshly when Bill tries to kiss her. Then she lets him kiss her, emerging from the contact with raised eyebrows as who should say, 'What next?' 'I'm your type,' Bill says.

The taxi stops at the grey stone downtown Hotel Tomson. She says, 'What's all that on the floor?' and points to a scatter of small seeds. Bill looks at them closely and then at his zipper-bag which has come unzipped by a small fraction.

'Rice,' he says. 'One of my sample packs must have burst and this bag isn't closed properly.' He zips up the bag and says, 'Never mind.'

He takes her to the narrow swing doors and hands her suitcase to the porter. 'I'll look for you seven in the hall of the Metropole,' he says. He kisses her on the cheek and again she raises her eyebrows. She pushes the swing door and goes with it, not looking back.

FOUR

At the hotel desk she seems rather confused as if she is not quite sure where she is. She gives her name and when the concierge asks for her passport she evidently does not immediately understand, for she asks him what he wants first in Danish, then French. She tries Italian, lastly English. He smiles and responds to Italian and English, again requesting her passport in both languages.

‘It is confusing,’ she says in English, handing over her passport.

‘Yes, you left part of yourself at home,’ the concierge says. ‘That other part, he is still en route to our country but he will catch up with you in a few hours’ time. It’s often the way with travel by air the passenger arrives ahead of himself. Can I send you to your room a drink or a coffee?’

‘No, thank you.’ She turns to follow the waiting page-boy, then turns back. ‘When will you be finished with my passport?’

‘Any time, any time, Madam. When you come down again. When you go out. Any time.’ He looks at her dress and coat, then turns to some other people who have just arrived. While the boy waits, dangling a room-key, to take her up, Lise pauses for a moment to have a good look at them. They are a family: mother, father, two sons and a small daughter all speaking German together volubly. Lise meanwhile gazed back at by the two sons. She turns away, impatiently gesturing the page-boy towards the lift, and follows him.

In her room she gets rid of the boy quickly, and without even taking her coat off lies down on the bed, staring at the ceiling. She breathes deeply and deliberately, in and out, for a few minutes. Then she gets up, takes off her coat, and examines what there is of the room.

It is a bed with a green cotton cover, a bedside table, a rug, a dressing-table, two chairs, a small chest of drawers; there is a wide tall window which indicates that it had once formed part of a much larger room, now partitioned into two or three rooms in the interests of hotel economy; there is a small bathroom with a bidet, a lavatory, a washbasin and a shower. The walls and a built-in cupboard have been a yellowish cream but are now dirty with dark marks giving evidence of past pieces of furniture now removed or rearranged. Her suitcase lies on a rack-table. The bedside light is a curved chromium stand with a parchment shade. Lise switches it on. She switches on the central light which is encased in a mottled glass globe; the light flicks on, then immediately flickers out as if, having served a long succession of clients without complaint, Lise is suddenly too much for it.

She tramps heavily into the bathroom and first, without hesitation, peers into the drinking-glass as if fully expecting to find what she does indeed find: two Alka-Seltzers, quite dry, having presumably been put there by the previous occupant who no doubt had wanted to sober up but who had finally

lacked the power or memory to fill the glass with water and drink the salutary result.

By the side of the bed is a small oblong box bearing three pictures without words to convey clients of all languages which bell-push will bring which room attendant. Lise examines this with frown, as it were deciphering with the effort necessary to those more accustomed to word-reading the three pictures which represent first a frilly maid with a long-handled duster over her shoulder, next waiter carrying a tray and lastly a man in buttoned uniform bearing a folded garment over his arm. Lise presses the maid. A light goes on in the box illuminating the picture. Lise sits on the bed and waits. Then she takes off her shoes and, watching the door for a few seconds more, presses the buttoned valet who likewise does not come. Nor does room-service after many more minutes. Lise lifts the telephone, demands the concierge and complains in a torrent that the bell-pushes bring no answer, the room is dirty, the tooth-glass has not been changed since the last guest left, the central light needs a new bulb, and that the bed, contrary to the advance specifications of her travel agency has a too-soft mattress. The concierge advises her to press the bell for the maid.

Lise has started reciting her list over again from the beginning, when the maid does appear with question-mark on her face. Lise puts down the receiver rather loudly and points to the light which the maid tries for herself, then, nodding her understanding of the case, makes to leave. 'Wait!' says Lise first in English then in French, to neither of which the maid responds. Lise produces the glass with its Alka-Seltzers nestled at the bottom. 'Filthy!' Lise says in English. The maid obligingly fills the glass from the tap and hands it to Lise. 'Dirty!' Lise shouts in French. The maid understands, laughs at the happening, and this time makes a quick getaway with the glass in her hand.

Lise slides open the cupboard, pulls down a wooden hanger and throws it across the room with clatter, then lies down on the bed. Presently she looks at her watch. It is five past one. She opens her suitcase and carefully extracts a short dressing-gown. She takes out a dress, hangs it in the cupboard, takes it off the hanger again, folds it neatly and puts it back. She takes out her sponge-bag and bedroom slippers, undresses, puts on her dressing-gown and goes into the bathroom, shutting the door. She has reached the point of taking a shower when she hears voices from her room, a scraping sound, a man's and a girl's. Putting forth her head from the bathroom door, she sees a man in light brown overalls with a pair of steps and an electric light bulb, accompanied by the maid. Lise comes out in her dressing-gown without having properly dried herself in the evident interest of protecting her hand-bag which lies on the bed. Her dressing-gown clings damply to her. 'Where is the tooth-glass?' Lise demands. 'I must have a glass for water.' The maid touches her head to denote forgetfulness and departs with a swish of her skirt, never to return within Lise's cognizance. However, Lise soon makes known her need for a drinking-glass on the telephone to the concierge, threatening to leave the hotel immediately if she doesn't get her water-glass right away.

While waiting for the threat to take effect Lise again considers the contents of her suitcase. This seems to present her with a problem, for she takes out a pink cotton dress, hangs it in the cupboard, then after hesitating for a few seconds she takes it off the hanger again, folds it carefully and lays it back in her case. It may be that she is indeed contemplating an immediate departure from the hotel. But when another maid arrives with two drinking-glasses, apologies in Italian and the explanation that the former maid had gone off duty, Lise continues to look through her belongings in a puzzled way, taking nothing further out of her suitcase.

This maid, seeing laid out on the bed the bright-coloured dress and coat in which Lise had arrived, inquires amiably if Madam is going to the beach.

'No,' says Lise.

‘You American?’ says the maid.

‘No,’ Lise says.

‘English?’

‘No.’ Lise turns her back to continue her careful examination of her clothes in the suitcase, and the maid goes out with an unwanted air, saying, ‘Good day.’

Lise is lifting the corners of her carefully packed things, as if in absent-minded accompaniment some thought, who knows what? Then, with some access of decision, she takes off her dressing-gown and slippers and starts putting on again the same clothes that she wore on her journey. When she is dressed she folds the dressing-gown, puts the slippers back in their plastic bag, and replaces them in her suitcase. She also puts back everything that she has taken out of her sponge-bag, and packs them away.

Now she takes from an inside pocket of her suitcase a brochure with an inset map which she spreads out on the bed. She studies it closely, finding first the spot where the Hotel Tomson is situated and from there traces with her finger various routes leading into and away from the centre of the town. Lise stands, bending over it. The room is dark although it is not yet two in the afternoon. Lise switches on the central light and pores over her map.

It is marked here and there with tiny pictures which denote historic buildings, museums and monuments. Eventually Lise takes a ballpoint pen from her bag and marks a spot in a large patch of green, the main parkland of the city. She puts a little cross beside one of the small pictures which is described on the map as ‘The Pavilion’. She then folds up the map and replaces it in the pamphlet which she then edges in her hand-bag. The pen lies, apparently forgotten, on the bed. She looks at herself in the glass, touches her hair, then locks her suitcase. She finds the car-keys that she had failed to leave behind this morning and attaches them once more to her key-ring. She puts the bunch of keys in her hand-bag, picks up her paperback book and goes out, locking the door behind her. Who knows her thoughts? Who can tell?

She is downstairs at the desk where, behind the busy clerks, numbered pigeon-holes irregularly contain letters, packages, the room-keys, or nothing, and above them the clock shows twelve minutes past two. Lise puts her room-key on the counter and asks for her passport in a loud voice causing the clerk whom she addresses, another clerk who sits working an adding machine, and several other people who are standing and sitting in the hotel lobby, to take notice of her.

The women stare at her clothes. They, too, are dressed brightly for a southern summer, but even here in this holiday environment Lise looks brighter. It is possibly the combination of colours — the red in her coat and the purple in her dress — rather than the colours themselves which draws attention to her, as she takes her passport in its plastic envelope from the clerk, he looking meanwhile as if he bears the whole of the eccentricities of humankind upon his slender shoulders.

Two girls, long-legged, in the very brief skirts of the times, stare at Lise. Two women who might be their mothers stare too. And possibly the fact that Lise’s outfit comes so far and unfashionably below her knees gives an extra shockingness to her appearance that was not even apparent in the less up-to-date Northern city from which she set off that morning. Skirts are worn shorter here in the South. Just as, in former times, when prostitutes could be discerned by the brevity of their skirts compared with the normal standard, so Lise in her knee-covering clothes at this moment looks curiously of the street-prostitute class beside the mini-skirted girls and their mothers whose knees at least can be seen.

So she lays the trail, presently to be followed by Interpol and elaborated upon with due art by the journalists of Europe for the few days it takes for her identity to be established.

‘I want a taxi,’ Lise says loudly to the uniformed boy who stands by the swing door. He goes out to the street and whistles. Lise follows and stands on the pavement. An elderly woman, small, neat and agile in a yellow cotton dress, whose extremely wrinkled face is the only indication of her advanced age, follows Lise to the pavement. She, too, wants a taxi, she says in a gentle voice, and she suggests to Lise that they might share. Which way is Lise going? This woman seems to see nothing strange about Lise, so confidently does she approach her. And in fact, although this is not immediately apparent, the woman’s eyesight is sufficiently dim, her hearing faint enough, to eliminate, for her, the garish effect of Lise on normal perceptions.

‘Oh,’ says Lise, ‘I’m only going to the Centre. I’ve no definite plans. It’s foolish to have plans.’ She laughs very loudly.

‘Thank you, the Centre is fine for me,’ says the woman, taking Lise’s laugh for acquiescence in the sharing of the taxi.

And, indeed, they do both load into the taxi and are off.

‘Are you staying here long?’ says the woman.

‘This will keep it safe,’ says Lise, stuffing her passport down the back of the seat, stuffing it down till it is out of sight.

The old lady turns her spry nose towards this operation. She looks puzzled for an instant, but soon complies with the action, moving forward to allow Lise more scope in shoving the little booklet out of sight.

‘That’s that,’ says Lise, leaning back, breathing deeply, and looking out of the window. ‘What a lovely day!’

The old lady leans back too, as if leaning on the trusting confidence that Lise has inspired. She says, ‘I left my passport in the hotel, with the Desk.’

‘It’s according to your taste,’ Lise says opening the window to the slight breeze. Her lips part blissfully as she breathes in the air of the wide street on the city’s outskirts.

Soon they run into traffic. The driver inquires the precise point at which they wish to be dropped.

‘The Post Office,’ Lise says. Her companion nods.

Lise turns to her. ‘I’m going shopping. It’s the first thing I do on my holidays. I go and buy the little presents for the family first, then that’s off my mind.’

‘Oh, but in *these* days,’ says the old lady. She folds her gloves, pats them on her lap, smiles at them.

‘There’s a big department store near the Post Office,’ Lise says. ‘You can get everything you want there.’

‘My nephew is arriving this evening.’

‘The traffic!’ says Lise.

They pass the Metropole Hotel. Lise says, ‘There’s a man in that hotel I’m trying to avoid.’

‘Everything is different,’ says the old lady.

‘A girl isn’t made of cement,’ Lise says, ‘but everything is different now, it’s all changed, believe

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