

## The Conference

From Dijon the railway followed the valley of the Saone, all the way to Lyon. From his seat by the window Adam watched the river appearing and reappearing through the trees. It was a dark day in November and in the distance he could just make out the terraced hills of Beaujolais. The glass of wine that he took with his lunch in the buffet car had come from over there.

This would be his fourth Company European Conference and he was feeling confident and well-prepared. Preparation, for Adam, was everything. At the conference hotel he had managed to reserve the suite that he had occupied for the last two years.

At the age of thirty-nine it had become a habit to take an inventory of his life, checking off in his mind its component parts. He assured himself that his senior position in the legal department was secure; he had worked hard to gain the good opinion of the people who mattered. His health was sound - the company's annual check-up had been reassuring. He thought about his two children and again felt satisfied. They were in the competent care of Elspeth, his ex-wife.

He stretched his legs and leant against the headrest, watching a family group cruising on the river, trailing fishing lines. A boy stood up in the boat to wave at the train and Adam responded. But then unwelcome thoughts began to intrude. It was not just competent care that Elspeth gave the children; it was everything he had lost when his own mother was taken from him by a flu epidemic in 1936. Her only child, he had been wrapped in her love for seven years and then abandoned. A year later he was at boarding school, a lost boy, always fearful, inventing little rituals to keep himself safe.

Adam's sense of well-being was dissolving and now it was shaken further, by a sudden and particular combination of sights and sounds. From the window of the train he recognised the pastel-painted houses on the outskirts of Macon and at the same moment a group of children passed noisily along the corridor. Suddenly Adam was on this same route, on his way to a different conference, beset by feelings that he had spent two years trying to bury.

It was the Autumn of 1966. The Swedish family struggled into the corridor with their luggage, the two children chanting, "Bye bye, Mister." It was a noisy journey but Adam had enjoyed responding to the kids, eager to try out their few phrases of English. He closed the door and returned to his seat at the window. He exchanged a smile with the only other occupant, a woman of about thirty, who sat opposite him. They had briefly greeted each other when she boarded the train at Chalon and they recognised the familiar company labels on each other's cases. They were bound for the same destination.

"A lively pair," Adam remarked.

"Do you have children?" she asked. The voice was low, the accent unmistakably French.

"Yes - a boy and a girl, just a bit younger than those two. And you?"

She shook her head and looked down, fingering her wedding ring. He studied her more closely. Chestnut brown hair falling over the collar of a camel-hair coat, a pleasing combination. He didn't remember seeing her before; this must be her first conference.

Adam took out his company folder to remind himself once more of his programme for the weekend. But his concentration was lacking. In the restaurant car he had departed from his usual moderation. He had ordered a glass of wine, but the waiter brought a half bottle and he rashly accepted it.

Now he looked up and saw that she had turned towards the window. It was becoming darker outside and the glass, now streaked with rain, reflected the interior in reduced detail. Faces were simplified to broad areas of light and shade. Half an hour remained of the journey and he passed it in covert observation of her features in the glass. Warmth and softness were the qualities he saw. He couldn't be sure where her eyes were focused. Was she perhaps looking at him?

As they approached Lyon they rose to recover their luggage. The sudden braking of the train unbalanced them and she clutched at him for support. They were both a little unhurried in drawing back from their accidental embrace. To overcome the awkwardness that followed, Adam said brightly, "Shall we see if we can find a taxi?"

The short ride to the hotel was spent in silence. Something had passed between them on the train and Adam was anxious to hold on to it. Superficial conversation would only restore their former distance.

At the hotel they threaded their way through a foyer crowded with company employees, all greeting acquaintances and chatting loudly. They checked in at the reception desk. Adam learned that her name was Sophie, as she wrote in bold letters below his neat signature in the register. They escaped to the lift and the door closed on the two of them. He looked at her, saw her eyes lift slowly to meet his. They were moving towards each other when the doors opened at the fourth floor. They wheeled their cases along the corridor until they reached number 418, Adam's suite. He turned the key in the door and stepped back. She entered ahead of him.

The cases were parked as soon as the door closed and they fell into a long embrace. The sensation of her body against his took Adam back, all the way to his early teens, to the weekly dances in the village hall; to a girl called Jane Piper. He and Jane never spoke much, but she would slide into his arms and he would hold her, in a state of rapture, wishing that the dance would never end.

Adam sensed that this coming together of strangers in Lyon was as unfamiliar to Sophie as it was to him, and yet the sequence of their movements might have been choreographed. Outer garments were unbuttoned without haste and there was a gentleness in the way they held each other, swaying slightly, as if to a slow melody. Not since Jane Piper had anyone felt so much in tune with him. Their eventual lovemaking came after another long embrace, under the covers of Adam's hotel bed.

Later, she lay still beside him. Neither wanted to break the spell of their strange and silent intimacy. After a while she rose and sat on the edge of the bed, gathering up her clothes. Holding them in front of her, she walked round the bed and stood above him, looking down. She seemed to be studying his face, as if trying to fix its image in her mind. Then she let her hands drop and stood there for a moment, uncovered. She turned and stepped quickly through the door to the sitting room. A minute later he heard the outer door closing behind her.

He didn't see her again. She must have left the conference early the next morning, doubtless retreating to whatever situation she had come from – her marriage, in all probability. That final moment remained imprinted on Adam's

mind. Her simple gesture of exposure seemed like an offering, almost as though she were in his debt.

Adam's well-being had always depended on the avoiding of risks. But on that day two years ago his caution had deserted him. Overwhelming desire - or perhaps it was a craving for warmth and touch that harked back to his boyhood deprivation - caught him unawares. In another man such an experience might have awakened an appetite for promiscuity, but to Adam it felt as though the foundations of his being could no longer be trusted. He began to let things slip at work and was forced to ask for a period of time off. At home he was failing as husband and father. 'Two children are as many as I can cope with,' Elspeth told him one day, exasperated by his helplessness. Trying to ease the guilt, he confessed his infidelity. She threw him out.

Slowly and methodically, a single man now, he set about reconstructing the supports that had underpinned his life. With echoes of boarding school, he became obsessive in establishing routines and rituals. At work in the legal department, where they valued that kind of behaviour, he picked up the threads of his career.

Now, two years later, he was once again in Lyon. He reached his familiar suite at the hotel and unpacked his case, hanging clothes in the wardrobe and placing his toiletries neatly in the bathroom. Then he went down to the bar to have a gin and tonic before dinner.

Sophie entered the bar in time to see Adam walk through the door to the dining room. She ordered a Martini and took it to a table in the corner. As she sipped her drink she thought about the day when she had boarded a train at Chalon to attend her first Company Conference.

From her seat by the window she had watched the Swedish family lifting their cases down onto the platform at Macon. When the train began to move the children looked up and waved. She raised a hand in response. Then she lifted the collar of her coat and turned towards the window, unable to keep the tears from her eyes. The man opposite, who was also with the Company, seemed to have sensed her mood; he hadn't sought conversation after their brief exchange about children.

They were on the last stretch of the journey. The wheels of the train were hammering out a steady rhythm on the track beneath her. Her eyes rested on the reflection in the glass of her fellow-passenger - this tall, fair-haired colleague who had two children. Her expression gave no hint of the thought being conceived in her mind.

Sophie finished her drink, gave a touch to her hair and walked into the dining room. Adam was sitting alone. She went up to his table.

"Bonsoir, Monsieur. Good evening."

Adam's surprise rendered him speechless for a moment. He gestured for her to join him and she sat down. A waiter approached their table and he waved him away.

Adam looked at her in disbelief, and then found his voice: "You look well." It was true. She looked relaxed, radiant even.

"You weren't here last year," he said.

“No.”

By way of explanation she opened her bag and drew out a small photo. She passed it across to him. He saw a little fair-haired girl, standing unsteadily in a sunlit garden. The hand of someone outside the frame was visible, waiting to catch her.

“Yes,” she said, “I really am very well.”