

THE LACQUER POT

As a Journalist writing for Broadsheets, one must refuse to take the assumptive view. When new evidence appears, Journalisms role is to construct a report. However, never so frequently has an investigation, as the Three Men from Paraguay, resolved itself only to disintegrate between the printed word. Never has so many forefingers pointed to the prevailing wind and the sail gone limp.

Having some time in-between deadlines, I booked a trip to Monte Carlo's Hotel de Paris, where all the events surrounding the figures occurred. My decision was informed by a desire to jump from desk to being an on the ground reporter. A move in my career I had long anticipated.

On arrival, the hotel lobby was busy, it being the beginning of the summer season. The channels of new guests and those departing for a late lunch were unaware that the thirty foot Skylight had trembled and cracked, throwing shards of glass down to those sat at the bar in the early hours of May fifth. The Société des bains de mer de Monaco wanted a swift restoration of the hotel. The appearance one month on, was that nothing had interrupted the one hundred and fifty year old decoration.

After being shown to my room, I made my way out to the private beach to catch the last hour of sun. Looking out to the sea, there was a group of yachts sailing toward the harbor. Trailing each other, they formed a long thin line that blocked the horizon.

Turning back to the hotel's façade, I could see the vertical column of balconies that were still missing. Dislodged on the night of the Egyptian bank Tejarat's Investment Banquet, when a helicopter collided with the top floor balcony. Witnesses have said that the boys, son's of the Industrialists to whom Tejarat had held the banquet, were already waiting on their individ-

ual balconies before the helicopter was first heard.

My vision, upon reaching the bottom of the absent column, came to view a solitary figure wearing black round sunglasses. Madam flicked her cigarette off the terrace facing forward to me, as I was alone on the beach.

It was evening by the time I stepped out of the terrace doors. Madam hadn't moved and was sat with her legs crossed, a journal spread out on her lap. The black sunglasses had been removed, a lighter shade spectacle being placed closer to the end of her nose. She was wearing a light blue woolen suit, whose skirt finished just under her knees. Her shirt was white with a low collar, with the first two buttons undone. I sat a few tables across from her and was served with a Martini. Madam was drinking Champagne.

"Bonsoir," she said, "care to join me?"

I rose and sat at her table, facing the sea.

"Holidaying?" She asked.

"No, I'm a journalist, I've been writing on the case of The Three Men from Paraguay and have come to see the hotel."

"Well, its notorious for a service that always says yes."

"What may I ask brings you to the Hotel de Paris?"

"I've been here for a year now, I've been living in hotels since I was divorced"

We had made dinner arrangements for 8pm. I retired to my room and changed into a dinner suit, as I thought it necessary for dining in the hotel restaurant. I entered the lift as the attendant greeted me, it was an opportunity to begin my inquiry amongst the staff.

"May I ask, how long you have been working for this hotel?"

"It's been almost two years."

"You were working the night of the Tejarat banquet?"

“Yes.”

We had reached the ground floor were the doors opened to the lobby. He went to open the gate.

“What do you remember about the night?”

As there was no one waiting for the lift, he allowed the doors to close again. He then pressed the top floor button. We ascended without being interrupted by anyone calling the lift. On reaching the top, the attendant pressed the stop button, shutting the lift down.

“It was the son of the French Industrialist from Paris. Around 2am the lift was called to his level and when the doors opened, I saw he was clinging to the walls. He was a very thin boy and very tall, so I thought it was general exhaustion or that he had been drinking. So I wanted to be as discreet as possible when brining him into the lift. But as I went to help him in, the strength of his perfume hit me hard. I stepped backward and grasped my face, as it was burning. Relieved I was able to open my eyes, I saw he had fallen across the lift entrance and the doors had begun to close. I pushed the whole of his body inside and cupped my mouth to savor some fresh air. I looked down at the boy. His shirt was undone bearing his red raw chest, it was crimson. I realized then why he had always worn his full-length suit, even on the terrace. I thought he had passed out, but he reached for the pocket of his blazer from which he drew out a perfume bottle and began to spray as if it was involuntary. My eyes began to see black spots as the spray created a cloud. He kept on spraying whilst I fell to the floor. The boy kept requesting, “FLOOR 36! FLOOR 36!” I replied. “There is no such floor sir! No such floor sir!” We had eventually reached the top floor. As the doors

opened I gasped for breath. But he had closed the doors again and proceeded spraying, demanding we go higher, higher still! He must have thought he was in a Skyscraper! After much time in this conflict, he pulled out yet another perfume bottle from his inside pocket. This time it was tiny, I imagine it only consisted of one spray. He held it out to his neck as the lift doors opened and I stepped out, fearing its strength. The doors closed but the lift remained at the top level.”

There was a bang from outside the doors. The attendant enabled the lift and we started to descend. Upon reaching the ground floor there was an older staff member waiting. I was allowed to walk out first before the lift ascended with them both inside.

From the lobby, I made my way to the restaurant, arriving at the top of a marble staircase that curved its way into the main dining area. I could see madam sat at the center table with two waiters stood either side. I descended the staircase and was shown to her table.

Upon seating, I ordered the wine she was drinking, as her taste was agreeable. I ordered my food. The waiter, departing directly after, told me Madam had already ordered hers. She had changed into a dark blue suite with another white shirt, the two top buttons undone. She now adorned a hat; a shallow cylindrical piece made out of mink and died with light and dark blue shades. Where the fur ended it complimented the tight curls of her short haircut. The conversation from the terrace resumed.

“Its amazing how rapid the restoration project is.”

“Yes, its astonishing.” she replied

“Though, it is strange that there was no pause during the initial investigation.”

“Well,” she picked up her glass, “the hotel has a service to provide and it’s the best service

on all the Riviera’s.”

I detected a movement amongst the furniture. A group of guests arrived and one of the waiters broke his posture, ushering them to their table.

“Did you ever meet the three men from Paraguay?”

“I never spoke to them, but I remember how distinct they were with their white suits and hats, such a strange cut, like a side parting you’d see in South America.”

“There have been accusations that they were responsible for the boys deaths.”

“Who knows, they seemed like they were here on a business trip.”

A hand passed over my shoulder and curled towards my place setting. The scallops had arrived and they looked sumptuous. I thought it weird Madam hadn’t been served her first course.

“I’m not eating.” She said.

This doubled as a moment in which she took her leave, the waiter pulling her chair out.

“Ill be on the terrace.”

The dinner had been shorter than I expected. My meal continued with the lamb and caramelized tomato crisp. The waiters were very attentive and I soon forgot about Madam’s invitation. By the time I had finished the restaurant was empty. I requested my bill, which I signed.

“May I say you have a very distinguished signature sir.” Said the waiter.

“Thank you. Its just a request, but is it possible for you to give me a tour of the hotel? I’ve seen most of it, but I haven’t seen the banquet hall. I heard the decoration is un-missable.”

“Certainly sir.” He turned and gestured to his colleagues.

“This way please.”

I followed him up the stairs and back into the lobby. Turning left and circling the lift column, we entered the back of the hotel. The banquet hall was positioned under the terrace. All the tables were laid up for a dinner scheduled for the next night.

“It’s a dinner for The Bank of Brasilia.” The Waiter informed me.

“Were you working on the night of the Tejarat banquet?”

“Yes.”

“Can you explain to me what it was like?”

“There was much the same layout. Apart from the tables were all labeled with the different cities that Tejarat invest in. There was Cairo, Paris, London, New York, Sao Paulo, St Petersburg, Rio de Janeiro, Dubai, Frankfurt, Melbourne, Tokyo and Beijing. We served the starter, there was a speech by the head of the firm. We served the main course, again another speech and then desert.”

There was nothing I didn’t already know from the boy’s account of the night. He suggested touring me in the gardens.

The night air was fresh and a relief from the heat of the day. After strolling past the spectacular gold fountains, we started down one of the avenues leading to the cliffs where the garden ended.

“What do you know of the three men from Paraguay?”

He didn’t stop walking, but remained silent for a few moments.

“The maid heard a cry from the roof. She was in the fire exit at the very top of the hotel, changing the rooms ready for the arrival of the Tejarat guests. She climbed the stairs to see what was going on. Reaching the roof, she saw the three of them with their white suits and hats. They had their arms outstretched, pointing

to a black helicopter that had almost disappeared over the south side of the city.”

“Would I be able to talk to the maid?”

He shook his head.

“She left only a few weeks ago. I haven’t heard anything from her. It’s the same with everyone that leaves here. They promise they will contact you, that they will send an invitation for you, but nothing arrives. They disappear without saying where they are going.”

Being outside had made me want to go into Monte Carlo, to get out of the hotel. So I asked if he could recommend anywhere to walk.

He glanced back towards the entrance that had led us out to the garden. There stood another waiter, an older man.

“I’ve got to go back to the restaurant sir, but you must see the harbor, they have the biggest yachts in the world!”

Leaving the hotel, I reached a street that led down to the harbor. The window displays were all still lit, so I paused to view some of the garments and jewelry. Reaching the bottom of the street, there was a display of sunglasses. One pair caught my eye. It was Madams black round ones. I thought of her and hoped she hadn’t thought it rude of me to not join her on the terrace.

Reaching the harbor, the stalls selling souvenirs, hats, clothing, sandals were all being packed away into vans. I walked along the waters edge to the far side where the old fort walls edged the harbor. There was a narrow path that bent round to a private spot with a view to the moored yachts.

The lighthouse, placed at the very extension of the harbor wall, rotated its light hitting the cliffs just above me. There was a noise of sliding doors from a yacht whose

mooring was not far off. The suited men entered the helicopter as the engine began to whirl. It took off from the yacht in less than two minutes and flew towards the direction of the hotel de Paris. Once over the hotel, it span around to face the other direction flying back over me, positioned at the south side of the harbor.

Looking back to the hotel, I could see the small silhouette of a figure stood alone on the roof, an arm outstretched in the direction of the helicopter. It remained there till the engine noise dissipated and then descended the fire exit.

I woke the next day much later than I had wanted. I showered quickly and threw on a linen suit I had intended to have ironed. I made my way down to the ground floor and walked immediately out toward the terrace. I had hoped to find Madam there, but on approaching the doors one of the ushers informed me that the terrace was closed due to restoration works under way. I peered out of the window to see the scaffold that had been erected that very morning.

As I walked back to the lobby I saw Madam at the entrance hailing a taxi that pulled up directly in front. I started to run, as I saw her enter the back. Dodging the bellboys with the bags, I should have shouted but I felt to be a little inconspicuous.

The taxi hadn’t left the parking bay when I exited the hotel. Looking in, the back of the taxi was empty. I inquired to the driver where Madam had gone. He shrugged and pulled away.

A few moments passed till a convertible pulled into the bay. I turned around, as I had started to walk back into the lobby. Madam was in the driving seat smiling.

“Come for a drive, you’ve hardly been out of the hotel!”

“I’d be delighted!”

We had left the town behind quickly, Madam being a speedy driver. Taking the road leading to the Italian border, we drove till we hit the coast, Meandering through the curves that hugged the edge of the cliffs. We came to a halt where there was a gap in the barrier of hedges. She stopped the engine.

“You might have already guessed. This is where the three men from Paraguay crashed their car.”

She opened the glove compartment, pulled out a stack of papers, and placed them on my lap. I asked her how she had acquired them.

“Of course it was the men from Paraguay. On the evening of their departure I was sat out on the terrace and they approached me. Not to sit down, one of them stepped forward and handed me these drawings . Another stepped forward and said, “these are the documents of our past actions, bring them to latitude 40.543865 longitude 14.229805. Go south madam.”

Her driving gloves rubbed the edge of the steering wheel.

“There are two days before the location is to be met.”

I was silent a few moments as I stared between the gap in the hedge.

“Well I have deadlines, I must return to London.”

She didn’t register my reply.

“They told me to come to this place where they would end their mission one month following their departure. And that I should bring an associate. I have chosen you because you have renounced all hope of finding a conclusion to your investigation and what’s more, hope will disappear from your life. Your departure from the impartial reporter to a search for authenticity has exposed you, whilst leaving no satisfaction to articulate. An object as dead as a pillar is presence in itself. Is

as unidentifiable as the assassin in its relentless silence. We mark the gaps between meaning and between words. We enact the espionage that can never register till it has stricken.”

I turned to look her in the face.

“And when it strikes, the objects left behind form a rhetoric, cutting a thin trajectory whose narrative will remain hidden and whose tactics are laid bare as objects stored in a private collection.”

She exited her car and made her way to open the trunk. She returned to the driving seat and handed me the object she had retrieved. The black lacquer pot was rich in its quality, simple but gorgeous to hold. Lifting the pot upside-down, the inscription on the underside read;

FUCK YOU VANDALIST

“But first, before we head south, we must take a detour to Cap Martin. To deposit this object on the grave of the Owl. “

As we drove I took the time to examine the drawings Madam had handed me. They consisted of thin lines arranged in close proximity to each other, others crossed over or rounded to create an un-ended shape. In the middle of the stack I came to a page of text arranged as if it were a title. It read:

BY PRESSING FOREFINGER TO THUMB;
RELEASE THE POISON EMBEDDED IN THE
LEATHER DRIVING GLOVE

The Grande Cornish curved its way onwards to Cap Martin. The sky had whited out from the intense midday sun. Looking out, there was a group of yachts sailing in zigzags away from the harbor.

