

How's the Pain?

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The sound coming from somewhere in the darkness was barely audible, but it was enough to shatter his sleep. The drone of the moped grew louder until it was directly beneath his window, grating on his nerves like a dentist's drill boring into a decayed tooth. Then it faded into the distance, leaving nothing behind but a long rip through the fabric of the sleeping city. He hadn't opened his eyes or moved except to twitch his mouth in annoyance at the buzzing mechanical insect. Lying flat on his back with his hands crossed over his chest, Simon could have been a recumbent tomb effigy. One at a time he opened his heavy eyelids, gummed together like the rusty shutters of an old shop. He groped for his glasses on the bedside table, but could barely see any better once he had put them on. The pale light of dawn behind the floral-patterned lace curtains bathed the room in a uniform grey. Every object and item of furniture seemed devoid of substance, as if they

had been hastily sketched on the walls. The bedspread, blanket and sheets had hardly been disturbed. He had slept peacefully, without waking. If that two-stroke engine had not roared in to break the spell, he would probably still have been asleep now. His travel clock beside the lamp showed 6.11 a.m. The alarm was set for seven. No matter, he was wide awake now. Besides, time did not follow its usual course in hotel rooms; it stagnated like the dead arm of a river.

Simon glanced around at his rudimentary universe: his shoes, sitting quietly at the foot of the bed, a sock rolled up inside each one; his jacket hanging limply over the back of the chair; the little table where he had emptied out the contents of his pockets, with the car keys and documents, his wallet, notebook, a pen, a handful of coins, a few banknotes and a large envelope addressed to Bernard Ferrand. He checked its contents: his Geneva bank account number and a power of attorney for Bernard, along with a short note saying, 'Thank you and good luck'. He gazed at it for a few moments, then screwed it up with a shrug and lobbed it into the wastepaper basket. Next to the envelope sat an apple and a skipping rope, still in its colourful plastic wrapping. A poor copy of Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* hung on the olive-green wall. The bathroom light was still on. A notice on the back of the door informed guests of the fire drill, room rates, mealtimes and so on.

Was it him that creaked on the bed, as he extricated himself from the sheets? He rubbed his neck. Wretched trapped nerves. His knees were like banister knobs. His calves were dry and hairy like crab claws, his toenails hard

as ancient ivory, like the claws of an aged dog. He yawned, got up and raised a corner of the curtain. The same pallid light outside as in. The clouds were low, clinging like tufts of cotton wool to the mountains encircling Vals-les-Bains, Ucel and Saint-Julien-du-Serre. It was impossible to tell what lay beyond. Between the streaks of rain running down the window, he could just about make out the muddy waters of the Volane flowing past the Béatrix-spring rotunda.

‘It was too good to last. The forecast says it’s going to carry on raining all week.’

‘You’re the one who wanted to take the waters. We’ll just have to go to the pictures.’

This was a conversation Simon had overheard the previous evening, from the neighbouring table in the hotel restaurant. A retired couple: the wife shaking her head over the menu, the husband hiding behind *Le Dauphiné*. The front page was taken up with the news of the death of a well-known film producer, pictured sporting a dazzling display of dentures and a glitzy starlet on each arm.

Simon tucked into his Vichyssoise and fillets of sole and saved the apple for later, which is to say, now. He bit into it. A little floury. Disappointed, he put it down and went into the bathroom.

He had still not worked out the shower. It was a toss-up between freezing-cold or boiling-hot water. Perhaps because his body sensed that it had already been deserted, it refused to respond to his brain’s orders. The glass tumbler slipped from his hands and smashed on the tiled floor. He knocked his elbow, banged his knee and cut himself

shaving. All he saw in the mirror now was the outline of a blurred face seeking anonymity. A dab of aftershave and that was it, done. He changed his underwear out of respect for the people who would soon be dealing with his corpse.

Once dressed, he paced the few steps from the window to the bed, from the bed back to the window. Then he took the skipping rope out of its packaging. The brightly coloured box showed a little girl in a pink dress playing in a daisy-strewn meadow. He had bought it the day before in the souvenir shop next to the hotel, just before it closed. The shop assistant had smiled at her last, curious sale of the day. The rope was white, with red handles. He tested its strength by tugging on it sharply. 'Made in China', he read with suspicion. Then he placed the chair underneath the frosted-glass ceiling light with its stylised tulips, and clambered onto it. He carefully tied one end of the rope around the hook on the ceiling and looped the other around his neck. He was perfectly calm. He was not quite sure what to do with his hands. He clasped them behind his back and waited, wearily watching the raindrops streaking down the windowpane.