

The Berlin Hotel

and the Hong Kong Restaurant.

I was crossing over and going on up the street, after pausing briefly in front of some shoes hanging up on display. Without being drawn to any one pair, I was tempted by their polished leather and slipped inside the shop, then paid unenthusiastically, having succumbed to the charms of the saleswoman with her silent smiles, which had no soul, for she stood there determinedly, in complete control, bringing me every pair of shoes she had one after the other.

The Berlin Hotel and...

As I walked along, feeling extremely embarrassed by the intrusive voice at my side, the look of the two signs, right next to one another on the high wall, caught my eye.

The Berlin Hotel and The Hong Kong Restaurant.

For some reason my attention shifted suddenly on to murky areas in my mind, and a whiff of strangeness, and a random, unsettling feeling.

"Excuse me, I wanted to ask you..."

The movement round about, raucous and fragmented, had an indefinable radiance when taken as a whole.

"Hey!"

The voice came from behind me, and I turned, still just able to see the two signs, high up in my field of vision, so that I could only catch a fleeting view of them, or one distorted by irritation and a feeling of oppression!

The third look confirmed some interesting details: the backgrounds of the two signs didn't match, so they looked incongruous displayed in the same small area. One was a dull red, and the other floated in a sea of tentative whiteness.

How often had I passed this way, brushing shoulders with other people, or speeding unhindered along this pavement which was like a vast entrance hall. But I had never glanced to one side at the thronging life on the wall, or studied the spaces rushing towards me in the splendour of their decor of advertisements and hoardings.

"Hey! Just one word."

At the start the voice sounded soft, as if it was releasing the first yearnings of its desire, and the footsteps were lost, camouflaged by the disconcerting flow of movement along the old marble pavement.

From what I could see there was no sign on the front of the hotel or its main door amongst the concentration of small restaurants and *cafés*, whose patrons were visible sitting stiffly on leather seats, and the metal staircase spiralled upwards in the soft dusk leading to some impenetrable maze, although a man in working clothes stood calmly and confidently beside it looking as if he could have been at the service of the two signboards.

I imagined for a moment how strange it must be in the cramped darkness in the building, and pictured that there was nothing behind the wall, no clean rooms or corridors, only bare emptiness under disintegrating ancient columns.

"I really don't know where I've seen you before!"

The voice had taken on a slimy note and the cautious interval separating his two sentences seemed to have been shortened by his lust bursting out of him uncontrollably.

It was nobody's business to make light of this blind desperation to commit an assault, or dismiss in some hair-splitting exercise the upheaval caused by such a blatant act of violation.

All eyes were averted from the object of the man's folly, or stole a quick glance from under lowered lids, while he stared shamelessly, using expressions deliberately intended to be lecherous and vulgar.

I had got caught in the grip of a slow moving crowd beside a pavement where dusty glass display cases showed up in the street lights, crammed with books and shoes and long-forgotten advertisements, and newspapers and magazines and socks and shirts were laid out on the ground. The merchandise gleamed with a quiet confidence, and from a distance it appeared illuminated at strategic intervals, as if arranged by a sympathetic hand.

"Hey! Come with me!"

The man, who'd caught up with me now, was in his forties or older, and his unnerving behaviour contained an element of pathetic exhibitionism. I felt disgusted by the way he hovered about, and the crude manner in which he attracted attention to himself by that insolent presence of his.

I looked at him out of the corner of my right eye, and it occurred to me in a sort of desire for revenge to say something nasty to defend myself against his warped behaviour and pay him back in a painful way which would make him stop running after me so brazenly. I thought about it for a while, but walked on protected by the other

bodies round me, while he continued studying me, his power to annoy intact.

He stumbled, without subtlety, in different directions, like someone who's deliberately lost something and is pretending to look for it. Then we came face to face after all the equivocation, in the crush of pedestrians, in front of the passing cars. He seemed to have speeded up, as he insisted with a contrived lack of urgency: "Just a minute. Listen! Honestly..."

The rest of what he said was lost, despite his exaggerated care, and I carried on my way, skilfully dodging the people invading the pavements, who were strolling along, looking lazily about them as if they had all the time in the world.

I'd completely forgotten what had tempted me to go out for a walk along this street after I'd been in Rabat for two weeks, for normally I wasn't easily persuaded to stroll with no definite aim in mind. And where had this man sprung from, who was so openly insolent and pleaded so humiliatingly just because of a crude whim, degrading himself and using all the silliest tricks to convey the illusion that he'd landed up in front of me, and not some other woman, out of pure coincidence, only to be swept off his feet and sucked into some reckless adventure at the sight of me, and this was why he'd said all these strange things to me?

A man so bent on pestering me made me lose my bearings in the middle of the street and forget what I'd come out for, and I busied myself dodging eyes which might be about to snare me, with their expressions of vague complicity mixed with mockery.

I avoided focusing on shop windows on the opposite pavement as I was no longer interested in anything but escaping from this man's web, and his unabashed pursuit of me.

I wondered briefly what had brought me here and made me leave my hotel alone that evening. Was it because I'd grown bored of the dull emptiness of the room during the past two weeks? I'd lived them at a slow pace which hadn't been interrupted by my repeated spells of looking down from the balcony on to the Balima's trees, and its neatly ordered chairs where its patrons sat indolently for hours, sipping their drinks in the broad courtyard, bounded by iron railings and trees.

I was trapped momentarily between two palm trees, and between me and the post office with its high arches were asphalt and cars, their slow passage impeded by chaotic pedestrians, crossing unhurriedly in front of them, with the doggedness of people who aren't concerned with their safety.

There was a crowd by the wall of the Ministry of Information, and a lot of commotion, and placards held aloft, designed for one

another's consumption by young men wearing clothes in odd combinations of colours and size, and with interesting haircuts and styles of beard and sideburns.

The man slid out from the middle of all this and came up to me, remarking with the freedom of one taking advantage of the atmosphere around him, and apparently rethinking his style of harassment and way of projecting himself:

"See. I'll come to this side, so I can talk to you..."

Then, moving closer, so that we were walking slowly in step, he added, "Are you in a hurry? What's wrong? Aren't you listening to me?"

After this he made to turn off to the left, into the shade of a side street. He walked for a bit then looked round. I noticed this in my irritation as I considered how best to rid myself of this affliction.

I'd been dreaming of a quiet stroll to kill time, after returning from my daily visit to hospital which always made me depressed and sad because of the neglected patients everywhere, and the wretched stale wards, on top of the painful process of having the dressing on my middle finger changed, and now I was unexpectedly being followed in this contemptible way.

I decided not to continue walking. I had no option but to get right away, so I would no longer be besieged by the crude talk and unnerving sound of his footsteps.

I accelerated slightly in order to force my way through the press of bodies, and stepped down off the pavement, in my bid to escape, towards a taxi which appeared to me at that moment to be the sole means of getting away.

I raised my hand. Several passed by, and I kept my hand raised until one stopped in front of me, pale blue.

I looked about me as I grasped the handle, and before the door had opened the man was planted beside me, something I hadn't expected, amazingly casual, repeating in the hearing of the elderly driver, "Fuck you! Who do you think you are?"

I stood rooted to the spot for a moment in panic and anger, before sliding into the car, composing myself with some difficulty. As I sat there, the voice soon disappeared altogether.

The car drove for some distance, before I pulled myself together. The driver was looking at me doubtfully. "Where to?" he asked.

In an attempt to retrieve the situation I said, "Let me out here."

To the driver's bewilderment I got out at the Parliament building.

When I crossed the street to the Balima Hotel, I had put a noisy crowd and quite a few buildings between me and the man's obscene behaviour.

RABIA RIHAN, a short story writer, publishes in the press and in reviews. Three collections of her short stories have appeared.