

Paul Morgan

## THE VERY NEXT ROOM

"I'm sure they make it up," said Yolande. (A thick book with a scarlet steam train on the cover was let slide to the floor.)

"Nothing like that happens to me when I travel. I meet the check-in clerk. I meet flight attendants. I meet waiters. Yet the moment Chatwin or Theroux or Newby step outside their front doors, interesting things begin to happen. As soon as they enter a country, every eccentric and colourful character for miles is queuing up to meet them — all those lovable rogues, exiled royalty, the ruined beauty with an enigmatic past, the endlessly hospitable peasants. And all those strange incidents they effortlessly get into — life just isn't like that!"

"It isn't that they don't happen," I replied, "it's that they happen so *neatly* in travel books. There's a *point* to everything, a punchline, or a moral, or a conclusion of some sort — like in a fiction — that's what makes me suspicious. Whenever I travel, the journey always seems to contain things that "half-happen," things that might-have-happened, but probably didn't, or that seem to start but never lead to anything, just kind-of dribble out."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I remember once the strangest thing. I thought of writing a story out of it, but never did. It never came to anything — just started, then ... nothing."

"Tell me."

"OK," I said, and let my book slide to the floor too.

"You remember that time I bought a round-a-world ticket? It was near the end of the trip. I'd seen all I wanted to of Europe. I had a caseful of undeveloped film. I had a fake Rolex from Hong Kong. I was dog-tired, almost out of cash, and ready to come home. There was an overnight stopover in Singapore, then a direct flight to Sydney, and all I wanted to do was sleep. The hotel they'd booked me was expensive, but I wasn't complaining. I was glad of the big, old-fashioned bathroom and the huge linen-covered bed. The thought of surrendering myself to sleep, of feeling those soft, heavy chains drag me beneath its surface, was delicious. The light was out. Already my leg had jerked a few times, a sure sign I was drifting off.

It was then the noises started."

"Noises?"

"A noise of scrabbling, and paper rustling. As though someone were sat nearby writing something. I sat up, and saw a keyhole of light in the darkness. A door to the next room had been sealed and the handles removed. Obviously a larger suite had been divided in two at some time, but sound leaked through unhindered. Beyond the door, someone was wide-awake in a brightly-lit room, writing furiously, sorting through what sounded like an immense pile of papers. I decided to ignore him ..."

"Or her ..."

"... or her, and tried to sleep. I turned my face to the wall and tried some more. I tried for what seemed like hours, but it was no use. Was it a salesman working on his quarterly figures, his job on the line? But at two in the morning? And writing so fervidly? Maybe he was cooking his books, making a false audit-trail before facing a suspicious manager in the morning? Or was it an exam? His parents had sacrificed everything to get him through university. He was their only child. And every cent had gone on gambling. Tomorrow was his final exam and he knew nothing. Desperately trying to cram three years' work into a matter of hours, he knew it was useless but had to carry on — haunted by the picture of his mother's silent, reproachful face! I checked my watch again. 4.30 AM. This was crazy. I had to sleep. Then suddenly the rustling gave way to a sound of violent ripping and scattering of paper, then silence. Then muttering and quiet scuffling as I heard what I guessed to be a retrieving and smoothing of the abused papers."

"This was too much. It wasn't so much the noise that was disturbing me but the mystery. It was the unwanted, unwonted curiosity it raised, racing from one possibility to another instead of letting me doze off. I had to know. Pulling back the sheet, I got up and crept to the glowing keyhole. Kneeling naked, I put my eye to it and saw ..."

"Yes?"

"... saw a patch of wallpaper and that notice that tells you where to assemble in case of a fire. Otherwise nothing. And then the weeping started. My God, such sobs and moans as I've never heard before! It was hard to believe they came from a human, and not some pitiful troglodyte, born only to know pain and suffering. I felt embarrassed to be listening, crept back to bed, and then at last ..."

"At last?"

"... I got off to sleep. I managed a few hours anyway before my call."

"And then?"

"And then nothing. I tried to spot someone with red eyes at breakfast, but nobody looked likely. I flew from Changhi that morning and that was that. So you see what I mean? Things start to happen and lead ... to nothing. I actually thought it had the makings of a story at first, but there wasn't any point. There just wasn't an ending — that's when the Chatwins and Therouxes start inventing things, I'd bet."

Yolande was looking at me with a curious expression, like she'd just seen an extraordinary deep-sea creature in an aquarium and didn't know what to make of it.

"Man," she said, "you really are something. There's someone — another human being — in the very next room, obviously in real distress. A woman, maybe, and crying her heart out, for goodness' sake! And all you could think of was your precious beauty sleep! Do you know what amazes me? That your only response was to peer through a keyhole, to satisfy your curiosity, to maybe get an idea for a traveller's tale. Well I think you should write it. I think you do have a point for your precious story. Do you know what it is?"

I had a feeling I was going to find out. I said nothing.

"I'll tell you," she said. "It simply didn't occur to you, it didn't enter your head, to help, did it? To maybe knock on the door to ask if things were alright? To maybe offer to make a cup of tea? Anything!"

"I think that makes a very telling point actually," she said, "*about you.*"

And muttering, "Boy oh boy" to herself (rather self-consciously, I thought), Yolande disappeared again behind her big red book.

She was absolutely right, of course. It really hadn't occurred to me. And it did give an ending to the story. I went to my desk. I reached for paper. I uncapped my pen. I began to write.

