Bourne toWrite... creative writing workshops

Ordinary Day

by Jane Hicks

John was a private investigator. He had been doing the job since his teens, when his father began training him. Now, approaching fifty, he was starting to feel jaded. In his line of work, he saw the very worst of people. The hours were unsociable, his relationships had suffered, and he was single again.He had reached a crossroads. Did he still want to do this job? The trouble was, he didn't really know anything else.

Over the years, he had taken on various temporary jobs while following suspects. Today, he was starting work in a hotel, where he hoped to find out more about the manager.

The manager had a shady past, and a contact of John's in the police had hired him to investigate suspicions that a drug ring was operating from the hotel. The police had been watching the manager for a while, but they needed someone inside to gather more information.

Working as a hotel porter would allow John to observe the manager's comings and goings and listen for gossip among the staff.

John knew he was still good-looking in a rugged sort of way, and he hadn't entirely lost his charm. Before long, he got chatting to Sally, the receptionist, who looked to be in her late twenties. She seemed to enjoy his flirting and banter, although he reminded himself that being pleasant to strangers was part of her job. Perhaps, once she felt comfortable around him, she might let something useful slip.

His shift finished at six, but he decided to linger and see what he could find out.

At around seven, two men he recognised as suspected drug couriers entered the hotel and asked to see the manager. One was pulling a large suitcase.

John followed at a discreet distance and watched them disappear into the manager's office. When they emerged half an hour later, neither had the case.

He noted the time and a description of both men in his notebook, then headed down the corridor. If he could find a reason to enter the office, he might discover what they had left behind.

He was almost at the door when the assistant manager appeared.

"What are you doing along here?" the man asked.

"Sorry," John said. "I've taken a wrong turn."

"You were supposed to finish work a while ago."

"Yes. I forgot my coat and came back for it."

The assistant manager glanced towards the office, then back at him.

"You're nowhere near the staff lockers."

"Still finding my way around."

For a moment, neither moved.

"I'd watch my step if I were you," the assistant manager said. "Accidents have a habit of happening around here."

John apologised, turned and walked away. He resisted the urge to look back.

Outside, he kept going until the hotel was out of sight, then rang his police contact. He described the visitors, the suitcase and the exchange in the corridor.

"Don't go back in," his contact told him. "Leave it with us."

Once, that warning would have thrilled him. Tonight, he just felt tired.

He drove home with the radio off. The threats, the lies, the constant need to watch his back—he had spent so long accepting them as part of the job that he had almost forgotten there might be another way to live.

He wasn't sure what he wanted instead. That was the part that frightened him.

Later that evening, his phone rang.

It was his police contact. Two plain-clothes officers had gone to the hotel following John's call. They had caught the assistant manager in the car park, about to leave with the suitcase. Inside were packages of drugs.

The manager had also been arrested, along with several others suspected of involvement in the operation.

One of them was Sally.

John sat quietly for a moment.

"The receptionist?"

"That's right. We're still establishing everyone's role."

After the call, he left his notebook on the kitchen table and went into the garden. He lit a cigarette and stood beneath the cold, clear sky.

Sally had seemed so open, so pleased to talk to him. Perhaps she had been keeping an eye on the new porter all along.

He gave a small, humourless smile. Still good-looking. Still charming. Still capable of being a fool.

Beyond the fence, someone was calling a dog indoors. A kitchen window glowed in the next house. Ordinary things, happening at the end of an ordinary day. John realised how much he wanted a few of those.

He stubbed out the cigarette and went back inside. His notebook lay where he had left it, open at a page crowded with times, descriptions and registration numbers.

For once, he closed it without checking anything.

Tomorrow, he would tell his contact he was taking a break. He didn't know what the next chapter of his life would look like, but he could at least give himself time to find out.

His phone buzzed again.

John glanced at it, then turned it face down and put the kettle on.