

The Chinese Transfer

Martin Lloyd



Queen Anne's Fan

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Paris in the 1970s

When the second truck flashed its headlights at me I began to take notice. I was grinding up the climb from the Porte d'Italie to join the Autoroute du Sud, overloaded with tons of the ancient entrails of Paris to be dumped on the landfill site at Sauvigny. My Berliet tipper truck was maintaining a steady 20 kph in the third of its eight gears. The black smoke belching from its exhaust almost obscured the crocodile of frustrated vehicles crawling behind me.

I glanced across at the other truck as it rattled down towards Paris and my heart sank. Having flashed his lights, the driver was holding up his papers against the windscreen and waving them at me. That could only mean one thing – he had just seen a police check. Another week and I would have been clear. Why did they have to choose today? Perhaps they would not pick me out. I knew that I was only kidding myself. The moment the cop saw the mound of earth appearing over the brow of the hill he kicked his motorcycle into life and as I fumbled the roaring engine up a gear, he waved me to follow him down the slip road.

Parked in the courtyard of the police HQ were two other trucks from the Turbigo site. One was loaded like mine, the other was empty. They were parked side by side, their hoppers touching. I eased my truck to a stop and switched off. The roar of the engine died away to a relative silence. Beyond a single line of scrawny poplar trees the traffic on the autoroute swished by. I leaned forwards onto the steering wheel and gazed morosely through the dirty, fly encrusted screen.

MARTIN LLOYD

‘Merde!’

The hot air rising from the engine rippled the view as if I were looking through a cool mountain stream. It was 28 degrees Celsius. Behind me a vague haze of dust and pollution hung over the city, before me the sky was blue and unencumbered by anything that would provide shade.

‘Merde!’

I recognised the truck in front. It was Janacek. He had rumbled out of the bowels of Paris half an hour before me, wagging his fingers in a rude sign at the foreman. Now he was stripped to the waist, bent double in the hopper of his truck, languidly shovelling sour-smelling earth into the empty truck alongside as it baked in the sun.

‘Merde!’

I booted open my door and clambered down the iron steps to the yard. The heat and smell from the tarmac cloyed at my throat. I looked at the back wheels. Even stationary, it was obvious from the eight tyres of the twin back axle that I was overloaded. I wondered by how much. Probably eight or nine tons. They always overloaded the trucks – it was the only way they could expect to shift the soil. I didn’t care. It wasn’t my truck. I had needed the job and I had known they would not bother to ask to see my licence. It would have been impossible in any case. I didn’t have one.

‘Merde!’

I kicked savagely at the wall of a tyre. The cops were in no hurry. Three of them lounged in the shade of the guard house, drawing cruel spectator amusement from making a man try to shovel eight tons of earth. They would get around to me, eventually. They would ask to see my papers. I would hand over my I.D. card and start to search for my missing licence. They probably would not recognise the name. The court case had been nearly a year ago but their filing cards would betray me.

‘Merde!’

In another week, the court was due to return my licence. I would have been legal then. I suddenly realised the fix that I was in. Driving an overloaded truck whilst disqualified. Another suspension, a fine which I would not

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be able to pay and so a prison sentence. I had to do something.

I climbed back up into my oven of a cab and thought rapidly. My light blouson was hanging on the back of the seat. I emptied the pockets into my jeans and left it hanging there. I grabbed a rag from the locker and wiped the steering wheel, then the gear lever, then the door handle on the inside. I leaned an arm casually over the window ledge and surreptitiously wiped the outside door handle. Keeping the rag in my hand I opened the cab door and climbed down the ladder. Once at the bottom I threw the rag back into the cab through the open window. Pushing my hands into my pockets I ambled away from the truck.

‘Hey!’ One of the cops called me.

‘I’m going to the toilets!’ I shouted back and pointed towards a dirty grey concrete building. The cop eased his shoulders from the wall and started towards me. His colleagues turned their attention from Janacek’s sweating back.

‘We haven’t done your papers,’ he shouted above the drone of the traffic. I continued shuffling away. I waved a vague arm back at the truck.

‘In my blouson,’ I shouted.

He glanced across at my truck where my jacket could be seen hanging on the back of the seat. I only had a lead of about ten seconds. Not enough to get lost with. If he went for the jacket it would take him time to examine it. Out of the corner of my eye I could see him diverting towards the truck. I rounded the corner and immediately stepped briskly out towards the officer at the pole barrier. He watched me from inside his glass box. His glance was slow and heavy like treacle. He must have been cooking in there.

‘I need some more smokes.’ I made a mime with my fingers of puffing at a cigarette. ‘Where’s the nearest tobacconist mate?’

He pointed down the road. The shops were at least two hundred metres down a straight road with no cover. Merde! Nobody runs in 28 degrees to buy a packet of cigarettes.

‘Thanks.’

MARTIN LLOYD

'You're welcome.' He was not even looking at me.

The sun beat up from the white gravelly soil with merciless brutality. Spanning the road, thick black cables looped limply like liquorice laces. A fawn-eyed dog was squeezed into the shade of an iron gate and lay panting on concrete.

I lengthened my stride and paced along as fast as I dared, listening intently for sounds of pursuit. At the first small junction I glanced quickly down the side streets right and left to assess the possibilities of flight or concealment. Nothing. Rows of red tiled villas, drooping trees and cream rendered garden walls. I stopped and looked again to my right. About fifty metres down the road a brown Rolls Royce was parked. A portly man was crouching by it. He was straining at the wheel wrench, trying to change the wheel.

As I approached I could see madame sitting in the front seat. Dark glasses and wide brimmed hat, pale lipstick and pastel blue dress.

'Do you want a hand?'

The man looked up at me. 'Blasted things,' he said, 'they must have put them on with a pneumatic spanner.' He straightened up stiffly and flexed his fingers. From a distance I had thought him portly. I could now see that although he was past sixty he was squarely built and strong with it. Brown eyes inspected me rapidly from beneath a bristle of grey crew cut. His light grey suit was not the uniform of a chauffeur, it was an expensive lightweight. He was obviously the owner of the car. 'See if you can budge them if you like. I'll get you a beer if you can.'

I nodded and then got down on my knees to check that he had installed the jack properly. Looking under the car I saw a black and white Renault cruise slowly over the cross roads, the cops peering out of the windows on both sides. I stayed down a little longer.

'So you don't think I know how to put a car on a jack?' The accusation was good natured but his regard was piercing.

'Two tons of Rolls Royce dropping onto its axle ends would not be funny,' I replied and then added, 'Even when the Rolls is not mine.'

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He grunted.

'I've also chocked both rear wheels.'

'I noticed.' He had left the wrench on a wheel nut. I grasped it firmly. The bars were still warm. 'You've not loosened any of them?' I asked.

'No, the buggers! Two of them moved a bit but then stuck fast.'

I tested the nut. It was as if welded to the stub. Then something of what he had said made me remove the tool and stand up again. From the cool inside, madame gazed placidly out at the suburban avenue as if it were a different planet but of no particular interest and I were a non-threatening alien life form which she had just discovered upon it.

'You don't exactly exert yourself do you?' he said testily. 'Give me the wrench and let me have another go.'

I could see that the heat and the effort was trying his temper. His silk tie was loose-knotted and he had grime on the cuffs of his jacket. He moved to take the spanner from me but I absently drew it out of his reach.

'Now look here,' he protested, 'either you give me that wrench—'

'Just a minute! I'm thinking.'

'I don't want a thinker, I need a doer,' he snapped.

'No, that's your problem, mate.' I was purposefully insolent. I disliked his tone. 'You are the doer not the thinker. It's not Hercules you need,' I tapped my forehead with my finger, 'it's Einstein.'

'Stop talking crap and give me that wrench.'

I passed it across to him and watched him as he fitted it over a wheelnut and braced his legs.

'I wouldn't if I were you,' I said.

'You what, sonny? Do you think I don't know how to take the wheel off a car? I didn't start life with a Rolls, you know.' He tugged at the bar.

I could not prevent myself from wincing.

'I'm sure you know how to take the wheel off a car but I don't think you know how to take the wheel off a Rolls.'

That stopped him. He looked at me. I waited.

'Go on,' he said.

MARTIN LLOYD

'Left hand thread.' I pointed at the wheel. 'Rolls Royce put right hand threads on one side of the car and left hand threads on the other so that as you drive along the motion of the car tightens up the nuts on all four wheels. You've got the left hand side.'

'You're not joking are you?'

'No. You've just tightened up all the nuts as tight as you can get them. On a hot day,' I added.

'Well I'm buggered.'

'Probably.'

He took the wrench from the wheel and dropped it to the ground. It raised a small puff of white dust. I watched it drift slowly away like an arthritic genie. The sun was burning the skin on the back of my neck. Away over the roof tops a jetliner was descending to the runway at Orly like an old lady lowering herself gingerly into an easy chair.

'All right then.' I heaved a sigh. 'Show me your tool kit.'

It took me thirty minutes of gentle tapping on the wrench to get all the nuts off. By the time I had got the spare wheel on, my black hair was plastered down on my forehead with perspiration and dust. Ignoring his lightweight suit the man sat on the redundant wheel and offered me a can of beer. The passenger window slid down silently.

'Raoul! Your suit!'

I took the beer. It was cool. The man grinned up at me.

'There's got to be some advantage in owning a car with left hand nuts,' he said. 'Fridge in the cocktail cabinet.'

I held the can against my neck and revelled in the coolness. Forcing the cold beer down my hot throat was like swallowing knives. The man flapped his hand vaguely.

'Well, thank you,' he said. For me, that was enough. It was genuine. 'What do you do for a living?'

'Driver. Coach driver.'

'Who for?'

'Well I used to drive for a small company. Sort of one man show affair.'

'But you're not now?'

'No.'

'Not working?'

'No. I haven't driven a coach for a year.' It was the

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honest truth. I had lived the first three months by driving taxis on Sundays so that the owners could have their day off. Then I had turned up at the Turbiggo site one day when they were short of truck drivers and had started within the hour. God knows what they were going to do with the hole when they have finished with it. Some say it is going to be one of those underground shopping centres like they have in America. At the moment it is a quarry in the centre of Paris, down below third basement level and still descending. A never ending string of trucks await their turn, night and day. You get the flag. You pull forward, your wheels slithering across the clay which is perpetually wet even in this heat. You stop. There is a noise like thunder and your truck squats. Clods of earth the size of television sets rain down on either side and you get the flag again and hope that you have enough teeth in your gearbox to drag you and your burden up to the street level. Four times a working day for the last nine months they had tried to bury me alive.

‘Drink problems?’

‘No.’

‘Boss’s wife?’

‘No. My face just doesn’t seem to fit at the moment. It happens like that.’

‘But you’re a useful sort of chap to have around. A bit pig headed.’

‘But right.’

His face screwed up into a laugh. ‘Yes and cheeky with it. Bosses don’t like that.’ He fumbled in his pocket and pulled out a business card. ‘You don’t know who I am do you?’ he asked as he wrote on the back of the card. I shook my head. ‘Thought not.’ He handed me the card.

Raoul de Mello, President of the Coach Operators’ Federation.

‘Ah,’ I said.

Raoul de Mello had started at the bottom, sweeping the garage floor and cleaning the coaches. With his wages he had paid his fees at commercial college. He had come back as management. In thirty years he had built up a prosperous business whose fleet of fine coaches had been the envy of all others. Film stars, cup-winning sports teams, top business groups had all insisted on a Car de Mello.

MARTIN LLOYD

Then at the height of success, some say with characteristic shrewdness, he had sold out to his rival and bought a fishing rod. He now divided his time between mountain streams of the Pyrenees and his responsibilities as President of the influential federation for coach operators.

‘Go and see Artur.’

I flipped the card over and read the name. ‘Artur Fromme? Autocars Fromme? He certainly won’t want me.’

‘You can drive?’

‘Of course.’

‘Bit of a mechanic?’

‘Fairly good.’

‘Well that’s what he wants. A garage dogsbody. It didn’t do ME any harm.’

I smiled ironically as I echoed his words.

‘You don’t know who I am do you?’

‘You’re a cheeky fellow who knows how to change the wheel on a Rolls and does it without asking and you’re an out of work coach driver.’

‘Called Simon Laperche.’

He looked at me as the name sunk in. Then he said quietly, ‘Papa Coursamel was an old friend of mine.’ He held my gaze unblinkingly. I suppose his reaction was what I should have expected. I shrugged and offered him back the card. He added, ‘He was also the biggest fool this side of Christendom. I had warned him years before.’

‘You didn’t speak in my defence.’

‘I was not invited. It was not my affair. Anyway, you were a fool as well. I trust you have learned by it?’

‘I’ve learned how far people can push their hatred.’

‘And that’s why you don’t get coaching jobs?’

‘What do you think?’

‘That’s taking it too far. You’ve paid the price. Go and see Artur. Get back into coaches.’

I did not go to see Artur. I went to see Daniel. He was the tours manager for Cityscope. I had known him a long time. When I had worked for Coursamel we had occasionally helped him out in an emergency, supplying a coach for a city tour or a transfer. The Cityscope offices were just off the

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Place de l'Opéra – a large double fronted shop whose windows were hung with posters of Versailles and Chantilly and the Eiffel Tower. This was the tourist quarter. The pavements overflowed with the hideous dress sense of brightly coloured foreigners, usually bunched around the free map they could get from Galeries Lafayette. Daniel worked at a desk inside the window, sheltered from the public gaze by the hanging posters which he had cleverly arranged so that, whilst providing the privacy, they did not obscure the strategic views he needed.

I walked briskly past the agency and glanced through the poster gap between the Trianon and the Musée Grévin. His desk was empty. I went to the corner and listened to some Americans arguing over their free map. I walked back past the window. The desk was still empty so I stopped at the newspaper kiosk and pulled the papers about until the old cow told me to clear off if I was not buying anything.

I'd try just once more.

Daniel saw me. The shock on his face was instant. I lifted my hand before my mouth, suggesting a drink. He looked quickly behind him, put up a handful of fingers to mean five minutes and then angrily waved me away out of sight. I went to Charlie's Bar down the narrow street at the back of the Opera House. It was where I used to meet Daniel and listen to his incessant complaints about his wife. He loved his wife but did not know it. Charlie's was a poky place, gloomy and none too clean. It was run by an ancient Moroccan. I had asked him once if he had brought the flies with him from Rabat. He had given me a yellow toothed grin and swatted at them ineffectually with a cloth. Charlie's had one big advantage as far as we were concerned. It was not used by coach drivers.

I took a pastis with a large jug of water and sat at one of the two tables that the patron had managed to squeeze onto the pavement. Daniel came by about ten minutes later.

'You've got a bloody nerve,' he said, 'showing your face around here.'

'How's Amélie?' I shouted above the noise of the Volkswagen that was rattling like a badly adjusted chainsaw as it tried to reverse into a space near our table.

MARTIN LLOYD

‘Don’t you know that...? What?’

‘I said, “How’s Amélie?”’ I pointed to the chair.

‘Oh, she’s fine, fine.’ He sat down and ordered a drink.

‘She wants another kid.’

The car had pulled out into the street to make another attempt. The driver was a woman in her late twenties. Quite pretty. Her dark hair hung to her shoulders and swirled around her neck like a ballgown as she flung her head anxiously from one side to the other.

‘She wants another kid,’ I said. ‘I want another job.’

‘For Christ’s sake, Simon, you don’t think I can give you a job do you? I could probably lose mine just by being here.’

She was not going to make it this time. The nose of the car stuck out too far and the rear wheel had hit the kerb. She revved the engine to try to mount the pavement. A daft idea – it would make her position even worse.

‘If you can lose your job that easily it’s obviously not worth having,’ I said.

‘We can’t all afford the luxury of being single. I’ve got mouths to feed.’

‘Tell me about Autocars Fromme.’

‘Fromme?’

‘Yes. What kind of set up is it?’

He fiddled with his glass. He was drinking Vichy water and peppermint. The young woman had realised her mistake and pulled out again, but she had left her rear wheel too close to the other car. She would not make it next time either.

‘Their garage is up in La Villette. Behind the Paris City Abattoirs.’

‘What’s the old man like?’

‘Artur Fromme?’

‘Yes.’

‘Nobody’s fool. He’s a bit cautious – won’t take risks.’

‘Which is why he still has a small garage but is still in business I suppose.’ That engine was still racing.

‘Yes, probably. Why do you want to know?’

‘Just a minute, Daniel, I can’t stand this any more.’

I got up and opened the door of the car. The woman looked up at me with startled eyes. She was wearing a neat

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linen suit and high heeled sandals.

‘Monsieur!’ she started.

‘Move over!’ I ordered her.

‘But monsieur I didn’t ask—’

‘Stop protesting and move over. We were enjoying a quiet drink till you came along.’

I pointed to the passenger seat. She opened her mouth; neat white teeth, and then clamped it shut and moved across. She had freckles on her nose and her thighs were suntanned. I parked the car in three moves and cut the engine. She was saying something as I got out but I waved my hand in dismissal and went back to Daniel at the table.

‘Who was that?’ He nodded at the linen suit as it disappeared down the street.

‘Some woman who couldn’t park a car.’

‘Do you know her?’

‘No,’ I replied, surprised, ‘do you?’

‘No, of course not. I thought you did from the way you went up to her.’ He gazed after her. I could sense envy in his manner. He jerked his eyes back to me. ‘So why do you want to know about Fromme?’

‘I’m going to ask him for a job.’

His glass stopped in mid air and descended to the table top. He stared at me. Now he really did think I was mad.

‘Oh that’s rich! That really is rich! You’re going to ask Artur Fromme for a job? Doing what?’

‘Mechanic, dogsbody. Whatever he will give me.’ I remembered de Mello’s instruction. ‘I’ve got to get back into coaches.’

‘Why Fromme? Why should he take you?’

‘He’s looking for someone.’

‘But not you.’

‘I come with a recommendation.’

‘You?’

I took the card from my pocket and dropped it onto the table. He picked it up. His eyebrows shot up and he looked searchingly at me as if he expected me to have grown horns or scales.

‘Read the back.’

He read it.

MARTIN LLOYD

‘Well,’ he said, the relief flowing over him like a cool breeze, ‘with friends like that you don’t need me.’

‘Did I ever?’

I could smell the diesel even before I could see the coaches. Outside the garage an ancient Saviem was parked with two wheels on the sidewalk. Once a proud excursion coach, the dark green paint was now patched in several versions of green and the outdated, elaborate lettering of *Autocars A. Fromme* was faded to beige. Underfloor mid engine, gear lever in the dashboard, four wheels, plastic seats and spongy brakes. Simple, reliable, unbreakable. The jack-knife doors were open and the engine cover was ticking as it cooled down. I reached in and scooped up the driver’s orders from the padded dash. *06.00 G.E.C. Nord; 07.30 Hotel de Ville - Lycée St. Ouen; 08.45 Gare de l’Est - Postes.* Factories and schools. A bread and butter coach for bread and butter work. This coach was thirty years old and had now sifted its way to the bottom of the pile.

The garage was three long sheds with vaulted part glazed roofs through which a grey light filtered to the oil-stained concrete floor below. In the pit in the corner, the electric blue crackle of an arc welder lit the chassis of a fifty three seater as a shadowy figure cursed the spark into tricks that Ampère had never dreamed of. An unused driver was perched on an oil drum, kicking his heels and watching the mechanic. He was probably the pilot of the ancient Saviem I had inspected outside, waiting for his next job. He watched me as I approached.

‘Looking for the boss,’ I announced.

‘That’s him there.’ He indicated the figure in the pit. ‘He’s in a bad mood so don’t try to sell him anything.’

‘I won’t.’ I only had Simon Laperche to sell and the product was not in demand.

I sat on a crate and we watched the completion of the job in silence. If the driver had any curiosity about me, then he did not show it. Artur Fromme laid down the shield, turned off the power and then spat on his weld. It was a welder’s signature. He climbed out of the pit.

‘I’ll finish that off tomorrow,’ he said to nobody in

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particular. 'Shouldn't you be on your way to Le Plessis?' he said to the driver.

The man hopped smartly off the drum.

'I'm on my way Monsieur Fromme.'

Artur Fromme turned to me. 'What do you want?'

Standing there in his blue overalls, with his ruddy face and ginger moustache he looked more like a farmer than a coach operator. He pulled off his heavy gloves to reveal clean hands with properly clipped nails. That was not something that I could flaunt. His blue eyes pinned me.

'Well?'

I decided to go in with the big gun.

'Monsieur de Mello sent me.'

'Ah yes,' he sighed. 'I've been expecting you. Come into the office.'

He led me to the glass box which served as his office. It was the same as garage offices country wide. The nerve centre of the entire operation. In this glass box, coaches were bought and sold, customers were pampered or insulted, all the bills were paid, all the routes were devised, the wages were doled out, the arguments were settled and drivers were sacked and hired.

He flicked a switch and a vast electric fan wobbled into life on its perch on the filing cabinet and began to swing back and forth, pausing at each end of its sweep as if sluggishly following an endless argument or watching a game of lethargic tennis. Monsieur Fromme sat in a polished wooden rotating chair which creaked dryly with his every movement. The top of his desk was covered with a sheet of heavy glass below which a map of France had been spread out. A map which could be consulted or ignored but which never got greasy finger marks on it.

'Sit down.' I sat. 'I'll tell you now that I don't want you. Sit down!' he roared as I made to get up. 'I don't want you but if you are any use I will take you.'

'Thanks.'

'Any trouble and you are out.' He drummed his manicured fingers on the table and inspected me. 'You've got a powerful friend in de Mello.' I said nothing. 'Hmm!' he muttered, annoyed that he had learned no more.

MARTIN LLOYD

'I owe him nothing and he owes me nothing but I respect his judgement. He's a very shrewd man. If he says you are all right then I'm willing to take the risk. Got your licence?'

'Yes.'

He held out his hand for it then sucked on his teeth as he examined it. 'Suspended for a year weren't you?' There was no point in denying it. I nodded. 'What did you do for a year?'

'Bit of this and that. Odd jobbing. I coped.'

'Awkward, not being able to drive.'

I fell into the trap. 'Yes it was.'

He pointedly looked at my bare forearms. First the right, then the left.

'So what have you been driving then without a licence?'

I opened my mouth to protest my innocence but before uttering a denial, I, also, looked at my forearms. My left arm was tanned dark brown from leaning on the window of the truck, my right arm was much paler.

'I drove a truck. A tipper truck on a building site.'

He flipped the licence back to me. 'You've got to play straight with me Laperche, you've got no room for manoeuvre. If you cheat, I'll catch you and you'll be out.'

'I understand.' I understood that there were no flies on Artur Fromme. If he was still running his own show when others had gone to the wall then it was not by luck.

The phone rang. He picked it up. I could hear the voice of the driver resonating in the earpiece like a tinny bell on a cheap toy. He was at Le Bourget, Monsieur Fromme. He was doing the UTA staff, monsieur. His coach had been blocked.

'What do you mean it's been "blocked"?' Fromme's voice thundered.

'There's a protest or strike or something. It's the public transport union. They've blocked the exit from the police pound. I can't get out. Nobody can. They're only letting through the RATP buses. What shall I do?'

'What are you doing in the pound?'

'The police sent all the coaches over to clear the front of the terminal. We're all stuck.'

'Ring me back in half an hour if it's not settled.'

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'Yes monsieur.'

Monsieur Fromme dropped the receiver to the cradle with one hand whilst the other pulled the order book across. He flipped back to today's page and then glanced up at the clock.

'Imbeciles!' he said. 'Lebrun!' he shouted through the open door. 'Oh yes, he's gone to Le Plessis,' he said to himself. He pushed the book away. 'Right. What can you do?'

'I can spit on my welds like the Army taught me.'

'I see.' His tone was even.

'And the usual mechanical stuff, injectors, filters, servos, pumps.'

'What about air conditioning units?'

'Not yet. But have you got any?'

His mouth twitched. 'Not yet.'

The phone rang again. The amused smile left his face as he listened to the ranting voice. It was the station manager of UTA at Le Bourget explaining none too gently that Autocars Fromme had the contract for staff transport and was expected to fulfil it, come hell or high water. He would not accept the excuse of a few placards and a handful of striking bus drivers for a non-execution of the service for which Autocars Fromme were contracted and, he might add, quite generously paid. Autocars Fromme, he took the liberty of pointing out, was not the only fish in the ocean.

Monsieur Fromme placed the receiver back on the cradle with an exaggerated gesture as if it were Sèvres porcelain. He strode out into his garage and stood tapping his pen on the palm of his hand. I followed him out. Apart from the sick coach squatting over the pit and a school bus lurking in the corner, it was empty.

'Am I right in thinking that you have got a staff transport to do for UTA and that your coach is immobilised at Le Bourget?'

'That's about the strength of it.'

'Use another coach?'

'How do I contact the driver? Courier pigeon? Anyway my nearest coach is on a service at the moment. I could have done without this happening at this particular time.'

‘Where does the coach pick them up from?’

‘Outside the air terminal, at Departures. They are a mixture of office and airside staff. They’re a good bunch. It’s only the station manager who’s an idiot.’

‘I could take that.’ I nodded at the school bus. It was actually an ex-RATP bus, still in the green livery. It was not an uncommon occurrence for a coach company to buy a couple of Paris town buses secondhand at the official auctions because they were ideal for school services; they were robust and they had the reputation of having been kept in tip-top working condition.

‘Yes you could. If I gave you a job. Can you drive it?’

‘Semi-automatic gearbox? No problem.’ We walked over to it. ‘If I took down the *schoolchildren* signs and took a UTA board with me... Do you have a spare one?’

He looked at me for an instant, indecision wavering in his eyes. I remembered what Daniel had said about him not taking risks.

‘I’ll look.’

He walked over to the storeroom door and I jumped up into the open bus and insinuated myself under the steering wheel. By the time he came back carrying a UTA signboard, I had taken down the school signs, started the engine, checked the fuel gauge and was waiting for the compressed air cylinder to fill up to release the brakes.

Monsieur Fromme looked to the doorway.

‘We could wait for Lebrun to get back.’

‘As you like.’ I shrugged. It had been too good to be true. Looking in the rear-view mirror and seeing lines of seats stretching out behind me I had nearly believed it. Even if they were brown plastic and interspersed with vertical grab poles. It had so nearly worked. Suddenly he said, ‘Go. Go on. We can’t wait. Lebrun will be years.’

I raised my hand and eased the bus forwards towards the open doorway. I paused on the threshold for a second to allow my pupils to contract and then drove out into the sunlight.

I was back in coaches.