

Sue Eckstein

**THE
CLOTHS
OF
HEAVEN**

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For Alastair

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

'He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven', *W.B. Yeats*

Brighton, October 24th 1990

POST CARD

THE ADDRESS TO BE WRITTEN ON THIS SIDE



As promised, a post card.
I'd forgotten what an
English autumn could
be like - crisp and clear -
the sort of weather I used
to dream about in Bokinabe.
I've started making plans - London
but I'm rather out of practice.

There's a good chance Guido
Ansaloni will take me on as a pupil in the Spring -

Rome seems a good place to be as any.
I think of you often. Look after yourself! R x

Daniel Macdonald
FCO Tickunda
C10 Ring Charles St
London SW1A 2AH

Bakinabe, West Africa, 1989

When Isabel Redmond walked out onto the veranda she could not help noticing that her husband's hands were firmly cupped round a pair of rather splendid black breasts.

'Thought you might like a cold drink, Patrick,' she said with a cheery sigh, placing a tray with two glasses of lemonade on the only clear corner of a low wooden table.

'Ah Izzy, you're a marvel,' said Patrick rather distractedly, as he carefully fastened the buttons of his companion's blouse, deftly giving one large, erect nipple a valedictory tweak as he tucked it in. 'We'd just finished. Thirsty work, eh, Isatou?'

Isatou re-tied her headscarf and smiled her thanks as Isabel passed her a glass. Patrick, meanwhile, dismantled his tripod and put his cameras away with rather less enthusiasm and dexterity than he had demonstrated only moments earlier.

'Same time next week? Marvellous!' he said, ushering Isatou into the house and out of the front door.

Isabel picked up the empty glasses and put them down on the tray. She heard Patrick walk back along the corridor and into the shower room. She heard the rusty squeak as he turned on the shower, and the familiar sharp intake of breath as the cold water hit the top of his balding head. She looked out over the dusty road, the hedges of flaming bougainvillea, the corrugated iron roofs and sighed again, this time slightly less cheerfully. Patrick. What was she to do with him? What could she do? As hobbies went, it was perhaps a little out of the ordinary but as a deviancy it was really quite mild.

It could be a lot worse. Decades in Africa had had a far more bizarre effect on many of the expatriates they had encountered over the years. What about Stanley Shea, that

surveyor in Kaduna? The one Eleanor Cameron had known. Years ago now. It was one thing to shoot yourself in the head when your house-boy finally tired of your advances, but quite another to miss so badly that you spent the rest of your life in a nursing home in Worthing. And Thomas Kayne, that judge who had served in the colonial service and was now living out his retirement following a clan of Fulani herdsmen and their cattle as they roamed the Sahel. Rumour had it you could trace his journey by the pale-skinned, green-eyed children that peppered his route. And just what Father Seamus was doing up in Brikaba was anyone's guess.

Isabel looked down at the mess of papers and magazines on the table. Dusty back copies of *West Africa* and *Private Eye*, sheets of yellow paper covered in lines of poetry and crossings out. Recipes. Reminders. Letters. Bills. She shuffled them into ungainly piles. There should at least be a bit of order around the place.

Isabel had married Patrick when they were both still at Oxford and now, forty-one years, six children and two continents later, she could not imagine what life would be like without him. It would be strangely empty and devoid of any real meaning, despite her children, her teaching and her many other interests; none of them, admittedly, as exotic as Patrick's.

If Patrick ever thought about these things, which Isabel suspected he rarely did, he would have expressed very similar sentiments. Isabel was, quite literally, his better half, though he would have worked hard to think up a more erudite way of putting it. Every evening, except when one of their children was over from England or someone dropped in, they would walk, arm in arm, to six o'clock Mass at St Gabriel's and then stroll on to their favourite beachside bar. There they would sit beside each other in companionable silence, watching the sun go down, each with a cold beer and a well-worn novel or book of poetry. From time to time they would read

out snippets that each thought the other would appreciate. Occasionally, Patrick would look around, smile wickedly, pull out a short blunt pencil from his top pocket and open his small black notebook.

Patrick went nowhere without this notebook, in which he would jot down snatches of overheard conversation and anything else that he thought might come in useful. There had been a bit of a commotion the previous month when one of his poems, 'Cocktails at Eight, Fenella', had appeared in the *London Review of Books*. It had just been bad timing that old Alec, the High Commissioner, had been on home leave when it came out, bad luck that his hosts had subscribed to it, and unfortunate that his wife, Fenella, in an uncharacteristically literary mood, had read it. Patrick and Isabel's relationship with the High Commission and the other British expatriates, at best tenuous, was now somewhat strained.

Isabel picked some dead flowers off the bougainvillea and crunched up the brown petals. She held her hand over the veranda wall and watched as the dried fragments spun and eddied to the ground. It was so hot and so dry. You could taste the dust in your throat and feel it in your eyes. Isabel, who was not one to complain or to wish herself anywhere other than where she was, found herself longing for the rains. The roads would be a mess. Shoes – unworn for a couple of days – would be covered in a light dusting of mould, and you would drip with sweat all day and night. But the earth would yield the most marvellous treasures, and when the rain clouds cleared the sky would be an azure so deep that you thought you would weep with the beauty of it.

'Izzy, my love,' said Patrick, coming onto the veranda, brandishing an airmail envelope in one hand and his reading glasses in the other, and dressed only in a towel, a pair of flip-flops and the canvas hat he was rarely seen without, 'have you read this letter from Joe?' His large white stomach flopped comfortably over the towel.

‘No. I was about to and then I got sidetracked. What does he have to say for himself?’ Joe was their youngest child and only son. He had graduated in philosophy from Edinburgh University and, after a brief foray into journalism, had distressed both his parents by joining a merchant bank. As if that were not bad enough, he seemed to be doing remarkably well and appeared to have little interest in Africa except where it affected the commodities market.

‘The bugger’s fine,’ said Patrick affectionately, scanning the letter. ‘Moving in with Lucy, it seems.’

‘I hope she knows what she’s letting herself in for,’ said Isabel who, while she adored her only son, disapproved of his cavalier attitude towards his girlfriends and life in general. ‘She seems far too good for him. I hope she doesn’t let him walk all over her.’ Isabel felt herself to be partially to blame for what she saw as Joe’s shortcomings. A much longed-for son and brother, tall, blond and beautiful, he had spent his youth at a Catholic boys’ boarding school inconveniently set in the middle of several hundred acres of Yorkshire dale. When he left, he was like a lion released back into the wild. Girls were the zebras he had always known were out there (he had five sisters, after all) but had rarely had the chance to pounce upon. Isabel had failed to find the equivalent of a tranquilliser dart with which to curb his enthusiasm and Patrick had not been much help, openly enjoying Joe’s tales of conquest.

‘Seems Lucy’s cousin is out here. At the High Commission,’ continued Patrick. ‘Some kind of second secretary. Poor sod.’

‘That must be Daniel Maddison,’ said Isabel. ‘He’s that slim, dark-haired chap who arrived a couple of months ago. Only about twenty-five or so. I bumped into him in the supermarket – quite literally – and we got talking – a few weeks ago now. I remember telling you at the time. He seemed very pleasant, if a little disappointed.’

‘Why? Not enough cheddar cheese and Branston pickle for him?’

‘Quite the opposite, I think. He seemed amazed that there was so much imported stuff available. I think he imagined he was being posted into the bush or something.’

‘Probably read too much Graham Greene. It does that to you. Still, if he can read at all it singles him out from the rest of the diplomatic crowd,’ said Patrick contemptuously.

‘And I saw him again in town last week,’ said Isabel, frowning as she recalled the occasion. ‘I don’t think he saw me. He was standing outside one of those Lebanese cloth shops, staring in at the piles of batik print. He looked a bit odd, actually.’

‘What do you mean, odd?’ asked Patrick.

‘I don’t know. Sort of distracted. Confused. That sort of thing. He looked as though he was about to go in, and then suddenly he turned away and walked off.’

‘Probably overpowered by the vulgarity of the colours,’ said Patrick dismissively. ‘Not quite the right thing for those High Commission cocktail parties, are they?’

‘Oh, Patrick, don’t be such a beast. I think we should invite him round. Especially if he’s Lucy’s cousin. You never know, she may survive life with our angelic son for more than the usual six months. And anyway, he seems interesting.’

‘Why? Because he has a thing about garish material and a passing interest in Africa?’

‘You’re just jealous, Patrick, in case you have a rival for the position of resident iconoclast. I’m going to drop him a note and suggest he joins us for a drink. So there. Now go on, you old goat. Get dressed. Mass starts in twenty minutes.’

Isabel took the letter with one hand and Patrick’s glasses with the other and then hesitated. Dropping them onto the table, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. His arms enveloped her and, as they did so, his towel dropped to the floor. He buried his face in her hair and nuzzled her ear. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle.

‘What about eight o’clock Mass instead?’ they said together, laughing as they walked hand in hand into their bedroom, the damp towel trailing behind them.

* * *

Daniel Maddison had offered to join the High Commissioner on his visit to Juntaur. He needed an excuse to get off the High Commission compound. Maybe a trip down the coast would clear his head.

The journey had started inauspiciously with old Alec snapping at the driver – something to do with the angle of the Union Jack on the bonnet – and then going into a sulky decline in the back of the Range Rover. He had responded to Daniel’s enthusiastic commentary first with irritable grunts and then with a moody silence. Two hours into the journey and old Alec’s temper was showing no sign of improving.

The road skirted the fish-smoking huts and the smell of barbecued fish caught the back of Daniel’s throat. Every now and then, groups of small children would run out of their compounds, shouting *Toubab! Toubab!*, laughing, and trying to touch the side of the car as it sped by. Daniel gazed out of the window, smiling to himself. Where else could you spend a working day driving down palm-fringed dirt roads, with the sea shimmering behind the dunes, past wizened old men sitting on wooden benches in doorways watching the world go by and groups of women carrying water pots on their heads, their hips swaying in ways which made it difficult for him to swallow. Go on. Where else? Where else, for that matter, would you get fish called *bonga*?

Daniel felt himself relax. The unease he had been experiencing over the past few weeks seemed to be diminishing. But if he shut his eyes for a moment he could still see her face. Pale and still, her fair hair falling over her eyes as she bent over the rolls of cloth.

Daniel glanced sideways at the High Commissioner and noticed that he had tired of staring at the back of the driver's head and was now immersed in a thick novel with a scarlet and gold-embossed cover. Well at least he was spared the ordeal of having to make conversation with Alec, who appeared to regard him as only slightly less strange than the people he insisted on calling 'the natives' whenever he felt it was safe to do so. Daniel shuddered as he recalled the last conversation they had had while waiting for a visiting dignitary at the airport:

'Got a girlfriend back home then?'

'I'm sorry?'

'A girlfriend. You know. Two legs, a pair of t-'

'Yes - I know what you -'

'Good-looking chap like you. Must have them queuing up.'

'Well ...'

'What about Hélène?'

'Hélène who?'

'Smets. Hélène Smets.'

'She's married.'

Daniel could still see the look that Alec had given him - a combination of undisguised incredulity and amusement.

The driver turned sharply off the main road and drove into the village chief's compound, the little Union Jack flapping through clouds of yellow dust. Old Alec snapped his book shut. The muffled sound of children calling out grew louder and louder. Hands waved, inches from their faces; grimy fingers tapped on the glass and doors. They stepped from the car. The heat and uninsulated shrieks of laughter hit them. Daniel stood back and watched as Alec gasped and clutched the bonnet and tried, without success, to find his handkerchief in one of the many pockets of his tropical-weight beige suit. Alec and Daniel were engulfed by a group of men in long blue or white robes, all reaching for their hands and greeting them. They were led to a wooden bench

outside a building so new it seemed as though the bricks could be lifted from their soft bed of cement. Alec looked, to Daniel, as though he was gearing up for an afternoon in the dentist's chair. The village chief thanked them, in a mixture of broken English and Bakawa, for the generous gift, the fruits of which they were obviously sitting in front of. A pair of scissors was handed to Alec. He cut the yellow ribbon. A huge cheer went up.

Daniel noticed that the High Commissioner was wiping his hands on the back of his jacket, probably hoping no one would see. If he would just relax, keep his hair on. What little there was left of it. It wouldn't have taken much for him to just cut the piece of ribbon with a smile, declare the community centre open with a bit of good grace and a couple of words of encouragement, would it? Why couldn't he just try to enjoy it? Listen to the drums? Look at the women beginning to dance?

First one woman then two, then ten, twenty, shuffled in thin plastic flip-flops to the sandy space in front of the building. Several had sleeping babies tied tightly to their backs. The infants' heads wobbled and shook as they slept. The women danced wildly to the drum beats. The whole space was a mass of movement and colour as they clapped and turned.

Old Alec was squinting at his watch, wiping rivulets of sweat from his eyes. The sun was directly overhead now. He should have worn a hat, thought Daniel. *Alec Moss, who died of sunstroke just three years before he was due to retire from the Foreign Office, will be remembered for his uncanny ability to absent himself, in spirit, if not in person, from any situation in which he did not feel comfortable. Rarely seen without a large gin and tonic in one hand and a pretty girl in the other, Alec Moss will be much missed by his wife Fenella, Isatou in the visa office, Mariatou at the supermarket, Fatou at the British Council library, Yassin at the...*

All around Daniel, the men were chewing kola nuts. His neighbours spat great gobs of red saliva onto the ground and laughed. A group of men were crouched over a charcoal stove, brewing up *ataaya*. They emptied cones of white sugar into boiling green tea then poured the frothing brown liquid into small glasses. They tipped the tea from glass to glass, holding the glasses far apart. The waterfall of tea glistened in the sun.

Daniel's eyes wandered over to where a young woman was feeding her baby. Her eyes were like chocolate wells. They stared back impassively. The baby, saturated with milk, flopped off the nipple, mouth open, eyes shut. Its tiny black toes curled and uncurled. The breast shone with milk and saliva.

There was a huff of irritation at his ear. Old Alec was stamping and rolling his eyes like some kind of demented horse. A demented sweaty horse with a cocktail party to go to. The driver, who had ambled over, drawn by the smell of food it now appeared certain he was not going to get, muttered something in Bakawa. The village chief laughed and slapped him on the back in sympathy. Daniel, reluctant to leave without eating the meal that had been so carefully prepared in their honour, shook hands with as many villagers as he could, then opened the car door. It was like an oven in there. Alec was already sitting in the back seat, fiddling with the buttons of his jacket. Daniel got in next to him. The driver turned the key in the ignition, jabbed on the air conditioning, and screeched away in a cloud of dust and disappointment.

* * *

High above him, a vulture circles. Thomas Kayne squints into the sky, his green eyes disappearing into creases of leathery brown skin. What is it? He is losing the words. They dance in his head, forming pairs, couplets, coming together, parting

again. There are moments of clarity when the words line up in the right language, in the right order. Moments of calm in the heaving, twirling dance hall of his mind.

The words are playing with him now, darting this way and that. He is reminded of a. A what? Sharp, blue, quick, smelly-nested, black what – black beak. Black sheep. Baa Baa Black Sheep Have You Any Words? The Wool Sack. Good King Richard. Kingfisher. Stop. Shining-Blue Kingfisher. *Alcedo quadribrachys*. Hold on to those words. But the bird – that’s the word – bird. The bird in the sky – what is that? That’s not a king, a king what? King Onigbogi of Benin. The Alafin of Oyo. Alafin, Elephant. I wish to make a trunk call. Trunk Trunk Humpety Hump. There used to be camel trains here, you know. Last train for Beckenham. Hurry along, young man, we haven’t got all day. She’ll be waiting for you, you know. Pretty girl that Eleanor. I’d snap her up if I were you. Hazy days, lazy ways. Bring on the dancing words. Journey out here all right? You must need a drink. What’s your tippie, then? Damned hot today, eh, Tom? Fetch the master a drink, Musa Mohammed, Mohammed Musa, Musa Musa that’s no excusa. Polly put the kettle on. Polly *cholli jigawal*.

Jigawal. Vulture. *Cholli*. Bird. Thomas Kayne smiles and lifts a quivering hand high above his head into the pale clear sky, as if to grasp the words and hold them tight in his fist. Around him, the thin goats graze. The young herdsmen walk slowly amongst them. They hook their arms over the long wooden sticks that rest on their shoulders. Their wide-brimmed leather hats shade them from the glare of the sun.

A piece of green plastic bag drifts towards Thomas Kayne. A goat stops to nibble it. Kayne remembers something. Something small and green. What? A green frog. A frog prince. A tree frog. A fat hog. Home again, home again, jiggedy jog. Roast the hog. Cook the books. Yes. A small green phrase book. *Taylor’s Fulani-Hausa Phrase-Book*, 1926. The sentences line up for inspection.

The merchandise that comes from the north consists of ivory and ostrich feathers.

Before the white man came there was much strife and highway robbery.

The labourers to clear your compound passed here a little while ago.

Take this hobbling rope and hobble the horse fore and hind.

I shall issue new putties and cummerbunds tomorrow.

Thomas Kayne swirls the phrases round in his mouth, tasting each syllable with his tongue. As they fade, they leave a bitter aftertaste. He brushes his wild grey hair from his face. *Min njokki kakadi lawol ngol*, he says quietly. We have come to the end of this road.

* * *

A warm breeze wafted over the garden, bringing with it the sound of the waves and the smell of frangipani. Strings of fairy lights swayed between the trees. The flag, Daniel noticed with a smile that verged on the sardonic, was flying. From the veranda came the usual sounds of ice chinking against glasses, the low hum of conversation punctuated by the odd familiar hoot of laughter. So Fenella was up and about again, then. Amazing how quickly the High Commissioner's wife recovered from malaria. Must be all the quinine in the tonic water. Its restorative powers seemed to have worked for Alec too, who appeared to be deeply engrossed in conversation with the Togolese Ambassador's wife.

Daniel approached the drinks table and noticed that Baboucar the garden boy had been appropriated as barman. No longer dressed in his loose blue robes, he was immaculate in white shirt and trousers. Unused to the constraint, he was fiddling with his flies in a way that would have been alarming in any other situation.

‘Baboucar! *Salaamalekum.*’

‘*Malekumsalaam*, Mr Daniel.’ Baboucar grinned from ear to ear and held up a bottle of gin with a flourish.

‘You look great! Like the trousers. I’ll have a whisky, thanks. No ice. How are the children, and Bintas One and Two?’

‘They are all well, Mr Daniel. Binta One is gone up-country. Her father, he is very sick.’

Baboucar was devoted to his two wives, who shared the same name and the same good looks, and lived with him in the small hut at the back of the compound. Between them they had seven children, of whom Daniel had grown quite fond since his arrival at the High Commission. Baboucar took a tall tumbler and poured the whisky up to the brim.

‘Erm, Baboucar. Not full. Just a little,’ suggested Daniel, checking that Fenella was not anywhere near. She had been known to get rid of staff for far less. He remembered with a shudder the incident involving Mariama and Fenella’s shih-tzu. Mariama had only been trying to be helpful by cutting the smelly dog’s fringe so that it could see.

‘Tip it back in. Look, I’ll do it. There, that’s fine. NO! No tonic, thanks. Not with this drink.’

‘No tonic, Mr Daniel?’ asked Baboucar with wonder. ‘Only this little?’

‘Yes, that’s lovely. Just remember. Whisky – no tonic and not full tumbler, not in public anyway.’

‘OK, Mr Daniel. No problem. Thank you,’ said Baboucar, no doubt relieved he would not be having to break the bad news about an imminent move to Binta Two, who, though the younger and second wife, when roused reminded Baboucar uncomfortably of Madam High Commissioner.

Daniel looked over at the crowd by the house. For a moment he thought he saw her – that fair hair, those strange, sad eyes. But she would hardly be here, at a High Commission drinks party, would she? He found himself

smiling at the unlikely image of the silent, sombre woman chattering away with a crowd of expatriates and ambassadors and a smattering of old Alec's 'favourite natives', plucking canapés from circulating silver trays. No, it could not have been her. Anyway, now was scarcely the time to try to work on that conundrum. There was mingling to be done. He took a deep breath.

'Here goes. Into the bloody lions' den,' he muttered grimly, taking a large swig of whisky.

'Lions? I didn't know there was big game here. It gets better and better.'

Daniel looked up from his glass and found himself a little too close to a short, stocky man with rather unpleasant teeth. He recognised the south London vowels but not the speaker. The man was holding out a hand expectantly.

Oh, Christ! No! Why me? thought Daniel. He shut his eyes for a second or two. A vision of a phone box, a flash of red tights and a sudden escape flashed through his mind. Then he opened his eyes and held out his hand.

'Daniel Maddison. Aid Attaché. How do you do?'

'AIDS Attaché. Blimey! I didn't know it was that bad! What do you do? Go round with an attaché bag handing out condoms?' The little man guffawed. A glob of saliva landed on Daniel's tie. I am not paid enough for this job, thought Daniel, gazing at the man with a fixed smile. The man took a drag on his cigarette, blew out a cloud of smoke that enveloped them both, coughed, and came a step nearer Daniel.

'Keeps the mozzies away, you know,' he whispered conspiratorially. Daniel held his breath as a wave of nicotine, gin and halitosis swept over him.

'Bob Newpin. New Pin Enterprises. "Timeshares for those with times to share." Neat, eh? Here, I've got a card somewhere. Cast your eyes over this.' Newpin thrust a rather sweaty card literally under Daniel's nose.

‘Thank you,’ said Daniel, glancing at it and taking a step backwards. ‘You’re here on business, I take it?’

‘Too right I am. Place is a gold mine. Sun, sea, sand and a bit of the other I shouldn’t wonder. Had a meeting with the Minister of Tourism this morning. Should be a piece of cake. I’ve heard you can oil his palm for the price of a weekend’s shopping in Croydon.’

Daniel shuddered, visualising lengthy correspondence with Prisoners Abroad, calls to a distraught wife in Eltham, letters from MPs, the works. Why these morons thought they could come over here and pollute everything with their foul get-rich-quick schemes, he just could not understand.

Newpin was waving his cigarette around as he talked. There was a stench of singed hair. Daniel put his hand up to his head and fingered the frizzled ends. Newpin, oblivious of his incendiary activities, continued. He was clearly not on his first, or even second, double gin. ‘Miles of golden beaches, half-naked ladies selling mangoes as big as tits, beach boys with rippling muscles for those who incline towards a bit of black, if you know what I mean. I’ve half a mind to settle here myself.’

Daniel’s grip tightened on his tumbler. Would smashing a glass into the head of a guest at a High Commission cocktail party constitute an international incident? Would he be protected by diplomatic immunity? Christ! What was happening to him? He was sure he had never harboured murderous thoughts before he came out here.

Newpin dropped his cigarette end and ground it into the lawn. ‘Called in to leave my card with the First Secretary, Commerce, here at the Embassy and before you know it, here I am. Invited to a blooming do.’ He paused to get out another Rothmans and light it with a shiny metal lighter.

‘High Commission,’ said Daniel.

‘Yeah, whatever.’ Newpin dragged heavily on his cigarette and blew another cloud of smoke into Daniel’s eyes. ‘Anyway,’

he said, swaying rather alarmingly and raising his glass, which now contained only a couple of pieces of ice floating in some rather scummy dregs, 'Here's to shared times, times shared, big times, big bucks and big tits. Cheers, Damian.'

'Daniel,' said Daniel grimly. 'Cheers.' He turned away from Newpin and started towards the veranda again. Then he stopped. No, he was not going in. He had had enough for one night. Another bloody mindless conversation and he did not know what he might be capable of. Any more of Fenella's 'do' and it would be his mother writing to Prisoners Abroad. He headed back to the drinks table. He smiled at the garden boy turned barman and held out his glass.

'Fill it to the top, Baboucar.'

'But Mr Daniel. Did you not say only a little of whisky in a glass?'

'That was before, Baboucar. This is after. Go on. Just this once.'

Baboucar smiled and shook his head wonderingly as he poured the amber liquid to the rim of the glass. *Toubabs!* Even that nice Mr Daniel. You could never really understand what they meant.

Daniel sipped off the top centimetre of whisky. 'Cheers, Baboucar. See you. Here, buy something nice for those children of yours.' He thrust some coins into Baboucar's hand, turned, and walked swiftly away from the house and into the darkness.

* * *

A few yards beyond the high wrought-iron gates and sentry box, Daniel stopped. He realised that he had no idea where he was going, apart from in the opposite direction from the cocktail party. He looked round and saw the guard watching him quizzically. Daniel waved at him – somewhat hindered by the fact that he was still clutching a tumbler full of whisky

– and turned back to the road, striding purposefully towards nowhere in particular.

He felt a curious kind of elation as he walked, avoiding the storm drains and potholes and giving a wide berth to the street dogs that roamed in scrawny, companionable packs. A sudden breeze brought with it the smell of sewage, honeysuckle blossom and cheap tobacco. He realised, to his surprise, that this was the first time since he had arrived that he had walked anywhere after dark. He listened to the night. Beyond the whirr of generators and the low muttering of the watchmen as they squatted in twos or threes outside high walls and gates, brewing up *ataaya* and puffing on cheroots, all he could hear was the sound of the sea and the scuff of his shoes in the sand as he walked.

The road led towards the tourist hotel complexes. The guests would be sitting in the air-conditioned, stripped pine restaurants and bars, eating pizza and chips and drinking imported lager, free for a few hours of the touts selling them fruit and batik skirts and shirts on the beach. They were an extraordinary lot. Only a couple of weeks ago, while he had been talking to the wife of that British Council person in the supermarket – what was her name? Imogen or something like that – a Swedish woman wearing nothing but a thong and a deep tan had asked one of the shelf stackers if they had any tinned mangoes. It was as though most of the tourists' sense of perspective and sensitivity had somehow missed the plane in Luton or Stockholm or Hamburg and was waiting to be reunited at some later date.

Daniel remembered with some embarrassment that Isabel – yes that was her name – had just raised an eyebrow and continued their conversation undeterred, while he had been unable to say anything at all until the mahogany buttocks had disappeared behind a stack of Libby's Pineapple Chunks. Even then, all he had done was mutter something pathetic about the unexpected availability of incongruous imported goods.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of a vehicle heading towards him at speed. He stepped back into a bougainvillea hedge and out of the glare of the headlights. The car passed, sending up waves of sand and grit, then stopped with a sudden screech of brakes about fifty yards up the road. Daniel could see the outline of two people – a man and a woman – sitting in the front seats. He was emerging from the hedge when he saw the man raise a fist into the air. Daniel winced and turned his head away as it came down. When he opened his eyes, he saw that it had crashed down onto the dashboard. He could hear muffled shouting, first a man's voice, then a woman's. The passenger door opened and the woman got out. The man leaned over the seat towards her as the door slammed in his face.

'Walk then!' His furious voice pierced the darkness. He smashed both hands onto the steering wheel, started the engine, and drove off, horn blasting. Daniel watched from the shelter of the hedge.

'Are you all right?' a familiar voice called from behind him. He was about to reply, when he realised that the question was not addressed to him. Isabel Redmond had emerged from her gate. 'Only I heard the shouting. And you seem to be without transport now. Can I give you a lift somewhere?'

There was a pause and the woman turned and called out, 'No, I'm fine. Thanks.' She paused again and brushed the hair off her face. 'I don't live far away.'

Daniel recognised the fair, wavy hair and the way that she pushed it away from her face, up off her forehead.

'Are you sure? I'll happily come with you.'

'I'm sure. Really. Thank you. I'm sorry for disturbing you.'

Isabel stood for a few moments watching the woman walk away, then turned back towards the gate.

'Good gracious! What are you doing here?'

'Hello. Isabel, isn't it? I'm Daniel from the High Commission.'

‘Yes, I know what you are in the Foreign Office hierarchy. I mean what are you doing in my hedge? Did you have anything to do with that scene out there?’

‘God, no! I was just out walking when the car passed. I was trying to get out of its way. They didn’t see me. I would’ve done something. I mean, if you hadn’t come out.’

But was that really true? he wondered. In times of crisis, when had he ever done anything other than wince and look away?

‘I doubt there is much you could have done. I wish she had let me take her home, though. I wonder who she is?’

‘She works at the Lebanese cloth warehouse on Canal Street.’

Isabel gave him a curious look. ‘Why don’t you come in for a drink? I could do with one, and there are at least six flies in whatever it is you have in that glass. I’m sure Patrick would like to meet you. We know someone in common. You’re Lucy Maddison’s cousin, aren’t you?’

‘I am. How do you know that?’

‘She has the misfortune of being our son’s latest girlfriend.’

‘So you’re Joe’s mother? I’ve heard a lot about him. Well, he’s very lucky. She’s great, Lucy. The two of us used to spend summers with our very adventurous great-aunt Eleanor in Oxford.’

‘Not Eleanor Cameron by any chance?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘We knew her when we were in Borno State – on our first posting. Must be nearly forty years ago. Well, isn’t it a small world? How is she?’

‘She’s very well, I think. Still busy with various committees and things to do with West Africa. Threatening to visit me next dry season.’

‘Well, do remember us to her next time you’re in touch,’ Isabel continued as she ushered him through the gate and

up the path to the house. As they walked onto the veranda, Patrick Redmond put down his book, adjusted the piece of cloth he was wearing as a sarong and raised his grubby canvas hat.

‘Ah! Our Man in Havana, I see. So we meet at last. How do you do? Here, sit down. Aren’t you meant to be at some High Commission event?’ Patrick waved his hand vaguely in the direction of an embossed invitation on the bookshelf. ‘Thought I’d give it a miss, myself. Though I imagine the crème of the expatriate set are, even as I speak, gathered round the piano singing early Barry Manilow. What do you think?’

‘Yes, well...’

‘Oh, Paddy, just give the boy a drink, for goodness’ sake, not an interrogation.’

‘I was just enquiring – ’

‘Well, don’t. Daniel – a beer?’ Isabel asked, taking the tumbler from his hand and disappearing into the kitchen.

‘Yes, please. That would be great.’

‘What was all that racket outside?’ asked Patrick.

‘Some kind of domestic argument, I think.’

‘Local girl?’

‘No, English. Sounded it, at least.’

Isabel came onto the veranda with the drinks. ‘I hope she’ll be all right. It’s so hard to know what to do in these situations,’ she said.

‘Maybe our Honorary Consul here should keep an eye on her,’ said Patrick, winking at Daniel.

Isabel looked at him kindly and then at Patrick, less so. ‘I’m sure he will,’ she said in a tone that suggested a different topic would be in order. Patrick looked at her quizzically, opened his mouth and thought better of it. ‘How are they all, then, up at the nerve centre?’ he asked while flicking through his book. ‘Old Alec and Fenella and the delightfully endowed Isatou?’

‘Fine, thank you.’

‘How are you settling in, Daniel?’ asked Isabel quickly. ‘Do you like it here?’

‘I love it. Here, I mean. Not the job particularly, though it has its moments. Sometimes,’ he added lamely as he thought of his recent encounter with Bob Newpin. ‘I’ve wanted to live in West Africa ever since I can remember.’

Patrick looked up from his book.

‘I had relatives in the Colonial Service – I was just telling Isabel about my great-aunt Eleanor – so it’s always been there, in the background,’ Daniel continued. ‘It’s hard to describe. There’s something about the people and the movement and the smells. There’s a vibrancy that –’

‘Izzy, our Burnt-Out Case is clearly not quite. More beers all round, I think.’

Two hours later, Daniel rose to leave, swaying slightly. Isabel kissed him warmly on the cheek.

‘Join us for a sundowner any evening. We’re usually at Bakari’s on the beach,’ she said, steering him towards the door.

‘Yes, do. I won’t get up,’ Patrick added.

‘Can’t, more like it, you old soak. Safe journey home, Daniel.’