



AUDREY THOMAS

*Maybe I'm just trying to demonstrate the terrible gap
between men and women.*

A MONDAY DREAM AT ALAMEDA PARK

Coming down to Mexico had been the best thing they could have done. Laura was afraid of nothing, nothing, and her strength was infectious. Although he did not have her youth or her cast-iron stomach (perhaps the two went hand in hand) and his minor attack of *turista*, became in San Miguel, cramps and diarrhoea of such intensity that he took himself off to the hospital, not surprised at all to hear it was somehow, in spite of all precautions, dysentery. He had not taken all precautions no indeed. His old self would have taken all precautions — his wife would have seen to that. It was as though after that first lack of caution or precaution which led to her pregnancy and later to their marriage (a miserable affair in a Registry office) she had settled down to make sure that nothing would ever happen by chance again. Laura came to the hospital with great bunches of flowers, sat on his bed and held his hand and he forgot to be afraid. He was ashamed of his sickness — losing control of his bowels — there was something very humiliating about that. As though the neat bandage of skin which so tightly binds in all the necessary nastiness of the human body had suddenly slipped and revealed things that are best kept hidden.

Laura did not spend all day at the hospital — oh no. She was her own person (they had made a pact before they left Vancouver) and besides, he wouldn't have expected it. He read Octavio Paz and Oscar Lewis and slept — the sickness had taken a lot out of him. At five o'clock the bells would begin to ring and the roosters to crow. It was the first time he had slept away from Laura since their marriage.

He thought of her waking up in the pension, her long naked body stretching and turning and settling down again. When she walked down the street with him he understood for the first time the sense of pride a man can feel at the side of a beautiful woman. Yet knew she would be displeased if he told her that and knew himself it was not an acceptable (any more) way to feel. If men brushed against her she grew angry and cold. Not frightened but contemptuous.

He was the one who had wanted marriage — he told her it gave him some protection, some security, although he wasn't even sure what he meant by that. The bells rang, the roosters began to crow — he imagined his wife turning over in the double bed.

Last year she had taken acid with her younger sister and a friend. And masturbated. Had her first masturbation orgasm. She told him this with the same frankness she told him everything. He and his first wife had been so shy, so horribly reticent about their bodies. It had nearly killed him. It would, in the end, have killed him. She had written him long, hysterical letters, proclaiming her love, her unhappiness, her desire to try again. Or presenting him with past hurts like unpaid bills.

He had never loved her, that was the worst discovery of all.

"Fourteen years as vegetables," he said. "What are you crying about?"

When Laura made love to him she made sounds, very low at first and then louder, louder, never words, just a strange babble or tide of sounds, crooning to him and touching him all over with her long restless fingers, igniting him, giving him life.

She was the first woman who had ever caressed his nipples; he loved it.

And she loved him — in spite of the dysentery stains on his trousers.

For twenty years he had been a teacher — at first young and eager and with ideas as fluffy and tentative as the hair on a new-born chick. Student-graduate student-lecturer-assistant professor and so on. His mind toughening, reaching out. He had chosen the Metaphysicals because of their intelligence and acrobatics. He loved teaching them — it still, after twenty years, amazed him that anyone should pay him for what he liked doing best. But where had his body been during all that time?

His wife said, "It was dope that turned you on, not Laura."
"That may very well be," he replied. "But why couldn't you?"

*Love's not so pure, and abstract, as they use
To say, which have no Mistress but their Muse*

With all his degrees and metaphysics he had never known before what it actually felt like to be his foot. His foot in his sock in his shoe. At first he was frightened, but the dark-haired girl sitting opposite him smiled and leaned over and touched his face. Over the weeks everything hard and cold within him began breaking up, like winter ice. He wrote a letter to his wife.

"The real meaning of Easter, it now seems to me, is that resurrection is a possibility for us all." He applied for a leave and got it.

On the fourth day the doctor said he could go home. That is to say, back to the pension. They celebrated by having a drink at *La Cucaracha* although the noise made him feel a little dizzy. Laura began talking to a woman who had been a nurse in World War Two. She was at the *Instituto* taking a course in batik. She was telling Laura about S.I.F., "Self-Inflicted Wounds."

"You could always tell the S.I.F.'s," she said.

"How"

"They always shot themselves between the first and second toe."

"To get out of the fighting?"

"To get out of the fighting."

They strolled arm in arm across the street and into the *jardin*. Everywhere was the sound of birds and bells.

"The first night you were in the hospital," she said. "I was feeling a bit lost so I came here to sit for a while. There was an American lady on one of the benches. Dowdy, late middle-age. Sitting there and trying not to cry. Every so often she would put her head down and dab at her face and then sit up straight again. Finally I went over and asked her if I could help. She was ill, she said, with high blood pressure and was going home the next day. She's been coming to the *Instituto* for six years, ever since her husband died. She said her blood pressure attack

came on because someone “tampered” with a package — that was her word, “tampered.” It contained her dead husband’s stone-working tools. ‘I can replace tools,’ she said, ‘but I can’t replace *his* tools.’ Now she hates Mexico and doesn’t think she’ll ever be coming back.”

“I can understand that,” he said.

“I’m trying to,” she said.

They decided they were glad to have seen San Miguel but it was time to move on. Laura had put flowers everywhere in the bedroom. And had scented the sheets with some sweet, pungent herb. They had to get up with the roosters if they wanted to catch the early bus.

“This afternoon in the church by the market I saw this sign,” she said.

“It was written on a blackboard and I copied it out for you —

Misas Rezadas:

Una por María de los Angeles Rodriguez

Otra por Crescenciano Rivera

Otra por Victoriano Muñoz

Otra por Soledad Ortiz

Otra por Julian Zalasar

Otra por Felepa Soto

Tres misas Rezadas por todas las ánimas apuntadas.

“Three masses for all the damned souls. Is that right?”

“I think so. It reminded me of Lowry’s virgin for them who have nobody with.”

He thought briefly of his first wife. No. Souls damned themselves. And saw himself once again as a man miraculously saved. As though he had been literally held down or held under. And then had somehow broken free and swum away. Must he now light candles for the ones who didn’t make it? For “*todas las ánimas apuntadas*?” Let the dead bury the dead. He handed her back the piece of paper.

“I’m glad I have ‘somebody with’ ”

But it still seemed a strange thing to copy down.

That was a week ago. And they were beginning to find out, to their surprise, that they liked Mexico City, in spite of itself, in spite of that first sight of it, coming in on the bus, terrifying — a haze over the city as though it had been bombed about a week before and the dust was just beginning to settle. One expected to hear faint cries for help from underneath the rubble. And the traffic! He was glad again that they had decided to leave their car back in Canada. They found a little hotel within walking distance of the Anthropological Museum and after a day or two began to settle in. They got up late and went down together to the cafe connected with the hotel. Orange juice and rolls and coffee. His insides were still not quite right and Laura would count him out the *Lomatil* “how do I love thee, let me count the ways.” Teasing him, but not maliciously. Often they did not meet again until late afternoon or evening. He had to take things more slowly because he had been ill, and besides they were very liberated, very liberal, in their attitude to one another. What was the point in their always being together.

Some mornings he simply walked to the Anthropology Museum, taking his lunch with him in a basket — bread tortillas, yogurt, cheese, an avocado, a tin of juice — ate outside in the courtyard and then walked home again. He would take a nap (somehow he never mentioned this to Laura), setting the alarm so that he would be up and washed and downstairs in the cafe sipping a chocolate when she breezed in. She loved the markets and loved bargaining — bought cloth and ceramic flutes and spinning tops and papier maché masks for her nieces and nephews. Her Spanish was minimal but she always made herself understood, got where she wanted to go, had only positive adventures. She assumed that people would like her and so of course they did. In the evenings they wandered around hand in hand until they found a place to eat, then went to a movie and home to bed.

One night they met some people in a bar and were invited to a party. Americans and Mexicans and he and Laura sat in the back of a taxi with a Mexican they called "the pole." The pole kept going on and on about mushrooms. When they arrived at the party no one was there but a boy and a girl making love in an old brass bed. Their new friends said it didn't matter, wrong address and offered the lovers some beer and some tequila. They all got stoned and slightly drunk and he kept telling Laura that this was a far cry from the Museum of Anthropology. But the next day his guts were very bad and he felt the whole thing wasn't worth it. He began to envy Laura's energy and good health. She was thinking of staying on in Mexico for a while — he had to go back in two more weeks and see his sons. He tried not to be hurt that she might stay on — after all, that had been the agreement, they were both free to come and go. He met a girl in the bank that afternoon and invited her to a movie that night. She was from Chile and very beautiful.

"I can practice my Spanish," he said and Laura smiled and nodded.

"If I were your wife," Inez said "I wouldn't allow you out of my sight."

"That's ridiculous," he said, and then looked up and saw she was teasing him. She was a psychologist at the Institute for drug research. She would introduce him to her boyfriend, Rosario, who was doing workshops with LSD. Donne and Marvell seemed very far away.

Laura wasn't too sure about going — "maybe I'm jealous," she said.

"Do you think so?" He couldn't help feeling pleased. "She says her boyfriend will be there." They were all to meet at Inez' apartment and then go out for a drink.

Rosario was small but beautifully made. Inez had on white jeans and a tiny crocheted top. Her apartment was large and full of rugs and soft furniture. She kissed Laura and offered drinks. It was the apartment of a wealthy woman — she said she lived alone except for the maid. "A Chilean refugee." Rosario was running a marathon acid session at the Institute beginning Saturday morning. There would be participants and attendants and observers. People were coming from as far away as Harvard, would they like to come? Inez put her arm around Laura. "Your skin is incredible." They were all a little drunk.

"What about this movie," he said.

"Oh!" said Inez. "Do we really want to go to a movie. We cannot talk in a movie and we are all just getting to be friends." There were white curtains of some beautiful thin gauzey stuff and brilliant woven cushions on the sofa. Rosario smiled at him and began to talk about the expanding consciousness. Inez got up and offered to show Laura the bedroom.

"All of us," she said, "let us all go and see the bedroom."

It was the biggest bed he had ever seen. A coarse-woven cloth and more bright pillows, dozens of them. Who suggested it? Rosario? Inez? That they should all make love together. Rosario sat on the edge of the bed and rolled a joint. Inez put her arms around Laura and kissed her. He had never seen one woman kiss another like that before and it excited him. But Laura pushed away. Why?

"I don't want to stay."

"I'd like to"

"That's fine."

"You don't mind?"

Inez looked from one to the other. How old was she? Thirty? Thirty-five? It was hard to tell. She was small, like Rosario, and had to reach up to kiss Laura. Had reached up and pulled her head down, a gesture both childlike and erotic.

"But Laura, it will be great fun. We will all become really acquainted, really friends."

Laura shook her head.

"I'm sorry."

Inez shrugged and turned away, dismissing her.

"And you?"

Laura had told him he must always be honest.

"I want to stay."

Laura came over and kissed him on the cheek and then was gone. He told himself he felt no guilt, she was a big girl and that if she'd wanted him to come she would have said so.

They took off their clothes and Inez lay down on the bed between the two men. They just lay there smoking, nothing happening, until suddenly she pulled him over on top of her. Rosario began caressing his back and his buttocks, harder and harder so that when he finally came he wasn't sure whether it was because of Rosario or Inez and that frightened him a little. Rosario and Inez both began to masturbate, with their eyes shut and then he was pushing her hands away and licking her while Rosario got down behind and began licking him. He was totally out of his senses, totally. It was just pure sensation and violence, too. And nothing loving about it at all. Inez screamed and pushed him away and Rosario rolled over on top of her. The sight of Rosario fucking Inez excited him again and he felt lost, left-out and frustrated. Inez came and then asked whether he wanted her or Rosario to suck him off. He said "both" so they took turns.

"Now we are very close," she said, "very close. I am sorry your wife wouldn't stay. She has a beautiful body, beautiful skin."

He arranged to meet Rosario for the acid marathon and went out into the street. He did not feel close to those people at all and was terrified by his response to Rosario. Things would have been different if Laura had stayed.

She was sitting up in bed waiting for him when he got back. He told her everything.

"That's why I left," she said. "I felt we were somehow being set up for their amusement. They're cruel people, sophisticated and cruel."

"I was frightened," she said. "When I got to Reforma I began to run — it was ridiculous. I just didn't want you to come after me and drag me back there. I went into one of the hotels, I don't know which one. There was a mariachi band and all the tourists were whooping it up. I met a man, older, who'd been sitting in that hotel for four days afraid to go out. His brother was supposed to join him and was delayed. He hadn't been *outside* of the hotel."

They wept in one another's arms.

"Were you attracted to Inez?" he asked.

"No, because I felt I was being manipulated."

"Have you ever made love with a woman?"

"Yes," she said. "Once, but it was someone I loved. I don't think I could make love with a strange woman."

"Yet I was turned on by Rosario."

"You were being very carefully manipulated."

"Todo el mundo es loco loco."

"What?"

"It's a movie sign I saw today, with Ethel Merman."

"I love you," she said, "even if you are loco loco."

He began to cry again.

"Let go of it," she said. "Let it go."

The next day he felt very tired and convalescent. He decided to go back to the Anthropology museum once more and she would go to the Museum of Modern Art. They agreed to meet for a picnic lunch at two. The walk seemed very long and the broad avenue of Reforma crowded and unpleasant. "Let's take a bus," he said, "I still feel a bit woozy."

They stood at the bus stop together and she leaned up against him.

"I feel very close to you," she said. "I just wanted you to know." It came over him that if he died right then, that instant, he would have known more happiness in his few months with this girl than he had in all the years of his former life. What about never going back? What about staying down here and finding a little village somewhere. All for love and the world well lost. Laura got off at her stop and blew him a kiss.

"Two o'clock."

"I won't forget."

She asked nothing of him except that he be himself. If he weren't there at two she would not be jealous or hurt (although he would like to think she might be a little concerned). She would assume that something had caught his interest and he couldn't make it. "Loving," she had said to him, "is letting go, of yourself and of the other person, the 'beloved' as your old poet-pals might put it."

It was not a lesson he learned easily. For if she stood him up??

And then of course his museum was closed. Monday. Why hadn't he noticed that before. He stood there at a loss. It was only eleven and the Museum of Modern Art would not excite him a second time around. However, he began to wander back in that direction — to find Laura. To tell her he was going on to something else. A man and a woman were setting up a little stall of glass figurines outside the children's playground. He smiled and bought a fragile giraffe and three babies which were carefully wrapped in grey lint. They were not very expert examples of glass-blowing but they pleased him all the same. Laura was sitting on a bench in the children's playground watching two monkeys feed a bird.

"Hey Señorita." She didn't turn around. "Laura!" Turned and saw who it was and waved. There was a high fence between them.

"How did you get in?"

"Keep going. Around the other side."

Her museum was closed too. Maybe everything? He wanted to see the stuff at the Palace of Fine Arts, she was easy, didn't really care. They walked back towards the entrance to the park and found a phone booth. Someone assured him the Palace of Fine Arts was open.

"Let's go."

Then just as they were about to cross the boulevard she saw a balloon man.

"Wait a minute, I want to buy a balloon."

"What colour? I'll treat you to one."

"Red," she said, "yellow, I don't care."

In a sudden rush of delight he bought them all. Eighteen, twenty, he wasn't sure how many. The balloon seller thought he was crazy. Loco loco. He went away shrugging his shoulders.

"Here," he said, embarrassed now. "A special bouquet."

"You will become a legend in some small street in this city. The crazy gringo who bought up all the balloons."

They crossed over and began a slow leisurely walk along the boulevard, Carlotta's boulevard, arm in arm, the balloons bobbing in the air above them. Why had he thought the street unfriendly, cold? Laura gave a balloon to every child, to old people, to a laughing policeman. She did not expect to be snubbed and no one snubbed her. They walked like this for about three miles, slowly, ceremoniously, arm in arm. Laura had on a long dull-red skirt and a black tee-shirt. He wanted to photograph her but did not have his camera. She was colour and life and delight. When they reached Alameda Park it was afternoon and they sat amongst the statues and shoe-shine boys and ate their lunch. Laura tied a balloon to the bench where they had sat. He felt quite dizzy when he stood up to go and thought for a minute of his usual afternoon siesta. He could go back now, Laura wouldn't care. No. It was just the late night and the dope and drink and of course the altitude. The altitude slowed almost everybody down.

A boy came up to them, carrying his brass-decorated shoe-shine stand.

"Shine your shoes, Señor?"

He held out his sandalled foot and laughed. The boy laughed too.

"Cut your toenails??" Laura gave him the last balloon but one.

The Palace of Fine Arts was closed — only the office (with the phone) was open. He was terribly tired. The secretary suggested the Rivera murals at the Ministry of Education. They walked round and round. His head ached, his back ached, his whole body ached. Yet still he felt the power of Rivera's vision.

"I read somewhere," Laura said, "that at one time they wanted him for President of the Republic."

His people were as solid as mountains. The calves of the peasant women bulged. Freedom. The women handed out machine guns. Liberty. Everything was made simple. The truth shall make you free. His back ached horribly.

"There's one more place I'd like to go while we're down in this area," she said.

"Where's that?"

"It's a hotel with a big Rivera mural. The Hotel del Prado."

"Do you know where it is?"

"I know it's near the Alameda Park — where we ate lunch."

They went back the way they had come. Laura had kept one balloon, a red one, and now, because he was tired and felt ill because he really didn't give a damn about seeing another mural, because all he wanted to do was go back to the hotel and go to bed, it seemed to him that people were laughing at her — stupid American woman carrying a balloon. He wished it would break before they got to the Hotel del Prado, but of course it didn't.

They had walked all the way around the park before they found out where the mural was. Across the street, the traffic snarling and pouncing, up some stairs and into the lounge. It was "Happy Hour," a sign said, they could have two drinks for the price of one. He ordered two gin and tonics and when the girl came she put the drinks down and then stood with her hand out. He paid for the drinks and still she stood.

"What d'you want?" He hadn't meant his voice to come out so loud.

"You have to tip me Señor."

"What do you mean, I *have* to tip you."

"It is the custom."

He shrugged and gave her a few pesos. She looked at him with contempt, put the money down by his drink and walked away.

"Stupid bitch."

"Shh. It's beginning."

A small man with a pointer came out of nowhere and began to explain the mural. It was huge — the history of modern Mexico set in Alameda Park. That was the name of the mural — "A Sunday Dream in Alameda Park." Rivera had painted himself in the center, a small boy with a frog and snake in his pocket. On one side of him a woman, a skeleton in a long dress. The Plumed Serpent was a feather boa around her neck.

The gin had made him feel a little better, but the mural danced like a landscape in the water and he couldn't pay attention to the little man with the pointer. General Zapata. Madero. Rivera's first wife, Guadalupe, his daughter Ruth, his second wife Freda in maroon with a yin/yang symbol in her hand. The landscape was divided into three parts. In the Colonization Period everything was smokey and unclear "because our nation was not independent." Then balloons like Laura's balloons — strength — "everythin' is shiny bright — the win' is not even blowin'." When was that? After Juárez presumably. Then the winds began to blow amongst the trees in Alameda Park — There will be a revolution — "leaves begin to get sick."

He tried to follow. Which revolution? What was the man talking about? Laura was taking notes. Good. He could ask her later.

Phrases stuck in his mind. "Forty years late on." "Lil boy" "Consider him par of the family." *Tierra y Libertad*. "*El Sueño de un domingo en la Alameda*."

The lecturer announced that he was Facundo Vázquez and that contributions will be accepted.

Laura put her notebook away and hunted for some change. She went up and stood chatting with the man. He wondered if he would faint if he stood up.

A Sunday dream. A Monday dream. Rosario and Inez. Had we but world enough and time. How old was Freda when Rivera married her? In ten years Laura would be thirty-two and he would be sixty.

She came up to him as he was moving towards the door.

"Leaving without me?"

"I just wanted to get some fresh air."

They took a taxi back to the hotel. There was no elevator and the stairs seemed endless. Left foot. Right foot. He took off his sandals and fell across the bed.

"Got to have a little sleep. Very tired."

She smiled and shed her clothes. Stood there naked and unselfconscious in the middle of the room and he felt nothing, nothing at all. Sleep. The soft lap of sleep. The caress of sleep. The last thing he heard was the sound of the shower.

She came out towelling her hair, and looked at her sleeping husband. She kissed him gently and covered him up with a light blanket. Then she put on a dress and her sandals and checked that she had money and her keys. It was not that she didn't love him, for she did. But all around her the lights of Mexico City had come on, in the fountains, the circles, the parks, the bars, the boulevards. She tied her balloon to the arm of the single chair and quietly let herself out.

In Alameda Park the lovers walked with their arms around one another's shoulders. But let him sleep.

INITRAM

(for Bob Amussen)

Writers are terrible liars. There are nicer names for it, of course but liars will do. They will take a small incident and blow it up, like a balloon — puff puff — and the out-of-work man who comes to ask if he can cut the grass ends up in their story as an out-of-control grey-faced, desperate creature who hurls himself through the garden gate and by his sheer presence wrecks a carefully arranged afternoon between a married woman and her impending lover.

The truth is I was reading the manuscript of an old friend. The truth is I thought the man hadn't gone but was lurking in the back lane just beyond the blackberry bushes.

The truth is I only thought I saw him there — flashes of a red-plaid shirt beyond the green. (Writers also lie to themselves.)

The truth is that when the police came and I was asked to describe this man I was overcome with shame and embarrassment to suddenly notice him, half a block away, moving a neighbour's lawn mower up and down in regular and practical stripes.

The truth is I still insisted (to myself, after the grinning policeman had gone) that the man had been sinister, menacing, unpleasant. And of course he is, in my story.

But what do writers do with the big events in life — births and broken hearts and deaths — the great archetypal situations that need no real enhancement or "touching up." Surely they simply *tell* these, acting as mediums through which the great truths filter. Not at all — or not usually or maybe sometimes when they happen to other people.

That is why I decided to call Lydia when my marriage broke up. I was living on an island — felt I needed a wider audience, an audience that would understand and accept my exaggerations for what they were. It had to be a fellow writer, preferably a woman. I called her up long-distance. One of her daughters answered and said she wasn't there could I leave my number? I put the phone down, already planning the ferry-trip, the excitement of the telling of my terrible news. Lydia was perfect. Yes. I couldn't wait for her to call me back.

I didn't, in fact, know her very well. I had done a review of her first published book and then later, when I went to visit her city, had on a sudden whim called from a phone booth and identified myself. She had told me to come right over. I had my husband and three kids with me. That seemed too much of an imposition on anyone we didn't know so I took the littlest and he agreed to take the others to the Wax Museum. We drove up a very classy road, with huge houses — some were really what we used to call mansions — on either side. I began to get cold feet.

I had visions of a patrician face and perfect fingernails — drinking tea from her grandmother's bone china cups. We would talk about Proust and Virginia Woolf with a few casual remarks about *Nightwood* and the diaries of Anaïs Nin.

As we drove up to the front door of a big, imposing, mock-tudor residence I thought of "Our Gal Sunday" a soap-opera I had loved when I was a kid. It always began with a question as to whether a beautiful young girl from a small mining town in the West could find happiness as the wife of England's most wealthy and titled lord, Lord Henry Brinthrop.

It was her stories, you see. They were about life in rural Ontario — about farms and poverty (both spiritual and material) and, very often, a young girl's struggle against those things. Yet here was this house, on this road and a statue in the garden.

"Wait for me," I said to my husband, "If a butler or maid answers, I'm not going in."

But Lydia answered — in black slacks and an old black sweater and no shoes. She gave me a hug and I went in with my littlest child and didn't look back.

Through the hall in to the sitting room, then the dining room (an impression of a piano and lots of books, of a big antique dining table covered with clutter generally now that I think back on it. Somewhere upstairs a small child was screaming) through another narrow hall and into a big kitchen. She asked if my little girl wanted some orange juice. She wouldn't answer so I answered for her as mothers do on such occasions.

"Yes please."

When Lydia opened the refrigerator door a great pile of things fell out on the kitchen floor. Frozen pizzas, a dish of left over mashed potatoes, the bottle of juice, something unidentifiable in a glass jar. We looked at each other and began to laugh.

"The house," I said, "I was terrified."

"I *hate* this house," she said. "I hate it."

Then talked and talked while our two little girls (we each had three, extraordinary!, we each had the same dinner set bought on special at the Hudson's Bay Company years before "cherry thieves" it was called — she used one of the saucers for an ash tray) played something or other upstairs.

She was older than I was (but not much) and incredibly beautiful with dark curly chaotic hair and the kind of white skin that gives off the radiance a candle does when it has burnt down at the core and the sides are still intact. Her book had brought her fame (if not fortune) but she was having trouble with her second one, a novel.

She hated the house and couldn't keep it up. Her husband was a professor — he loved it. It was miserably cold in the winter — sometimes the furnace stopped all together. What did I think of Doris Lessing, of Joyce Carol Oates, of *The Edible Woman*? Her daughter had made a scene in the supermarket and called her a "fucking bitch." Did that kind of thing happen to me? Her neighbour was a perfect housewife, perfect. She was always sending over cakes and preserves. One day she took one of her neighbour's cheese cakes and stamped all over it with her bare feet, she said. An aging Canadian writer (male) had told her drunkenly, "Well, I might read ya but I'd never fuck ya." Did I think it was all right to send a kid to day care when she was only three?

And even while I was talking with her, marvelling at her, helping her mop up the floor, I kept wondering why she didn't write about all this, why she had stopped at twenty years ago and written nothing about her marriage or this house or her child who had been still-born and how the doctor (male) and her husband couldn't understand why it took her so long to get over it. I wondered about her husband but he was off somewhere practicing with a chamber-music group. He liked old instruments, old houses, things with a patina of history and culture. His family accepted her now that she'd won awards.

I only saw her a few times after that — we lived in different cities and there was a boat ride between us. But we wrote (occasionally) ; she had large round handwriting, like a child's.

Her novel was not going well — it kept turning itself into stories — she was going to Ireland with her husband for a holiday. How was I? Not literary letters: we were both too busy, too involved in our own affairs. Just little notes, like little squeezes or hugs which said, "Sister, I am here."

We read once, at a Women's Week, or rather I read, with two others while Lydia sat on the blue-carpeted floor with a Spanish cape over her head and let somebody else read for her. She and I were both scared and had gotten drunk before we went — by not reading I felt she had somehow let me down. We four ladies all had dinner together and talked about what it was like to be woman and writer and egged each other on to new witticisms and maybe a few new insights but I did not feel close to Lydia that evening. I was still sore about the way she'd plonked herself down on the carpet and pulled her shawl over her head and let somebody else read for her. It was very clever, I thought to myself, and very dramatic. For there was Lydia's story, unrolling out of the mouth of another woman (whose story it was not) and there was the author herself sitting like an abandoned doll, on the floor beside the reader. The audience loved it and sent out sympathetic vibrations to her. I thought it was a con. And almost said to her, "Lydia, I think that was a very clever con," but didn't because I realized that maybe I wished I had thought of it first and why not store it away for some future date — it was a nice piece of dramatic business.

And once we had lunch in her city — at a medieval place — where we swept in in our capes (I had a cape too by then) and ate and drank our way through a rainy West Coast afternoon. I wasn't staying overnight so I still hadn't met her husband. Her novel was out and she was winning awards. I was a little jealous. My books came out and vanished into the well of oblivion. She just went up and up and up. "I've been writing for twenty years," she said, "don't forget that. Two books in twenty years."

She had used to pretend she was making the sitting room curtains when her neighbours invited her over for coffee. She always worked in a basement room. Now her secret was well and truly out.

"How does your husband feel about it all?"

"Oh, I never write about *him*," she said. She lit a cigarette.

"He's probably my biggest fan."

Now I waited for her to call me back. My husband (correction, my ex-husband) was coming over to be with his children. I had a whole day and a night off. Whether I wanted it or not I had to leave this place. And I wanted to, I really wanted to. What was the point in hanging around while he was here, crying over spilt milk, locking empty, horseless barn doors, trying to pick up nine stitches, or mopping up all the water under the goddamn bridge. I baked bread and cleaned the cabin and got supper for the kids and still she hadn't called. My ex-husband called, however, and said in his new strained, estranged voice, was it all set for tomorrow and I said sure but began to feel really sorry for myself because there was really no place I wanted to go except this one place — Lydia's and I'd got it into my head that if I couldn't go there I couldn't go anywhere and would have to end up going back to the city I had left behind and getting a room in some cheap hotel down near Hastings street, and drink myself into oblivion with cheap red wine. Or going back and forth all day on the ferry, ending up at midnight on one of the neighbouring islands, getting a room at the inn. A stranger in a brown wool cape. Going into the public room and ordering a drink. Did they have a public room. Would there be local characters sitting around and playing darts — a handsome stranger whose sailing boat was tied up because of the storm? There was not even a small craft warning out but never mind — the weather was almost as fickle as friendship — it was not inconceivable that a sailboat-disabling storm could blow up by tomorrow night —

"I'll always care what happens to you," he said.

We were teasing wool on the floor in front of the pot-belly stove, the three of us — the youngest child was asleep. There was only the oil lamp on and the CBC was broadcasting a documentary about Casals. "The quality of a man's life is as important as the quality of his art," the old man said. Our hands were soft and oily from the lanolin in the wool. We touched each other's faces with our new, soft, hands. Yes. I thought, yes. And maybe I'll be all right after all. The fleece had been bought by my husband's lover, my ex-best friend. It was from New Zealand, the finest wool in the world. I paid for it, the wool. I had left a cheque on the table the last time I was in town. On the phone my ex-husband mentioned it wasn't enough, she'd mistaken the price or the price had been incorrectly quoted. But it was all right, he'd make up the difference.

"I bet you will," I said.

I was seeing everything symbolically. Lydia phoned and I said, "Just a minute I have to light a candle." The room with the phone in it was in darkness. I stuck the candle in the window and picked up the phone again with my soft lanolin-soaked hands.

"Hello," I said, "Can I come and visit you tomorrow and stay overnight?" Her voice sounded a bit funny but that could be the line which was notoriously bad.

"Sure," she said, "of course. But I'll be out until suppertime. Can you find something to do until suppertime?"

"Can I come a little before? I want to talk to you."

"Come around four," she said. She sounded as though she had a cold.

"I'll bring a bottle," I said.

"Fine."

I had to be away on the first ferry — what would I do all day? I rubbed lanolin into my face. Sheep shed their old coats and went on living. Snakes too. I could hear Casals' child laughing in the

background. Someone had lent us a spinner and it stood in the corner of the front room. Not a fairytale spinner which would turn straw into gold. Very solid and unromantic — an Indian spinner without even the big wheel. Nothing for a Sleeping Beauty to prick her finger on — It worked like an old treadle sewing machine but I didn't have the hang of it yet — my wool always broke. Whirr Whirr. There was something nice about just pressing down on the treadle.

I took the candle into the kitchen and wrapped my bread in clean tea towels. I put out a jar of blackberry jam and two poems folded underneath the jar. That would have to do.

When I got to Lydia's house she was frying chicken in the kitchen. Same black slacks and old black sweater. Same bare feet and clutter. There were two enormous frying pans full of chicken wings both hissing and spitting away and Lydia had a long two-prong kitchen fork in her hand.

I took off my cape and sat down, unwrapping the bottle.

"Good," she said, "pour us a glass." Her voice didn't sound as though she had a cold any more, it sounded harsh and a little loud, as though she were talking to someone slightly deaf. She was jabbing the chicken wings as though they were sausages in need of pricking. She couldn't leave those chicken wings alone and after my second glass I began.

"Listen," I said, "I've got something I want to tell you."

"I've got something I want to tell you too," she said, and then, rather absent-mindedly, "did you only buy one bottle?"

"Sorry. But have some more, it doesn't matter."

"It's all right," she said, "we'll drink the dinner wine. Tony will just have to bring some more."

I was anxious to begin. I wanted to make it funny and witty and brave — to get rid of the pain or to immortalize it and fix it — which? I don't know, I never know. I took another drink of my sherry and wished she'd stop poking at those chicken wings.

"I don't actually live here any more," she said, waving the long-handled fork. "I only come back to cook the dinners."

"You what??"

Turning all the chicken wings over one more time, she lowered the heat under the pans and came to sit down next to me. She kept her fork with her, however, and laid it on the tablecloth where it left a greasy two-pronged stain.

"I've left him," she said, "the bastard." Her voice was very harsh, very tough. I felt she'd put something over on me, just as I'd felt the day of the reading when she sat on the floor and pulled her cape over her head.

"I wish you'd told me over the phone."

"I couldn't. It's too complicated. Besides, I come back here every day in any case."

It was both moving and bizarre. He had been supposed to move out, she had even found him an apartment only a few minutes away. But at the last minute he panicked, said he couldn't live in an apartment, talked about his piano, his collection of old instruments, the upheaval. He suggested she move out instead.

"But what about the children?"

"That's the trouble of course. I have to pick Ellen up from school — he can't do it of course and so I just stay on and make the dinners. The other two are all right, it's only the little one who still needs to be looked after."

"But that's crazy."

"Is it? what would you do?"

I admitted that I didn't know.

"But how can you all eat together — how can you stand it?"

"I can't," she admitted, "but he won't move out and finding a house big enough for me and the girls is going to take time." She got up and rummaged in the pantry. Came back with a bottle of wine.

"I think we'd better start on this," she said. I undid the cork while she got up to turn the chicken wings.

"He brought her right to the house," she said. "When I was on that reading tour. Brought her right here and the children were here too."

The name of the wine was *Sangre de Toro*.

"At least she wasn't your best friend," I said.

"I knew her, I knew her, she's one of his students. I used to think she was mousey. I encouraged her to do something with herself. Ha. And I think the lady next door too," she said.

"The one who bakes cakes."

"That's the one. The perfect mother."

"Maybe you're just being paranoid."

"Maybe."

We began the *Sangre de Toro*.

"What's your big news," she said.

The two older girls were out somewhere for the evening so there was just the youngest child, who must have been six or seven, Lydia, her husband and myself. She and I were pretty drunk by the time we finished the *Sangre de Toro* but she had insisted I call her husband at the University and ask him to bring home another bottle.

"Tell him specifically what you want," she yelled at me from the kitchen. "Otherwise he'll bring home Calona Red."

I told him. Now he sat opposite me with two huge plates of chicken wings between us. I didn't want to look at his baffled eyes, his embarrassed smile.

"He still wears a white handkerchief in his breast pocket," she had said. "Irons them himself."

The vegetable was frozen peas and there was bread on the table because Lydia had forgotten all about the potatoes. The child was raucous and unpleasant. I wondered what happened when she woke up in the night with a bad dream and whether he went in to her or whether her teen-age sisters did. I wondered if she had been the one to tell about the student. Kids will do things like that and not always out of innocence.

Lydia ate one chicken wing after another. We were all going out as soon as the dishes were done and the baby-sitter came. My real self didn't want to go but my drunken self thought what the hell it's better than staying here with these three miserable people.

While Tony was doing the dishes Lydia hauled me upstairs, pulled me up after her like an older sister a younger, or a mother a reluctant child. I understood the fierce energy of her anger. It was like someone who is hurt during an exciting game. While the excitement is there the pain is simply not felt. She hurled me into their bedroom.

"Look," she said.

I don't know what I expected to see. Stained sheets piled up in a corner or the student stark naked and manacled to the bed or what. But everything seemed all right. No shattered mirrors or blood-stained bedspreads, just an ordinary pleasant-looking bedroom.

"I don't see."

"Look." She was pointing to the walk-in closet.

"I've left all my shoes here except one pair. Crazy isn't it. I just can't seem to take my shoes away."

"Maybe you don't really want to go."

"Oh no, I want to go. I have to go. Or he does. One of us anyway. It isn't just the girl."

"It never is."

On his side of the closet the tweed jackets and neatly pressed trousers were hung with military precision. On her side there were only empty hangers and a large heap of shoes piled any which way. Was that significant, the order/disorder? Was it an attempt to break through this orderly self that made him bring his student to this bed? Or had he just been lonely. I didn't want to think about that for after all, wasn't he the enemy?

We went back downstairs.

The baby sitter came and we went out. Lydia had put on a filthy white crocheted wool poncho. Tony objected mildly. "Are you going out in that? It's dirty."

"That's tough," Lydia said.

They were playing to me, an audience of one. Maybe that's why we were going out — to gain a larger audience. I panicked — what if I had too much to drink and began to cry? Lydia looked witchy and wicked with her uncombed hair and dirty poncho — I felt she was quite capable of doing something terrible to her husband — mocking him or humiliating him in some way and I was to be her accomplice. He had a heavy projector in his hand.

"We had arranged to show some slides," he said, "before we knew you were coming."

"Slides of our European trip," Lydia said. "One of Tony's colleagues is going this summer — he wanted to see them."

I thought it was strange they didn't invite him over here but maybe Lydia had refused to actually entertain. I found the whole thing strange — sitting between them in the car following them up the steps of their friend's house, saying hello and taking off my cape, patting my face to keep the smile in place, the way some women pat their hair before they go into a room. Our host was shy and pale and had a club foot — there didn't seem to be any hostess. But there were two other people in the sitting room, a tall, lean man in a bright blue shirt, string tie and cowboy boots and a plump woman in a black creepy dress black pointy fifties shoes and a rhinestone brooch. Both the man and the woman had nice faces, expectant faces, as though they expected that whoever walked through the next door was bound to be cheerful and interesting and good. Innocent faces, almost the faces of small children. We were introduced and asked what we would like to drink and Tony began to set up the projector.

Lydia was talking to Tony's colleague in her strange new brassy tough-gal voice, flirting with him, making him smile. "Does he know?" I wondered. He had introduced her as Tony's wife. I sat down next to the man in the blue shirt.

"What do you do?" I asked.

"I'm a bee-keeper," he said.

"You might say he's a bee-baron," said his brother. I could see they were brothers in their smiles and something to do with their ears, a strange extra little fold where the ear joined the head. Other than that they didn't really look alike, the one small and dark and with the pallor of the academic, the other tall and fair and with what we call a "weathered" skin.

"A swarm of bees in May," said Lydia, "is worth a load of hay. I remember hearing farmers say that when I was a kid. I grew up on a farm," she said and flashed a smile at the bee-keeper's wife.

"Do you like it," I asked, "keeping bees?" I had thought of buying one or two hives for the island. I already had hens and a fleece for spinning and would have my nine bean rows in the spring. Lydia had laughed when I told her my real dream was to have a little farm.

"Ha. Only city people yearn to live on a farm. I hated it."

"Why?"

"I'm not even sure why any more. The constant work — the catastrophes — the exhaustion — the women always in the kitchen — something always being butchered beheaded or skinned or pickled or preserved."

"Maybe it doesn't have to be that way?"

"It has to be that way. If you really live off the land you live off the land. Nothing can be put off or wasted or ignored. I always felt the kitchen smelled of blood or sugar or vinegar or manure or all of these. I felt I went to school stinking of all of it."

"Those are good smells. Honest smells. I worked in an asylum once — I got that smell on me. I used carbolic soap and tried to get it off."

She shook her head and changed the subject, only adding, "They weren't good smells when I was going to school."

Had she been teased, then? Had the boys pulled chicken feathers out of her dark curly hair — had her dresses been too long — were her hands all wrinkled from washwater? I realized how little I actually knew about her except through her stories. I guess this conversation took place before her novel came out.

Tony asked in his apologetic manner if we were ready to see the slides. Lydia and the bee-keeper's wife were sitting in easy chairs on the other side of the room, where the screen had been set up so they had to move. Lydia came and sat cross-legged on the floor by my feet. The bee-keeper and I were on the couch and we shoved over to make room for the bee-keeper's wife. Tony was next to me, behind the projector and his friend was next to him on a kitchen chair. He got up and after offering us another drink (only Lydia and I accepted) turned out all the lights.

I don't remember much about the slide show. Tony projected and Lydia commented. Ireland, England, Scotland, Wales and then across the Channel into France and down through Spain. They were all "views" — that is to say they told me nothing about the two people who had taken that trip. Alone. Without the children. Was that when

they first suspected they had nothing to say to one another. Had they set off with high hopes and become more and more disenchanted? What had finally driven that orderly controlled man to introduce that student into his bedroom? Not secretly but openly, "In front of the children." From where I was sitting I could see that his hands shook every time he put in another slide.

"You've got that one in backwards," Lydia said. We all came to attention and studied the screen — it was a bull fight scene and looked perfectly all right to me.

"I don't think —" Tony began.

"Look for yourself. Look at it. Can't you see it's back to front?"

"I sure don't see anything funny," said the bee-keeper.

"'Initram'," Lydia said in her bold brassy voice. "Look at the advertisements and tell me what kind of a drink is Initram."

"Oh," he said. "Sorry."

"Ha."

His hands shook a little more as he carefully pried out the offending slide and turned it around.

"There," he said. "Is that better?"

"Oh God," said Lydia. "You've done it again." And sure enough he had. There was 'Initram' being advertised again.

"I'd like another drink," said Lydia, "Initram on the rocks."

Tony switched the projector off and for a minute we were in a complete tension-filled darkness before his friend had enough presence of mind to reach up and switch on the lights.

"That's all folks," he said, trying to sound like Woody Woodpecker, trying to be funny.

"Don't you want to show the rest of the slides?" Lydia said.

"No, I think that's enough."

"Well, tell us about bees then," she said, turning around and facing the sofa, backing away a little bit so she could gaze up at the bee-keeper, her pretty head cocked on one side.

"What do you want to know," he said, smiling. But uncomfortable too for he was not so dumb or naive that he didn't see what she was doing to her husband.

"Oh. Everything. Everything." She waved her hand. "Their mating habits for instance. Do they really only mate once? The queens, I mean."

"No, they can mate more than once, maybe two, three times. But usually only once. It's funny," he said, "when you stop to think of it. From a human point of view the drone that wins is the loser really."

"I don't follow you," I said. I really know nothing about bees. Whereas I had a funny feeling about Lydia. Would a kid who had a grandfather who kept bees — ? or maybe she never did have such a grandfather. Maybe her grandfather just said that whenever he saw a swarm — the way my father used to say, "Red sky at night, sailor's delight" when he'd never been near the ocean.

"Fun, frolic and death," he said, "fun, frolic and death. Those drones are the laziest devils you'd like to see. Waited on hand and foot by their sisters — don't have to do nothing except eat and lie around and take the occasional look see outside. Then one day the queen just zooms up into the blue with hundreds of those drones dashin' after her. A fantastic sight — fantastic."

"And the race is to the swift," said Lydia, taking a long sip of her drink as though it were some strange nectar, then parting her lips and looking up at the bee-keeper with her new bold look.

"The strongest and swiftest catches her," he said. "Sometimes she even zooms back towards 'em, because she wants to be caught you know. That's all part of it."

"She wants to be caught," repeated Lydia. "She has to be caught." She took another long sip of her drink. The bee-keeper's wife just sat back against the cushions and smiled.

"She has to be caught — it's her nature."

"So she is caught."

"And then?"

"And then he clasps her to him, face to face — there's a little explosion as all his male organs pop out and they fly together like that face to face, while he fertilizes her."

"Then he dies?" I asked.

"Then he dies. You see, they fall to the ground together, outside the home hive of the queen, and when she tries to pull away, he's stuck so fast to her she pulls most of his abdomen away."

"Ab-do-men," said Lydia, lightly mocking him. But not in the way she said, 'Initram'.

"My brother probably knows more about bees than any man in North America," said the man with the club foot. "He could write a book about them."

"It's my job," he said simply.

"Oh don't," cried Lydia. "Don't ever write a book about them." She gave a mock shudder. "I wonder what it feels like," she said. "To fly out like that after the darkness of the hive into the blue sky and the green trees and to feel the sunshine on her back. To know that her destiny is about to be fulfilled." Then she turned towards the bee-keeper's wife. "And you. Is it your life too? Bees?"

She nodded her head, serene in her black dress and rhinestones. She had a strong Southern accent.

"It's my life too."

Then the bee-keeper did a beautiful thing. He just reached over and put his lean brown hand over hers.

"We try to study the bees," he said. "We try to do what they do."

"Fun, frolic and death?" said Lydia, flirting, slyly mocking.

"No," he said, but not angrily. He didn't swat at her any more than he might swat at a bee who flew a little too close to his ear.

"They are true communists — the bees. No one works for any profit to himself. Everything is done only for the good of the colony. If we could live like that —"

"Ah yes, Utopia." Lydia sighed. "Perhaps if we all ate more honey?" She was mocking him again, circling back. She smiled at the three men in the room. All she needed was a yellow sweater.

"Who knows. That's where our word honeymoon comes from, you know — The old belief in the magical powers of honey. Germany I think it was, or Austria. The newly married couple would drink mead for a month after the wedding."

"What was it supposed to do for them?"

"Now that I'm not sure of. Make 'em happy and industrious I guess."

"Is it true," said Lydia, "that the queen can sting over and over — that she doesn't die when she stings? I read that somewhere I think. Tony, do you remember reading that somewhere or somebody telling us that the queen could sting over and over?"

"I don't remember."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?" She appealed to the bee-keeper.

"It's true. She has to defend herself. It's her nature."

"There, you see Tony, I was right. It's her nature."

"There is usually only one queen," said the bee-keeper, "she kills off all the others."

"Why not?" Lydia said, "it's natural."

Then we were all leaving — I can't remember who stood up first. We said good-bye to the bee-keeper and his wife. I wrote down the name of a supply house where I could get supers and bee suits. I wrote down the names of two books. He (the bee-keeper) went out to his van and came back with a little jar of honey for each of us. Alfalfa honey, clear and thick and golden.

"Jim Ritchie and Sons," it said, "Abbotsford, B.C." and "Unpasteurized" underneath. "Mary Beth designed the labels," he said proudly.

I slept downstairs in a little parlour with a fireplace. They had coal and started a fire for me. Made up the Hide-A-Bed and went off upstairs together. I lay in the darkness under Lydia's grandmother's Star of Bethlehem quilt and smelled the smell of the coal fire and was back fourteen years under a quilt in a big double-bed in Scotland. On my honeymoon. The maid had come in with a stone hot water bottle but we were already warm from drinking a strange mixture in the public bar — something called Athol Bross and now that I thought of it, I seemed to remember that it was made of porridge and honey. Or maybe I just had honey on the brain.

What had happened to us? What had happened to us all? I began to cry while Lydia made noisy love upstairs. I heard her — she wanted me to hear her. It was the last line in the last paragraph of the story she'd been writing all evening. I wondered if she'd come down the next morning with Tony's abdomen irrevocably stuck to her front.

We don't see each other very much any more. She lives in a distant city. But once a year we meet, at the Writers Union annual general meeting and compare children and lovers and ideas for stories, usually in that order. We flirt, we get drunk, we congratulate ourselves that somehow miraculously we have survived another year, that we each have money and a room of one's own and are writing fiction. This year I told her (lying) that I was thinking of writing a story about her.

"I'm calling it 'Chicken Wings,'" I said.

"Chicken Wings?"

"The night I came to see you, and you and Tony had just split up."

"And you wanted to tell me about your break-up."

"*Sangre de Toro*," I said. We began to laugh.

"Do you remember the bee-keeper and his wife?"

"Of course, they're in the story."

"Fun, frolic and death — Oh God."

We laughed until we cried.

"What name d'you want?" I said. "You can choose your own name."

"Lydia," she said. "I always wanted to be called Lydia."

"All right," I said. "You can be Lydia."

"But I don't like your title," she said. "I think you'll have to change it."



AFRICAN JOURNAL ENTRIES

JOE APPIAH'S STORY OF THE TRO-TRO DRIVER

During Nkrumah's reign a tro-tro driver was arrested by the Special Brigade because he had painted "Ghana Hard-O" on his lorry. Charged with Treason, I guess (ask Joe) and his case was brought to court. Prosecution wanted to make an example of him — defaming the government and all that.

His lawyer was advised to say that what he really meant was Ghana Very Strong-O, that he was an illiterate man and had gone to a sign painter and asked for a good slogan saying that. (First the lawyer had tried agreeing that times were hard, etc., but judge didn't like that very much.)

Man got off with a small fine — because he pleaded his case so well. "Your honour, I be solely an illiterate man," and was told he must paint out that sign and put something else. He went immediately out of the court and bought some paint and came back to report that he had done this and had painted a brand new slogan.

"And what is that?" asked the judge.

"All Shall Pass."

He was arrested again.

CAPE COAST CASTLE

The next morning I went in for breakfast and then back to the chalet, ostensibly to work, and I had chair and table taken out on the little verandah. But I was hoping John would come and offer to take me to Cape Coast Castle right away. I was remembering being at Elmina with Ian and the girls and was just feeling so lonely and depressed I couldn't see how I was going to manage the rest of the

trip. So I went for a sit-down on the beach but even at 8 a.m. the sun was terribly hot and in less than an hour I came back to the chalet. No sign of my "guide" so I started writing down some really self-pitying thoughts about my unresolved anger towards Ian and it turned into an address from me to him so I thought what the hell and began a very depressed letter to him (which I have not mailed). But at eleven o'clock I felt I would go mad if I didn't get out of that chalet and plucked up my courage to go to John's office.

He was there and seemed very cool. "Oh hello, I was wondering where you had got yourself." (Rather accusingly.) Said he had been going over his files all morning and I said oh well, I've been writing all morning, which was only true in a sense other than the one I wanted him to take it in. He said unfortunately he had to go to Sekondi for a supply of beer so we'd have to go to Cape Coast right away and he wouldn't have time to take me to any other place that day. Then I said all right, I just want to finish a letter (I'm not sure why I said that) and will be right back.

Came back and he said he had decided to give me his car and a driver as otherwise I might not have enough time to see the town and castle properly.

I was really hurt by his attitude and couldn't imagine anything more lonely — particularly in my depressed state — than "doing" Cape Coast with a car and driver.

"A car and driver," I repeated after him and maybe I really looked distressed because he went and called some things in the vernacular to a voice which replied in the same and then he said: "I think I will have to take you myself, the driver has not finished his meal and does not want to come now. If you want to see the man at the Methodist Book Depot we will have to go now."

I'm sure Jackie would have said, "Well don't do any favors for me," and been really defensive and angry; but I just felt relief that I wouldn't have to go with the driver and didn't really care what John felt about it/me/anything.

So off we went. Mr. Mathieson was in Accra so we couldn't see him (it seemed to fit in with my general bad luck) and so we went to the castle. The guide was eating his lunch (of course) but he did agree to come down and arrived with a large battery-flashlight and said he would start at the dungeon. (We were standing in front of a wooden

door — or possibly metal — with thick bars in it and a very heavy old padlock.) Guide starts by saying padlock is 300 years old — it had “Major” incised in it but I couldn’t figure out if that was the officer’s name or his rank (but isn’t Major an American rank, not British?). I was very nervous, staring through the bars at the darkness beyond. Guide said 1,500 slaves were kept in a space 13’ x 20’ (could that possibly be right?) and later he showed us a place up the stairs near the chapel where a slave sat all day — a slave who could speak five dialects and listened for any plotting. This was a spot where every sound travelled upwards. I wonder what sort of men these “stool pigeons” were and 1) whether they ever reported anything or 2) what special privileges they received.

Another nice thing the slave traders did was to *hang up* any particularly strong-looking specimens with weights (I think cannon-balls tied to their arms and legs). This ensured that they would be too weak to try and escape as they were marched out of the fort to the sea.

When the guide opened the door I know I couldn’t go down that sandy slope and into the darkness, torch or no torch.

“Please. Are you afraid?”

“Yes,” I said, “but not of you — of being shut in.” He misunderstood me and thought I meant he might shut me in the dungeon. “Ho. You do not need to be afraid of me. And your friend (this was John) will be with you.” I explained again that I was claustrophobic and small dark places terrified me. I was trying to will myself to go in — wanted the *experience* of being down in there in the darkness, trapped, but I couldn’t do it. I felt dizzy and faint and kept shaking my head. (John just looked bored.)

The guide understood. In fact, in a way I think he was quite pleased. “Some ladies *do* faint down in that place,” he said with satisfaction. I was ashamed of my weakness — as I always am — and relieved when we moved on. (See letter to Ian and booklet on castles for information about the castle itself.)

In the visitors’ book I wrote “Excellent guide” under “Remarks” and turned back to see what Jackie had written when she visited there. “No one can fail to be moved by the suffering which has taken place in this castle.” And she would write it because she meant it, not to impress.

JOE APPIAH'S STORY ABOUT THE MAN WHO CONDEMNED HIMSELF TO DEATH

Man was from a small village and was on trial for murdering his wife and trying to murder his mother-in-law. Joe told him *not* to go in the witness box (where he could be cross-examined by the prosecuting attorney) but to say he would remain in the dock (where he could not be cross-examined).

Joe thought the man had agreed, but when the judge asked the accused if he wished to swear on oath and go in the witness stand he said "yes."

Joe: "No. No. You must not do that."

"Your honour, Mr. Appiah does not want me to take the witness stand — he wants to save my life. I am grateful to him but I want to tell the world what really happened."

He and wife lived in two separate villages. Hears rumours that she is carrying on. Tries seven times to catch her (in English law and Ashanti custom, a man who catches his wife and lover is legally justified in killing them). Asked mother-in-law who denied it — swore it wasn't true — he believed her for awhile but rumours came to him again and this time he believed them. Asked wife and mother-in-law to come early to his village. They waited under a tree in the yard. He came out in his hunting dress, holding the gun behind him. When he thought he was in easy range he quickly held up gun and shot. His wife died instantly. He shot again but missed killing mother-in-law and only broke her jaw. Her screams attracted the villagers and the accused was taken into custody. (He did not try to resist.) "I am only sorry for one thing. That I missed that old devil, her mother."

Joe with head in hands.

Judge: "Mr. Joe Appiah, I am very sorry for you."

Did he hang? Yes. Every day asked, "when is my time coming?"
Red Warrant. Hymns. Special food or drink. Peace with your mother.

Brave? No. He only wanted to get to the other side to shoot her all over again!

TO THE YEJI FERRY

More and more lorries arrived. We saw two particularly good names: "Boy Sinbad" and "Two Shadows." The driver had assured us the ferry would leave at 8 a.m. but at 8:30 when we walked down to the end of the jetty, there was just grey water and dead trees and the vague outline of the other side. Some people had taken their headloads down to the water's edge and were sitting beside them. Up above, on the slope, an old Moslem man, his back to the ferry sign and his head protected by an umbrella, sat chanting his prayers. (He stayed like this, always chanting in a strange, surreal voice — aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaayaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa — until the ferry actually came in.) Peggy says the people here live only half in reality and certainly their ability to wait for hours (not just Moslems at prayer — that's a religious "escape" if you will) must be partly due to an ability to either transcend or maybe just tune out the factual reality of their discomfort.

STORE CUPBOARD WOMAN

Peggy told me that once they discovered a woman in the store cupboard downstairs (the servants sleep downstairs in this house). No ventilation in this room at all — nothing but darkness.

The nightwatchman, who officially does not have a room here (seeing as how he only comes at night), uses the store cupboard as his unofficial room.

I said, "How did you discover her?" P. said, "Well, the children are up and down and anyway she had a very bad infection — of the leg I think — and she smelled."

ON THE BOAT BACK TO ENGLAND, Dec. 1971

Mr. M. — from Tyneside. Daughter Vivian. Wondered if his daughter was a virgin. Talks to his wife about it. "I mean, I know she isn't in the puddin' club, but I just wondered."

The girl has quite good relationship with "Our Dad." Has been having a ball in Nigeria and doesn't really want to go back home to that "bloody dump."

When he tells her she's not been able to stick at anything and God knows what she's going to do with her life, she says, "Well, that's my problem, isn't it?"

He accuses her of staying out till 4 a.m. on school nights and she says: "There's nowhere to go in that bloody dump on a week night." Very pretty with good figure and long hair but a used, slightly sulky face.

We have a long talk about mixing the races and he tells me the story of his cousin who married an A-rab and only four people turned up for the wedding. Vivian thinks Omar Shariff is "ever so handsome," and Father says, "Well he's nothing but an A-rab isn't he?" Says mixed marriages aren't really fair on the children, but it really turns out that he doesn't want to be grandfather to a mixed-race child.

And girl, it appears, may like Omar Shariff (she keeps calling him — "a Persian, is he?") but when asked about the Africans on the boat she says, "Who them? I wouldn't *look* at one of *them*." I say, do you mean because of the facial characteristics? "Yes," she says, "they don't appeal to me, they don't."

THE PEOPLE SAY

"Oh . . . Fine."

"Donmentionit."

"Please . . . I beg you."

"Aaaah." and "Sah."

"Oh . . . Sorry."

"Finish."

"One time."

} these said mostly by whites

SIGNS

Don't Mind Your Wife — chop bar outside Kumasi

Dunkirk Rest Stop

Tarzan Transport

Sam's Cold Store

Chellerams

Hollywood Hairdressing Saloon (Ladies and Gents)

Mars Trading Company

Joseph and his Brothers Tailors

Hotel de Bull

Atomic Paradise Niteclub

P. says there used to be a place called *The Wayfarers Inn* but Nkrumah, embarrassed by this evidence of semi-literacy, had it changed.

The VC-10 Café

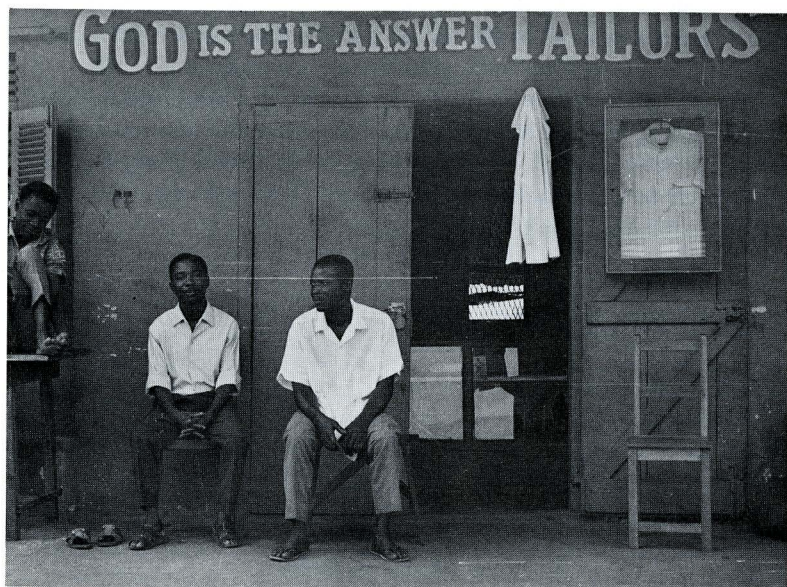
Family Planning

Better Life

Ask About It

Think About It

Talk About It



TWO IN THE BUSH: An African Story

Ten years ago I went to Ghana and spent two years there with my husband and two small children. Five years after my return to Canada I had a chance to go back for a few months and gather material for a proposed novel. I decided to visit some of the neighbouring countries as well, and this story is something that came out of my visit to the former French protectorate of the Ivory Coast. Some of the names may be confusing: Kwame Nkrumah, or "Osaygefo" (oh-say-je-foh) as he preferred to be called (the name means "Redeemer" or "Saviour") was head of State when we arrived in Ghana in 1964. He was deposed in February 1966 and since then there have been several "coups" or takeovers.

Busia was head of government when I returned. He was overthrown shortly after my visit. The President of the Ivory Coast is M. Felix Houphouet-Boigny or, as he is referred to in the story, "the man from Yamoussoukro." So far as I know he is still in office. He was very fond of referring to himself as a "peasant" although he is, in fact, a tribal chief.

— A.T.

"So," said Mr. Owusu-Banahene, "you are off to meet the man from Yamoussoukro." He inclined a half-smile in my direction, then picked up a small bone and sucked it thoughtfully. Five of us had gone to the City Hotel for Sunday lunch. Now we sat, stuffed and lethargic, around a small metal table on the verandah. The table was littered with beer bottles and the remains of chicken curry. I had just announced my plans to visit the Ivory Coast.

"You make him sound," I replied, "like the Wonderful Wizard of Oz. But," and here I too picked up a bone and sucked it, "the wizard turned out to be a fake."

"Did he indeed? Are you so sure? Oz was a happy place; he gave the people what they wanted."

"At any rate," I said, "I doubt that I shall meet him. I don't travel in such exalted circles." He shrugged. "It's not impossible. Do you know what he is always sayin'? 'I am only a peasant.' 'I am only a peasant'! The foreign reporters eat it up." His handsome aristocrat's face expressed disdain.

"Perhaps you will meet him in the market. Perhaps you will see him haulin' nets or pickin' cocoa. 'I am only a peasant'!" He ground the remains of bone between strong teeth.

"They say he has accomplished miracles," I offered, in the pause that followed. The other three at the table watched with interest. Two of them, husband and wife, were friends from long ago. One was a dull botanist named Les who wore a yellow and black striped jersey and had black, fuzzy, close-cropped hair. He looked like a wasp and had contributed nothing to the conversation except a long and boring tale about his defective Omega watch. He had been brought along to keep me company I guess. Jimmie Owusu-Banahene I had known since Nkrumah's time and then after the coup and now again after five years and how many coups (was it two more?) in-between? Not one of Busia's men. His own man. There were rumours, now, of yet another plot. I wondered what he knew.

"Miracles!" he said. "You'll see miracles, no blinkin' fear."

"Oh don't let's talk politics any more!" said Mollie in her shrill, rather affected, English voice. I agreed, nodding.

"You're wasting your time on me. I'm not political." Jimmie laughed, then raised his voice a little so that people at the other tables stopped talking.

"Not political! Nobody in this world is not political. When you are born you commit a political act, changin' the census in your village, town or state. When you die you do the same. Two unavoidable political acts and many more political acts in-between. For some" (his voice went louder still, took on his best courtroom manner) "even curry lunch at the City Hotel is a political act." He waved his arm at the manager of Barclay's Bank DCO, at the new Secretary of the Town Council, at a fat black priest surrounded by a tableful of female parishioners. He broke into loud, happy laughter, then wiped his forehead with a dazzling white handkerchief.

"Listen," he said softly. "Busia is a sick man. His wife goes everywhere with him to give him his injections. And the country is sick too — sick proper! In the north they are callin' for Osaygefo again — the price of yams is terrible. Everyone steals and I don't blame them. So perhaps we too will have a peasant again as president." He laughed. "Do you know, just before the coup, whenever Nkumah made one of his rare public appearances the vans would go ahead of him with loudspeakers: 'when Osaygefo appears, the crowd will cheer and applaud.' "

"Do you think he will come back?"

Jimmie shook his head. "No. Never."

"Ah," said Mollie, her eyes sparkling, (she loved to be "in on things") "Jimmie knows something." She was wearing an olive-green jersey with a sergeant's stripe on the sleeve and a cartridge belt around her middle. Across the chest had been printed, in black ink, "Let's go US Army" and an eagle. She told me she had bought it in London on her last leave. It was the "latest thing" there and she had wanted something "right up to date." I thought it was terrible. She leaned forward on her plump white arms.

"Tell us what you know!"

"Go to the market and ask the market-women. It is the women who decide."

"Do you really believe that?"

"Of course."

"But it is the men who will act."

"It is the men who will act. But only with the power of the women behind them. We have a sayin' here. 'The hen too knows that it is dawn, but she leaves it to the cock to announce it.' " He got up. "You must excuse me." Paused for a minute by my chair.

"When do you go?"

"On Saturday. By lorry." He nodded. "But of course. You too want to be known as a peasant."

I ignored this.

"Can I bring you something?"

"A bottle of good French wine. A pound of butter. A miracle."

Several heads on the verandah turned carefully to watch him walk away. Did he know something? What? They watched his stride. They looked for tiny, infinitesimal signs of nervousness or elation. Something was up. It was in the air, along with the terrible heat and the lingering smell of spices from the abandoned buffet table.

"There goes the most attractive man in the country." Mollie gave a dreamy sigh.

"Jimmie told me," said John, "that one reason Nkrumah was so successful in the beginning was that he used as his ministers and officials men who were the sons of slaves and had a grudge against society."

"Oh *don't*. Please. No more politics." Mollie was restless: she had seen and been seen and was ready to go. Les, who had come with them, would, I hoped, return the same way he had come. I had had enough and wanted to be alone. Which was very ungrateful because they were treating me to lunch. All around us there was talk and laughter. We sat on in a little island of silence — it was as though Jimmie had taken the talk and the laughter with him. Then Mollie said suddenly,

"Darling, how would you feel if I went along with Isobel? Felicity could see to the children — I could do with a little holiday." Mollie ran a small catering service from their bungalow — incredible English birthday cakes and fancy hors d'oeuvres and petits fours. These were much in demand at the fashionable birthdays and weddings in the town. She had just catered an enormous reception for the Star Brewery — a huge success. John was an artist who taught design at the university. A small quiet man who had at least one African mistress. I looked at him in despair.

"Maybe Isobel wants to go alone."

"Nonsense darling. It's much more fun to have a companion. You don't want to go alone, do you?" All three looked at me. I knew I should say yes, that's exactly what I want to do. Yet this would be, at best, misinterpreted; at worst an insult to Mollie who had, after all, been so kind to me since my return. Jimmie's words came back to mock me: "Every act is political." Or politic at least. I contemplated the American eagle. It would be Mollie's trip. But after all, why not? She was already going on about how she knew someone who knew someone who knew someone who knew a Peugeot taxi. She would find out when it was going to Abidjan. It would all be arranged; we would simply go to the lorry park and get in.

"It sounds good," I said. "Come and let me know this week what you find out." My chair made a nasty scraping noise on the concrete floor of the verandah.

"I'll need a visa," Mollie was saying. "Darling I'll have to pop down to Accra."

Outside I walked past the boys selling Pioneer Biscuits and wrapped sweets, past a stout woman in an incredible pale blue chiffon dress and pale blue chiffon cartwheel hat. The doorman, in white gloves, was handing her into a taxi. High up in the sun-faded sky two vultures circled lazily, like scraps of black paper or bits of soot. A big Mercedes full of musicians and their instruments came fast and arrogant down the long semi-circular drive. Later on there would be an acrobat from the capitol and dancing to Afro-Beat, the latest craze.

"Who's Makin' Love/To Your Old Lady/While/You're/ Out/Makin' Love/" The number one hit song across the nation.

And yet in the *Graphic* this morning: "a five-inch baby alligator is alleged to be haunting the lives of an Accra market-woman and her family." The woman was receiving spiritual treatment from the Prophet Tawiah. "I believe this reptile to be the work of a witch." What was it Blake said? "Without contraries there is no progression." Perhaps so. Jimmie Owusu-Banahene with his beautiful Ashanti face and beautiful Oxford accent; John with his Cape Coast mistress; Mollie with her funky jersey; the vultures wheeling up above the most fashionable hotel in the city. I wanted to find Africa. Was this it? Was this the real Africa? Maybe it will be different in the Ivory Coast, I thought. I was depressed and out of sorts. A chain of small children formed behind me. "Hey Bronie Bronie Bronie, you give me pesewa!" Five years before the same children — or their brothers — had danced behind me to only a slightly different tune: "Hey Bronie Bronie Bronie you give me penny-o." I gave up and hailed a taxi. The children laughed and waved as I went past. One of them stuck his tongue out; I stuck my tongue out back.

The *Hotel Ivoire* was called the "Pearl of the Lagoon." Outside a smooth symmetry of concrete, steel, and glass with a tall unfinished tower growing at one side.

We had gone there to find a man — an Angolan Freedom Fighter whose name I had been given in London. Marques Kakumba, B.P. 388, Phone 37-40-99. Which I did. A woman's voice, speaking rapid French, assured me that he either lived (or worked) at the *Hotel Ivoire*. We had spent the night at a brothel in the Adjamé district. The man Les had given the address to Mollie — he was either a simpleton or a practical joker. The *Hotel Humanité*. At one o'clock in the morning, stumbling through the darkness. No one had heard of it. "Hey, Madame!" "Hey, Madame!" But we had found it on a side street — Rue des Ecries — the proprietor most unhappy to see us. In the tiny lounge there was a very beautiful old-fashioned wall clock with roman numerals and filigree hands and a large sepia etching of a Perseus type wrestling with a hairy monster, Humanité herself perhaps. We had been misinformed. There were no rooms. A young woman in a torn red velvet dress came in on the arm of a fat, drunk, middle-aged man. They did not even stop at the desk but headed on down the narrow corridor. I looked at the proprietor; he looked at me.

"Nothing?" I asked. "*Rien?* We are very tired." I handed him a two-dollar Canadian bill. He put it in the drawer and sighed.

"You will have to lock your door. And there is only one bed. *Non-climatisée* you understand." We said we understood.

The room was tiny and the mosquito netting over the single window had large three-cornered tears. The wardrobe was full of mops and buckets and on top of the wardrobe a sign said "hotel," only back to front — "ИЕТОН." Another sign over the exposed and dirty toilet said "*Defense d'uriner dans la salle de bains.*" As there wasn't one this seemed gratuitous. I spent the night holding myself away from Mollie's plump, hot, sticky body. The mattress sagged terribly in the middle. In the night there was several times the sound of laughter and once the sound of someone retching in the next room. The proprietor informed us proudly the next morning that he had sat on a chair outside our door all night. "*Vos protégées*" I said and made him laugh. I wanted to burn everything I had on and scrub myself with something powerful and antiseptic. Cockroaches were scampering across my feet when I awoke. Mollie, undaunted, looked at the addresses I had and charmed the proprietor into lending us a few thousand francs until we could cash a cheque. We left our suitcases as security; he was most upset to think we might return. Obviously the protection of the virtue of two white women was not an honour he took lightly or easily. He hoped we would find something on the Plateau. He recommended the Hotel du Parc. We embarrassed him — perhaps we even threatened him. What if something happened? He sent out his eldest son, a ragged boy of about eight, to find us a taxi.

"*Hotel Ivoire*," I said to the driver grandly.

"Eh! Madame!" He grinned at me in the mirror.

"*Hotel Ivoire.*"

He laughed and laughed and started the meter ticking. There was a small crowd gathered on the pavement.

"*Hotel Ivoire!*" they shouted back. "Bye-bye." We drove off in a cloud of thick red dust.

At lunch over the pool we sat and ate smörgasbord and drank white wine and looked at the flat bellies of the young men who, wearing only the tiniest of bikinis and espadrilles and perhaps but not always a smart terry-towelling jacket, helped themselves to cold beef and cold pork, salads, sausage rolls, hot rolls and fresh fruit.

"Good," said Mollie. "But not that good." She flicked a sausage roll with her finger. "D'you think he works here?" I said. Mollie had unbuttoned the top two buttons of her blouse and her eyes darted like goldfish around the terrace.

"What? D'you think so?" The wine was going to her head. "*Garçon*," she called. "*Garçon*." A waiter appeared. She explained about our *ami*. He thought he had heard of him. *Kakumba*. Yes. He had heard of him. *Kakumba*, did he work here? A beautiful young Frenchman blew us a kiss. *Oui. Absolument*. He worked here. *Kakumba*. We wrote out yet another note. "Dear Joao, you don't know us but we're friends of Grethe's, in London. . . ." Gave it to the waiter, who put it in his pocket. Our money was almost gone and it was Sunday.

"*Excusez-moi*," I said to the waiter. "Where can we cash *les voyageurs cheques*?" But the desk was not interested. Unfortunately, we were not staying at the *Hotel Ivoire*. If, on the other hand, we knew a guest . . . I felt we couldn't mention Joao *Kakumba* in case he turned out to be a waiter. "Let's go and ask in the *Tour Ivoire*."

They knew him, by god. He was a guest — he lived there. Room *trois cent quatre*. We left another note. "We have enough for a drink," Mollie said. "Let's sit and wait awhile and then give up." A small dark man was standing at the other end of the corridor. "Excuse me," he said, in heavily-accented English. "You would like to see something *intéressant* perhaps?" He placed a small white box on the marble counter.

"What is it?" I asked. The small man held up a hand.

"Wait." He took off the cover very slowly. Mollie and I and the desk clerk leaned forward to peer into the box. A huge black beetle was there. Black and highly lacquered — like a child's pull toy.

"Cochineal," he said. "I found it."

"I thought cochineal were very small," I said.

"African cochineal," he said. The insect gave off an angry clicking sound. "I will sell it," he said, replacing the cover. "Very rare." Even with the cover on the angry clicking noise could be heard. "I have other things," he said.

"*Très intéressant.*" He pinched my elbow. "You would like to see?"

"No," I said. "No thank you. No."

He shrugged and tied up the box with green waxed ribbon — like florists' ribbon. Mollie and I looked at each other and moved off down the long, thick-carpeted corridor that connected the main body of the hotel with the almost-completed tower. She suggested we have a drink and wait around to see if Joao would come back and find our note.

"I don't think he exists," I said. "The waiter thought he was a waiter — the desk clerk thinks he's a guest. He doesn't exist and I'm not sure I want to hang around here."

A man in a white tropical suit and an incredible red tie was passing as I said this. He turned around.

"Say, are you girls American!" He was very excited.

"English," said Mollie in her most English voice.

"One-time American," I said. "From Canada."

"That's just swell. Would you like to join me in a drink?" I hadn't heard anyone say "swell" in years. We explained about the fugitive Angolan; he said it didn't matter; he'd be pleased to keep us company for a while. Mollie did not seem too keen. Perhaps she thought he would cramp our style. She wanted a no-hipped French boy, maybe, not a rather sad-looking middle-aged American. She suggested we find the ladies' room and then join him. It was as I expected. "We don't want to get stuck with that man!"

"There's no reason why we should."

"Just one drink."

"That's fine with me. No drink would be fine too. Why don't we walk around the city for a while."

But the *Hotel Ivoire* obviously had its charms. Pouting her lips at the gilt-framed mirror she applied a thin glaze of lipstick and then, quite unself-consciously, placed her hands under her breasts and pushed them up and out. She wore only the best French bras and fancied herself quite sexy.

I wanted to take a bath — the smell of the *Hotel Humanité* seemed to have followed me here and while I was smoothing out my long skirt a cockroach fell out and skittered away into the corner. Only Mollie and I were in the powder room and she hadn't noticed. I imagined some wealthy lady from the States sitting in her cubicle when the cockroach hurried in. If there was one — ! I knew I should probably look for it — the repercussions could be incredible. And such disgusting creatures, even to one not unacquainted with them. Years before, when I lived out here, I had picked up a big and seldom-used coffee pot off the topmost shelf in the kitchen. We were packing up to go home and I stood there with the thing in my hand, debating whether I would ever serve sixteen simultaneous cups of coffee back in Canada. Then I became conscious of a movement and opened the lid. It was full to the top with cockroaches. Maybe dozens of them. The big old coffee pot, high up on the warm shelf, must have seemed a castle to the breeding insects. Probably the first two came down the spout. I flung the thing across the room and cockroaches exploded everywhere. Later I put the coffee pot back and left it there — I knew I could never use it again. What if "my" cockroach — or the cockroach of the *Hotel Humanité* — had been pregnant? Why were they so disgusting — for they were. I shook out the folds of my skirt again — I wanted to rip it off, to strip completely and take a bath in one of the delicate marble washbasins. Wondered if the American man had a room with a bath and would he mind?

"Let's go," I said. Mollie was dabbing Countess Somebody-or-other's perfume behind her ears. I was afraid some elegant ladies would come in — the cockroach would be discovered and we would be accused. A cochineal in a florist's box was merely eccentric. A cockroach, on the other hand . . .

"And where might you two young ladies be staying?" Looking up our "hotel" in the tourist map.

"Pardon, Madame. It appears there is no such place." Hauled off for seditious behaviour.

"But they came into this country by road, by bush taxi. A most unusual thing, your honour, for two white women to travel thus. Unusual — and, I might suggest, suspicious?" The *Hotel Ivoire* abandoned — deserted. The huge tropical plants in the pillared lobby are left unpruned and untended. In their search for water they grow and grow, push blindly at the heavy glass windows, crash through into the swimming pool, their tendrils waving.

The pretty French boys, the fat politicians, the beautiful women — the rich Americans — all desert the most luxurious hotel in West Africa. The government falls. And all because of a single insect.

"Let's go," I said again.

We joined Arnie in the *Rendez-Vous Bar*. It was still rather early and we were the only customers. We sat in big leather armchairs and sipped gin-tonics. Arnie had been doing some enquiring.

"Your friend is real all right. He lives in the tower and comes in here nearly every evening." After his second drink he began to tell us the story of his life. It was sad and too intimate and too painful. He owned a fleet of tuna-fishing boats; three were docked in the canal right now.

"Hell," he said. "You could anchor half the world's ships here and still have room to spare." Tomorrow we would have to come and see one of the boats, have lunch on board. The cook was terrific. We'd love it. Arnie's wife didn't love him. Her name was Lilian. She'd gone off sex completely about two years ago. "It's just terrible to lie there and watch her undress." He went to all sorts of doctors. Wondered if he had body odour or bad breath. She even tried to set him up with her best friend.

For Christmas he gave her a Mustang done up in red ribbon. The next day she went out and bought herself an XKE. We'd have to come to lunch on one of the boats. He was a millionaire but what difference did it make. Without love there was nothing. She said she loved him but she didn't want sex any more. I decided not to ask if he had a bathtub in his room.

The boy behind the bar came over with a note.

"I am sitting in the corner. Joao." I read it aloud. Nothing was going to surprise me any more. We turned around and looked across the room. Two men were sitting at a table. They both

waved and got up. One was around thirty-eight with a brown handsome face and shaved head. The other was fat and about sixty, vaguely Levantine or Egyptian. Both had on immaculate and very expensive tropical suits. The young and handsome one was dressed in grey, the fat man was, like Arnie, in tropical white. Only Arnie's suit was rumpled — the other two could have stepped from the window of some exclusive men's shop.

"Arnie Freitas," said Arnie, then added, "tuna fish."

"Joao Marques Kakumba" said the handsome one, then added softly, "guns."

The third man handed me a card, reciting at the same time ;

"Mr. S. M. A. Alamoody

Vice-President

African Development Bank

Abidjan (Ivory Coast) Telephone 2256 - 60/69

P.O. Box 1387."

He smiled as he sat down. "Tuna-fish," he said. "Guns . . .
And money."

Arnie ordered more drinks and Mr. Alamoody fished out a handsome crocodile wallet and attempted to pay the boy. Arnie, who was on his fifth whiskey, shook his head.

"Naw. Put your money away Mr. Alamoody. Nobody pays when Arnie's around."

The man with the cochineal came in; he set the white box down on the bar, waving at Mollie and me.

"You know that fellow?" Arnie said. "You want to invite him over?"

"No," I said. "He showed us his beetle. That's what he's got in that box."

"How extraordinary," said Joao. Underneath the table his strong well-tailored leg pressed mine.

"Where are you staying?" he said. "At the Hotel here?"

"No — at a small hotel in the Adjamé district — a very small hotel."

The drinks had made Mollie pink-cheeked and talkative. The whole story was told. Stumbling through the hot darkness, the only hotel we knew of that was near the lorry park. The proprietor who sat outside our door all night. I wanted to add the bit about the cockroach but wasn't sure.

Arnie was horrified.

"Why you girls shouldn't stay in a place like that!" He offered us the use of his suite on the twenty-second floor. He'd sleep on the boat. It wasn't right. "Funny things happen in this city — I could tell you things."

"But of course," said Joao, laughing a gold-tipped laugh. "We must come to your rescue."

"First we will all go to one of the truly native places and then we will bring you back here to Mr. Freitas' suite. It is very simple." Mollie was gazing wistfully around at the other people in the bar. She was not attracted to black men and somehow Arnie, although in a photograph, say, would pass for a not-unattractive man, somehow exuded unattractiveness in person. Perhaps that's what living with Lilian had done to him. All around her at other tables were beautiful Frenchmen.

"I don't think . . ." she said — . I agreed, but for other reasons. I did not like to be so "arranged" by these three strangers.

"We are too tired this evening," I said. "And I think we must return to the *Humanité* because our bags are there. And once there, we may as well stay another night."

Mr. Alamoodo offered to go and get our bags. His car was just outside.

"You'll never find it," I said. "I'm not sure we will even find it."

"I will take you," said the Angolan. The pressure of his leg was unmistakable this time. "My car, too, is just outside. We will return here. Mr. Alamoodo and Mr. Arnie will entertain your friend."

It was like the buddy system when I learned to swim. Stay with your partner at all times. Yet I don't think Mollie would have minded if all three had gone with me and she were left alone, plump-armed and pink-cheeked, waiting. I almost suggested it but it would sound too crazy. Finally I reached over and took Arnie's hand and spoke the truth.

"Arnie, I don't want to stay at the *Hotel Ivoire*. It's beautiful but it's not where I want to stay. I'm terrified of heights as well and would never sleep on the twenty-second floor of anything. I would like to come to the fishboat for lunch and appreciate your kindness. Could we meet you tomorrow somewhere?" It was a very formal speech and he didn't argue. It was arranged that we would all meet in the bar at noon except for Mr. Alamoody who had a director's meeting — he would take us home now, accompanied by Joao — I can't remember why but it seemed reasonable at the time. When I stood up I realized I was drunk.

It seemed very funny as we said goodnight to tunafish and went off with money and guns. Tunafish was ordering another whiskey. I wondered what he would do with the rest of his evening.

Mr. Alamoody drove a handsome car — something very dark green and smelling of real leather. I supposed he dismissed his driver at night. The car purred through the parking lot, down the hill and across the bridge. Joao sat in back with me, running his hand up and down my arm. If I had remembered the buddy system when they suggested to split up, I remembered now twenty years before and the back seats of a hundred up-to-now forgotten cars. I was surprised — the Angolan seemed incredibly sophisticated, not just his dress but his manner — to want to feel me up in the back seat of a Citroen. Slick bastard, I thought. And then, "Well, don't forget, you looked him up." I didn't know much about Angola except it was Portuguese and oppressed. He had been recommended as a freedom-fighter and a charming person. It didn't fit; I never figured it out.

The paving ended and we bumped, in Mr. Alamoody's beautiful car, along narrow unlighted streets. We got lost.

"I'm sorry," I said. "It seems a shame to subject such a fine car to such treatment."

"It is nothing," said Mr. Alamoody, gripping the steering wheel. He slowed down at the sight of a robed figure, rolled down the window and shouted out something in French. The reply was derisive but included some accurate directions.

In another five minutes we pulled up in front of the grimy stoop of the hotel.

"It's horrible," I said. "We can't invite you in." Even at this late hour a crowd of children and loungers had gathered around Mr. Alamoody's handsome car. He was chivalrous, concerned. Joao was kissing my knuckles one by one. We made our *adieux*. The proprietor had been very worried about us.

"Oh my god," I said, "we never cashed any money."

"We can still go to the American Embassy," Mollie said.

"There's always a marine on duty, isn't there? I mean, don't they have to help you?"

The proprietor, shaking his head, sent a small boy to find us a taxi. We said we'd be back very soon.

The marine's name was Sgt. Lee Lillie and he had been asleep. He had on a white tee shirt and cotton trousers and a dog-tag. He wasn't supposed to cash our checks but he did. Twenty-one maybe, with a crew cut and a dog-tag around his neck. He was as unreal as the rest of them. He invited us to come the next day and meet his buddies. There were four of them and they took turns. On Fridays they had a TGIF party. If we wanted a cheap hotel why didn't we try Treichville. He pronounced it "Trashville." It was in the African, or "old" quarter. Lots of good dancin' places there.

It was two o'clock in the morning when we got back to the *Humanité*. Cockroaches, disinfectant, would-be customers; I didn't care. We fell into bed and I, at least, was asleep almost immediately.

Just as I went off I heard drums start up somewhere quite far away. Someone had been born, or had died. Something was being celebrated or mourned. Was that Africa? Was Mr. Alamoody Africa or Joao Kakumba or even Sgt. Lee Lillie or Arnie the tunafish king? I didn't dream — why should I? Africa was a dream.

Mollie was a rather unhappy lump on the other edge of the dirty mattress. Da Da Da Da Da Da / Da Da Da Da Da Da — the drums didn't care about us. "Who Are You?" a drunken young man had shouted at the doorman as we left the Hotel. The doorman was barring his way. "Who Are You?" I fell asleep.

Lunch was fresh shrimp with pasta and garlic, asparagus, fresh bread; fresh pineapple and wine. Arnie wasn't in the bar to meet us — only Joao. Arnie was at a meeting and would come down later. Joao was once again immaculately dressed. His skin shone with good health and a good diet. His fingernails were incredible, as perfect as Gatsby's shirts. He drove very fast and confidently. Mollie sat between us.

"You held his hand," she had said accusingly. "I was quite surprised."

"He held my hand." He had stuck his tongue between each of my fingers. It was very pleasant.

"You didn't pull away."

"No, I didn't pull away."

"Well I was surprised, that's all." Mollie, whose eyes had darted to all the pretty Frenchmen.

The boat was big — I don't know what I expected. The captain was Joseph Goais, very young and handsome, a Portuguese-American with a moustache and a gold chain around his neck.

"I lie awake nights worrying," he told me. We were all in the captain's cabin waiting for Arnie before we had lunch. Two buyers had appeared — an Italian named Borghe, heavy-set in a hot-looking blue suit and Pete, a French-Canadian who worked for one of the big companies in the States.

"They follow him everywhere," Joseph said. "We've made a big haul."

"Why do you come to Africa to fish?"

"Why not?"

His brother John, also handsome, also young, was talking to Mollie who was rapidly more cheerful. She was really after a Frenchman but a handsome Portuguese-American might be a pleasant stop-gap. Pete had found a guitar and was playing the Green, Green, Grass of Home. "Hair of gold and lips like cherries." The fridge was stocked with beer and ice. Bottles of spirits lined the shelves of the bookcase. Joseph, Mollie, John and I were sitting on the oversize bunk. There were two other men in the room besides Pete and Borghe — Joao, who said nothing and stood by the door, his eyes half-shut, (but waiting I felt, waiting, and sizing things up) and a man called John, a senior member of the crew. He'd been married to the same woman for twenty-six years, god bless her.

"Come all you young maidens," sang Pete, "and listen to me." Everybody laughed.

Arnie had saved young John's life. That's why Arnie had a limp. Something had fallen and Arnie had seen it falling, pushed John, who was just a kid, out of the way. As Joseph talked Arnie took on new dimensions.

"Are you married, Joseph?"

"No! Not me. I nearly was once though. The boss's daughter, just like in the movies. We got half-way to Las Vegas and I changed my mind. Got cold feet or something. She was crying and yelling 'I hate you, I hate you' and I said 'half an hour ago you were saying I love you.' That's the closest I ever got."

"You?" he said.

"Yes."

Drunken John, the older John, picked up on this.

"Are you faithful to your husbands, girls? Tell me, are you faithful to your husbands? I been married twenty-six years and never cheated on the wife, god bless her."

"Arnie's been really good to us," Joseph said. "When we were just little kids our old lady took us both to Portugal. I was thirteen and John was eleven when we came back. We couldn't speak any English. The kids at school were terrible to us — terrible. Beat us up, called us 'wetbacks,' laughed at our pronunciation." He got up and grabbed my hand. "C'mon, I want to show you somethin'."

We went out to laughter and whistles. Up some stairs to the deck above. Joseph opened a little concealed door in the ship's frame. Inside a tiny cupboard space was a triptych of Mary and the Baby and two saints. A small velvet cushion was placed in front of this tiny altar and there was also a votive candle and a fresh hibiscus flower, voluptuous and blood-coloured, floating in a clear glass bowl.

"Every day I thank Our Lady for sending Arnie into my life." He crossed himself and closed the door. "I'm the youngest tuna-boat captain of a registered ship," he said. "Pretty good for a wetback, hey?" He showed me the great tank where the fish were kept alive and then, in port, dynamited to the surface and caught up with a gaff. He was sure-footed and sure-brained, full of technical knowledge.

"Arnie started out as nothin'," he said, "same as us. Now we're a team."

"Do you know his wife — Lilian?"

"That bitch." He spat and made no further comment.

As we came back up, Arnie was coming down.

"Seen everything? After lunch I'll show you the bridge and the engine room." Joseph put his hand on Arnie's arm. "How're ya doing, sport?" The three of us went in to lunch. Joao had disappeared.

We moved to a new hotel, in Treichville. Lebanese, and the proprietor owned the restaurant next door. We were supposed to meet Joao and Mr. Alamoodu in the *Rendez-Vous Bar* at nine p.m. Our new room had two beds and a shower and was clean. The proprietor of the *Humanité* was not sorry to see us go although it was obvious he liked us. He warned us to stay away from sailors and take only taxis with meters. In the courtyard behind the hotel his wife was pounding fou-fou with a long pole. A small child sat at her feet and reached her hand in quickly between strokes, to turn the soft glutinous mass. Then the pole came down again. Thud. Pause. Thud. Pause. Thud. Like a great heart beating. Later they would dip the soft balls of yam into a communal pot of ground-nut or palm-nut soup while the elegant ladies in the *Rendez-Vous Bar* sucked thoughtfully at the imported olives in the bottom of their glasses.

"Why not," I thought. "Why not just stay on here?" I was romanticizing, of course, but the life of the woman in the courtyard seemed as simple and as regular as the thud of her fou-fou pounder. Mr. Owusu-Banahene had told me another of his people's sayings — "The Sky-God pounds fou-fou for the one who has no arms." Could that really be true? What about for the one who has no yams?

In the Treichville market I bought cloth and cowries and beautiful shirts. Everywhere was colour and bargaining and laughter. I wished we had asked Arnie to come with us. Just as the proprietor had warned us against sailors so had I warned him, for no real reason, just a feeling, against Joao Marques Kakumba. Arnie had arranged to meet him and Mr. Alamoody one hour before we were supposed to show up.

"Suppose," I said, "he wants the *Cape St. Vincent* to carry guns?" We were up on the bridge and Arnie was signalling to other ships — a small boy showing off. Mollie was very drunk and had gone off somewhere with John.

Arnie was busy at the transmitter. He was unconcerned.

"He better not forget he's dealin' with a pro!"

"There's something about him. His eyes maybe."

"Hello," he said. "Hello, *Cape St. Vincent* to *Tana Maru*.
Cape St. Vincent to *Tana Maru*."

I gave up. I was not political. It was none of my business anyway. Yet these people had a kind of innocence or naiveté. Joao and Mr. Alamoody looked at me with disillusioned eyes, what James saw, nearly a century before, in the eyes of Europeans. Now it included the new African politicians, the Lebanese, the Egyptians. Someone like Arnie could be a godsend. And Joseph, although younger and more cynical, would do anything Arnie asked him to.

A woman selling manioc from huge plastic garbage bins snapped two palm leaves together to make a parcel. She scooped up the exact amount of meal and snapped the palm leaves shut. The market women were professionals too. I would pay five times as much for whatever I wanted — the price of my white skin. And bad French too. Maybe six times as much.

Mollie was upset because she had screwed with John and she wasn't on the pill.

"Why did you do it then?"

"I got carried away. He took advantage of me." It was like a Victorian novel. We had gone to a chemists and asked for a douche. I wondered if I would sleep with Joao that night and what it would be like. I had decided I didn't like him but he interested me.

A freedom fighter with perfect fingernails. Perhaps he would try. He was smart enough to see my sympathy for Arnie. Perhaps I would end up a headless corpse in the lagoon. That such things didn't happen was nonsense. The veneer of civilization is never more than a few inches thick. Jimmie Owusu-Banahene had told me about the murder of the new secretary of the town council six months before (he'd been stealing funds). Found with a nail driven through his head. Rushed to hospital but he died. The nail had been removed, apparently, before he ever got to the hospital and it was given out that he died of cerebral hemorrhage. The first week I was here, so many long years ago, I had seen the picture of a severed female head in *Drum* magazine. It had been placed at a cross-roads and no-one came forward to claim it. If Joao wanted me to sleep with him I would. A political act. Or so I would call it later.

But he never appeared, nor did Mr. Alamoodo nor Arnie. We sat in the *Rendez-Vous Bar* and accepted drinks from Frenchmen and Americans and rich Lebanese. It was my birthday, only nobody knew but me. Mollie disappeared with a young Lebanese boy, no more than eighteen or nineteen, who wanted to take her dancing. She obviously didn't believe in the buddy system. I was too drunk to be surprised when Joseph and all of the crew of the *Cape St. Vincent* suddenly appeared. Joseph sat down at my table and the others pushed a number of tables together and sat a few yards from us.

"You didn't say you were coming here," he said.

"We were supposed to meet Joao and Mr. Alamoodo, a banker. It's my birthday," I said, sounding like Mr. Toad.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks."

He was not as attractive in his American floral sports shirt as he had been in his old grey shirt on the *Cape St. Vincent*.

A girl came in and sat down at the big table. She was very pretty and wholesome-looking in a white lace blouse and long skirt. She could have been on a tourist poster.

"Ghanaian." Joseph said. "She's a whore." He pronounced it 'hoor.' "All the best prostitutes here are Ghanaian."

"Why's that?"

"God knows. But they come here by the hundreds. D'you want to know something else? Have you seen all the highrises on the Plateau?"

"Yes."

"Pretty, eh? Very modern and smart, like this place, eh? But the Africans will only live on the ground floors, they're too used to living in huts."

"Is that so?"

"Absolutely so. There's 300,000 people in this crazy city and 200,000 of them are foreigners." He shook his head. "Is this Africa? I ask you, is this Africa?"

"I don't know Joseph. Probably. It's France too. And Portugal too and everything that's gone before."

The girl got up and went out and one by one the men followed her. They came back tucking in their shirts.

"Four thousand CFA a time," said Joseph.

"Don't let me stop you," I said. He shook his head.

"They use Arnie's suite. She's really cool, that one. D'you know what her name is?"

"What?"

"Comfort." He looked miserable.

"Listen," I said. "Why don't I go?"

"No. Please. Let's go to the Casino. It's your birthday, I'll buy you a pass."

"I don't like gambling."

"Never mind." We got up and left. Back down the long corridor where we'd first met Arnie and through a door. Down a sort of outside arbour and into the *Elephant D'Or* — "No Ivoirians allowed," said Joseph.

I have the card still: *Carte d'admission valable trois jours*
Du Saison 71-72
Elephant D'Or Casino

Joseph told me what to do. Pete and Borghe were there, Pete's eyes reptilian when he gambled. I won 3,000 dollars in half an hour at

twenty-one. An Indian boy no older than eighteen, with silver bangles and a silver ring in his ear, blew me a kiss whenever I won. I thought how much Mollie would have liked him. Pete, Borghe, the Indian, the pretty Frenchmen, everybody was watching me.

"Joseph," I said, "I'm going home." He tried to get me to keep the money but I couldn't. The bored, intense faces of the players had defeated me.

"Will you come back to the ship with me?" he said.

"No. You're beautiful but no." He got me a taxi.

"Joseph Goais you've come a long way. I like you." And added as an afterthought,

"Take care of Arnie."

The hotel room was locked. I walked through the narrow streets of Treichville. Bought a chicken wing and pepper brochette from an old woman in an alley. I ignored the sailors who followed me. I was thirty-five years old — happy birthday to me — and knew nothing, nothing at all. And where was Joao? And Mr. Alamooddy. And Arnie? I curled up in a doorway and put my cloth over my head and tried to sleep. Africans are night people — it wasn't easy.

The next day Mollie apologized for locking the door. She got carried away. She had thought I'd be with Joao. I took a shower and told her it was time I went back to Ghana.

"Really? We've seen nothing," I said I didn't care what she did, I was going back. Finally she said she'd come with me — putulantly; she didn't want to stay alone.

We went to find Arnie at the *Hotel Ivoire*. He invited us for lunch and seemed preoccupied. We all had club sandwiches stuck together with nasty little cellophane-decorated toothpicks.

Across the room an incredibly skinny, incredibly beautiful African girl was feeding bits of a fruit salad to her lover. He would open his mouth and she would pop in a bit of paw-paw or pineapple and then run her finger around his lips. They were oblivious of everyone else.

"We've had some good times," said Arnie.

"Sure we have Arnie."

He gave us each a card and thought it would be swell if we ever got together in Sausolito. The sugar cubes were wrapped in papers marked like dice.

"D'you know what we do?" he said. "We play craps for who's going to pay for dinner. With the sugar cubes."

We laughed appreciatively.

He said nothing about Joao or Mr. Alamoody (Joao had phoned and said he'd been tied up by business) and I decided to let the matter drop. If Arnie ran guns that was his affair.

"Goodbye," we said, shaking hands.

"Goodbye Arnie." He saw us to a taxi.

On the trip back we were stopped first by a health van (on the Ivory Coast side) and made to line up one by one and have our necks felt. The man who did this gave no explanations, simply felt our necks and motioned us to go. There was a nasty-looking syringe in some alcohol and a thermometer in alcohol and dirty cotton wool.

"What is he looking for?" I asked Mollie.

"God knows." We were very frightened.

Later on, across the border, a jeep drew up and blocked our way. Five young army officers got out and threw down all the luggage. The driver argued with them while eight of us stood in the heat, waiting. I was eating a piece of bread and one of the officers came up — he had his cap on backwards — and whipped out a knife. He pressed it through the thin fabric of my blouse.

"Give me a piece of your bread," he said. It happened too fast to be frightened. The knife was there, had always been there, pointed just below my ribs.

"Feed me," he said. "Bronie woman." He spat at the roadside. I fed him the rest of my bread. The driver paid some money and we were let go. There was a tiny hole in my blouse and a scratch just below my ribs. Busia's men. Crazy. Or bored. I began to shake.

The next day I came around the corner by Barclay's Bank and ran into Jimmie Owusu-Banahene. He was dressed in an English morning suit, very correct, and with a rose in his buttonhole.

"Hello!" he said. "So you are back."

"Yes."

"And what did you bring me?"

"A bottle of good wine; a pound of sweet butter. They're at the resthouse."

"And the miracle?" The boys outside the post office were watching us carefully. I shook my head.

"No miracles."

"And did you meet the man?"

"If I did, I didn't recognize him." He put his hands on my shoulders.

"Did you commit any political acts?"

I smiled. "I released a cockroach in the *Hotel Ivoire*."

He smiled too. And then I added, "I know nothing about Africa, nothing."

With his broad thumb he traced a line on my cheek — like a tribal mark. "That's a beginning," he said. "A good beginning." Then he added, "We have another sayin' that might interest you."

"Yes?"

"Once you have stepped in the river," he said, "there is no more time to think of measuring its depth."