



**Audrey Thomas / TWO PROSE PIECES**

## TIMBUKTU

"... up the River to Timbuktu." For the past few minutes she had been doing the jelly-fish float, head down and arms around her knees, bobbing just below the surface of the water like a cork. The sea was a little too warm, a little too sticky, to be really pleasant, but it was better than going back and sitting under the striped umbrella with Mrs. Avis and hearing once again about Sabina's malocclusion or the latest piece of villainy on the part of the Avis' cook-steward. She had just stood up and was shaking the water out of her ears when she heard — or thought she heard — the end of somebody's sentence: "... up the River to Timbuktu." "Rivah," the voice said, "up the Rivah." She looked around. The glare from the water was almost unbearable and she had to squint. Several people were near enough to have been overheard: a solitary overly-tan woman lying face down on a blue and orange Lilo; she was the closest but there was no one for her to say *to*. Only the brown, ringed hand of the woman moved with tiny movements, paddling the air-mattress away from the shore. And anyway, she thought it had been a man's voice, soft and southern, yes, but definitely male. Where was he? Who was going up the Rivah to Timbuktu? Perhaps because her ears were still full of water, perhaps because she had been disgruntled when they set out for the beach, the words had presented themselves to her with a strange, almost symbolic force. "Timbuktu-ou-ou." Curiously erotic and beckoning, the sound of doves and train whistles calling through the open bedroom windows of her childhood.

A large beach ball landed with a thud and a splash in the water just in front of her. She tossed it away, absently, not bothering to look around for the owner. The blue-green water was full of men and women and children, almost all of them white, and more couples and family groups were spread out on mats under the huge *Air Afrique* umbrellas. The men were enjoying a morning without work, for this was Sunday, and the women were worrying about what to have for Sunday lunch. "You will have a cook-steward," Philip said, a few days after he proposed to her, "and he'll do most of the cooking.



Actually I've had the same man for years. But it's always cold chop on Sundays — that's the usual day off." How strange she had thought it — then — having a man for a servant, a man to clean and cook and put away the laundry (a washerman to do it). "Lucky you," Philip's mother had said to her just before they sailed, "fancy having someone to do all your work for you." Philip's mother believed firmly that a woman's place was in the home. She was getting on and yet she still, servantless, kept her house immaculate, tended a garden which was not only beautifully neat but well known for its beauty of color and texture and shape. She put up her own jams and jellies, did her washing on Monday, ironing Tuesday, mending Wednesday, baking Thursday, and walked three miles to the village every day to do her shopping. Three afternoons a week she played Duplicate. The father was a retired grammar school teacher. He raised fuschias and long, delicious cucumbers in a greenhouse at the bottom of the garden. Every leave Rona and Philip went back to Sussex to visit them. Rona wanted to go to some place like Abidjan or Accra or maybe even drive to East Africa, but Philip pointed out quite reasonably, that they were getting on and he was their only son. And they did get up to London for several weekends. Philip bought new shorts and shirts while Rona went to the Royal Academy show or the Victoria and Albert (her favorite museum) where she laughed over all the Victorian sentimental paintings — a young soldier approaching a little group around a simple gravestone and the caption underneath: "Too Late." In the evenings they went to plays. They both loved London although it had become "wickedly expensive." It amused her to think to herself in the idiom of the English — "chop," "up to Town," "super," "Sunday joint," "wickedly expensive." She couldn't say these things aloud without feeling self-conscious — even after all these years — but it amused her to think them. Out here under the relentless clarity of the African sun, the English seemed so terribly, terribly English. Never mind, she probably seemed terribly, terribly Canadian — or American, she should say. To the British and Europeans there was no real distinction. And yet if she had said to a Scotsman, mistaking him for Welsh, "Oh well,

it's all the same thing, isn't it?" he'd walk away in a fury and only refrain from knocking her down because she was a woman. And the children at the school where she had taught, with their "Ta-ra, Miss" and cups of "tay" and "Our Mum, she," "Our Eddie, he." Constantly saying to her "Please Miss, speak English," when she forgot and said truck for lorry or running shoes for plimsoles. Mrs. Avis, the wife of Philip's boss, had been in Dakar ten years and still didn't speak more than a few words of French. Menu French and Steward French, that's all. She prided herself on this fact and she wasn't the only wife like that. The husbands, of course, spoke the language — it was part of their job. But with the women, or some of them, it was as though if they should learn to speak French, French *thoughts* might creep in. The fortress of smugness and insularity behind which they hid might be invaded or even over-run. Rona was terrified of becoming like these women, practised her own halting French at every chance she got. And made such chances. Went not just to *Printania* to do her shopping (where leeks hung in bunches, perfect apples mounted in pyramids so immaculate one hesitated to disturb them, one found imported pate, imported wines, bins of chic bikinis, air-conditioning, wives of French diplomats and bureaucrats in big sunglasses and chic little dresses) but also to the market in Medina. There she heard the "ordinary" Africans speak French, as well as their own dialects, the French an altogether different sounding thing from the Parisian French on the Plateau, the section of the city where the Europeans lived. The market sprawled in front of her, crowded, noisy, smelly, hot. It both repelled and attracted. Small children ran after her — "Hey! Madame! Un p'tit cadeau!" Fat market women called out to her to buy their manioc or tomatoes or ground-nuts. She would buy an orange and *whisk* it was peeled and a little plug cut out so that she could suck at the sweet juice until all that was left was a soft pulpy sac. The market women laughed at her French and she knew she was overcharged; but she persevered and now most of the regulars knew her — enquired after her health and showed her their "pickins," as Mrs. Avis and her friends would have called the fat, solemn little babies who slept in the shade of their mothers' stalls or were bounced and fondled by an older brother or sister. Philip wanted a child. It was hard to use the word "desperately" about someone as calm and self-contained as her husband, but it was the word that occurred to her. He was more than twenty years older than she was — it wasn't just his parents who were "getting on."



Each time they went on leave his mother made some oblique reference to the childlessness of Rona and Philip and she always felt a little sorry for Philip as he maintained that this was a joint decision:

"We need time to get to know one another."

"Five years?"

His mother smiled at them over her tapestry.

And when she saw the black babies, asleep on their mother's back, snug, secure, untroubled; or wide-eyed, gold earrings in their ears, hair done by an older sister or "Auntie" into a dozen intricate braids, it wasn't just her heart that lurched. It seemed to her that her very womb ached with longing. The fat market women laughed.

"Madame, combien des enfants avez-vous? 'Ow many b  b  s?"

"J'en ai rien."

They would pat her flat stomach with their broad capable palms and some would offer her beads or little fetishes, recognizing the longing in her face and convinced that she was barren.

Why couldn't she then? What was holding her back? Just this morning it had come up again. Jennifer Phelps was back from England and they were supposed to go round for tea at four o'clock and see the baby. John had been interviewing nurse girls although he knew that Jennifer would want to make the final choice herself. Philip had got up early and made the tea, as he always did on Sundays. He brought in the tray and sat down beside her on the bed. It was very early and the flat was still cold.

"You'd better get back in bed," she said, sitting up. "It's chilly."

He smiled at her and stayed where he was. Philip's best features were his eyes which were of an incredible clear blue — almost the blue of the clear unfaded sky over Dakar. He had put a bunch of violets (god knows what they must have cost him!) on the tea-tray. She reached out her hand to him.

"What lovely flowers. When I was a child we used to pick violets and give them to our mother in little bunches. She had a pretty yellow egg cup — the last of a set — and she'd put the violets in that. But they weren't big like these, nor so velvety. These must have come all the way from France!"

"They did," he said. "I saw them in the window of *Marchand's*."

"You're extravagant."

"I thought of you."

(She was touched and flattered and yet a tiny, disloyal part of herself wanted to shout out, "There are gorgeous flowers for sale on every street corner in this city. Gorgeous *indigenous* flowers." But that wasn't fair. Neither she nor Philip were indigenous. Perhaps the violets were the right thing after all. Why was she so irritable with him? She reached out her hand again.)

"Philip, put the tray on the floor and come back to bed." Suddenly she had such a desire to hold him and tell him how much she cared about him and how grateful she was to him for rescuing her from —.

She always slept naked but had put on a loose cotton robe to sit up and have tea. Now she took it off.

"Come back to bed," she said again. "I'll make another pot of tea."

Both the wives of Philip's co-workers and the market women seemed to think it strange that she had her sandals made in the market and often wore a piece of cloth, a "pagne" as it was called here, wrapped around her for a skirt. Early on in her stay she had found this the most comfortable and modest garment for her walks around the city. In the market she had wrapped the cloth around her awkwardly and the women, laughing, had shown her where to start so that she would end up with her legs in two separate sections of the cloth. Now she could walk freely and not be hobbled by the length or straightness of the skirt. She was not really trying to be African — she was too intelligent and self-conscious for that, and never wore her long skirts in England except perhaps to a party or at home. And she knew that many of the bold and brilliant designs favored by the Senegalese (portraits of Senghor or current football heroes, wax prints in bright oranges and greens and purples) did not suit her skin or coloring, and so she chose the more subdued patterns and colors or bargained for the lovely indigo tie-dye cloth. Philip did not really disapprove of this — not in so many words. But he wasn't too happy about her wandering away from the Plateau. If she *must*



go, he urged her to take Hyacinth, their steward, with her. But the steward did not like her — he had been with Philip and his first wife (“Wifie One” as she and Philip referred to her) in Abidjan; Philip, when he transferred, arranged to bring the man with him. He was devoted to Philip and not at all pleased when his master came back from overseas with a new, young wife. And Rona discovered she was not good at giving orders. The English seemed to have a knack, so did the French. Perhaps a sense of Empire still lurked way down deep in their subconscious. It didn’t help, either, that Hyacinth was a man and older than she was. “Would you mind,” she would say. “S’il vous plaît?” And whatever it was she requested would probably not get done.

“Put the tray on the floor,” she said. She liked making love on Sunday mornings while it was still cool and fresh and Hyacinth wasn’t in the kitchen chopping up fruit salad for their breakfast. The city was quiet too — or quieter, for Dakar was never really still. She liked that sense of Sunday morning and the privacy and coolness. She took off her robe and pushed the sheet down with her legs. “Come and let me thank you properly.”

(“I don’t want to go and see Jennifer’s baby,” she thought, standing in the lukewarm sea and staring absently at the graceful dugout canoes which moved slowly across the horizon.

“I don’t want to go back to England and have a child in an English hospital away from my husband and bring it back to turn over to a nurse girl and then send to England at the age of seven, ten at the very latest.” There wasn’t a European child on the beach who was over the age of ten. Yet these were all excuses. She could modify or even change conventions. She didn’t have to have a nurse girl or go back to England to deliver her child. What was she *really* afraid of? To whom was she complaining in that fretful tone?)

She felt confined on the Plateau with its broad avenues and plane trees, its shops run by Europeans and catering to European tastes. She felt that she had somehow jumped from youth into middleage without going through — what? Something indefinable, something she sensed but for which there was no name. Occasionally she would see a young couple, packs on their backs, moving about the city or sharing bread and cheese on a bench. Afterwards the names of the streets seemed to mock her — *Place de l’Indépendance*, *Boulevard de la Libération*.

Philip was a cryptographer for the Foreign Office. He had had a taste of Africa during the War and had yearned to come back. Sitting in St. James's Park in London, or in coffee shops during those first few hectic weeks together, she had sat as Desdemona must have sat with Othello and listened to Philip's stories about Gibraltar, Malta, Morocco, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, where he was now living. Standing in the water, knowing she should have something on her head if she was going to stand like that much longer, it came to her that perhaps she had married Africa and not Philip. She turned and looked back at the beach. There was a whole group of people under the Avis' umbrella now. Mrs. Avis usually brought an enormous thermos of gin and orange and held informal court on Sunday mornings under the big umbrella. Today — as it was getting towards December — they were probably discussing how many turkeys could be smuggled in, in the diplomatic pouches.

The women sat around her on woven straw prayer-mats, not on the side with the mosque of course; there was no need to be offensive and the mats were just the thing for the burning sands of the beach. The women thought Rona was peculiar because she didn't come to their coffee mornings and had been married five years without presenting Philip with a child. It was a good life for the women out here — or so it appeared on the surface. Yet a phrase of Oscar Wilde's (or somebody from that era) came back to her as she looked at them: "and as for living, our servants will do it for us." Released from housework and cooking and childcare, they seemed lost somehow, aimless. Perhaps the slaves had felt like that after emancipation. They were good common-sensical women, not much given (like their French counterparts) to "style" and witty conversation. Their talk was mostly about servants or their far-away children or what they would do on leave. Rona found them incredibly boring, even the younger ones like Jennifer Phelps (she had bought Jennifer's new baby a small ivory bracelet for a teething ring. Philip pointed out that it would have to be thoroughly disinfected and not to be hurt if even then Jennifer didn't use it). Most of the wives had been knitting matinee coats or embroidering their batiste nightgowns for weeks. The baby was now three months old — he had had to stay in England until he was old enough to have a smallpox shot.



"Actually," Philip had said, "John Phelps was in *Marchand's* buying a special bouquet for Jennifer. He called out to me and that's how I happened to see the violets in the window." They were sitting in their robes in the cool dining room. Rona put a spoonful of paw-paw in her mouth and waited for the inevitable gentle question.

"Darling girl, why don't you go off the pill for a while? Just for a few months and let's see what happens."

The two paunchy young men over there. It must have been one of them. Their pale puffy bellies hung down over their bathing trunks like bread that had been left to rise and then forgotten. She knew one of them — or knew who he was — an American from Maryland. He also did de-coding and she had seen him and his wife at a few parties. "Rivah." Of course. It had to be him. She had heard him talking once. His wife had been explaining to someone that she always kept the money when they went out. "They think Mastah's got the monah and ah've reallah got it — it reallah fakes 'em out." "Ayeh, sure do," her husband had said, in confirmation. "It surely does just that." It was the same voice that had said "Rivah" and "Timbuktu."

She saw Philip swimming way out; he was an excellent swimmer, very slow and methodical but beautiful to watch. He would be a little while yet. She began a side-stroke that would bring her just a little ways above where the two fat young men sat in a rubber dingy, talking, each with a beer can in his hand.

"Excuse me," she would say, "did one of you mention Timbuktu?"

The train for Bamako left on Tuesdays and Fridays. She had not been able to find out much about the boat. The two men had had their tickets arranged through a friend in Mali. She carefully found out what boat they would be on for she was determined not to travel with them. They had not been pleased when she approached them and gave her what information they had reluctantly. Perhaps they were afraid of what their wives might think. They were gonna do a little huntin' in Mali as well, they said. She saw them back in Maryland driving dusty trucks with gun racks in the back and maybe big plastic dice dangling from the rear-view mirror. Gettin' drunk on Sat'day night at the Legion. It was hard to imagine that these coarse men were working in the American Embassy. Perhaps they were good at their job — perhaps code work was more mechanical than she imagined it. It probably beat spreading manure and praying for

rain. They weren't exactly *unfriendly* to her, but clearly they thought she would cramp their style. Been out in Vietnam, perhaps, and picked up French and a taste for the exotic. Went back and married the girl next door, or from the same district anyway; but the dreary monotony of farm life no longer appealed. Out here it was always summertime and the livin' was always easy. She thanked them and swam away. That night she told Philip she wanted to go to Timbuktu and they had the first real quarrel of their marriage.

"I can't get away just now," he said uneasily. (Jennifer Phelps had been plumply radiant with Jamie asleep in her arms.)

"Alone," she said. "I want to go alone."

"You can't do that!"

"Why not?" And added angrily, "I'm neither a child nor a fool."

"What about your job?" She taught French twice a week at the American Embassy School.

"I can arrange for a substitute."

"Why Timbuktu?" he finally said, exasperated and worried.

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "I don't know anything about the place really. Its name means something to me even though I never knew where it was, exactly, until I looked into the Atlas this afternoon."

Philip turned his wedding ring around and around with long, brown fingers. It was an unconscious and very moving gesture.

"I realize you haven't been completely happy here," he said, looking at her with his uncanny blue eyes. "Sometimes I even think I was wrong to ask you to marry me and come away with me." She opened her mouth (to say what?) but he smiled and shook his head.



"Let me finish." (Round and round went the gold band on his thin brown finger.) "You were very young when I met you and had just been through a bad time." (How she had wept in his arms, how comforting it had felt to let go! How surprised they had both been when, in response to his innocent question, "How did you happen to end up teaching school in Birmingham?" she had promptly burst into tears.)

"We had both been through a bad time." (Round and round.) "I fell madly in love with you, you know — with your open-ness, your intelligence, your wit. You seemed so different from . . . from any other woman I'd ever known. I think I used Africa as a kind of bait — the way a rich man will sometimes use his money to get the woman he wants." Again she opened her mouth and again he motioned her quiet. But she could not keep still.

"I love you!" she cried, "I love *you*. Surely you know that by now!" He nodded. "I know that. But you don't love this life."

She shook her head, her eyes full of tears.

"I don't know what I want — I just know I have to get away for a bit. Right away."

"Why not Paris, then," he said brightening. "What about two weeks in Paris? Perhaps I can even get compassionate leave. If we told them you had to see a specialist —"

"Why would I go to Paris and not London?" she said reasonably. "And anyway, I want to go to Timbuktu and I want to go alone. I don't feel real any more. I don't feel as though I'm a separate person. It's as though there were some limb or set of muscles that I'm not using, that I can feel shrivelling up, atrophying. If I don't go now I'm afraid I'll never be able to go anywhere alone again. I'll end up like those women who run off to the Hotel Croix du Sud as soon as their husband or driver calls for them. Eating their meals in the restaurant. Looking fearful over the balconies. Afraid to go anywhere alone. Please Philip," she said, "please understand." He managed a smile.

"I'll try."

So here she was leaning out a window as the train slowly pulled away from the throngs of people on the station platform. Philip became smaller and smaller and smaller — a tall lean figure, outstanding amidst the crowds of Africans. The corridors were jammed with people leaning out the windows — in spite of the warnings — “*Defense de se pencher au dehors de la fenêtre*” — posted on the wall. As the train curved slightly, she could see two white children being held up to look and wave good-bye to someone. She reflected almost immediately that they must be new to this country for their faces were plump and rosy. They did not have the lean, pale, leggy look of children on their second or third tour. They were two cars up — she really should go and see who their parents were. (Yet knew she would not for she did not want to get involved with anyone in any way — it was necessary that she be alone.) As the train picked up speed she went and sat down on her narrow bed. The fans were not working yet and the tiny room was like an oven. She had seen the man in the next compartment take out a prayer mat and calmly kneel down, his face turned, to the East. Even on a train he did not forget his duty to God and to Muhammed.

Later on, in spite of her excitement and the violent swaying of the train, she had fallen asleep with the compartment door open. When she woke up she saw that he was facing the other way. The train had changed direction. A very devout man — perhaps he was going to pray all the way to Bamako. She did not know a great deal about Islam or the Muslims although she knew a little bit more, now, about Timbuktu.

Maureen Avis had given her a bag of apples, three Mars bars and a warning to lock her compartment door. “Rape,” she said. And added, “Don’t smile at me my girl, it’s happened.” She ate a Mars bar and drank some of her store of bottled water then leaned out the forbidden window into the night. Africans moved constantly to and fro along the cars — gusts of laughter and excited talk blew back in her face like smoke. It was completely dark out and the moon hung, yellow as butter in the indigo sky. She felt tremendously free, speeding through the night like this to Timbuktu. Well, not actually to the mysterious city itself but to the Niger, at least. She saw herself in her small cabin waking up to the sounds of the river, going out on deck to watch the mists rise into the clear blue sky. She had not yet



seen an African river but imagined it broad and muddy and full of crocodiles. Too much Humphrey Bogart. She smiled at her romanticism.

She and Philip had walked one Sunday to the Muslim cemetery, its gravestones all turned east towards Mecca. How simple life must be to a True Believer. There were things you did and things you didn't do. She had been several times to the Grand Mosque on the Allés Coursin and had visited the small women's mosque on the side. From what little she had seen it was not a very good religion for women; but then what religion was? When the train passed near a village or a compound she could see the glow of charcoal fires and oil lamps. How strange the people in that village would find her — a white woman travelling alone and with no other purpose than to get up the Niger to Timbuktu.

"There's nothing to see," Richard Avis had warned her. He had flown up a few years ago. "Oh, there's a nice Sudanese mosque but precious little else." Rona smiled sweetly at him.

"I expect you're right," she said. Philip told her Richard had suggested they take a few weeks' leave and have a holiday. There were planes to almost anywhere from Dakar.

"He thinks I'm bushed," she said, pleased that she knew the lingo. Philip smiled. "I expect so."

"Do *you* understand, Phil? *Do* you?"

"I'm trying."

How could she help but love him? Tonight there was a big dinner party at the American Embassy. All the diplomatic and British Council people were going. She would have put her journey off until Friday — what difference does a few days make when one is going to Timbuktu? Yet in the end she couldn't do it, even though she suspected her husband would not show up without her. Her bad self wished that he would go and fall madly in love with someone else. Wife One had walked out on him and gone back to England — she had hated Africa and had asked him to choose. Back to Sussex and muted colors, muted emotions, everything safe. Rona had met several

men who had been out here for years without their wives. Once handsome men who drank too much and were always invited to parties. Men who went home on leave and had African "girl-friends" and sometimes African children as well. Yet neither husband nor wife divorced one another. The wife had respectability, a regular allowance, and a husband who only "bothered" her for six weeks out of the year. The husband had the prestige he would not have enjoyed in his own country plus his personal freedom. So long as there was no scandal, no real "ocular proof" of what was going on, everyone turned a blind eye to the girlfriends. But Philip's wife divorced him as soon as she could. He gave her grounds and did not contest the actions. He said he felt that he had let her down. "As he feels he has done to me."

The train had a wonderful horn — almost like an English hunting horn — a long clear note that raced along beside them for a bit, then fell away. A nervous young Frenchman came and stood beside her for a while. He was a linguist with some foundation, and was going to Mali to study the Tuareg people. He wore a short-sleeve shirt and she could see that his arm was still swollen from his shots. At one point he went off and came back with two cold bottles of orange juice. "Jus d'Or," she said. "En français c'est très belle, n'est-ce pas?" He told her there were some other Americans ("Je suis Canadienne" — "Bien sûr" he replied impatiently) on the train. The parents of the two little girls — "Ils sont religieuses" — and a man who was travelling by himself. They were all in his car — but only the single man spoke French. Very good French.

"Pas comme moi," she said, smiling and sucking on her juice of gold. She felt as though she were sucking on the cold orange moon.

"Ah, non! Vous parlez très bien." The pungent smell of his French cigarettes filled the corridor. A man she had loved, a man who had loved her and left her after she had crossed an ocean to be near him — he had smoked Gauloises as well. Then she had thought it exciting that her hair and skin and clothes always smelled so Continental. He had written her a letter in the middle of the night — or maybe written it long before and got up and left it on the kitchen table — propped against the concise Oxford Dictionary of the English Language. "Dear Rona, I've looked and looked but there is no nice way of saying this."



They had a tiny flat up above a jeweller's on Goodge Street. She was twenty years old and desperately in love. The gas stove ("the cooker") took pennies and only a certain amount at one time — so how could she be sure if she stuck her head in the oven? In the end she fled to the grime of Birmingham and Bishop Ryder's Church of England Infant and Junior Schools — such a grand name for such a shabby, slummy place. One little girl had nineteen brothers and sisters: "Dear Miss, Please excuse our Ethel becuz she had to stay home and help with the new baby." After a while she found that because she was now working in England she often had no sense of being there. She got up, ate a hasty breakfast, stood on the corner outside the fish and chip shop and waited for the bus to Five Ways. There she jumped on another bus which took her down into the old heart of the town. Then she began to walk. She realized that this was how England must appear to the English and that came as a revelation. She was not a tourist any longer. "Ta-ra, Miss, Ta-ra." The shabby children ran out of the schoolyard to play in the shabby streets. She put her lover behind her except sometimes in dreams, and began to enjoy herself. To go to museums, the art gallery, the newsreel theatre. Even to take the occasional trip to London without too much pain.

(The young man threw his cigarette out the window and the sparks flew out like fireflies, into the dark blue night. He gave her his card and the address where he was staying and went back to his own car. The smell of his cigarette lingered for a long time in the narrow corridor.)

Philip had insisted that she wire ahead to the Grand Hotel and make a reservation, if only for one night. She did not want to do anything so formal, but he had pointed out to her that sometimes the train was as much as two days late and that she might be very tired by the time she got to Bamako. In fact, the train was only a few hours late but it arrived after midnight and there was no moon. She was glad, then, of Philip's advice, and followed a porter with a large white "2" stenciled on his shirt, to a waiting taxi. Just as she drove away she glimpsed for an instant the two children, two men, and a

pale, pretty woman who must be the children's mother. They got into the taxi behind her. One of the little girls was sobbing fretfully, like a child who has been awakened from a deep sleep and forced into its clothes. She heard the soft girlish voice of the mother — "There now, there now, hush," before she drove away. But she was too tired to speculate, too tired to do anything but stagger up the imitation marble staircase behind the night clerk whom she had had to shake and shake before he would wake up. He was obviously contemptuous of her because she had insisted upon a room without air-conditioning — "non-climatisée." It was not because these rooms were cheaper but because she hated the chill artificiality of air-conditioning. She preferred rooms with the old-fashioned three-bladed fans where the change in temperature between inside and outside was not so extreme. Philip agreed with her, thank god. The flat they lived in was fashionable but old, and air-conditioning was put in only at the tenant's request. The young clerk muttered something under his breath as he opened the door to the room. The louvred windows were shut and the place was stifling and airless. Never mind. She gave him a nice tip and shut the door. Having adjusted the louvres and given herself a hasty wash (she would shower and wash her hair in morning), she gave a little guilty, loving thought to Philip far away in Dakar and maybe lying awake and thinking of her. And then stretched out blissfully and alone, alone, alone. It took her a few minutes to get to sleep for her body was still swaying from the motion of the train; but only a few minutes, for wasn't she young and wasn't she healthy and wasn't she almost on her way up the river to Timbuktu? Ou-Ou-Ou. Erotic and beckoning. She did not dream, or not in words and pictures. But every now and then she seemed to hear the curious note of the train's horn clear and golden, racing through the night. Jus d'Or.

In the morning she took her passport over to the Surêté, where she surrendered it reluctantly, but was assured that she would get it back when she was ready to leave the country. It was the first time in years that she had been without her passport, and she felt vaguely uneasy. At the bank she had a long wait before she could change her money into Mali francs, and so the sun was already climbing swiftly to the center of the sky (she saw it as some spectator in a cosmic amphitheatre, climbing higher and higher and higher until he reached the very top row of seats) by the time she reached the office of the steamship company. There she had her first real disappointment,



for unless she wanted to go on the boat which was leaving tomorrow — the boat the two American men would be on — there were no more cabins at all. Not for the next boat or the next and, glancing at the Air Afrique calendar on his desk, after that, Madame, it was January, and the River was drying up and who knows — there might not be another boat until the Rains. She bit her lip and wondered what would happen if she gave him a bribe — un p'tit cadeau. This was a funny country: Armed guards at the border and please surrender your passport. Perhaps she would be arrested for trying to bribe an official. The steamship line was government owned. She stood there, uncertain, biting her lip and trying to decide what to do.

"You can go, of course, as a deck passenger, Madame. Like the Africans. But with your skin I personally do not advise it." Little blue plastic streamers blew from the fan on his desk. Could she do that? Could she live on the deck, under the burning sun, sipping bottles of lukewarm Evian water ("Si clair, si léger"), existing on ground nuts and fruit. It was a romantic idea — it smacked of Lawrence of Arabia. Have a heavy, body-shrouding caftan made here in Bamako — find a shop where they sold inflatable air-mattresses. Salt tablets. She already had with her malaria medicine and enterovioform and halazone tablets if she should run out of mineral water.

"Je reviens," she said to the official behind the desk. "I will return."

"If Madame wishes to embark tomorrow — ?"

"No. Not tomorrow. But perhaps as deck passenger on le bateau prochain. Je reviens."

The heat of the day assaulted her as she turned left and absently made her way back towards the cathedral. She had seen a little café there, with glass topped tables set out on a shaded verandah. She was very hungry and thirsty and would eat there. And was surprised that in this most African city — far more African than Dakar from what little she had seen of it — that the café was run by Vietnamese. There were Vietnamese in Dakar, of course, for Dakar was part of the great colonial system of the French-speaking people who had been moved along that system from as far away as Indo-China; but it startled her here. She sat down and gave her order to the bent old woman who shuffled over and then in front of the railing which set off the café from the street, appeared a plethora of beggars and boys selling air-mail envelopes, mosquito coils, lengths of beautiful cloth, ball-point pens, and leather pendants.

"Eh, Madame!"

"Eh, Madame!"

She opened her Michelin map and ignored them. How long would it take to get up the Niger? What if she decided to go on from Timbuktu to Niamey? Her stomach twisted with excitement and when her food came she couldn't eat it and sipped instead at her citron pressé. She felt happy and free — after Niamey possibly into Nigeria and all the way down to the Niger Delta and the sea? — and yet Philip or the fact of Philip was there at the same time — a pull in another direction, a pull not so much of mystery as of love. When they were first together he had bought her a copy of John Donne's poems —

"She is all States and, all Princes, I — "

She loved him, she really loved him, and she thought she understood now just what loving meant. Yet at the same time, passing the public letter writers setting up shop in front of the post office, fresh from a good night's sleep (alone) and a delicious (solitary) breakfast, she had almost stopped and asked the boy to write out for her a message:

"Dear Philip,

There is no nice way of saying this — "

"Dear Philip,

I love you but I'm bored bored bored with the people who surround you — "

"Dear Philip,

It is not so much Timbuktu I'm after but myself."

"Dear Philip,"

"My dear husband,"

"My dearest friend,"

She sucked at her straw and wondered if she could get a freighter back from Nigeria to Dakar.

"Well you'll have to eat *something*, Muffie, or you'll get sick."



Rona swung her head around. Just a few tables away sat the American woman and the little girls. The mother and her daughters had on dresses made of the same material and almost of the same style. The children had on white sunbonnets as well. The two men stood in the doorway which led to the dim interior of the restaurant proper, discussing something — the older man was doing all the talking — with the old Vietnamese woman who had served Rona her lunch. She could not hear what they were saying but the young man seemed agitated — he folded and unfolded a piece of paper in his hands — and the older man looked tired and a little cross. At one point he said something quite sharply to the old woman, gesturing at the table and the young man shook his head and put a restraining hand on the older man's arm. Rona tried not to stare. She was afraid to move her chair to a more comfortable position (from which she would be able to look at them without craning her neck) for fear it would scrape on the concrete floor. She watched curiously as a small child of perhaps eight or nine came slowly up the stone steps of the verandah leading an old woman. The child's dress was clean but torn and faded, and Rona could see that the old woman was blind. River blindness, probably. She had read about it. She had read that sometimes a single child will lead a long line of men and women blinded by the River, lead them from village to village, begging. The couple moved slowly from table to table but few people looked up to drop a coin in the empty jam tin she held out to them. Gradually they worked their way to the side of the verandah on which Rona and the American woman were sitting. (The two men were still engaged with the old Vietnamese.) The child looked at the two American children in their new, bright cotton dresses. She looked at the American woman and held out her tin. "Madame, un p'tit cadeau. Pitié de nous, Madame, Pitié de nous."

"What's she saying?" the older child asked in her high piping voice.

"What's she want?"

The mother's voice seemed less soft, less childlike now.

"She's begging. The old lady's blind."

"What's she begging for?"

"She wants us to give her some money."

"Does she want all of us to give her some money? What's she going to do with all that money?" The child's voice was fretful puzzled.

The African girl stood there — impassive — holding out her tin.

"Tell her to go away," the little girl said. "Tell her she's not supposed to beg. Tell her what the Book says, Mommy."

"Go away," she said. "Shoo. Go away."

The girl didn't move. The old woman began a kind of high-pitched chant, almost a whine.

"Pitié de nous," the girl said again, but without emotion or appeal, the way someone might say, absently, "Pass me the salt, will you?" or to a hovering waiter — "Two beers."

"Go away," the small girl shrilled. "Go away."

The customers on the verandah had stopped talking and were watching the little drama (if one could call it that) between the impassive African child and the white woman. For a few seconds the only sound (and part of Rona's consciousness, used to the noise of the African cities by now, thought how incredibly quiet it is, all of a sudden) was the high-pitched chanting of the shapeless old woman whose skin hung from her bones like a hand-me-down. Then the older of the two Americans — perhaps noticed the strange un-African stillness on the verandah — wheeled around and seemed to take in the situation at a glance. There was a clink of coins and the African child, jam tin on her head, and leading the old grandmother, went slowly back the way she had come. The hubbub of voices began again. Rona turned back to her map, oddly shaken. It was not the begging that had upset her. The opaque eyeballs of the old woman were nothing compared to the twisted and rotten limbs of the lepers. (At first they had terrified her. Most were Muslims and crawled, or limped, or hobbled after her in their long white robes — sticking their claw-like hands in her face, persisting, persisting, persisting. It was as though the sweet diseased breath of Africa blew over them as the gales blew over the palm trees down by the shore, knocking off branches, twisting limbs, bending some of them to the ground. Nothing in her upbringing or education had prepared her for the lepers.) No, it was the determined, almost hysterical manner of the mother and her oldest child. Terrified self-righteousness, that's what it was. The Frenchman on the train said they were Missionaries.



The eldest child had a missionary voice. "Tell her she musn't beg —" Rona ordered another citron pressé and bent again over her map. But she had been shaken. She saw Philip holding out his love for her, not begging — the English didn't beg — but holding it out, saying to her — *Pitié de moi*.

"Deux bières," the American shouted, and sat down across from her without asking.

"Thank Christ *that's* settled," he said, as though they were old friends, he and she, or should I say 'Thank Abdu'l — Bahá'." He looked so good-humored and at the same time so fed-up that she had to smile.

"Where are your friends?"

"Packed 'em off to the Hotel for a sleep — I couldn't stand it any more. The kids are cranky anyway — it'll do them good."

"Are you travelling together?" she asked.

"God no. Do I look like a religious nut to you?" He had on a brown straw hat with a hat-band of a strip of local weaving in the black and white geometric designs so much favored in French West Africa. He took it off and wiped his forehead with a large white cotton handkerchief. The old woman brought him his beers and bowed to him with respect.

"She's a religious maniac too," he said, grinning at Rona.

"Would you believe it?"

"What religion?" Rona asked, trying to imagine.

"B'hai," he said.

"I've heard of it, but I don't really know anything about it!"

"Good. Neither do I, or not much. Just what the Weavers told me on the train." He started on his second beer, giving a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"God I love African beer! How I'll ever be able to drink that American piss again I don't know." He wiped his mouth. "Try some of those pickles. They're delicious. Everything here is delicious. It's not a bad religion, actually, or doesn't seem to be. Preaches universal brotherhood, the end of war, you know the kind of thing. From what I can understand it began as a breakaway Islamic sect. Now, or so the Weavers say, it's all over the world, and even has a Universal Court — sort of like the World Court at the Hague. And probably equally as effective," he added.

"Had you met them before last Tuesday?"

"How do you know I met them last Tuesday?"

"I was on the same train."

"You were!" He looked at her with renewed interest. "How come I didn't see you?"

"I didn't see you either, but someone described you — and the Weavers — to me."

"Well isn't that a shame — we could have got drunk together. I'm P.J. Jones," he said shooting out his hand, "I'm pleased, very pleased I might add, to meet you."

"Rona Hooper," she said, and extended her own hand. "Are you staying here long?"

"Hey, the man's supposed to ask that question!" And laughed because he had made her blush. "I'm only kidding. Strangers in a strange land, as the saying goes — things have to be established. Yes and no to your question. Here in Mali, yes. Here in Bamako yes and no, I come and go."

"Go where?"

"To Timbuktu."

She didn't believe him. He had seen the red circle on her map.

"You're teasing me."

"Not at all. Perhaps I should go on with my introduction. After all, if we'd met at a party and, liking my looks from across the room, you had rushed over to your hostess and said, who is that attractive large — you would say large, wouldn't you, not fat? (Rona nodded) — man over there in the corner? you would have meant not just what's his name but what does he do? Right?"

"I wish I could say 'wrong'?"

"Well, she would say, that's P. J. Jones, his mother named him Pliny but he can't stand the name so you'd better not ask what the 'P' is for, and he's the engineer who is widening the air-strip at Timbuktu . . . 'Wherever that is,' she might add."



"And that is really what you're doing?"

"That is really what I was hired to do and what I've been doing and will continue to do when I'm not running around acting as interpreter for a family of innocents who come out here without knowing any French or anybody except they have a letter from some Vietnamese contact, written in pidgin, whose last name is the same as at least 90% of the Vietnamese population of West Africa."

"Does the old woman know who it is?"

"No, and the contact had promised to find them a house. But I knew she was a B'hai so I brought them here. She maintains she knew nothing about their coming but they do have the letter so it can't really be a mistake. Anyway, she's a good old bird and I think she'll help them. They're to come back tomorrow afternoon at four."

"The woman seemed really angry about the beggar-girl."

"B'hai's aren't supposed to beg. It's also a religion with a strong work ethic. She was offended, she said. D'you know, they hadn't been west of New Jersey in the States — come from around Trenton I think they said. And they get on a plane after saving and working for three years and wham eight hours later they're in Dakar and boarding the train for Mali."

"They must have really deep convictions."

"Really deep something. They don't either of them speak a word of French and none of them has had a cholera or yellow fever shot. Now the littlest kid is feeling really sick because of course they weren't allowed out of the airport until that little oversight was corrected. Nobody checked them when they got *on* the plane." He smiled at her.

"Is all this boring you? I felt I had to talk to someone or explode. I had to find them a hotel room and take them around to the Sûrete and the Bank this morning, and then come here with them this afternoon, and now the first day of my week off is all fucked up — if you'll excuse my French."

Rona began to fold her map carefully, getting all the creases right. P.J. was nice but she wanted to be by herself and think about what she should do. How strange that he was working up at Timbuktu. She wondered if that would be a good thing or bad. He seemed nice and friendly and more intelligent than he let on. Also married. He wore a broad band of African gold on his ring finger.

"I must go," she said.

"That's not fair! Now you know everything about me and all I know is your name. Can't you stay and chat a little longer? Or, better still, how about dinner tonight? Where are you staying?"

"At the Grand Hotel."

"Well, so am I. And so, temporarily, are the Weavers. But we don't have to eat at the hotel. I know a very pretty place called the *Lido*. We can sit outside under the African moon."

"I don't know, I —"

"What don't you know?" He had lost his bantering manner.

"I'm married," she said. "Very happily married."

"I see." He paused, then regained his grin. "But my dear young lady, I'm only asking you to dinner. And I'm old enough, I think, to be your father."

"So is he," she wanted to say, "he's old enough to be my father, too."

"All right. What time shall I be ready?"

"Around seven-thirty. I'll order in advance, shall I, things that I know they do well?"

"That sounds nice. I'll be down in the lobby at seven-thirty."

He made no suggestion that he go with her now and she liked that, although she could feel his eyes on her as she walked away. As soon as she was around the corner she searched out a cab and asked the driver to take her to the swimming baths. And while she swam she thought to herself, over and over, "Will I, won't I," and sometimes, "Should I?" On her way home she stopped and bought a postcard of a Mali trader and wrote on the back of it — "Dearest Philip — I do miss you" and gave it to the hotel clerk to mail. Then she went up to the marble staircase to rest a little before it was time for dinner.

Leaning over the staircase to see if P.J. Jones was down there, for she didn't much like the idea of sitting in the lobby alone, she saw him deep in conversation with the young man she now knew to be Mr. Weaver. She was wearing one of her long skirts, one that she



was particularly fond of, not a tie-dye but a subdued wax print in a dull yellow and brown and a brown scoop-neck tee-shirt she had bought the last time she and Philip were on leave. P.J. looked up as she approached.

"You're lovely," he said, standing up. "All you need are some amber beads. Perhaps we can find some for you — Bamako is a good place to pick them up." The other man rose also and stood smiling shyly at her. He was very thin and pale and his Adam's apple stuck out so much it really looked as though, except for his pallor, he was bound to choke to death at any minute.

"Rona Hooper, meet Joe Weaver.

"Rona is from — where did you say you were from?"

"I'm living in Dakar," she said, holding out her hand. The three of them sat down. She wondered if they were going to dine with the Weavers — if they were to wait until Mrs. Weaver and the little girls came down. And suddenly felt irritated at herself. Two nights away from home and she needed a man to protect her — she should be wandering around the streets by herself, finding some little place that caught her fancy, not going to a meal that had been ordered in advance by someone else. Philip had reached up and grabbed her hand, just before the train pulled out.

"If you need me, I'll come," he said, and that had irritated her too. Need him for what? She had been in West Africa for five years and she knew the lingua franca. Women were respected in this part of Africa, not harassed. This wasn't Turkey or Spain or Mexico — women had power here, and status. So what was she doing with these two Americans, sitting sipping Martinis in the lobby of the Grand Hotel?

"Are you staying long?" the young man said. His Adam's apple moved up and down. She remembered the old songs at the newsreel cinema in Birmingham — "Just follow the bouncing ball." She tried staring at his left ear.

"I'm not sure. I'm just having a little holiday." One felt that this young man would not know a holiday if he saw one.

"I saw your wife and children at the Vietnamese café this afternoon."

"Ah yes! Madame Thieu has been real nice to us. She's going to find us a place to live."

"And then — ?" She could have bit her tongue.

"And then?" The young man looked puzzled.

"What are you planning to do after you find a place to live?"

"Why, whatever needs to be done. Whatever," he said in a firmer voice, "God's will tells us what to do." P.J. drained his glass. "We made reservations so I think we had better get going." The young man seemed almost frantic at this announcement.

"You'll be all right," the older man said, "the menu here is in English as well as French." He went over to the desk and said something to the clerk. Rona thought she saw some money changing hands. "Oui, Monsieur," the clerk said loudly. "Oui, Monsieur, bien sûr, certainement." P.J. nodded then extended his arm.

"Shall we?"

"Will they be all right?" she asked as they went out the door.

"No, of course not. They think the food's too hot and the streets too dusty and the beggars too persistent and Christ knows what else. But they see their duty and they are here to do it. In an awful way I can't help admiring them. Even though I find them naive and ill-informed and a general pain in the ass."

"What can you admire in them, then?" They had decided to walk to the *Lido*; P.J. said it wasn't very far.

"Oh — a kind of romantic vision, I guess. I don't have it or I wouldn't be widening the air-strip at Timbuktu. Think of all the tourists that will bring in. And Timbuktu itself is just a sad dusty town. Maybe it still means something to the Arabic world but it won't mean much to the tourists. Mind that drain," he said pulling her away just in time.

Over coffee — thick sweet Arab coffee — she told him about her plans.

"I wondered what you were doing with that map."

"I don't understand it myself. I stood up in the water and heard this voice mention Timbuktu. All of a sudden I knew it was where I wanted to go."



"I keep telling you, there's nothing there."

"Well, maybe I just want the trip along the river."

"Maybe." He took a sip of his coffee and gave her a searching look.

"What do you mean?"

"Doesn't he care if you wander around West Africa by yourself?"

"Being picked up by strange U.N. types?"

"You could do worse," he said.

"I'm not looking for a man," she said. "I told you, I love my husband very much."

"What are you after, then?"

"I don't know. A sense of my own reality — my separate reality. In order to stay with him perhaps I have to prove that I still enjoy doing things by myself." She laughed nervously. "Does that make any sense?"

P.J. reached over and took her hand. "You're too pretty to be so wise."

"Don't," she said.

"Don't what?"

"Don't make remarks like that. It spoils everything."

"But you are pretty."

"Maybe. But couldn't I still be wise?"

"Of course." But he withdrew his hand and called for the cheque. "L'addition, s'il vous plaît."

They wandered around the city. He showed her where to buy delicious loaves of French "pain" and where to get the best brochettes of beef or chicken. It was fun walking through the African night with him. Although he tended to play the caricature American she could see that he loved Mali and loved his job. He had had to learn the language in order to train his second-in-command who would, eventually, take over from him. He had been designing bridges when the opportunity for this job came. He still wasn't sure, in terms of Malian culture, whether the bigger airstrip would be a blessing or a curse. He had been here 18 months so far and it was going to be hard to leave.

"What does your wife think of all this?" she said, parodying him, as they sat at a cafe having a final drink.

"Oh, she stays in New York and likes her life there. I miss her sometimes. She's a photographer, quite a well-known one. I admire her tremendously."

Rona wished she could say I'm a something, not just I'm a wife. Rona wished she could ask "Do you love her? If so, how can you bear to be apart?" But went on sipping at her glass, long after the drink was gone and the ice cubes nearly melted.

"I think that kind of innocence is dangerous," she said suddenly. P.J. had seemed nearly asleep.

"What?"

"The kind of innocence the Weavers have."

"What harm can they do?"

"They have pre-judged everything and also they put everything in God's hands. Or whatever *His* name. Since there is no such creature everybody ends up running around and taking care of them."

"You sound jealous," he said.

"Oh, maybe." And was surprised at the prickling in her eyes. "But not really. I don't want to be taken care of by God or anyone else. I want to take care of myself."

"Sometimes it's blessed to receive." (She saw Philip holding out his love, his empty tin — *Un p'tit cadeau, pitié de moi.*)

"Sometimes." He yawned. "I have to get up early tomorrow. Get some work done before I take the Weavers over to the café."

"I've really enjoyed myself," she said. "Now I've got to go back to my room and sleep on my decision."

"You're really going to try it?"

"Why not? The next boat doesn't sail for a week. I can explore Bamako and get a caftan made, wander around a little bit."

"Don't do it," he said.

"Why not?"

"I'm not convinced you're 'going to.' I think you're 'running from'." She smiled and shook her head.

"No. That's exactly what I'm not doing." P.J. cleared his throat.

"Do you want to come to bed with me," he said. "You're awful pretty and I've really enjoyed tonight as well."



"No," she said, touched. "But thank you."

"No harm in trying."

"None at all." And so they kissed each others' cheeks and went down the corridor in opposite directions. Once again she didn't dream and fell, this time immediately, into a deep, refreshing sleep. Tomorrow she would really decide: tomorrow.

But did not see P.J. Jones all day and found herself somewhat disappointed. She went back to the steamship company and said she would sail as a deck passenger on the next boat up the Niger. She went into the market and ordered a caftan made out of heavy woven cloth and also a pair of loose trousers.

At noon she was at the Vietnamese café. The same African girl came by, leading the same old woman. It was a repeat of yesterday in many ways, but she liked sitting there and looking out at the crowds. Bamako wasn't divided. Like Dakar. This was a black town, an African town, and in spite of the heat she found it exhilarating. The fact that she did not have her passport no longer seemed to bother her. Perhaps she would not need it ever again. Perhaps she would go up the River and down the River and simply disappear. A new life. Without ties. Without love that chained her, made her a slave to her emotions. Leaning on the bridge in the late afternoon she saw her life spread before her as distant and magic as the mysterious veiled kingdom of Timbuktu. As changeable as the great river itself. Nobody married forever any more. Commitments were like manacles.

"Dear Philip

There is no nice way of saying this."

But she missed him today, really missed him and sent him another postcard, this time of the graceful pirogues which plied the river.

"Dear Philip —

I miss you. Am going up the River soon. Will call before I go."

She was lying down on her bed, quite at ease now that she had made her decision, when somebody knocked on the door.

"Who is it?"

"P.J. Open up."

"Wait a minute."

She put on her robe and opened the door. She had been half asleep and was annoyed at this interruption.

"What's the matter?"

"The Weavers' littlest child is quite sick with fever. D'you think you could baby-sit her while we go to see about a house?"

"Baby-sit!"

"C'mon Rona. It's no skin off your nose. We'll be back in an hour. I want to get a doctor too."

"I'll have to get dressed — "

"Room 220. Thanks a lot." And he was gone.

She walked slowly down the corridor, her anger mounting. Why should she baby-sit these kids. She had come here to be alone and was already in the midst of a whole complex circle of relationships. But when she saw the children she forgot her anger. The older one was sitting by her little sister, whose rosy cheeks had taken on a hectic, unhealthy, flush. "There now," the little girl said in her mother's voice, "there now, hush."

"Hello," Rona said. "I've come to stay with you until your Mommy and Daddy come back."

"That's nice," the child said, as though she had been expecting her.

"Muffin's really sick," she explained, "I have to keep cold cloths on her forehead. That's what my Mother said."

"I'll help," Rona said. "Why don't you play for a while?"

"All right," the child said obediently. She rummaged in a little suitcase and came up with a coloring book and some crayons. "I'm very good at coloring," she said, "I always keep between the lines." It was a B'hai coloring book but reminded Rona of the simplistic pages she used to color at her own Sunday school. Jesus Blesses the Children. Jesus with the Fishermen. Always happy — or positive scenes. Never Jesus on the Cross or Mary Weeping.

Rona was worried about the sick child and lay on the bed beside her.

"What's your names?" she said to the other sister.

"I'm Janet and she's Muffie — Margaret really, but nobody calls her that. We came on an airplane," she confided. "Mommy was crying."

"Why? Was she sad to leave her friends?"

"I don't know. Daddy told her it was God's will." The child carefully selected a color. "D'you think Muffie will die?"

"Of course not! What a strange idea! She's got a very bad reaction to her shot."

"If she dies and we bury her out here, she'll be all alone when we go back home to Trenton."

"She isn't going to die."

"She'll do what God wants her to," Janet said. "It's out of our hands."

Rona found this aphorism, coming from the mouth of a child, almost obscene. On the bed-table by the sick child was a jug of water and a book *Bahá' u' llah and the New Era*. She leafed through it sitting on the bed by the sleeping child. There was an almost Germanic profusion of capital letters: He, His, Servant of the Blessed Perfection, Declaration, Supreme Singleness, the Most Great Peace. But, as P.J. had said, the basic tenets of the Faith were harmless, indeed inarguable "motherhood issues," one might say. "B'hai." How exotic it sounded. Like "The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam". But also sheep-like — Baa-Baa-Baa. She learned that a B'hai accepts his lot with "Radiant Aquiescence." The Weavers didn't seem very radiant. There were a lot of old-fashioned "Biblical" endings on the verbs: enacteth, enforceth, sitteth, cometh, shineth. She shut the book and put it back on the table.

"How's your coloring getting on?" she asked the little girl.

"Okay. When are my Mommy and Daddy coming back?"

"Pretty soon. Are you thirsty? I could ring down and get the boy to bring up some coca-cola. Would you like that?"

"Yes thank you." The child did not look up from her work.

"I don't know how to talk to children," Rona thought. "Or not this child. She's like a little old lady, a little old selfrighteous spinster lady." As if to confirm this, when she put down the phone the child said, "It is forbidden to drink intoxicating liquors."



"It's not forbidden to *me*," Rona said sharply. Yet this remark would not have bothered her coming from the mouth of a Muslim. Perhaps she couldn't accept B'hai simply because it was a religion that was new — or newer than Christianity or Islam? People had probably felt the same about Luther. "Self-righteous bastard," and so on. Anyway, the child was only repeating what she had been taught.

There was a knock on the door.

"There's our drinks," she said, and fished in her purse for some change. But when she opened the door it was the Weavers and P.J. Mrs. Weaver was being supported by the two men — and she was moaning and sobbing. For the first time the little girl's unnatural composure broke and she ran to her mother, clinging to her skirt and looking up at her with wide, terrified eyes. P.J. shook his head and gave Rona a wry smile.

"We've had a little trouble." They half-carried, half-dragged the young woman to the empty bed and lay her on it.

"Ruthie," her husband said, "We're home now, it's going to be all right." This sent the woman off into a fresh paroxysm of weeping.

"Home!" she wailed. "I want to go home!" The sick child awoke at the sound of her mother's wailing and she began to cry as well.

"What happened?" Rona said. "What's the matter? Did she fall?" "Well, it's nothing to get alarmed about," the young man said, "Ruthie's just had a little shock."

"He wouldn't let go," the woman wailed, "he put it on me and he wouldn't take it off."

"Was she *raped*?" Rona whispered. She couldn't imagine it.

"No, no." The young man blushed scarlet. "P.J. and I were sent to look at a house where we might be able to stay and Ruthie went off to find a drugstore, what d'you call it here?"

"A 'pharmacie'."

"Yes. Well, she went off to find a *farmassee* and we said we'd meet her back at the café and if the place was ok then we'd come back here and pack up."

"So?"

"So the place was real nice. A whole group of B'hai people living together in a big old house. We can move in anytime. One of 'em even speaks some English."

"No!" the woman screamed. She sat up, eyes wild and teeth chattering. "No. We're going home. We're going back to Trenton. I'm not staying here another day!" The young man made an effort to ignore her.

"She'll be all right. It's so new to her, you see. She got kinda frightened."

"I've called a doctor for both of them," P.J. said. "He'll be along any minute."

"But what *happened* to her?"

"As far as we can make out she got a bit lost, and while she was standing there trying to decide which way to go, a group of beggars came after her."

"Beggars?"

"Lepers."

"Oh god."

The husband took up the story.

"You gotta understand — as I said, Ruthie's never travelled very much, neither of us have, and she's newer to the Faith than I am. Begging is forbidden to B'hai's. So is giving of alms unless to other B'hai's and out of the common treasury. And she'd never seen people like that before, no hands or legs and faces rotting away. Jabbering at her in French. They wouldn't let her go and one old guy, from what she says, sort of put his stump on her arm and wouldn't take it off." The young woman lay back on the pillows, moaning.

"We went looking for her when she didn't show up at the café," P.J. said, "And then we saw her running along a street with all these lepers coming after her and she was screaming at them that they were devils and filthy and so on."

"Lepers are very frightening," Rona said, "very frightening and very persistent. After five years they still scare me."

"I'm not attaching any *blame*," he said, "I'm just telling you what happened."

"She says she wants to go home," the young man said, "she says she won't stay here and the children are going home." Big tears rolled down his cheeks. "She has to stay. It won't be the same without her."

This time the knock on the door was the grinning desk clerk with drinks and the doctor. Rona donated her gin-tonic to P.J., who looked as though he needed it more than she did. Then excused herself and walked back to her room. Ruth, she thought. "Wither thou goest I will go — " Women had been following men around for centuries, maybe since the beginning. She was very depressed and found she couldn't sleep. She got dressed again and went out into the streets, confused and sad. She bought Philip another postcard — a Tuareg and his Camel. "Republique du Mali. Tombouctou. Les fidèles compagnons." The camel and his master posed proudly under a blue untroubled sky.

"There's nothing up there any more," P.J. had told her. "Just a dusty, crumbling town." Yet once scholars had gathered to study and decipher the mysteries of their faith. Once small boys had been put in chains for not knowing the whole of the Koran while the Kings' daughters walked proud and beautiful and unveiled through the busy streets.

"She is all States, and all Princes, I,

Nothing else is."

A companion was, literally, someone with whom you broke bread. She had been a faithful companion to Philip. She looked at the ring through the camel's lip and the rope which hung down from it. His master's hand was not in the picture but you knew that he was holding the rope. They needed one another, the Tuareg and his camel. What a handsome man the Tuareg was with his black beard and flashing smile! He wore a little leather charm around his neck to keep away the evil spirits. She knew she should go back to the hotel and see what she could do to help the Weavers. If she had been surrounded by lepers on her fourth day in Africa she too might have become terrified and hysterical. And she had travelled. She had worked in the slums of England and combed nits out of dirty little heads,



passed by the school for the “dummies” every day on her way to Bishop Ryder’s. The dummies, with their big heads and coarse features had stared at her through the fence. Sometimes they had called out to her in their thick voices. She used to dream about them at night. And out here she had got used to cockroaches and lizards scampering into the corners of cupboards and bureau drawers. Got used to. Accepted. But leprosy was a word with as many connotations as Timbuktu. Coming from a small town near Trenton, New Jersey, what could prepare one for the lepers? Perhaps Ruth saw their deformities as somehow a result of their begging rather than the other way around. The wages of sin — . She looked absently at the stalls along the roadside. Little tables covered with old watches, old keys, ceramic beads, Nescafé or his Malian equivalent, “Brun D’Or”. Her bare toes were dusty from the red earth. Tomorrow she must get together a really good medical kit. Plenty of salt tablets, bandaids, everything she could think of. The Niger lay out there, as old as Africa itself, a broad highway of adventure and self-discovery. She saw a display of pretty little strings of market beads and bought a few for Janet and her little sister.

When she got back to the lobby P.J. was sitting in a big armchair, drinking.

“How are they?”

“The little girl’s all right. The doctor gave her something for the fever. I’m not so sure about the mother. She’s had a sedative and is sleeping now.

“And Joe and Janet?”

“I had some sandwiches sent up. He’s upset but determined to stay. Apparently the whole B’hai community got together and paid the balance of their fares. One way. They haven’t got much money — he’s a carpenter and figured he could get work.” He sighed. “I really don’t know. I seem to get involved with the wierdest people. Present company excepted, of course.”

She sat down opposite him.

“You’re going to give them the money, aren’t you, if they want to go back.”

“Oh he won’t go back. He’s just not the kind of person who could renege on his duty to God.”

"But the woman and the children?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

"You've already offered it."

He smiled at her.

"You think you're pretty smart. Well what if I have? I expect she'll calm down; but you and I both know that Africa isn't for everybody and maybe, if she knows there is a way out, she'll be more likely to stay.

"Timbuktu," Rona murmured.

"What?"

"Nothing. I must go up."

"Have you eaten?"

"Not yet."

"Would you eat with me again or would you be bored?" He paused. "I've had a call and have to fly back up tomorrow instead of next Monday. It can be a kind of farewell party — or temporary farewell if we run across each other in Timbuktu."

"All right. Where shall we go?"

"Leave it to me."

It was late when they returned to the hotel. After dinner he had taken her for a ride on the river. She felt peaceful again, peaceful and sure of what she was doing. The crescent moon — how appropriate, she thought — hung in the sky above them.

"Thank you," she said, "I've had a lovely time."

"I don't suppose," he said "that you'd care to fly up with me? You could go on by boat from there and those American fellows you told me about would have gotten off."

"No. But what a generous offer."

"You're sure? No strings attached."

"I'm sure."

In the night she heard a knock on the door. She held her breath and pretended to be asleep. He knocked again and went off down the hall. She wanted Philip's arms around her; she wanted Philip and her freedom. How could she have both? She tossed and turned and thought the morning would never come.

As she went out (late, so that P.J. would already have left) the desk clerk called to her.

"Madame! Your fren' have left you somthin." He held out a small brown paper parcel and leaned over the desk, grinning, while she opened it. Inside was a string of heavy amber beads the color of dark honey. She put them on.

"Eh, Madame. Ca vous va bien!" Smooth and golden as the words of the Prophet himself. There was no written message, nothing.

As she left the hotel she happened to glance up at the Weavers' window. The louvres were shut tight although it was nearly noon. She paused for a minute, then realized what had caused her to look up. In the room behind the window she could hear Ruth Weaver's plaintive wail, over and over —

"I want to go home I want to go home I want to go ho —"

Rona sighed and walked back into the hotel. She didn't even know what she would say. She didn't even know whose side, if any, she was on.

"Téléphonez le medicin," she said to the boy at the desk. "Vite." "Hurry up." Then ran up the marble staircase. The amber beads, like love, hung beautiful and heavy around her neck. "You go to the people who need you," P.J. had said to her last night, "you go to the people who need you."

But he was in Timbuktu.





## CLEAN MONDAY, OR WINTERING IN ATHENS

A friend wrote later: "How awful it must have been! The *isolation* of these romantic, foreign places — I know it well. If you're going to smash, it seems, there's no place like Oaxaca or Tangier or a little village on Crete."

I fled the little village on the early morning bus. Two months earlier, in a rented car, we had stopped off for coffee at a tiny cafe. A retired army colonel who spoke some English asked us if we had any children. "Not together," we said. "You must drink much Cretan wine and make love and then you will have a son and name him Minos." He repeated his witticism to his cronies, this time in Greek, and everybody laughed. The bus rattled past the place where we had stopped.

"Why do we hold onto our pain," a character in my latest novel asks, "as tightly as to our pleasure? Let it go."

I spent the day in Herakleion waiting to travel overnight on the ferry to Piraeus. The agent told me that night's ferry was the ARIADNE which seemed to me, in my distraught state, to be singularly appropriate for hadn't she, too, been used and discarded by the man she loved? I was making sure that *I*, at least, would not be left behind on an island, sleeping, while my lover sailed away to Athens. I booked deck class just to guarantee that I would be miserable. It was the end of November and the winter rains were beginning. The agent told me, however, that if I got down to the boat early I might claim one of the small number of bunks available, free, to deck passengers.



Just before I left for the boat (sleeping on the deck in the rain didn't really appeal) I sat in the square where we had been drinking ouzo only two days before, celebrating my birthday.

"Look at the AVIS advertisement," he said.

"I see it."

"Well, if the Greeks read 'V' as 'N', how do you think they read that sign?" We were very gay and a little drunk. It was our first day off since we'd come to the island to write. We had also, that afternoon, had our first hot shower in a long, long time. I washed my stiff, sea-soaked hair.

"Everyone is staring at your hair," he said. "It's glowing." I sent him a postcard of the Bull's Head Rhyton from Knossos and put on the back a few brave words and the last two lines of *Lapis Lazuli*:

All things fall and are built again

And those that build them again are gay.

Then I ate a greasy souvlaki and drank a beer and headed down to the ferry.

Looking back now it seems to me that the one word which might sum up my winter in Athens is "bizarre" and that it really began with that ferry trip on the ARIADNE which had led me in, not out of the labyrinth which is life in a big, noisy, polluted foreign city. I also realize now that I carried the clue for my survival there in my own pocket. Once I began unwinding it (although a very scary time would pass before I understood) I would be all right. The clue? Simplify, particularize, create a space in the city of a size that you can comfortably deal with.

I was putting my pack and bags on a bunk near the narrow corridor which led to the deck (in case the ship began to sink in the wintry Aegean I wanted easy access to the lifeboats) when a tall, good-looking black woman came rushing along the passage. She saw me and gave a big smile.

"Honey, am I glad to see *you*!" She was about seven months pregnant and I wondered what she was doing travelling around alone in a state like that. Was she glad to see me because she'd gone into labour? Was I going to help her deliver as we crossed the sea to Athens? She staked out the bunk across from me, threw down her assorted parcels and bags and said, "Whew, now I can undress." Visions of ancient Greek women acting as midwives danced in my head. Why didn't she fly, for god's sake. She could be at the hospital in an hour. She certainly didn't look down and out.



Then she lifted her smock and began to unwind layer after layer of cardigans and shirts from around her middle. I stared in astonishment.

"It's the only way they'll leave me alone," she said. "I was desperate."

That was the bizarre beginning.

We went out onto the deck. She had a bag of peanuts and a bottle of wine. I had a half-kilo of spicy Cretan sausage (the kind my lover had hated — I bought it that day as a gesture of independence) and a plastic bag full of fat green olives. We leaned over the railing, chewing and sipping, watching the other passengers arrive. Priests, gypsies, old women in black, kids with backpacks, entire families who were to keep us up all night as they lay in their bunks and screeched back and forth with no regard for anyone else — city Greeks, I was to learn, are night people anyway, the dark seems to wake them up, not make them drowsy. A woman in a belted raincoat looked up at us and my new friend let out a yell and nearly fell over the railing, waving.

"Carlotta! Hey Carlotta!" The blonde woman looked puzzled for a minute, then smiled and waved back. She had frizzy copper-coloured hair and was deeply tanned. In a few minutes she joined us and after some more screaming and hugging I was introduced. Carlotta and my new friend, whose name turned out to be Mae-Love, which delighted me, had met at the bus stop in Delphi over a month ago. Since then Carlotta had been in Israel and now was back for a few days in Greece. Wonderful men in Israel. Wonderful men in Greece too, especially in the villages. Helping herself to food she admitted that she was attracted to "men of culture." American men turned her off. Three years ago she had been a well-to-do housewife in a Boston suburb. Then one day she said fuck it, dyed her hair and changed her name and took off. She gave the children to her husband and he promised her a small regular income if she would just stay away. A remittance woman, the first one I'd ever met! Now she travels around the world screwing "men of culture." It didn't take me long to realize what she meant. She was on her way to Athens to see if she could bum a ride to Spain; she wanted to be in Spain for Christmas. Had I ever been to Spain? I began to wonder if she had anything on under that tightly-belted raincoat.

Mae-Love suggested we go up to the bar and buy another bottle of wine. It was getting cold and dark and the ferry was about to sail. Carlotta said she didn't have enough money to waste on wine and besides it wasn't good for your skin. We said we'd treat her. She said she'd be up in a minute, her eyes scanning the deck.

We sat at a long table drinking wine. I was carefully drinking in little sips because I did not want to get drunk and start to cry. Carlotta had joined us almost immediately. She had just started a fascinating conversation with a handsome rabbi when his wife came up and dragged him away.

"I can't understand how a man like that could stay married to such a woman."

"Maybe he loves her," I suggested.

"Hmnn."

Mae-Love told me she was a teacher from San Francisco and on a three-month leave. Her husband, her *fourth* husband, was supposed to come with her. But he was a Yemeni and at the last minute, for some political reason, the government had refused him a passport. She had to travel or lose her pay. She was on her way to Egypt before going home at Christmas. She had loved Greece but not the men; the men wouldn't leave her alone. Her husband was a darling, did the Hoovering and brought her breakfast in bed. She showed me his picture. I was desperately trying to remember where Yemen was. The three of us exchanged life stories the way travellers, especially women, tend to do. I'm sure we all omitted some things, exaggerated others. As one of my friends said the other day, "Travel is the ultimate fiction" and of course it's true.

Two young Australians who were sitting next to us were laughing openly at our chatter. We were all three much older than they and must've seemed very exotic. In a few minutes they had joined the party and we were all chattering away. They were archaeology students and would be going home in two days. They, in turn were hailed and then joined by a handsome young Greek they had met in a taverna the night before. He began showing the Australians a pile of polaroid photos of girls. These turned out to be all the girls he'd screwed over the last Tourist Season. The pile was as thick as a pack of cards. I leaned over and looked at a couple of the photos — I expect they were all alike. Young girls with straight hair and big straight-toothed smiles. Girls in blue jeans and with backpacks out for high adventure. There was something really obscene about that deck of photographs. Girls back in Grosse Pointe or White Plains, Chelsea, Adelaide, Montreal, being handed around the table in a bar. It was their innocence and youth that tugged at me I guess. My room-mate and I had come abroad for a year of study and travel twenty years ago. We had both fallen in love; we had both suffered. There was nothing casual about it, ever. Sex was still something special then. Maybe the new way was the best way. I felt suddenly old as well as old-fashioned. Commitment was turning into one of those quaint words one is careful not to use because they date you so. Like "reefer," for example. The Greek, whose name was — of course — Adonis, began giving the boys some intimate details in a low tone. All three were laughing.

A dark face peered in the porthole and then a dark hand rapped. Mae-Love turned around and shrieked.

"Mo - ham - med!"

She had met him in Herakleion, in the Street of the Tavernas and he had given her some useful addresses in Egypt. Everyone shoved over to make room for Mo-ham-med, who was a big man of about thirty with a lion's claw hanging from a silver chain around his neck. He was from the Sudan, he told me, and when I mentioned that I might try and go overland to Kenya he gave me the address of his brother who lived in Addis Ababa. He also offered to put me up in his apartment. I explained I was writing a book and needed to be alone. No one would bother me, he said. I shook my head.



Out of his briefcase he took a pile of cold fried chicken, a loaf of bread and some spicy African sauce in a mayonnaise jar. Carlotta, who had moved down to Adonis' end of the table, saw the food and moved back down to our end. A pragmatist, she knew the other appetites could wait.

The ticket-taker was making his rounds and two hippie girls came over to Mohammed and asked if he would pay their fare, they had snuck on without paying. He gave them their fare and a thousand drachmas extra, making a great display of it. Mae-Love told me that he was a big man in Import-Export. The girls were from the caves at Matala; one had obviously made the scene in India, she wore a jewel in her nose. I felt that Adonis wouldn't try to score with them, they weren't clean enough!

At midnight I left the mad tea party and went below, utterly depressed. After a visit to the toilet, which was already ankle-deep in overflow and shitty papers (you can't throw your paper down the lavatory pan), I lay on my bunk with my eyes shut, listening to the voices of the Greeks all around me and pretending to sleep as young men (this was supposed to be a Women Only section) came and stood next to me, staring, evaluating, as though I were something on a slab at a butcher's shop (which I guess, in their eyes, is exactly what I was).

\* \* \*

That night was a good introduction to Athens, where, sitting in Syntagma Square, drinking a Nescafé (about sixty cents a cup) and reading the TO LET section in the *Athens News*, the little English-language daily, I learned that a woman alone, a "European" as opposed to Greek) woman, is assumed to be looking for a man. The streetcars which run past the open-air cafés on the Square should *all* be labelled "Desire". Perhaps it was naive of me not to realize this earlier but when you travel with a man you are protected as well as defined and in the village where we had been staying no one had ever

been anything but courteous, even if I were sitting alone down in the little square. I was unprepared for the open and arrogant approach of the Athenian men.

"Hello, I have been speaking English for seven years." Sitting down without asking.

"Go away."

"You want me to go away?" Smiling disbelief. After a couple of weeks the click-click of approaching worry-beads began to make me think of rattlesnakes. I was living in a little hotel and eating out, usually at the taverna next door as I discovered that if I went out alone after dark I would be followed or harassed. I was fast turning into a neurotic. One learns, and by 'one' I mean a woman alone in Athens, to walk down the street never looking directly at anyone, always a little to the side. And one learns that it isn't just the fault of the men. It's all that lovely, healthy young flesh, those perfect white teeth, those tight jeans. There they are, hundreds of them, fluttering like pigeons in the Square, just asking for it. Or so it must seem to the men of this covered-up, still very orthodox society. And don't forget Adonis and his wicked pack of cards. Enough have said 'yes', after all, to make it difficult for those who want to say 'no'. What Arthur Hailey could do with Syntagma Square. Perhaps he would just call it *Square!* (movie rights sold for a quarter of a million dollars). He could put it all in — the cafés, the American Express Company, kids outside holding up signs advertising used Volkswagens or looking for rides, the sweet young things in skimpy pants, the middle-aged tourists, bewildered by the noise and crowds staring at each other across one of the little tables wishing they were back in Duluth, the packed yellow trams going by, the dust, the ornamental orange trees, the airline offices who brought you here too quickly and, for a price, are willing to whisk you away to some other, perhaps less frantic, place. All Hailey would need is a crisis — a kidnapping perhaps, of some wealthy industrialist's daughter. Love Interest. Cameo characters who can later be played by Ava Gardner and Charlton Heston. *Square!* (with a climax on the Acropolis).

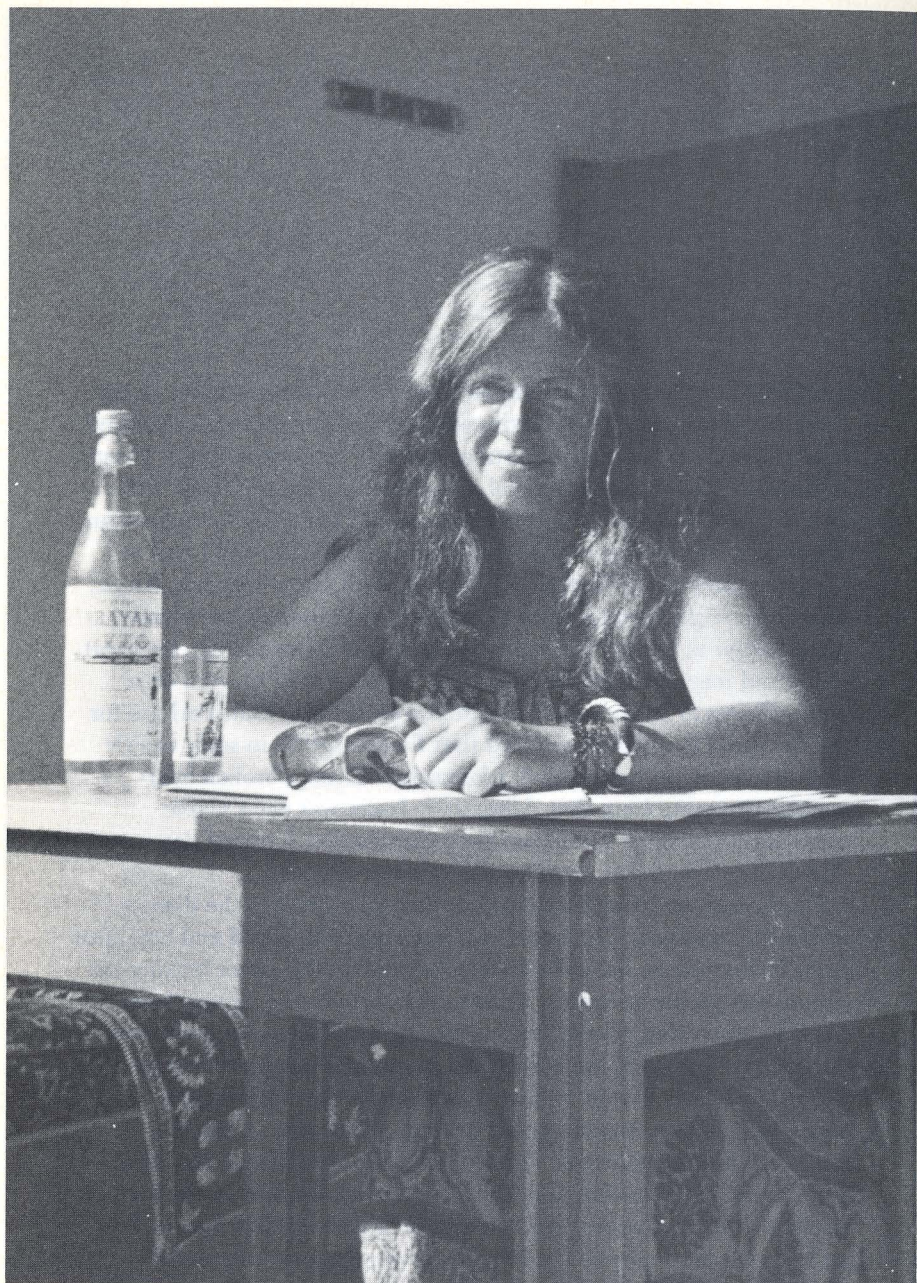
I learned that the red-printed signs on lamp-posts and in windows mean "TO LET" ΕΝΟΙΚΙΑΖΕΤΑΙ and I began knocking on doors as well as reading the paper. One day it snowed. One day there was a power failure. I seemed to be suffering from a power failure of my own. I couldn't find a suitable place. My book lay in a wicker hamper,



untouched. "The Funny Trumpet," a guest house-cum-travel group right out of Kesey and the Sixties were advertising their last overland trip to India that year. ("Christmas in Goa," they promised.) I began to think of abandoning my novel altogether, hitting the road. Why not? I had friends in India. Why stay around haunting the American Express for the one letter that would never come, the one I had no right to even expect? India! Why not? I don't know why not. Alone, miserable, frightened to death by the city, I decided to stay a little while longer at least. The magic bus to India was tempting (see great sights and meet new people) but I had come abroad to work on a novel. Going to India would be running away from that. Perhaps for the first time in my life I realized that I was a *writer* in some utterly deep-down committed way. A professional. Even a broken heart couldn't keep me from that. Ultimately India was not a viable possibility. The book would not get written unless I settled down and dug my heels in. Here. In this gods-forsaken city.

I answered an ad and went to live on a tiny street in the district called Philopappau. The house was large and old, a bed and breakfast place in the Season but now, in late November, they were looking for one or two people to stay, at a reduced rate, over the winter. I told them I was writing a novel and needed quiet. There were two rooms downstairs, they said, the best rooms in summer but much too cold this time of year. I went to have a look, chose the one with grey walls and a high, white, wedding-cake ceiling. There was a little blue desk underneath a tall shuttered window which looked out on the street. They promised a gas-fire and said I could cook upstairs in the big old kitchen. 100 Drachmas a day bed and breakfast. \$108 a month. The ad had only been placed for one day. Somewhere, in this hellish city of noise and brown smoke and indifference, somebody was looking out for me. I unpacked my notebooks and dictionaries, my pots and pans and all the little knick-knacks I seem to travel with (a little black





wooden statue, a chinese basket, photos of and drawings by my children, a mustard-coloured woolen shawl). I put up National Geographic maps of Greece and the Aegean, of Crete, an old P & O World Route map showing routes for boats which no longer exist. I set out pens and paper. I turned on the funky radio which the landlord, Dmitri, had lent me. It had come from the Flea Market and was straight out of my childhood, had a polished wood case and plugged in. Lively Greek music filled the room. There were two beds — one could be a kind of repository for manuscript and notes as the novel grew. That way it wouldn't look so empty. I ran down to the nearest big street and splurged on a bunch of orange flowers. These I arranged on the night table by my bed. Then I put the photograph of the man I loved on the night table as well. It was nice to see him smiling there.

When I went upstairs to pay the first month's rent Carole, the landlady, said, "There's a lovely hill here you can walk on. Just at the top of the street and up a path. Philopappau. That's where the district gets its name."

\* \* \*

I think it was probably the loneliest winter I have ever spent. Athens continued to distress me, even though I had a "clean, well-lighted place" to which I could retreat. In such a polluted city the number of cars is terrible and as well as the stink of exhaust fumes there is the damage to one's ears as each driver leans on his horn at any opportunity. The Greeks use their horns like worry beads, honk honk honk honk until the light changes or the traffic jam breaks up. Almost daily, in the papers, there are reports of people, especially old women, knocked down and killed. I learned to *run* across the street when the green "Walk" man appeared. Incredible. I think I had a slight headache from the noise and tension, as well as a sore throat from the filthy air, the whole time I was there. The litter, too, was appalling. Anything that is finished and can be just thrown down in the street ends up there. Their plastic shopping bags, rather in the shape of an English school "pinny" are handed out when you shop. They tear almost immediately and then they, too, are thrown down.



The Greeks are a nation of litterers — consumers and litterers. In this respect Athens could be any large North American city. In what century will green-antennaed, eight-armed archaeologists reach down to this midden heap of synthetic refuse which is modern Athens?

Aristotle said that the ideal city was one in which everybody knew everybody else personally. The only way to even remotely approximate this, in a city as large and crass and commercial as this one is to find a neighbourhood and more or less stick to it. Philopappau became “my” neighbourhood. I only went over to Syntagma Square when I had to use the post office on a Sunday or pick up my week’s supply of London *Times* which were delivered to me at American Express. (The rest of my mail was now coming to the house.) Otherwise I ate, slept, worked, walked in Philopappau. I took an empty bottle or two and walked along BEIKOT (“Veikou”) to the wine merchant’s. For eighteen drachmas (50¢) I could have retsina from a barrel, for twenty, a refill of ouzo, the popular anise-flavoured Greek aperatif made from grape stems. I bought bread, by the kilo, from a little Cretan “supermarket” in the opposite direction. I ate out occasionally, at a local taverna, not listed in any guidebook, where I could get half a barbecued chicken and chips for forty drachs, or a big bowl of fish soup (Greek soups are wonderful) and hunks of bread for even less. The television was on and the jukebox was playing but never mind. Once a week throughout the winter a street market set itself up quite literally right outside my door. (Once a vendor even tied support ropes for his stall to my door. I had to go to breakfast up the rickety spiral fire escape and then come down and out the other door to tell him off.) On Fridays stalls and cases were set up and unpacked as soon as it was dawn and by eight o’clock the vendors were shouting their wares and the local housewives had begun to arrive, pulling their wheeled carts behind them. One could buy small wares such as cheap pots and pans or cutlery or shoes and slippers, washing up bowls,



incense or spices weighed out on tiny scales and then poured into a little cone of paper. Chickens. Fish (shrimps, red mullet, mackerel). Big cream-coloured cauliflowers. Apples. Tangerines. Eggs with yolks the colour of sunsets. Grapefruits so sweet you could peel and eat them like oranges. The street markets of Athens are a culinary delight. I had to get used to the idea that the vendor would slap my hands if I picked out (to be put in the pan of his portable scales and weighed) only the very best tomatoes, the juciest oranges. The Greek housewives would talk back, throw down whatever bruised thing he tried to palm off on them but I would usually smile and accept a bruised tomato or two. Even the overripe ones could be skinned, cooked down and with a sprinkling of basil and a bay leaf or two, make a fine sauce for a spaghetti dinner. By avoiding meat (which is very expensive) and patronizing the street markets one can eat like a king (or queen) in Athens on about a dollar a day. Curried eggs and green onions on rice, thick white beans in tomato sauce, lentil soup, cauliflower/cheese, a meal of the best spinach I've ever tasted cooked up with slivers of garlic and served with yoghurt on top. A feast of artichokes, the leaves pulled off slowly and dipped into a mixture of Cretan yoghurt, salt, freshly ground black pepper and lemon juice. Perhaps for dessert chopped up apples and oranges served with honey and more yoghurt. A glass or two or three of retsina. The good Greek bread! Breakfast, as I have said, was included in my rent. A fresh egg, Nescafé, all the fresh bread and jam you wanted. Dmitri (a Greek from Istanbul) and Carole, his English wife, had leased the house last year and decided to turn it into a bed and breakfast joint. It will probably be torn down in a year or so, they say, to make room for a block of flats. All the old houses in Philopappau are going. While I was there a lovely plaster-work garland on the outside of the house became weakened by rain and pollution and fell off, leaving a place like a large scab on the yellow wall. Carole said it would be impossible to replace; nobody did that kind of work any more. From the flat roof where I hung out my clothes to dry I could see a veritable concrete forest of flats. Why not? Land is scarce and a contractor can put up flats, saving one for himself of course, and live rent-free while making an enormous profit. It's hard to believe that Athens was a city of less than 100,000 not so very long ago.

Dmitri would run by my window at eight a.m. to get the hot bread. I, who had been working since five, slipping out from under my down sleeping-bag coverlet, lighting the fire, shivering, drinking two or three cups of coffee from a thermos I had prepared the night before, would put down my pen and go upstairs for breakfast and a chat. They told me how astonished they were at the young Americans who come and stare blankly at the soft-boiled egg in the egg-cup. How to open it? How to eat? They have to teach them. Carole asks me if Americans don't eat soft-boiled eggs. I try to remember. It's been a long time since I lived in the States and anyway, I married an Englishman. Perhaps they don't. Perhaps they only eat fried eggs or scrambled eggs, hard-boiled or devilled. She shows them how to slice off the top, to dip in a piece of the crusty bread. Eureka!

Meanwhile tourists who stick to the hotels around the Square or in Plaka pay a lot of money for indifferent meals. "Chewing on lumps of grilled meat," as one friend put it. More and more I consider myself lucky to have found this place, this nest, to be allowed the run of the kitchen, to have the street market brought to me.

(On New Year's Day I meet a Greek man in smart camel-hair coat and plaid scarf up on the Acropolis. He is waiting to have his picture taken, with his daughter and his nephew, against the backdrop of the Parthenon. [3 black and white for 100 drachmas. Ancient photographers with ancient, hooded, cameras resting on tripods.]

"Are you from Athens?" I say.

"Are you *kidding*?" He waves his hand at the city in disgust. *He's* from Chicago. Or is now. Athens. You can keep it!

"Parts of it are nice," I say. Good heavens, I'm beginning to change my tune.

"It's a good place to be *from*," he says with a grin.)

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And as well as writing, eating, drinking ouzo and retsina, listening to the radio, I begin to take walks on Philopappau hill. It is a beautiful place, thick with shrubs and trees, and the many rocky paths lead up to the monument from which the hill gets its nickname (it is actually the *Mouse on*, the Hill of the Muses, elevation 484'). From the top one looks across at the Acropolis, which at its summit, is only



a little higher than Philopappau. This view is recommended by the *Blue Guide* as "particularly fine, especially at sunset." If one takes the long way round it's a good walk, past gum trees and clumps of wild thyme, the sea glittering five miles away on the left, the Acropolis itself out of sight until one gets to the top. Lovers come here to be alone, schoolboys to play football in one of those natural amphitheatres below the white cliffs, old women to pick various greens which will be boiled or used for salad. In the springtime the hill would be dotted with millions of tiny wildflowers, as though it had been embroidered. Tiny blood-red poppies, grape hyacinths, miniature daisies and iris, yellow flowers whose name I never knew. I would pick nosegays and stick them in glasses in my room.

The first few times I walked on Philopappau in my new bright blue hiking boots which somehow made me think of cartoon characters, there was no incident. Then one afternoon I saw a man peering at me from behind a bush, a silly smile on his face. Carole admitted that sometimes local perverts went there to hide in the bushes and masturbate.

"Everyone knows about it, really. They'd never hurt you." I was annoyed. This was "my" hill, my only real exercise of the day. I didn't want to be put off or frightened as I had been around Syntagma Square. I kept climbing the hill every afternoon sitting with my back against the monument, watching the sun turn the Parthenon, the entire Acropolis a warm bisque colour. "If *it* has survived all these years," I'd say to myself if I felt particularly low or lonely, "it has survived Turkish cannons and English archaeological vandals and Time himself surely I — ." "All things fall and are built again — ." Climbing Philopappau and looking across to the Acropolis at sunset was becoming some kind of symbolic act, some kind of reaffirmation of my own art. If the occasional odd person wanted to watch me from behind a bush (and I deliberately did not look for them as I climbed) well, let him. Greek society is very repressive — that's why



pornography is so popular here. The local cinema, the MITZI shows at least one porn movie a week, black stars or bits of masking tape stuck over the genitalia on the publicity photos outside. What can a lonely man do in a repressive society but fantasize in one way or another? (Many Greek men, if unmarried appear to still live with their mothers. Two told me, with utter frankness and no simpering, that they had slept in the same bed as their mothers until they were twenty-one. One, still a virgin at twenty-nine, even added the incredible detail that he had slept with his arms around his mother's breasts!) So I told myself it didn't matter, it was nothing to do with me at all. I *told* myself all these things but underneath I was quite uneasy. The Tourist Season was over; often I was the only one up at the monument. Coming down I could *feel* that I was being watched.

Then one day, as I was lost in a kind of late-afternoon day dream, remembering my little village in Crete, wondering if I would ever go back there, if I would ever get over the terrible sense of loss which still haunted me (at one point I had written a poem, never sent, to my love and ended it with the line "why don't you stay out of my dreaming?"), a man stepped from behind a tree and began to walk towards me across the flat, open, crest of the hill. He had on a long, shabby, gabardine raincoat and I knew what he was by the silly smile on his face and the way he was holding his raincoat closed. I also realized very quickly that there was nobody else about. I got up and tried to look unconcerned but I was very frightened. Did I go back down the way I had come up, which was longer, but more open, or did I take one of the steep, narrow, densely shrubbed paths which would quickly get me towards the main avenue? I decided to try the quick way, walked briskly to where a path began, trying not to turn around. I could hear him laughing behind me. It was no good. I began to run, slipping and sliding on bits of rock, terrified that I would fall. He ran after me shouting what I could only guess were Greek obscenities. As I got near the bottom I had to glance back. He had stopped a few yards above me and was frantically jerking himself up and down, laughing. I ran the rest of the way home and threw up and then drank a large glass of ouzo. It seemed that the pathetic satyrs of Philopappau had defeated me.

For a week I simply walked in the neighbourhood, edgy, angry at the whole society, maybe even the whole world, furious that I was being denied the right to climb my hill in peace. I noticed that the MITZI had yet another porn movie on, starring a girl who was billed as "The Black Emmanuelle." It was in English but the projectionist would turn the sound down so that the patrons could pay attention to the subtitles. Would my pervert be in the audience or had he achieved his thrill for the day? Down the street a mother held the ladder while husband and son centered a new sign over their little taverna.

#### FAMILY ENVINONMENT

it said. All that expense and the thing was spelt wrong! In my present state it seemed to me not just pathetic but sinister. Family Envinonment indeed. Athens had quite the opposite. The pollution was moral as well as technological. What would Plato have thought of his city now?

Another woman staying at the house mentioned at breakfast that she had been accosted and chased when she went up Philopappau to see the view. I told her my story and we decided to go to the police. It sounded like the same man and perhaps he was really dangerous. I looked up words in my Collins Phrase Book. The closest thing I could find was:

"That man is following me everywhere." And on the next page:  
"It is very annoying."

In fact the chief of detectives spoke some English. I explained that we were afraid, that the men who hung around Philopappau were sick, that the hill was an advertised tourist attraction and we wanted something done. The chief said something to the sergeant who had shown us in. They both grinned. Then he leaned across his desk: "These mans . . ." playing with his pencil and smiling. "These mans are only for lookings, not for doings."







"They are for doings," I said, "when they start chasing people." He promised to send a plain-clothes detective to the hill but we both felt that he wouldn't do a thing. I would have to write to the *Blue Guide* and tell them to revise their comments on the view of the Acropolis from Philopappau:

"Not recommended for women travelling alone."

The two policemen were laughing together as we left.

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I decided to take Greek lessons at the American-Hellenic Union, six weeks of intensive Greek for two thousand drachs (seventy dollars). The Union was a long way from where I lived. I would ride the tram one way, walk home the other. That way I would get my exercise. I began getting up at four instead of five, writing four hours before breakfast, then an hour afterwards and then, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays, off to Greek. Most of the people in the beginner's class were linguistic primitives. They had never studied a language other than their own. They could not remember that adjective and noun had to agree. They had never thought about conjugating verbs. There was an American man married to a girl from Crete, a man from Syria who spoke Arabic and very little English, a girl from Ethiopia who dropped out. The teacher was very impatient with all of us except two boys from Liberia, Seepo and Timothy who were training to be ships' officers (all those Greek ships flying the Liberian Flag!) and who studied three hours every day. In the second week they were transferred to Advanced Beginner.

The teacher would hold up a magazine photo pasted to a piece of card. In Greek she would ask:

"Who is this?"

"This is Catherine Deneuve."

"Is she young?"

"Yes, she is quite young."

"Is she ugly?"

"No, she is not ugly, she is beautiful. She is *very* beautiful."

"Who is this?"

Only if we were all stumped on a word or a phrase would she give us any instruction in English. I liked it, began walking around my neighbourhood with new eyes: TABEPNA "taverna", ΠΑΝΤΟΠΟΛΕΙΟΝ "grocery store", and the one I loved best, ΜΙΛΑΡ "bar." (Marlon Brando's photo outside the cinema one day:

ΜΑΡΛΟΝ ΜΙΡΑΝΤΟ ) I never became good at the orthography. I could handle most capital letters but not the small ones, particularly when faced with such things as our long T sound which might be written, depending on the word, *ι, η, υ, ει, οι, υι* . But began to speak a little, to the woman in the local post office, the baker, the Cretan grocery store man and his family. I stopped pointing and started talking and everyone was delighted. I was also learning to think in kilos and grammes. I even attempted that tongue twister *ένα τεταρτο* (ena tetarto kilo), “a quarter of a kilo of” (margarine, olives, sausage). This always brought a laugh. Perhaps you have to be born Greek to be able to say it properly.

I called out to the old woman across the way, “It’s a nice day” or “It is very cold” or in response to her greeting I replied that I was very well thank you and herself? or that I was (wonderful Greek expression!) “so-so”, [“etsy-ketsy”]. I could even stand outside the ΜΙΤΣΙ and know what was today’s show, what was Wednesday’s attraction, what was coming soon (not that it made much difference).

In class I learned that a married woman is: *η παντρεμενη* (ee pantre-menee) or *η συζυγος* (ee see-zee-ghos) but that I was *ελευθερη* “free”.

The bus stop was a “stasis”.

“Monodromos” was a one-way street.

There were little green 3-wheeled vans for hire throughout the city. They were called ΜΕΤΑΦΟΡΑ “metaphors” and this sent me running to my Skeat.

The yellow manuscript pages piled up. The winter passed.  
*“Μενω στην ΑΘΗΝΑΙ”* I could say, “I live in Athens.”

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One day Carole said she had been up on the hill all afternoon with the dog and it looked as though the perverts had all gone. She went with me the first time I returned. There were new leaves everywhere and the first wildflowers had appeared. I decided it was time to stop being afraid. Either the police had really cleaned the place up or I had exaggerated the problem. I started taking regular walks on the hill again, on weekends and the days I didn’t have classes.



On Clean Monday, the day before the beginning of Lent in Athens, everybody flies kites from Philopappau hill. And I mean everybody. Even the Prime Minister comes long enough to hang onto a kite string and have his picture taken. Families and lovers bring picnics and there is a general holiday. I went up the hill to watch. There were literally thousands of kites in the sky, all of a uniform hexagonal shape with long, be-ribboned tails streaming out behind. Mothers set out food while fathers helped children to launch their kites — a rather difficult feat as one cannot run very far, with a kite, on that hill.

I never did find out where the custom came from — nobody I asked seemed to know. I sat under a tree and ate hard-boiled eggs, bread, feta and tomatoes, drank half a bottle of wine. A few shabby gypsy girls danced to a tambourine in a rather desultory manner while their brothers or keepers demanded money from the picknickers, many of whom had brought their transistors which blared pop music as they ate. A FAMILY ENVIRONMENT nevertheless. Then I looked up and saw a used condom hanging from a branch. And then up into the blue sky where thousands of brightly coloured kites flew lazily about in the February breeze. Suddenly I saw the whole thing as some kind of wonderful Cosmic Ejaculation for, with my eyes squinted against the sun, the scene looked like nothing so much as a heaven full of brilliant spermatazoa, the apotheosis (a good Greek word) of all the fantasies of the men of Athens. I laughed and laughed and laughed. Somehow I had come to terms with this awful, vulgar, filthy, never-to-be-recommended city. I *did* live here. I was okay; I would survive.

Tomorrow, I knew, the hill would be covered in litter, the delicate early flowers crushed under a mound of plastic refuse and broken kites, their wriggling tails now soiled and still. But today — today it was lovely. A “diplomat”, I had learned, was literally one who could look both ways. In the months that followed, while I finished my book and lived my solitary life and winter turned into spring, I learned to take the diplomatic view of Athens, a city which is probably no worse than any other. I began to relax and enjoy.

