

# MARSH TIDE

Gordon G Hall

# ***MARSH TIDE***

A Literary Thriller

by

Gordon G. Hall

[words@lakefell.com](mailto:words@lakefell.com)

## One

I walk slowly, with the deepest foreboding, across the compound to the veranda, usually so busy with the queues of Kenyans bringing relatives for treatment. It is empty. The whole world seems to be empty. I can smell death. I breathe death. The world is very still. At the entrance there is a crumpled heap of white linen.

Sister Grace.

The flies are thick around her head. Where her eyes should be there is nothing but a gouge of red. The thick black blood has trickled down the side of her face and formed a pool extending from her left ear. It is nearly dry now, just a bit sticky. She was kind, this one. Painstakingly gentle with the old and infirm; reliable, honest and deeply religious. The flies crawl and buzz. This thing is not that caring human I so recently knew, it is a mockery of the living. I turn away, horrified by what I am looking at and terrified of what I shall find.

I fear there will be another.

I move on into the long low wooden building with its corrugated iron roof. It is stiflingly hot and I smell the raw, acrid stench of blood. I can see but dare not look. I trail my hand along the wall as I shuffle reluctantly forward, knowing that hell awaits my presence. Halfway down the corridor there is an obstacle. It impedes my way.

Sister Felicity.

Or it would have been. Once. She loved the children, so caring, so patient. She could calm them when even their mothers failed to do so; tireless, always with a kind word on her lips and a funny way of wrinkling her nose. The close-range serration of bullets from the machine rifle has cut her body completely in two. It is apparent that still-living top half of Sister Felicity has scabbled its way a good two metres away from the bottom half before succumbing. Now there is just an overstretched ribbon of putrefying gut that connects the two. There is more blood here, more blood than I have ever seen, and other things that I do not want to see. I step over that which was once animate and is now dead, slithering a little on innards uncongealed as I do so.

The door to Celia's surgery is open. I don't know what to expect, except death.

## Two

I put the helm down and she comes up through the wind, light and responsive. Five thirty on an early May morning. Nothing stirs but the dog, the boat, and the tide. Sonnet leans by the mast, the long, black fur of her ears flipped occasionally by the windward jib sheet.

Memories crowd my conscious mind. Old memories, good ones: my boyhood here, feeling the wind, the ebb and the flood, the salt, the ooze. But the feelings of pleasure that I know such memories will bring are fraught with danger. They are a gateway to a different past. A past that I must keep locked down. The fragile deception that now passes for my life is dependent upon such repression. I turn my head towards the gentle breeze. I must learn to be like my dog, to live in the present.

We near the shore; I free the main halyard, drop the gaff-rigged main and nuzzle the dinghy under foresail alone into the small creek by the Watch Hut. The prow squelches into a bed of black mud and Sonnet leaps for the cleanliness of the Samphire. I smother the jib, secure both sails, heave a mud-weight over the bows, wriggle into the grey-green rucksack, and slither after my dog.

Ahead of me is a wide shingle bank. It must be climbed, for beyond it is a different world. I hear the sound of the open sea before I arrive at the top. A deep rumbling ribbon of sound that underlies whatever else I experience. I stand, arms akimbo, on top of the stony ridge. There in front of me are the

breaking waves that pound this North Norfolk coast. I welcome this lonely world where even the horizon is an unreliable companion. I find in it an echo of my own loneliness. The sea stretches out, grey under a grey sky. There is no meeting point, it all blurs into a sameness.

I turn to the dog, speaking not to her, but at her; thereby failing to make contact. "Time now?"

Sonnet cocks her ears forwards, head slightly to one side, concerned that I might require something of her but unable to understand what that might be.

"Best forgotten."

It is wrong to speak to a dog in riddles. She loses interest in me, and wanders off in the direction of a pile of flotsam. I watch her in envy as she 'works' the area, never-remembered experiences bubbling up into her present, triggered by an event, a smell, or a sensation. These she does not yearn for, but recognises her experiences as she would old friends.

I turn back and stumble my return over the top of the bank, retreating to this quieter landscape of marshes. Here is a world of safety, consistency, and familiarity. I walk along the Marram to the end of the single low dune leading out into the mudflats. I slip the rucksack from my back and reluctantly, taking my time, I arrange its meagre contents on the ground. Sonnet watches, unimpressed.

The screw top of the canister is awkward to twist open. I am not sure how I should tackle this, how I should perform this small ritual. I hesitate; it seems so final, this act of throwing her away, of abandoning her.

I stand, holding the brown plastic urn in both hands. How cheap it has all become. How can this synthesized oblong of mass-produced tat be the, albeit temporary, repository of my beautiful wife? I stand with my back to the wind, tilting the vase, so allowing the grey dusty bits of Celia to blow from me far out into this shifting land of marsh, and mud, and beyond. The larger grey gritty pieces of my love fall accusingly at my feet, coating the Samphire, in a de-humanised frost. The Spring Tides will lift even these heavier particles and bear them out beyond the Far Point, away from the anguish and torture of those final unspeakable moments back in Kenya. My eyes are dry, unable to display even a trace of regret; but there is a tightening of my throat.

I stoop at the side of a saltpan to wash out the urn. I upend it so that salty mud-coloured water splatters onto the marshland. I stoop and dip my hands deep into the salty water and rub them together, cleansing them.

It is done.

I turn to the half bottle of vintage Bollinger, untwist the cage, and ease out the cork, allowing the pressure to release slowly, so as not to waste even a drop. I charge the white plastic mug.

“Only a half-bottle?”

“Yes, my dear, for we cannot share it now.”

Perhaps I should say something? People do say things, important things, on occasions such as this. I cannot imagine what might be appropriate. Despite the cleansing fizz of the bubbly my throat feels dry. Even if I could find the words, I could never string them together into something approaching speech.

“Here’s to you then.” I growl, aping the words from some old B movie. My sole audience chews rather messily on a Bonio.

Dog and I return to the boat, and slip out of the creek. She resumes her place at the prow.

The tide has turned now.

Six o’clock on an early May morning. Little stirs.

*Water Nymph* makes light work of stemming the ebb in this gently increasing nor-easterly breeze. The tiller quivers expectantly in my hand as bubbling water streams over the rudder blade. We pass the Cocked Hat marker and I haul the mainsheet as we make to starboard following the winding channel. Ahead, above the marsh, glide the white peaks of two sails heading for home. No Screamers this early in the morning; in the afternoon their rah-rah voices will slice the breeze muffling even the mocking of the gulls. Sonnet and I will have long since fled.

*Water Nymph* is into the Cut, travelling fast on a broad reach. We will brave the underwater hazard of Bridge Sands. I raise the centreboard making her slew somewhat as we foam over the shallow water. The half-raised rudder



blade just snicks the muddy bottom, but momentum carries the day and we are safely over and into deeper water.

Sonnet can see the landing. Her tail wags furiously as the boom slashes across in a controlled jibe. Then the bows are grounding on the fine shingle of the Carnser. The sails slap idly at the wind, their duty done.

The dog is out and away searching, I hope in vain, for a rotting fish to lower her shoulder to. I wheel the launching trolley and, amidst the crackle of flapping white, haul *Water Nymph* from her natural environment, lower main and jib, pull the boat to dry confinement and secure her. She has served us well this morning, but for now at least I am done with her.

I whistle for Sonnet and we walk, man and dog, companionably along the near-deserted Hard. As muddy stone gives way to tarmacadam, I find a conveniently placed commercial skip. I flip open its roll-top jaws and drop the empty urn into its depths. The lid snaps shut on its prey.

I swing open the passenger door of the battered green Land Rover. Sonnet leaps in, crossing to the driver's seat and forcing me to push her aside as I slip behind the wheel. All three seats now boast a damp coating of mud. Marshy wet-dog smell envelops us as we rattle along the rough track towards the sanctity of Curlew Cottage.

My thumb clicks down the Suffolk latch of the kitchen door. There is a key for this place but I am not good about locking doors. I kick it hard just above its threshold to break the swelling clinch of salt-seeking rainwater. I follow Sonnet into the stark lime-washed kitchen. Its simplicity is comforting.

Such scant comfort is enough. I do not want more. I do not deserve it. Such thoughts real, they are true, and they are my truth.

The living room window looks out upon a flat and watery scene. I have only recently returned to this, my sanctuary, from another world, one of colour and contrast and form, where the vivid harshness of the landscape vibrates in harmony with its culture. Here it is different; Stiffkey Marshes seep away from this lonely cottage, green and brown misting beneath an unbroken arc of wide, light sky.

\*

Celia and I are sitting in the darkness, choosing not to light the hurricane lamp so as to avoid the attention of a thousand flying biting things. The evening offers a respite from the burning heat of the day, but it is far from silent. The distant cries of wild animals and the occasional call of a night bird, and from the village in the foothills, the faint rhythm of drumming - a celebration of some kind- does little to disturb the peace of the evening. These people have so little and are leading such hard lives yet they have an extraordinary ability to express their feelings, their joy, in so many ways.

She is holding my hand, just loosely, lovingly, for although it is much cooler now it is still far too hot to lie together. Something skitters across the floor near to her foot and she jumps quickly to her feet, then laughs "I can never get used to that." She has been out here in Africa for over two years, that being most of our married life but she can still be jumpy about small creatures.

I was out here for some five years working for Third Aid as their senior field officer. Although promotion had brought a somewhat enhanced salary and a more responsible position, it meant that I spent most of my time in their Cambridge headquarters. I missed the field-work, and above all I missed Africa. There was an irony in my leaving Kenya just at the time that Celia had been posted here.

I scratch the mosquito bite on my leg. The irritation is intense, but it will quickly fade and soon we will be creeping under the net, its white web just discernible in the gloom at the back of our room, a weird misshapen tent.

This is so different from home, and different again from Nairobi with its bustling streets and chaotic traffic. Here there is the smell of damp vegetation overlying that typically Kenyan base note of warm earth. It is something that I revel in, but never realised how important it was to me, this rural Kenya, until Third Aid decided I would be more use to them back in England. The work here had been demanding, in particular making sure that aid got through to those that needed it. At times this involved me bribing corrupt officials. This would seem totally unacceptable in England, but here it was the sordid game that everyone played.

Celia had thrown herself into her work as a medic, working long, exhausting days in the heat without any sophisticated equipment. But she revelled in her work, helping people who were sick or injured. It was not just her energy or her medical skills, but she had a way with people, even if her language skills were limited.

Our marriage of three years has been so fulfilling, so right, although we rarely have enough time to spend a few days like this, 'quality time' as it now seems to be called. Yet here, at Yasabara, living in The Ark, we have at last found a couple of days to steal away from our busy lives and give ourselves unreservedly to each other.

That is if it had not been for Benje, and the awfulness of dinner yesterday evening. He is a large, flabby man, dressed, as ever, in khaki as though preparing to go on safari. We had sat at the communal table, all fourteen of us, plus Sarah, the Hospitality Manager. Benje was seated across from me with Celia sitting next to him. We endured over an hour of the man ranting about all things 'expat'.

During a pause whilst Benje ogled at a pretty African waitress, Celia whispered to me, half-jokingly, across the candlelit table "If the man hates the place so much, why doesn't he just go back home?"

"Because here he can be 'someone' here. Back home he would just be another failure."

Benje, having squeezed the passing bum of the pert little African turned back to me "So you still reckon that you can save the African from himself?"

He had decided that because I worked out here for a charity, I had similar intentions to that of a missionary. I really could have done without this tonight. My time with Celia was precious and I now fervently wished that we had opted to take a light meal alone in our cabin, "The work's going well."

Benje leant back in his seat, casually draping his arm along the back of Celia's chair. She gave a grimace and leaned away from an armpit that doubtless smelled of stale sweat. She was quite able to fend for herself but nevertheless I was disturbed that this disgusting man should be making a crude attempt to fumble her.

“Well if you can call it work,” said Benje. “When, you've been here as long as I have, you'll start to understand a bit more about the situation here. There's a song that says 'The enemy of Africa is the African.' They don't help themselves one bit. Just stand around waiting for some fool like you to come along and bale them out.”

Why should I bother to get heated by idiots like Benje with their huge bungalows, enormous aggressively driven 4X4s and their ignorance? Doubtless Benje knew Africa, but I had believed in this place, and still did. I knew how much I wanted to achieve for the people of this beautiful country. I was not just an expat, living here because it was cheap, and servants were easy to come by. I was proud of what I was doing and even more proud of Celia who dealt with hellish situations every day with calm professionalism.

“The trouble with the African, you see,” Benje was well into his stride. “Is that they have no pride in their work. If they can get away with doing nothing, they will.” There was silence around the table. I knew that most of those present would be as appalled as I was by the rant but good manners stopped anyone from interrupting. My gaze slid to the two African women who had been serving at table and were now standing by the door to the kitchen.

What was it like for them to listen to this and not be able to protest? I needed to be away from here and alone with Celia, just to be able to hold her in my arms and talk quietly about how things were going and about the future. I suddenly had a great longing for home, for Curlew and those misty green marshes.

“Dessert everyone?” Sarah sounded overly bright.

“That would be lovely,” said Celia.

“Ah, lovely is the word,” said Benje, taking another gulp from his whisky glass. “And talking of lovely, what’s a gorgeous lady like you doing wasting your life on this do-gooder? But then, my dear, you’re a bit of do-gooder yourself by all accounts, patching these people up all day when they fall off the back of a cart or something.”

My rage was so great that it left me speechless but Celia turned to Benje, her face even paler than usual. ‘I’m a qualified medical practitioner, and if you really want to know I spend most of my days carrying out much needed surgery on people too poor to pay for their treatment.’”

Benjie guffawed. “Feisty little thing, aren’t you? I like that in a woman.”

“I have no interest in what you do or do not like in a woman but I have to tell you that if you try one more time to touch my left breast with that filthy paw of yours you’ll need stitches in an area that would be very difficult to repair. What is more I would take the greatest pleasure in doing the job myself, and as ineptly as possible.’ She rose, abruptly shaking off the lingering arm.

I scrambled up as well, resisting the urge to lean over and smash my fist into Bejne's florid face. I knew that Celia had needed to deal with the awful man herself and, from the look of Benjie's face, spluttering and blustering, she had certainly done so. Others stood up around the table. The murmurs from the other guests were all subtly supportive of Celia, and went a long way to ease the aching fury in my chest.

We walked back towards the cabin in silence. Celia, clearly still unsettled, was possibly doubting her actions, perhaps regretting breaking up the dinner, and almost certainly angry with me for not wading in. I knew that it was best to leave her to simmer and that she would talk about it when she was ready. As we passed the lighted warden's house I could see that she had tears on her cheeks. Oh, how I loved her with that mix of fragility and strength. Could anyone in the world be as lucky as me? We entered our room, neither of us having uttered a word, and I was beginning to panic. Whatever Celia was thinking it would have to come out before we slept. I had so wanted this rare opportunity for some time together to go well, and now it was all unraveling.

Celia had undressed and was sitting on the edge of the bed staring into space. I went over to her and sat next to her.

"And what is a pretty little thing like you doing in a place like this?" I asked, with a slaver's leer.

Celia looked at me, gave a little choking half laugh, and fell into my arms.

\*

The Yasabara waterhole and salt lick, coupled with the feel and the scent of my beloved wife, starts to shimmer and fade. It merges into the melancholy of the now. Oh, if only I had it within me to feel a warm trickle of sorrow running down my cheek. Perhaps that will come, but not now. The now is empty of such things.

One Bonio is hardly enough for breakfast, nor is a half-bottle of Bollinger. Distracted, I pour the last of the champagne into Sonnet's bowl and bite on the second dog biscuit. We look at each other in mutual disgust.

.



### Three

We walk, dog and I, following the tide as it sucks itself out of the creeks. Feet and paws are dressed black with mud. Gurgles and slaps and slithers provide the background to every step. The smell of a thousand rotting mud-filled years drifts into our noses. We gain the marshland edge. Ahead lies a yellow-white desert. We press on across this open plain. The million-million grains of West Sand pass beneath our feet, secure by their numbers in their tumbling insecurity. Razor shells crunch and crackle and crush under my tramp. Solid sand-ripples are petrified testimony to the passing of waves; transitory frozen moments that time and the flooding tide will sweep away so that the ebb can again sketch its imprint on the vast stretch of a renewed virgin canvass.

I screw up my eyes against the whiteness of sand and sun. There is a harshness to this land beyond the marshes, born perhaps of its temporary nature. In just a few hours the tide will cover the beguiling safety of this flatness. This, where I now stand, will be open sea, an unbroken highway to Spitsbergen.

Way ahead, out where this impermanence of land meets water, lie dozens of small grey smudges. Sonnet and I forge onwards, splashing through rivulets of retreating tide, pushing calf-deep through Cabbage Creek, sinking into yielding areas in the gently moulded surface before gaining the yellow dryness once again.

It is good therapy, this walking. Inside me somewhere is a darkness, a black monster that, at times, stirs. As if to reveal itself. The salty air, the gritty sand, the physicality of it all, serve to keep that monster where it belongs. Hidden. Hidden deep within me. I am not a very organised human being. There has been no master-plan to my life, just a gently steered drift that over the past few years involved the satisfaction of providing help to those less fortunate than I. Then, suddenly in the midst of this slightly self-satisfied existence there is this terrible gash. A pain too deep to bear. A place within me that I cannot visit.

I shake my head just as Sonnet does the same. She makes the better job of it.

A long low line of white demarcates the change from yellow to blue and denotes the potential for conflict, the age-old struggle of this coast. At the whim of the sea the land goes; the land moves; the land arrives. Sandy cliffs are torn asunder and rearranged into mudflats, which in turn rise clear of the water supporting and supported by the colonising Marram. Today this struggle is benign. We reach that boundary and walk it lightly, effortlessly moving from land to sea and back again. Sonnet dips and snorts. She, a creature of the land, is challenged by this thirst-provoking salt-sea that mocks her need for familiar fresh water.

I muse upon how I have arrived here, my early years and the effect they have had on me. On leaving school I went up to Cambridge, but far from honing such talent as I then possessed into a force that other mortals would

have to reckon with it left me as a liberal outcast amongst future Captains of Industry and would-be Captains of Foot. The cut and thrust of student politics washed over me like a long, cold shower, whilst the rigours of academia held no allure. I read theology, but although I enjoyed toying with the concepts that were strewn in my direction the thought of pursuing a career in such an abstract manner was anathema to me.”

At the age of twenty-two, being over-educated but emotionally under-developed I threw a pack upon my back and started out into the world. I travelled, mainly alone, almost always on foot, to places that are but tiny dots on the largest scale maps. I met people who delighted me, people I loved, and people who chased me. Occasionally I feared for my life, more often I lingered in a far-flung corner until I'd dredged every last drop of experience from it.

The seals basking at Warham Hole raise their heads, unsettled by our approach. Danger for them comes from the land; their safety is in the sea. The tripper launches that travel to them with the tide are from another world, they are but playthings to be circled and are of no concern. Captive within these boats their humans come to gawp, to point, to digitize every movement of their sleek, unfamiliar, grey-blotched bodies; but they, the alien beings, do not come by land so they pose no danger to the pod. Would that Celia had seen the direction of her danger, she could be with me yet

Sonnet and I are something different. These Greys have finished suckling their young. For three weeks they provided the rich milk that has trebled the

weight of these small cream-coloured bundles, camouflaged as they still are for the whiteness of the last ice age. The seals sense us as danger, they move uneasily upon their bellies, they fear our upright stance, our noise, our smell. We intend these animals no harm but cannot tell them that, save by retreating. We are their predators and that is our lot. They rock slightly, curling their bodies upwards, uttering short barks of warning; ready, but unwilling, to flop themselves seaward. We will disturb them no further. The dog and I turn away, walking to the west.

I feel this compulsion to walk, -to be alone and allow my thoughts to run in the moment. It certainly provides the escape that I need from the excesses of human company that I have suffered all too frequently. If no one else benefits from this wandering Sonnet most definitely does.

I have been this way many times before, and now find memories are flooding back. Out here braving the iced mudflats, frozen early mornings with the worm diggers. Backs, covered in sacking, braced against the biting easterly; spades probing; buckets filling. And Charlie with his battered twelve bore repeater propped against the spare worm tubs. Probably illegal at the time, certainly illegal now. Then comes that eerie sound, the grating cry of the Greylag, accompanied by the beat of their wings thumping air, a sound that still sets the adrenaline coursing. Charlie standing, waiting, gun to shoulder, hardly aiming, just caressing that flock with the barrel. Seven shots burst in quick succession. Cartridges ejecting; spitting smells of rank powder. Feathers flying, falling. Grey/white bundles lying speckled red upon the ice-

rimed mud. Fellow diggers twisting the sides of their dour mouths. Charlie allowing the lightest of twitches to play on his broken, weather-beaten face. Not half a century ago, yet all gone now. Seen into history by bird protection laws and shotgun legislation. And, saddest of all, no one like Charlie left to this world.

I was a wildfowler in my boyhood, and recall a formative morning with Charlie and his punt gun. It had been, and was, my only experience of that particular machine of anatine murder. The punt was only just able to support the two of us. Charlie loaded the gun shore-side and we paddled out of Morston Creek against the faint flood of a February neap.

By that stage of his life Charlie was not interested in killing dozens of birds at one stroke, so when we came upon a whole flock of duck we passed them by. Charlie saw the pair of Mallard, signalling me to cease paddling and lie low in the boat. He brought us closer and closer to the two birds, keeping the flat-bottomed punt pointing directly at them. He carefully aligned the gun, using his paddle with infinite caution as he sighted down the length of the huge barrel.

The explosion was deafening, it must have wakened half of North Norfolk. Birds flew up from water, marsh and mud, shrilling great squawking cries. Ahead of us was a haze of powder smoke. The two victims lay at the water's edge. It was the work of a moment to push the boat up beside them and retrieve their warm bodies.

This was never sport. It was a way for a hardworking man to scrape a living, to feed his family before social security gave him a full belly and took away his sense of pride. I am pleased to have been out on a gun punt, but almost equally pleased that such slaughter will not happen again. It was from a time and a need gone by.

The tide has taken itself out to the far reaches of West Sand. The constant coming and going of the tide gives this place its heartbeat, a timeline within which things must either happen or be swept away into tomorrow. Seals bask, lugworms burrow, wading birds feed, Sonnet and I walk.

It is time for us to head landwards. The tide has turned and its momentum will burden these rivulets with a scum-laden swirling inrush, gentle at first, but then as quickening and unstoppable as the breaking of the day. It is to be respected, this coming of the water, this rising of the levels. It is not for man to pit himself against such immeasurable force.

The sands give way to a universe of hardened mud, pimped by a thousand worm casts, each one signifying the tail eliminates of one of these sea/mud creatures whose survival is measured in excreted swirls of salty sand

My mobile rings. Even out here, shielded from the world by this sandy salty wilderness we are bound to the rigors of technology, slaves of a wired age. I cannot speak into the thing, but this is text. I read:

`'tom arr shortly at curlew deidre'`

My sister is perhaps the only person that I have no wish to avoid. She has the ability to ground me to things that are worthwhile in this world. I doubt if her visit will be of much consequence, but I acknowledge it for what it is. I stride a little faster. Anticipation would be too strong a word. It brings with it the promise of too much feeling. I don't want to feel.

Deidre's Range Rover is already parked outside the single storey cottage. There is a lack of proportion. The vehicle dominates the simple collection of buildings that it stands by.

"Look at the state of you!" My darling sister pulls few punches.

"It's done, Dee. She's gone."

"By the Watch Hut, as you said?"

"Just so."

She touches me lightly, lovingly, on my arm. I flinch.

"I know you didn't want me there. But I'm glad it's over."

"It had to be just me; me on my own."

Deidre looks closely at me. "Haven't you got a razor? When did you last eat? Who does your washing? Why won't you answer your phone?"

"And you're wrong it's not over, not yet."

"Come on, Tom, I know you're going through one hell of a lot, but you've got to pull yourself together."

"Um."

Sonnet quietly removes towards the safety of a bed of un-pulled rhubarb. This is a human-to-human thing that dogs would do well to avoid. I regard that rhubarb patch with a degree of wistfulness.

With some reluctance I lead Deidre into the cottage.

“What a simply frightful mess you’re in, Tom. You can’t live like this.”

“Um.”

“Tom, I know she died only a month ago but we had the memorial service so you could let go. I know it’s hard, but she’s gone. You know she’s gone. You did what you had to. I’m sorry for you. I’m desperately sorry for Celia. But you just have to move on. Grieving is important, but so is the rest of your life and the people that rely on you. I know you think I’m unfeeling, but honestly Tom I’m only thinking of you.”

My sister is a couple of years my junior. She and her husband Clive live in the Old Rectory in south Norfolk that was home to us as children and is now owned jointly by Deidre and myself. I strive for conversational material.

“I haven’t seen Clive for a while.”

“He continues to pursue his minor interest in commercial law and his major interest in the male of the species.”

“So, he will be staying at the flat?” Clive and Deidre own a small but expensive pied-a-terre in Westminster that he uses for several nights each week.

Light small talk is falling upon stony ground.



“Now look here, you never intended Curlew to be your home. It’s far too small to live in.”

This is true. Some three years ago Celia and I rented a house in Cambridge, just off Hills Road, but we continued to enjoy weekends and the occasional holiday at Curlew.

“I like it here. I need peace, I need the familiarity of this place.”

“Tom, it’s filthy. You’re filthy. Come on I’m taking you home and bring that blasted dog with you.” Deidre is under the firm impression that she owns Sonnet. To be fair, this is almost entirely true. She bred her and, as I live large chunks of my life abroad, she cares for the dog much of the time. Nevertheless, I still consider Sonnet to be my dog. She is certainly my companion when I am in this country.

“No!”

“What do you mean ‘no’? You’ve got to brace up. We’re all desperately sorry for you and for the awful thing that happened to darling Celia, but you must put it behind you. You’ve bloody well got to get on with your life. You have to look to your future. You’ve got things to do and people who rely upon you. Yes, it will take time, but you are not going to get over it by moping around in this desolate spot.”

“I’m just fine here, I need this place just now, I have to stay.”

“Nonsense. Come back home and I will help get you back on your feet in a jiffy.”

“Dee, I can’t.”

She looks at me with an expression of determined affection. It is not often that she cedes a point.

“Well, if you’re set upon staying here whilst you sort yourself out then we’re going to have to get you some help.”

“Um . . .”

“Tom, I’m going to get you properly looked after. I’ll organize a woman.” Pausing only long enough so as to give the place the professional appraisal of a house makeover expert, Deidre heads for the door and deftly bounces the Range Rover down the track towards the village.

I assume that by ‘woman’ she is referring some sort of cleaning lady. I cringe at the thought of such intrusion. I am singularly content as I am. I do not need cleaning, and I certainly do not want my peace disturbed.

Sonnet decides to cease her detailed inspection of rhubarb and to start planning her forthcoming meal. This involves repeated firm insertion of wet muzzle into Master’s rib cage. It is a form of communication I can live with.

It takes rather less than an hour for Deidre to return accompanied by food in the form of crusty French rolls, pâté and cheese. “Evelyn Massingham will be doing mornings for you, starting tomorrow.”

“Look here, Dee,” I say by way of feeble rear-guard action, “I really can do very well without any Mrs M.”

“Unpack the Brie and shut up.”

I curl back into my own space.

Deidre had left by mid-afternoon yesterday following whirlwind action and multiple phone calls. These were hardly conversations, rather a series of staccato-like instructions to friends, businesses and sundry banks. From the ensuing briefing I understood that the Massingham woman is to be paid direct from my bank, and that various food products will be dumped upon my doorstep courtesy of the local milkman and paid for in a similar manner. Finally, I learn that a consultation has also been arranged for me with my local GP. Such matters would appear to be non-negotiable.

I relax on the old garden bench, my morning mug of coffee to hand. Away to my left the sun is gaining strength in the bright blue sky. The marshes are fast emptying of tide. Sonnet has a 'what to do today' look about her. There is a lazy contentment about the morning. I can concentrate on such small pleasures that this place and this time will allow me. This 'pleasure of the moment' is a new thing to me. Hitherto my life has been a series of scenarios with, when all goes well, a feeling of great achievement upon their accomplishment. That, for now, is way beyond my capabilities. I am fortunate to have a present to enjoy without having to look to the future, and never daring to venture into the past.

Deidre's departure has restored a degree of peace, but she has left me with things to do. Certainly, I see no need to start blabbing about my recent experiences to my doctor, even if he is a friend. I have feelings about Celia and feelings about what happened to Celia, memories of her death that are best kept away from the light of day. To share them would be to acknowledge

their existence and it is not my intention to give any credence to foul happenings.

\*

Within memory's reach is the Celia whom I love so dearly, and who loves me with such a passion. During the days, and nights, of my short time in Kenya she manages just once to get away and visit me in Nairobi, so that we, a married couple, can act out our love like teenagers. Oh, the feel of our hot sweaty bodies mingling on my simple single bed; and such heat, the heat of the late afternoon and the heat of our love. The sweat rolling down us, over my chest, between her breasts and then between our bodies as our stomachs slide over each other in the throes of lovemaking. And Celia, always Celia, her long brown hair flowing over me, over the pillow, and those eyes, always open, always staring at me with such love; blue-green pathways to her inner thoughts.

Yes, the sex is good, but it is not about sex, or at least not just about it. In Celia I have found my perfect match. Here is someone with whom I can share things, emotions, without feeling stupid or shy or embarrassed.

Afterwards as the day cools into night we take our post-showered bodies to the Carnivore. There is every kind of meat imaginable, some best not to enquire about, and all being cooked on traditional Masai swords. A waiter passes close beside us brandishing one of those swords to carve our meal as it lies upon the hot, cast-iron plates before each of us. Celia holds my hand and squeezes it.

We make our way back, no longer shielded by the air conditioning, nor protected from the raw happenings of the street. I make to squeeze Celia's fingers in my left hand, but grasp nothing besides my own palm. The scene has left me. I am alone.

\*

I wonder what quirk of genetics has prodded my sister into being such a competent organiser. She has energy and ability in abundance. Since our early childhood we have done things together and have been close all our lives. She is one of the few people in this world of whom I am wholeheartedly fond.

Sonnet stands up, awakened from her gentle snooze. Her tail curls upwards, her nose quivers. She is pointing down the track to the cottage. It is a sure sign of an imminent invasion of privacy. Two bicycles are approaching along the lane, kicking up a little dust as they come. I really do not want to face a couple of straying holidaymakers. I am not yet ready for interaction with strangers.

The bicycles resolve themselves into bearers of people. One is a fairly small, quite thin, brown-haired woman in her late twenties, comely rather than pretty, and wearing no obvious make-up. She is dressed in a cotton frock and a pair of stout shoes. The second is a gangly lad in his early teens with fair hair and a slightly pimply face.

The woman comes towards me. I bristle.

“Can I help you?” I ask, in the cutting manner of an Englishman defending his castle.

“You be Tom Farrow?” asks the woman.

“Oh.” I say “You must be Mrs . . . Umm?”

“Massingham” she says, “and it be Miss.”

I start to stand up, but given the scantiness of my clothing and the formal basis of our relationship think better of it. “Excellent,” I say trying to sound as if I mean it. “I daresay you’ll find everything you need in the cleaning line.” I wave my hand vaguely in the direction of the open cottage door.

“I brought all of them sort o’ things,” she says gesticulating towards the ample basket on her solid-looking bike.

“How about the lad?” I turn my head towards the boy, “Off school for the day?”

He does not answer.

“He be done with school,” says the woman, “he be sixteen gone January. You don’t fret through, he bain’t no trouble.”

“Bet it isn’t easy to get a job around here?” I ask the lad.

“Oh, he don’t speak,” says the woman, “He in’t slow though, not like some of them say he be.”

“This is Sonnet,” I say to the lad, “She doesn’t speak either.”

“He be Jack,” says Miss Massingham, “and you best call me Evelyn.”

I head towards the cottage. “I’ll just put some more clothes on, then I’ll be out of your way.”

Evelyn appears to be in control of the situation, “You don’t need to do nothing,” she says.

I pull on some shorts, an old T-shirt and an even older hat. Evelyn keeps up a constant barrage of chatter from a kitchen that is already surrendering to her ministrations. I gather that Jack’s father is no more, indeed that he hasn’t been for some time; that Evelyn ‘does’ for the Rigby’s over at The Grange - aha so that’s how Deidre found her - and helps out ‘evenings’ in the local pub. It seems that the indefatigable Deidre has organized this woman not only to clean the cottage, but also wash my clothes and make sure that I feed myself ‘proper’. I am in danger of being overwhelmed by all this care and attention.

“I’m sure you’ll manage everything very well, Evelyn,” I say emerging from the bedroom.

“Now that don’t look no better,” she says eyeing my crumpled clothes. “You best get them off you and be letting me have them for the wash.”

“Not today,” I say, and flee.

Outside the cottage Jack and Sonnet are playing together. This should keep them both amused for some time; the odds are against the dog tiring first. Today’s copy of *The Guardian* has miraculously appeared but my mug of coffee has gone. I am about to protest when Evelyn appears bearing a fresh

cup and some Bourbon biscuits. I sit down and, for the first time in many days, I start to toy with biscuits and the Arts pages.

Jack is sitting near me on the ground. Sonnet has gone off in search of water. I look at this lad and he stares straight back at me. He looks young for sixteen, but I am not much of a judge of these things. Despite the acne he is good-looking in a slightly rugged sort of way.

“Given up talking then?” I say. Whilst I did not expect young Jack to break into immediate conversation, I suppose I had half-hoped for a nod or a shake of the head. It was as if he had not heard me.

“I daresay you’re right,” I say.

Jack looks a bit surprised. He knows he has not spoken and yet he has found himself to be, albeit reluctantly, involved in a two-way exchange. He shifts away and looks at me with a faint air of suspicion, wondering, I suppose, whether this strange man is going to continue with such a one-sided discussion. He clearly expects me to say something further.

I say nothing. It seems a bit odd that he is here at all. I wonder if Deidre knew anything about him when, on my behalf, she engaged the services of the energetic Evelyn. I rather think she must have done. Deidre knows everything.



## Four

Before she left Evelyn had set the table for me and laden it with food. Dominating is an enormous homemade quiche. I really do not do quiche. In an absent-minded way, I break off a large section of crust. It tastes surprisingly good.

Sonnet is waiting expectantly in front of her bowl. “Better water the horses first,” I mutter. I pick the bowl up from the floor to fill it with kibble. Underneath is a piece of paper. I unfold it. There on this slightly crumpled sheet is a drawing of my dog. It is not overly detailed, but the artist has captured the essence of this Flatcoated Retriever in a few deft pencil strokes. It is a thing of joy where the character of the dog shines out through the two-dimensional representation. I let out a whoop of delight. I smile at the drawing.

Sonnet fed, I take the picture over to the table, looking at it as I consume the whole of the quiche. It is clear that Jack has a real talent.

In the bedroom there appears to have been a burglary. Whilst the bed is neatly made, and the sheets have been turned down on one side, I have been robbed of most of the clothes that I possess. “Blast the woman,” I say with such vehemence that Sonnet scoots out of the room with lowered tail. “Hell, Sonnet, I wasn’t talking to you.” The dog puts her nose rather cautiously round the open doorway, and slinks up to me with a cowering uncertainty, her tail waving gently.

“Sorry, old girl,” I say, playing with her silky black ears as she rests her head against my leg, “I wasn’t talking to you. It’s that Evelyn, she hasn’t left me one decent thing to wear.”

The tide of the following morning brings with it a haar that overwhelms the marshes, shortening visibility to a hundred yards and bearing a chill that I feel through my seriously depleted wardrobe. There is a feeling of quiet claustrophobia within the limited circle of my vision. Curlew Cottage becomes the very centre of its own universe.

But through this mist of mind and weather comes the ghostly figure of Evelyn, followed by Jack, pedalling along on solid pushbikes laden with goods.

“Have you brought me a sweater?”

“I do that,” she says rummaging in a one of the carrier bags draped over her handlebars. She pulls out a Gansey and hands it to me. I slip it over my head noting how fresh and clean it smells. I am not at all sure that this is how a fisherman’s sweater should smell.

“Smells good,” I say feeling warmer already.

Sonnet is making all sorts of fuss over Jack. The dog has clearly taken to her ball-throwing friend, and the lad is equally enjoying the attentions of the dog. Evelyn hands me my newspaper as we make our way into the cottage. She busies herself with coffee. Jack and Sonnet sit together companionably on the floor, engrossed in some dog and boy thing.

“You never going to be off walking in all this lot?” says Evelyn.

“No,” I say, “not today, well at least not this morning. I think I’ll just stay here.” I realize I might well be in her way. “You okay working round me? I can go over to the barn if that’s easier for you.”

“Course, you won’t be no problem.”

“Your brother draws really well,” I say.

“I be his mother,” she says, “but yes he do draw kind of special.”

I am slightly surprised. Evelyn cannot be much more than a dozen years older than Jack, but it is hardly my business and only of passing interest.

“Did they teach him to draw like that at school?”

“They do have them classes, but he always do drawing. He just make them old pictures sort of happen out of his head.”

Evelyn calls Jack over and the three of us sit at the table to drink coffee. I push the drawing of Sonnet towards Jack. He looks at it and then looks at me. I make a thumb’s up sign. He does not respond. I pat him lightly on the back, trying my best to show my appreciation. It is as if I had not touched him.

“He likely don’t want to know what you be telling him.”

“You mean he doesn’t know?”

“Oh, he know right enough, he just don’t want you to know he know.”

Confusing as it sounds this is an interesting insight into Jack’s situation. Perhaps an indirect approach is called for? I leave my chair and go and sit on the floor by Sonnet and make a bit of a pantomime of showing the drawing to the dog. I have Jack’s interest. Sonnet plays up to the action by sniffing the

picture and then putting her left front paw on it. Jack slips off his chair and crouches down next to the dog. He has pencil and paper. Just a few swift strokes and it's done. He puts this new drawing on the floor directly in front of Sonnet and immediately on top of the earlier one. Sonnet looks down. She can see a game in this. She picks up both pieces of paper in her mouth and backs away from us, tail waving furiously. Jack sits back, watching the dog intently.

“Come here, Sonnet,” I say. The dog brings me the drawings. “Dead.” She lets go of them into my outstretched hand. The new drawing is even better. It shows Sonnet as Jack saw her from floor level, and there is just a hint of a human, possibly me, in the background. I push both drawings towards Jack. “Thanks,” I say. As usual I get no reaction.

Evelyn is talking again, always talking. She is saying that Jack just does not know how to react with people. I know that. I wonder how he relates to her. They seem to understand each other, to communicate, I have no idea Jack does not speak, or whether he has ever spoken.

Evelyn is telling me about taking Jack for tests, taking him to hospital. The word sets my mind racing way beyond this English doorway, to the heat, to the flies. My head is filled with the buzzing of a thousand winged-insects and I smell the stench of death. My temples throb; I see starbursts of red. There is that constriction within me. I need out. I leave Evelyn in mid-sentence and rush for outside space.

I breathe deep breaths of moisture-laden air. I close my eyes. All I can see is that dusty, hot hospital. I can smell the cooking from open pots. I can hear the rumbling of the generator. Now I listen to the screams, the most horrible inhuman screams. I hold my hands against my ears.

The sun beats down unmercifully upon me. I cannot move. There is nothing that I can do. I open my eyes. The sight, the smell, the sounds slowly fade.

I shake.

Evelyn is outside with me, holding my arm.

“Go you inside,” she says “Reckon you had a bit of a funny turn there.”

I do as I am bid. I sit down and resume my battle with *The Guardian*. There is a mist in front of my eyes, perhaps it is my own personal haer. Eventually the print becomes clearer and I start to skim the paper, avoiding World News. That I cannot take.

\*

It is a hellish drive over terrible roads to get to the field station, but by late afternoon the battered jeep makes it. It will be so good to see Celia. She has managed to get a three day transfer from the up-country hospital where she is based to join me at this outreach station of Third Aid. She will have been here for a day already and will most likely still be on call, so our time will be limited. There is little privacy at the busy station but I am just happy and relieved to be here.

The driver parks the Jeep just inside the entrance to the compound,

near the little school and wanders off to find something to drink. From a classroom comes the sound of high-pitched singing.

I have not been here for some time and things have changed. The building I peer into is a bare, wooden construction. Two small windows with fly screens are doing little to air the room and it is stifling.

Forty children of various ages sit at small desks, in an orderly fashion. They see me and stand to attention chorusing their greeting of “*habari ya mchana*”. The teacher, a slim woman in traditional dress whom I half recognize, smiles at me as I feel my already hot face burning with embarrassment. I should have avoided this interruption. “Sorry,”

“No problem, Mr. Farrow. It is good to see you after all this time. Sit down, children.” Chairs scrape and desks rumble amidst some giggling and chatter as the children subside. I mumble some words of apology, have a brief chat with their teacher, wave goodbye to the children and walk over to the hospital block.

Celia is washing her hands at the large sink. She looks pale and drawn. My work in managing this charity, even this one month ‘sabbatical’ out in Kenya filling in for the disgraced Norman, is so much easier than hers. I suppose I shall always feel guilty about this, but it is part of her, part of this extraordinary woman who means so very much to me.

She smiles at me as I approach, “You’re earlier than I thought you would be. I’ve only just finished.”

Her lips are smiling but I can feel the hurt in her and know she has been

dealing with something difficult. There are shadows, like bruises, under her eyes.

“What is it?”

She sighs and leans against the wall, blotting her face with her forearm to dry the sweat.

“Female circumcision. Infection had set in. We were too late. She was only twelve.”

She pushes away from the wall and steps up to me glancing round to make sure we are alone. She reaches up and kisses me, just the lightest of quick touches on my lips.

“Oh, Tom. I’m so glad you came.”

Of all the things on earth that I want to do, what I want most is to sweep her up in my arms and crush her to me; to take away all this pain and sadness that is eating at her, trying to defeat her. But I know my Celia, she must work through it, deal with it herself, in her own way. She will come to me when she is ready.

I take her hand “It’s so good to be here.”

We eat a simple meal with the small team of dedicated medics. It is still quite light, certainly light enough for us to take a stroll outside the compound. The security guard gives us a little salute as we pass through the gate and keeps a watchful eye on us from a distance.

We walk to a baobab tree, sacred in so many African countries, and lean against its broad solid trunk as the sun sinks near the horizon. I look away

from the great spreading redness of the sky seeing Celia's face lit by the glow.  
I hold her by both shoulders "I love you so much."

She looks up at me, her eyes searching my very soul, "I love you too  
Tom."

And then the tropical darkness rushes upon us.

\*

I am awakened by Sonnet nudging my right thigh with her nose. It is way  
past dog lunchtime, well a dog biscuit or two for her. The cottage is quiet. I  
look outside. It is apparent that Evelyn and Jack have left. They will be back  
tomorrow, and again tomorrow; as regular as the tide. I need peace.

The morning mist has frizzled itself into oblivion and the early summer  
sunshine is pulling refreshing drops of moisture off every blade of grass. There  
is the sound of a small aircraft overhead, buzzing as inconstantly as the bees;  
to make a sound like that it must be performing aerobatics. I recall as a small  
boy watching the drone aircraft pulling targets off Weybourne so that gunners  
could practice in case of another war. In my mind's eye I can see again, out  
over the sea, the puffs of black explosions that punctuated those childhood  
summer skies. I hear the delayed boom as the sound follows each staining of  
the blue. That was a long time ago.



## Five

I walk over to the barn. The four-tonner is there, under her dustsheets, just as I left her a lifetime ago. It is not this small gaff-rigged cutter that I have come for, just a sad little collection of memories contained in a photo album. I find it secured in the second drawer of the dilapidated old wooden desk. I gather it to my chest and return to the cottage clutching it dearly to me.

In the bedroom I scrabble around in the side of a suitcase and extract a medium-sized manila envelope. I spread the few items that it contains onto the kitchen table. A short press cutting headed 'British Aid Worker Killed' and another from Kenya 'Nuns and Doctor Die in Hospital Raid'. There are two obituaries, both using Celia's maiden name 'Dr. Celia Baines', and a bill from the Lang'ata crematorium in Nairobi, which includes a receipt for the 'grinding of the bones at the city mortuary'. It identifies the weight of Celia's ashes as 1.78 kilograms. Such are the technical details for the passing of a wife.

I have no right to be here instead of her. She was the one who healed the sick, who relieved suffering, who had so much to offer. And she is dead. No more. Gone in a great maelstrom of agony. If only it could it have been me.

I promise that I will re-live those awful days, but I cannot face the pain just now. The pain of allowing those terrible images to populate my mind.

Memory is a cruel intruder and I cannot yet subject myself to its ravages. I leaf through the book containing our wedding photos and a few pictures of Celia and me on holiday in Scotland; images that should have been treasured by her, by our children and by our grandchildren. Those beings that should have been born and now only exist in the sorrow of my imaginings. These pictures would have been leafed over so lovingly, the passing of time highlighting the weirdness in fashion and the quaintness of yesteryear's cars. There will be no grandchildren, no children, no progeny, no continuum. Celia, she who had so much love to give, will never get to hold a child to her breast, never cuddle a grandchild, never read a thousand bedtime stories. This is my sadness. It is a sadness that I have yet fully to face, but it creeps around me, immobilising my mind and stifling any return to normality.

I pull up the clear page coverings towards the end of the book and insert my pathetic little collection into the album. It is not much of a record, not much of a memorial, not much to honour one so loved. I pick up the now completed archive and carry it mournfully back to the barn. There will be no further pages, it is ended, finished now, its blank pages accusing. It is now for no one but me, for provoking my yearning for what might have been. I have little need of such a mournful reminder. I leave it resting quietly. What will become of it? I can foresee no future.

Something has me in its grip, and forbids me to return to certain places, to see, hear, smell, feel things that once were and should never have been. It is as if I am not in charge of my own mind, my own thoughts. Seemingly the

need to self-protect is overwhelming. Recollection is something that cannot be rushed; I must come to it quietly, overcoming the rigidity of my fears.

The sound of a car turning off the end of the lane alerts my senses and defensive reflexes. Who would seek me out in this remote place, and come upon me unannounced? I hear the purring of a smooth engine. It stops. There is the almost simultaneous clunk of two doors effortlessly closing. Sonnet has stopped barking and is making ‘woo-woo’ noises of welcome. So, these are no strangers; to the dog they are friends. Even so I am reluctant to emerge from the security of my barn; but go I must.

“Tom, it’s so good to see you.” It is, Christine, my personal assistant from Third Aid.

Tears glisten in her eyes. She hugs me, her head barely reaching my chest. She has cared for me and organised me and backed me through thick and thin. I know she means so well, but despite my fondness for this selfless woman I freeze at her touch. “Oh Tom, I’m so sorry. You poor love. I didn’t mean to rush at you.” She, at least, understands just a little of what is going on inside my confusion.

“You look so thin. You’re not eating.”

“Um.” I say. This conversation is becoming Deidre-esque.

The passenger from the car is coming towards me now, brandishing an intrusive hand on the end of an outstretched arm. It makes its demand. I cannot refuse. I make a pathetic effort at a hearty handshake. My dear old buffer of a chairman, Marcus Worsted, claps me, fairly gently, on the back.

“Well done old chap, well done, well done.” It is as if he were speaking to Sonnet after a solid retrieve. I cannot help but cringe.

I move to put distance between us. I need space. My mind reels into conceiving this kindly-meant visitation as an invasion. I know that words must be spoken. I cannot just stand here dumb and ungracious. These people mean me no harm; they are friends, colleagues, my fellow travellers in the real world out there.

I must invite them inside.

My throat is dry.

The words of welcome that I know I must utter, that I want to utter, will not come.

I gasp like a drowning carp and wave at the cottage by way of invitation.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Divine providence intervenes. Evelyn is cycling down the track. As I turn towards this angel of salvation, she hops off her bike and comes straight up to me reading the situation with uncanny accuracy. “You get them old chairs out the utility, Mr Tom, and I’ll go do a cuppa for your friends. Oh, and I’ll put away this here washing.” So-saying my saviour departs indoors.

The spell is broken, I can move. Marcus and I secure an old rustic chair apiece and join Christine who has commandeered the bench. We all sit. I place my chair so that I do not have to look directly at either of them.

Over to my right a bumble bee is sucking nectar whilst buzzing for all that it is worth, wings beating at up to two hundred times every second.

These wonderful creatures are subject to the twentieth century myth that they are theoretically incapable of flight; this has of course been disproved. If you incorporate the effect of dynamic stall into the original equation then flight becomes theoretically possible, and fly they do.

“Tom?” says Marcus.

I have a suspicion that this may be at least the third time that he has uttered my name.

“Tom, we miss you. How long before we can properly welcome you back to Third Aid?”

I realise that I have already been on leave for the best part of a month and stammer something about letting the side down.

Christine comes to the rescue. “Now don’t bully him, Marcus, he will tell us when he’s ready, won’t you Tom?”

“Um . . . yes. Not yet. Will be.”

I divorce myself from this immediate conversation. They mean well. They want to help me. I think that they are trying to say that if I feel like getting back to work then they would love to see me. But hell, please, please not so soon. I know I am not there yet. It will come right, I am at least sure of that, but I have a clear sense of my own fragility. I can only stand outside this numbed mind of mine, looking on from a distance whilst it struggles to communicate.

I am ashamed of myself. These two have driven all the way from Cambridge just to make contact with me, and I cannot even be civil. “Thank

you.” I say, “I mean coming here and all that.” I find that I too have some water in my eyes. Bloody Hell!

Christine reaches out and makes to hold my hand. She is just the sort of loyal, dependable person that I found so easy to work with, first in the field, and more recently at our Cambridge headquarters. She is about ten years younger than me, a slim, vivacious career woman who has rather wasted her talents by remaining as my PA. I try not to shrink from her well-meant hand. “Tom, of course we came. We’re here to support you, to make sure that you have everything you need. Above all to ask if there’s anything that we can do to help?”

“That’s right,” says Marcus “We need you, old boy, place is falling apart without you.”

I know he means well, but pressure is pressure. I wince at his words, but he carries on. “Try to put it all behind you. Probably best to get involved again, keep your mind occupied, what?”

“Tom,” says the more empathetic Christine, “you must take all the time you need. I’ve spoken to Deidre and she tells me that she’s organized everything for you. You should have all that you need to keep you going, at least for the moment, but if there is anything that I can do . . .”

Evelyn appears with a tray of distraction. She deals out saucers and cups and plates. She pours tea; she dispenses Good Boy buns, those wonderful rock cakes with sultanas. I revel in the smell of warm Good Boy buns. It is the scent of boyhood, of home and of comfort. I do not have to speak now; I can

just absorb myself in the very English ritual of afternoon tea. I cast a sidelong glance at Marcus. He is wolfing down one Good Boy bun and feeding bits of another to Sonnet. I decide that, given the circumstances, it is probably best to refrain from reprimanding either of them.

“Bad do,” says Marcus holding his saucer in a vaguely disconnected manner and addressing his cup as if it were a miscreant schoolboy. “Should never have happened. Awful for you.”

This just curls me up. I really do not want to think about it. My mind plays me a series of snapshots; they are not pretty.

“Don’t think about it,” says Christine.

“Thanks, Chris,” I say “I’ll be fine.”

“Bloody awful show,” says Marcus. “My father was out in Kenya during The Emergency, you know, the Mau-Mau thing. Terrible atrocities then, he said that he once came across a bungalow where the whole . . .

“Marcus!” says Christine with such strength in her voice that he jolts upright, slopping tea from his admonished cup into its now re-united saucer and lightly anointing Sonnet’s head with Earl Grey. There is a clatter of porcelain and general mayhem.

“What? Oh sorry. See what you mean. Sorry Tom, old boy, not the best time to be listening to my ramblings, eh?”

I nod, and then shake my head.

“Someone asking about you at the Club yesterday,” says Marcus. “Odd chap, don’t know who signed him in. Pretty sure he’s not a Member.”

I try to reply, but just open and shut my mouth like an oxygenating goldfish.

Christine comes to the rescue, “Who was he?”

“Not sure I caught his name, but Jimmy Alston said he thought he recognized him. Said this fellow had something to do with the security forces. I told Jimmy that he must have been squeezing the gin bottle a bit hard.”

“What did he want?” I say,

“Not sure really, but he seemed to know you. Wanted to know where you had gone to ground.”

“You didn’t tell him?” says Christine.

“Well I’m not very good at covering up that sort of thing. Diplomacy is way out of my line really. In the end I had to let him know that you were up here on the coast.”

“If he really is some kind of spook then I expect he would have found out anyway. I wonder what he wants with me.”

“Perhaps he has some more information about the attack?” says Christine.

“If he does work for the security people it’s more likely he wants to know if there’s anything more you can tell them about it,” says Marcus. He is quite an acute old bird really. He knows his way around the establishment much better than he lets on. “Bit of a downer if this chap pulls in here and starts to tackle you about Celia, what?”



It is all getting too much for me. I feel the familiar dryness in my throat, the sweat pouring down my back, the shaking. I start to my feet, knocking into the tea tray. I have to walk. I need to get away. Christine, perceptive as ever, turns to Marcus “I think it might be best to leave now, Marcus. Tom’s so much better, but we’re upsetting him.”

Marcus nods. “Keep up the good work, old boy.” I am terrified that he is going to slap me on the back again, but he thumps Sonnet instead. “Damn fine bitch this. Got a good nose?”

“Yes.” I reply.

“Damn fine breed for shooting over. Good mouths, don’t you know? But these Flatcoats can be a bit wilful.”

I look at Sonnet. “We manage,” I say.

The two representatives of Third Aid are already regaining the Daimler. It was good of them to come, they mean so kindly, but it is beyond me to say so. I cannot trust myself.

Christine winds down the driver’s side window, “Do look after yourself, Tom. Take all the time you need.”

I nod to both of them. I wave as the car starts off down the track.

Hell, I did handle that badly. I sink down on the bench, shaking slightly as the world turns yellow and dusty. I smell the sweet stink of Africa. I see the wiry dogs and the naked children. I hear shouts. I feel the harshness of sun on skin.

Evelyn comes to clear away the tea things. She takes one look at me and sits down by my side on the bench. Very softly, as if talking to herself rather than me, she starts to chatter. Not about anything in particular, just the area, the Rigby's, other people that I once knew. She prattles on gently and her voice becomes as the humming of that bumblebee, soothing, comforting, dependable. After about ten minutes she looks at me, smiles, and stops talking. She tidies the tea things onto the tray and turns to carry it back to the kitchen.

“Thanks,” I say.

“That weren't nothing, just a bit of old chat.”

“Thanks,” I say again.

“Likely Jack 'll be here come morning.”

“Um.” I say.

“He be good for a walk then.”

I might manage a walk with the silent Jack, and Sonnet would certainly appreciate his company.

I nod.