QUARTERLY PRESS REVIEW

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The Prisoner by *Tammye Huf*

How Are Things With You? by *William Bedford*

Outside by *Caleainn Bradley*

Two More Gallants by *William Trevor*

Bioko by *Bill Barich*

Side by... ... by Side

Nuns Fret Not by *William Wordsworth* — Fordítás-változatok *Tárnok Attila, Papp Gábor Zsigmond* és *Varró Dániel* fordításai

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The Prisoner

by *Tammye Huf*

I set my alarm clock for midnight, because at one in the morning we wanted to slaughter. It rang muffled, under my pillow, but loud enough to jerk me awake, and I snatched it up to silence it before my mother could hear. I'd tell her what I'd done when it was finished.

I swung my legs off the bed and planted my feet into my house shoes, sliding forward onto the edge of my mattress, taking three deep breaths to steady my nerves. The air puffed out in white foggy bursts, and the full moon shone through the frosted window, making the ice look like a frame of lace, a little reminder that the world could be beautiful.

I dressed in layers; my work skirt over my long undergarments, my rough cotton blouse layered under my old wool sweater. Slinking like a thief, I collected the knives, the buckets and bowls, the rope. I kept the lights off so the neighbours wouldn't see me, though most of them would have kept my secret. Some of them had done the same thing and knew that I kept theirs, but there were a few who I wasn't sure about. As the war dragged on and we all grew hungrier, and the Fatherland grew greedier, needing first our men, then our food, then our boys, it became more difficult to know who you could trust.

I crept out to Pawel and knocked our secret knock. It was silly, of course. By now he knew my footfall without having to look, but silly things made me feel safe: secret knocks, and my father's promise when he left four years ago that everything would be fine, and my brother's promise when he left last summer that he would come home. Things I knew I couldn't count on, but I did.

Pawel was our compensation. We ran the mill, which the Party recognised as essential work, but we had no men to help us because they were serving the country according to the papers we'd had to fill out. I wanted to scratch the words through and write kidnapped, but I wasn't stupid enough to say what I really thought. We all saw how dangerous that could be when the school director was taken at the beginning of the war. And then there was that business in Steinen with Herr Krautmeyer.

I filled out the papers the way I was meant to and was rewarded with Pawel Tarkowski, our Polish prisoner of war. At first they brought him every morning from the labor camp but then they decided he could sleep in our pig shed, saving them the trip. It

meant we would have to feed him ourselves, so they gave us strict guidelines on his food rationing. I convinced my mother that the Party guidelines should be considered suggestions and that we should feed him as we saw fit and were able. After all, we needed him to work, not fall dead of starvation.

Pawel opened the door almost immediately at my knock, taking the buckets from my arms. “Everything all right?”

I nodded, smiling up at him, because his grey eyes were another thing that made me feel safe but shouldn’t have. He stepped closer and stood watching me. If things were different, he would have kissed me, and I would have let him. It took a few seconds for him to remember his place and back away, but not before I felt the heady rush I had learned to associate with standing close to Pawel.

We dropped the supplies at the back of the shed and sharpened the knives.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” He didn’t look at me when he spoke, carefully putting distance between us.

“I won’t let them have everything,” I said.

The authorities took stock of our food and appropriated most of it to themselves. Last winter we would have gone hungry if I hadn’t hidden potatoes in our pillowcases. This year I was determined to slaughter our pig before they came to collect it. My mother would have objected if she’d known. When she found out about the potatoes, she said I was robbing the cause, but when the hunger was gnawing at her belly, she accepted the food without a word.

Pawel went out to the toolshed to get the ax and I placed a bowl in the trough to catch the blood. When he came back in with it, I was shivering with cold and nerves.

He leaned the ax against the wall and draped his coat around my shoulders, rubbing my arms.

I leaned into the warmth of him, and we stayed that way until my hands drifted to his torso and lightly skimmed his back. Pawel jerked away.

He took up the ax and swung it, dull side down, hard onto the pig’s forehead. The muffled crack cut through the stillness and the animal collapsed unconscious. We tied it onto a ladder, feet splayed, and together we heaved it over the trough, its neck above the bowl. Pawel slit its throat, and as it thrashed, we held the ladder tightly in place.

When the blood waned from a gush to a trickle, we propped the ladder up against the wall so that the pig hung feet up, head down. With the ax and a knife, we hacked it open down the centre, letting its intestines spill into a flat basket below.

Steam billowed out of the splayed pig when the warmth of its insides hit the late November air. The small space grew warm and damp and close.

Pawel leaned up against the side of the shed catching his breath. He pulled his sweater off and mopped his forehead with his sleeve. Hot and sweaty and breathing hard, I stepped away from the pig, stripping off Pawel's coat and my sweater. He watched them thud to the floor before looking back at me with a vivid desire tempered by fear. We both knew the law and the consequences of racial defilement. In spite of everything I had been taught, I slipped my skirt to the floor and unbuttoned my blouse, baring myself to the moist night, to the illegal, gaping pig scenting the air with a coppery heaviness, and to Pawel.

His danger eclipsed mine, making him hesitate. It took six-seconds for hormones to conquer fear.

We didn't come together in the gentle, cautious way of new lovers. The war and the National Socialists had stripped us of our humanity by degrees, and we clawed it back from each other that night in a frenzy.

I crept into the house at sunrise to find my mother sitting at the kitchen table waiting for me, knitting.

"Marina Himmelbach, where the devil have you been?" Her clicking needles punctuated every word. "Sneaking out of the house and turning up at dawn?" Click, click, click. "If your father were here he would skin you alive–"

"Well, he isn't here," I said. And then recklessly, crazily, "He's out there dying for a madman–"

"Don't ever talk like that!"

She flew at me, striking me twice: once for Hitler and once for my father. Thankfully, she had dropped her needles.

*****

That evening, when we were speaking again, I told her about the pig. She pursed her lips at me as I reminded her that we'd be glad of the meat this winter. I told her it was already slaughtered, so she might as well help with the rest of it. That was how she worked. She would never break the law herself but she was practical enough to recognise the benefits.

"You shouldn't have been alone with him in the middle of the night," she said.

I turned to face her. "We slaughtered the pig. Nothing more." I held her eyes without flinching and wondered when I had become such a competent liar.

*****

My alarm chimed at two o'clock in the morning, waking me immediately. I crept down to the pig shed and knocked my secret knock.

"Marina." Pawel said my name in a way that meant go away and please come in. I chose to come in.

Without the heat of the pig we shivered under his meagre blanket, but we took our time, savouring each

other like raspberries in the winter.

"I'd better go," I said, this time well before sunrise.

He held me tighter, burrowing his face into the crook of my neck, inhaling my scent. "This is dangerous," he said.

The fear crept back into our cooling bodies, clearing our heads enough to see the madness. I lay my hand over his sputtering heart.

"You're right. This is too risky. We should just–"

"Will you come back tomorrow?"

I pushed off of him to sit up, but he grabbed my hands and pinned them to his chest.

"Will you?" he repeated.

I felt his heart hammering beneath his ribs. "We might get caught," I said.

He squeezed my hands in his. "Don't let them have everything."

I leaned down and kissed him as his hands snaked up my arms and down my sides, pulling me back on top of him.

*****

When the weather turned that spring, Pawel made a butter churner that we traded for a suckling piglet rejected by its mother. It squealed and shrieked at our lovemaking, so we took to meeting in a clearing in the woods. We'd lie together on his blanket under the stars and after we'd finished, we would intertwine our bodies, savouring the sensation of skin on skin.

Bliss can be a dangerous thing. It can make the world disappear until all that exists is the touch and the taste and the pleasure in front of you. Not the sun, a little too high in the east. Not the scent of the morning fire in the air.

They caught us on a Tuesday.

Herr Richter, only a few weeks back from the war, surprised us just after dawn. He'd lost his right arm and most of his hearing in some sort of explosion, which had earned him a medal and the self-proclaimed right to police the rest of us.

"Get up, you Polish swine!" He raised his gun with his one remaining hand.

I could see Pawel calculating his chances of wrestling it away, figuring that he could save me, even if he couldn't save himself. His muscles shifted and then froze as we both saw the posse of Hitler Youth coming up behind him, sweeping around us in a circle.

I gripped his biceps urging him back. My nails dug into his skin, pleading for caution.

"Fräulein Himmelbach, you are the worst kind of disgrace." He spat at us from a safe distance as the Hitler Youth closed in. When they'd formed a tight circle, he kicked at Pawel's back, his thigh, his side. Pawel flung himself over me to shelter me from the blows until he realised he was the only target. He tried

to pull away to keep me safe but I grabbed hold of his neck and wouldn't let go. Once we were separated there would be no coming together again.

They didn't let us dress when they finally marched us out of the woods, clothes clutched to our bodies for modesty and warmth.

The Hitler Youth boys laughed at Pawel's nakedness and gaped at mine, lecherous and disgusted at the same time.

I never found out who tipped them off. For all I know it might have been my mother. She was, after all, practical in her acceptance of law breaking, and the Racial Purity Law was impractical to break.

I argued with the officials. Pawel was a good Protestant, I told them. His father had been a pastor. He was born only twenty kilometres from the German border. Some of them laughed at me, some of them hit me. When they dislocated my jaw, I shut up and signed the Order for Protective Custody.

My official charge is Race Defilement. They put me on a platform in the market square of Frankfurt and the crowd shouted it at me as a barber shaved my head. The sign around my neck read, I was expelled from the Volk community because I consorted with a Pole. A newspaper photographer snapped photograph after photograph: me with the sign and my hair half shaven looking freakish, me standing bald in a sea of blond locks, me wading through the jeering crowd flanked by soldiers. He didn't take pictures of when they threw clumps of dirt or spat or knocked me to the ground.

I am glad that my village is too small for a spectacle, where I would have known the people spitting at me. And I am thankful for my shaved head in prison. It helps with the lice.

When they took me away, my mother told me to pray for forgiveness, and I pray every day, but not for that. I pray that we lose the war soon so that people will come to their senses, and I pray for a miracle for Pawel. If not a miracle, then justice, and if not justice, then remembrance. ♦

How Are Things With You?

by *William Bedford*

It was three in the morning when they left the club. Blossom Dearie had finished her second set with 'What Is This Thing Called Love?' and the audience were still on their feet, chanting and cheering for more. In the street, Daniel hummed the words, wanting to make Anna laugh. But she wouldn't laugh: frowning, sullen, glaring miserably into the rain. They'd argued in the hotel. Hadn't even unpacked. He was hurting her, and she'd pulled away.

'Don't.'

'They're love bites.'

'They're bruises.'

'Come on, Anna!'

'You should sell them.'

'What?'

'Like tattoos. Fake vows. Love you forever.'

'You don't want forever.'

'Five minutes would do,' he nearly said, but Anna didn't get jokes. His anyway. 'Hi lover,' one of the street girls grinned from a doorway, busking against Daniel to annoy Anna. A cat watched them from a flowerbox, waiting for the milkman to bring the dawn. A Japanese tourist was filming the rain. She was wearing a yellow mac and her body creaked against the plastic. He hummed briefly 'Once Upon a Summertime', then stopped.

'I could die for a cappuccino,' he said. Anna wanted to get back to the car. They had already cancelled the hotel booking. 'I feel like a man finding a strange girl in his bed,' he said, 'not knowing her name and wanting her.'

'Blue movies and rain,' Anna sneered.

They'd started talking in July when Anna joined the newspaper, meeting for coffee in a café opposite the offices. She was on a graduate training scheme, straight from university. He liked listening to her talk.

'Why me?' she asked.

'The editor likes me to keep an eye on the trainees.'

'Like Cyclops?' she said.

'Who's he?'

She didn't bother to answer. She was a tall girl, her dark hair ironed straight and with a long fringe to hide her eyes. Or hide behind, he joked. 'I iron it every night,' she said. When he laughed she flicked her hair over the collar of her jumper, distracting his attention. Her lips were thin and pale without lipstick. She wore skirts and knee-length boots that were all the fashion. Her fingernails were chewed to the quick.

She didn't seem interested in the younger journalists. 'Can't you find a decent man your own age?' Daniel asked when they started meeting after work. 'Girl like you. Must be plenty of young blokes around.'

'Married men are safer,' she said casually. 'We weren't talking about married men.'

'You don't get all the fuss,' she went on, ignoring him.

'Fuss?'

'"Say you love me,"' she mimicked.

'Anna . . .'

'Not that being married has done my mother much good.' Daniel sat back, acting defeated. 'I might as well not be here,' he said dryly.

After work, he would stay late at the office, his wife and her mother at home. His daughter was asleep by the time he got home. Some nights, he wandered the streets, thinking he might meet her, find her coming out of a club or café. One Sunday, he drove over to the office and spent hours walking around the city centre, searching for her face in the crowds. Which wasn't likely. She lived miles away in the fens, spent her weekends reading or helping her mother round the house. She had a lot of friends. He pushed the thought of other men from his mind.

At the end of August, the editor invited Anna to babysit for him, and told her she could bring a friend if she wanted.

'He suggested you,' she said when she told Daniel. She seemed irritated or offended.

'He's probably seen us around,' Daniel said. 'Having coffee.' She went on with her work as if he wasn't standing there.

On the night, they had a takeaway and then sat on the sofa watching television. 'I've known Sam for years,' he said.

'I haven't.'

When he drove her home, she sat silent beside him all the way. 'You don't seem very happy,' he said when they parked outside her parents' house.

'What do you expect,' she said, surprising him.

'I thought you only went out with married men?' She went quiet, biting her lips.

'I don't have to like it, do I?' she muttered, then got out of the car and slammed the door.

A week later, they took a picnic to an isolated village and sat in the grounds of a ruined abbey. Anna brought a volume of fourteenth-century verse with her. She'd studied it at university. It was a hot day, the last of summer. They sat under a sky of fierce cobalt blue, and she read aloud from a poem called *Handlyng Synne*. It was by the Lincolnshire poet Robert Mannyng. '"Blissed be he of God of heuene,"' she grinned, as they wandered the buttercup meadows and deep lanes, the riverbank where they collected simples, imagining they were being wise.

'I love you,' Daniel said, faint with the heat.

'Don't say that.'

'It's true.'

'Still, don't say it.' He dropped her off near her home and drove back to Lincoln where his daughter had a fever.

'I could rent a flat,' he told her on the Monday morning.

'While you stay with your wife?'

'I can't lose you,' he said wearily.

'Then stop going on about it.'

When she went on holiday, he realised he was missing her. She sent a postcard to the office, but it was for everybody in the newsroom. The day she got back, they went for a meal. She seemed preoccupied, restless. When he offered her a cigarette, she shook her head.

'Did you give up smoking?' She was always talking about giving up.

'No,' she said. 'They stain your teeth.'

'Seems a funny reason *not* to give up,' he joked.

'Clever sod.'

'Then give up.'

'I will when I'm ready.'

'Didn't you want to meet?'

'I'm here aren't I!' He laughed, trying to sound good-humoured. 'You might as well not be.'

She sighed then and relaxed back in her seat, fiddling with her coffee, her hair. 'I'm tired. I just got back from Italy.'

'I saw the postcard,' he said. 'I thought I might get one of my own.' She shrugged. She went on to tell him about a boy she met at university. They'd gone out together for a few months, and she'd spent her holiday staying with his family in a village in the mountains overlooking Lake Como.

'What happened?'

'What do you mean, what happened?'

'You stayed with his family, didn't you?'

'They're very strict,' Anna said abruptly, staring out of the window. 'His mother didn't like me. So, I came home.' She pushed her coffee cup aside. 'It was like a chapter from Lawrence's *The Lost Girl*,' she said, but he didn't know what she was talking about.

Then she started telling him about her father. He'd been in the navy, in the war. His ship was in Scapa Flow when they were torpedoed by a German submarine. Eight hundred men and boys, burned or drowned. She sounded bored, as if she were reading a script from a newspaper. She stopped abruptly, taking a cigarette from the packet Daniel had left on the table. He lit it for her. Her father was invalided out of active service, she said, and had suffered chronic depressions ever since, never holding down a job. He was always there. 'He smokes and goes fishing,' Anna said. 'He never catches anything. My mother looks after him.

That's her job.'

She stubbed her cigarette out. 'I thought I might like you,' she smiled, suddenly genuine, or sounding genuine.

'Well, I'm married,' he said sarcastically, 'so that should make it all right.' She relaxed then. As if she was relieved.

'You aren't married enough,' she laughed, 'keeping that photograph on your desk.' She meant the photograph of his wife and daughter. She finished her cold coffee and walked out of the restaurant.

It was September when he borrowed a friend's car and arranged the trip to London. He booked a hotel in Kensington, and tickets for Ronnie Scott's to hear Blossom Dearie. When they arrived at the hotel, Anna said she felt sick, and collapsed on the bed and went straight to sleep and they ended up checking out early.

She refused to speak on the way to Soho. When he tried to put his arm round her shoulders during the performance she shrugged him off. She hardly touched the food he ordered.

'You should have stayed,' she said as they walked back to the car.

'The club's closed.'

'There were plenty of girls hanging around. They'd look after you.' On the drive back to Lincoln, she was tense and white-faced. Their arguments usually ended this way, but he refused to speak this time.

'I'm sorry,' she said at last. She said she wanted to get back home to see one of her friends who needed her help. He didn't ask what help.

'We used to go to see the Stones before anybody ever heard of them,' she told him. 'I should have been there this weekend.'

When he didn't answer, she lit a cigarette.

'It's not my car,' he said. She shrugged and stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray. He could see her fists clenched on her knees. She sounded angry when she started talking. She said she'd had a lover called Rupert who hated girls smoking.

'He was lovely,' she said provocatively. 'He had a flat in Soho and his friends used to watch.' Daniel gripped the steering wheel. The speedometer flickered upwards.

'Watch?'

He screeched the car to a halt on the grass verge and told her to get out. It was five o'clock in the morning, a thin hot dawn rising from the fields. She slammed the car door and he drove off with another screech of tyres, the speedometer touching eighty before he slammed the brakes on and spun the car into a three-point turn in the middle of the road. He drove back slowly, trying to see where he'd left her. The road was deserted.

He found her crying up on the grass bank, terrified of being attacked. He got out and walked towards her, shouting obscenities. Pheasants clattered up out of the

long grass. He stopped when he saw the tears of mascara running down her cheeks. She climbed back into the car and they drove until they found an exit. Parking on the edge of scrubby woodland, they had sex on the hard ground, in a wilderness of wild garlic.

'I made it up,' she whispered afterwards.

'Made what up?'

'About Rupert.'

'Your lover?'

'Yes.'

Daniel lay on his back, watching an aircraft high in the sky, its vapour trail drifting to the horizon. He realised he'd enjoyed shouting at her, the drama of ordering her out of the car. The excitement he felt when she was telling him about the boy. The excitement he still felt.

'It doesn't matter,' he said, feeling the tiredness coming.

'What doesn't?'

'Nothing.'

They lay quietly together as the sky reddened. The roar of traffic drowned the sound of birds. I like her, he thought vaguely.

'Daniel?'

'Nothing,' he said again, but she didn't answer. ♦

Outside

by *Caleainn Bradley*

I sleep with a lot of different men because I like seeing the insides of their houses. There are other reasons, of course, the kind I could dissect at length with a therapist if that weekly hour spent discussing myself was a luxury I could afford anymore. But those other reasons are complicated, and this one is simple.

The accountant lived in a small but luxurious apartment in the city center. I liked to turn the dimmers up and down, to lie on his leather sofa and watch the wide-screen TV. He left me there once while he went to work and I took a long, long bath, soaking until my fingers wrinkled. Afterward I walked around in his robe, drinking his coffee and eating his bagels, nosing through his bookshelves, hoping he wouldn't come back on his lunch break.

The teacher rented a small room in a terraced redbrick by a railway station. Trains rattled past loudly, but inside every surface was covered in houseplants, and a golden lamp turned the room a soft yellow. I lay on his bed in the dark, curtains open,

watching the city glitter outside. He told me one of his housemates had noisy sex every Monday and Thursday, between 9 and 10 p.m. I wanted to know who with, and why so scheduled? Was he having an affair, perhaps with a yoga-pants-wearing working mother who could manage only those hours? The teacher didn't know. He didn't talk to his roommates. He told me how he hated living there, how he only did it for the low rent, how he mostly stayed in his room and watched TV. He told me, laughingly, that I would have to come over some Monday or Thursday and hear for myself. I laughed along, but I only stayed in the teacher's that one night and afterward stopped answering his calls.

The architect is twice my age and owns an ivy-covered house in Ranelagh. With a grandfather clock in the hall, and a modern kitchen done in elegant grays, and dark wooden floorboards that creak beneath my feet. The architect talks about his ex-wife a lot. The affairs she had, the furniture she broke, the letter in which she informed him she was gone to Spain and wouldn't be coming back. She was an artist. His mouth twists at the corner as he tells me she cared more about painting than she ever did about him. He still keeps a photo of her above the fireplace. She is beautiful in that late-forties way, with soft crow's-feet and a long graceful neck. The last he heard, the architect tells me, mouth twisting again, she was living with a film director in the mountains outside Granada.

I picture their house, the architect's artist ex-wife and her film director's. A view of the snow-tipped mountains, perhaps, her paintings on the walls, spacious rooms filled with light, a wooden breakfast table where they eat marmalade with fresh crusty bread and discuss films.

While the architect sleeps in, I make coffee, sit at his marble island in a patch of sunlight, and pretend this kitchen is mine. All the gray and glass. The *Sunday Times* and *The New Yorker* on the glossy countertop.

I'm too embarrassed to ask the architect for bus fare, so I walk home. I have €1.20 exactly, and when I reach Grand Canal Basin I spend it on a small bottle of chocolate milk and sit on a bench.

There's an abandoned boat at the water's edge on the other side of the basin. The summer before last, at the tail end of a night out, me and two friends climbed up on that boat. We watched the sunrise, and played music on a portable speaker, and ate pastries we'd stolen from a twenty-four-hour Tesco. I remember feeling good about everything: the sky, the stale pastries, the people beside me. I just don't remember how.

I drink my chocolate milk, and watch the seagulls, and wonder how I'm going to get back inside my life. Then I put the empty bottle in a bin and continue to walk. I've done this walk before. I've another half an hour to go before I'm home. ♦

Two More Gallants

by *William Trevor*

You will not, I believe, find either Lenehan or Corley still parading the streets of Dublin, but often in the early evening a man called Heffernan may be found raising a glass of Paddy in Toner's public house; and FitzPatrick, on his bicycle, every working day makes the journey across the city, from Ranelagh to the offices of McGibbon, Tait & FitzPatrick, solicitors and commissioners for oaths. It is on his doctor's advice that he employs this mode of transport. It is against the advice of *his* that Heffernan continues to indulge himself in Toner's. The two men no longer know one another. They do not meet and, in order to avoid a confrontation, each has been known to cross a street.

Thirty or so years ago, when I first knew Heffernan and FitzPatrick, the relationship was different. The pair were closely attached, Heffernan the mentor, FitzPatrick ready with a laugh. All three of us were students, but Heffernan, a Kilkenny man, was different in the sense that he had been a student for as long as anyone could remember. The College porters said they recalled his presence over fifteen years and, though given to exaggeration, they may well have been accurate in that: certainly Heffernan was well over thirty, a small ferrety man, swift to take offence.

FitzPatrick was bigger and more amiable. An easy smile perpetually creased the bland ham of his face, causing people to believe, quite incorrectly, that he was stupid. His mouse-coloured hair was kept short enough not to require a parting, his eyes reflected so profound a degree of laziness that people occasionally professed surprise to find them open. Heffernan favoured pin-striped suits, FitzPatrick a commodious blue blazer. They drank in Kehoe's in Anne Street.

"He is one of those chancers," Heffernan said, "we could do without."

"Oh, a right old bollocks," agreed FitzPatrick.

" 'Well, Mr. Heffernan,' " he says, " 'I see you are still with us.' "

"As though you might be dead."

"If he had his way."

In the snug of Kehoe's they spoke of Heffernan's *bête noire*, the aged Professor Flacks, a man from the North of Ireland.

" 'I see you are still with us,' "Heffernan repeated. "Did you ever hear the beat of that?"

"Sure, Flacks is senile."

"The mots in the lecture giggle when he says it."

"Oh, an ignorant bloody crowd."

Heffernan became meditative. Slowly he lit a Sweet Afton. He was supported in his continuing studentship by the legacy left to him for that purpose by an uncle in Kilkenny, funds which would cease when he was a student no longer. He kept that tragedy at bay by regularly failing the Littlego examination, a test of proficiency in general studies to which all students were obliged to submit themselves.

"A fellow came up to me this morning," he said now, "a right eejit from Monasterevin. Was I looking for grinds in Littlego Logic? Five shillings an hour."

FitzPatrick laughed. He lifted his glass of stout and drank from it, imposing on his upper lip a moustache of foam which was permitted to remain there.

"A minion of Flacks's," Heffernan continued. "A Flacks boy and no mistake, I said to myself."

"You can tell them a mile off."

" 'I know your father,' I said to him. 'Doesn't he deliver milk?' Well, he went the colour of a sunset. 'Avoid conversation with Flacks,' I told him. 'He drove a wife and two sisters insane.' "

"Did your man say anything?"

"Nothing, only 'Cripes.' "

"Oh, Flacks is definitely peculiar," FitzPatrick agreed.

In point of fact, at that time FitzPatrick had never met Professor Flacks. It was his laziness that caused him to converse in a manner which suggested he had, and it was his laziness also which prevented him from noticing the intensity of Heffernan's grievance. Heffernan hated Professor Flacks with a fervour, but in his vague and unquestioning way FitzPatrick assumed that the old professor was no more than a passing thorn in his friend's flesh, a nuisance that could be exorcised by means of complaint and abuse. Heffernan's pride did not at that time appear to play a part; and FitzPatrick, who knew his friend as well as anyone did, would not have designated him as a professor of that quality to an unusual degree. The opposite was rather implied by the nature of his upkeep and his efforts not to succeed in the Littlego examination. But pride, since its presence might indeed by questioned by these facts, came to its own support: when the story is told in Dublin today it is never forgotten that it has roots in Professor Flacks's causing girls to giggle because he repeatedly made a joke at Heffernan's expense.

Employed by the University to instruct in certain aspects of literature, Professor Flacks concentrated his attention on the writings of James Joyce. Shakespeare, Tennyson, Shelley, Coleridge, Wilde, Swift, Dickens, Eliot, Trollope, and many another familiar name were all bundled away in favour of a Joycean scholarship that thirty or so years ago was second to none in Irish university life. Professor Flacks could tell you whom

Joyce had described as a terrified YMCA man, and the date of the day on which he had written that his soul was full of decayed ambitions. He spoke knowledgeably of the stale smell of incense, like foul flowerwater; and of flushed eaves and stubble geese.

"Inane bloody show-off," Heffernan said nastily in Kehoe's.

"You'll see him out, Heff."

"A bogs like that would last for ever."

Twelve months later, after he and Heffernan had parted company, FitzPatrick repeated all that to me. I didn't know either of them well, but was curious because a notable friendship had so abruptly come to an end. FitzPatrick, on his own, was inclined to talk to anyone.

We sat in College Park, watching the cricket while he endeavoured to remember the order of subsequent events. It was Heffernan who'd had the idea, as naturally it would be, since FitzPatrick still knew Professor Flacks only by repute and had not suffered the sarcasm which Heffernan found so offensive. But FitzPatrick played a vital part in the events which followed, because the elderly woman who played the main part of all was a general maid in FitzPatrick's digs.

"Has that one her slates on?" Heffernan inquired one night as they passed her by in the hall.

"Ah, she's only a bit quiet."

"She has a docile expression all right."

"She wouldn't damage a fly."

Soon after that Heffernan took to calling in at FitzPatrick's digs in Donnybrook more often than he had in the past. Sometimes he was there when FitzPatrick arrived back in the evening, sitting in the kitchen while the elderly maid pricked sausages or cut up bread for the meal that would shortly be served. Mrs. Maginn, the landlady, liked to lie down for a while at that time of day, so Heffernan and the maid had the kitchen to themselves. But finding him present on several occasions when she came downstairs, Mrs. Maginn in passing mentioned the fact to her lodger. FitzPatrick, who didn't himself understand what Heffernan's interest in the general maid was, replied that his friend liked to await his return in the kitchen because it was warm. Being an easy-going woman, Mrs. Maginn was appeased.

"There's no doubt in my mind at all," Heffernan stated in Kehoe's after a few weeks of this behaviour. "If old Flacks could hear it he'd have a tortoise's pup."

FitzPatrick wagged his head, knowing that an explanation was in the air. Heffernan said: "She's an interesting old lassie."

He then told FitzPatrick a story which FitzPatrick had never heard before. It concerned a man called Corley who had persuaded a maid in a house in Baggot Street to do a small service for him. It concerned, as

well, Corley's friend, Lenehan, who was something of a wit. At first FitzPatrick was confused by the story, imagining it to be about a couple of fellow-students whom he couldn't place.

"The pen of Jimmy Joyce," Heffernan explained. "That yarn is Flacks's favourite of the lot."

"Well, I'd say there wasn't much to it. Sure, a skivvy never would."

"She was gone on Corley."

"But would she steal for him?"

"You're no romantic, Fitz."

FitzPatrick laughed, agreeable to accepting this opinion. Then, to his astonishment, Heffernan said: "It's the same skivvy Mrs. Maginn has above in your digs."

FitzPatrick shook his head. He told Heffernan to go on with himself, but Heffernan insisted.

"She told me the full story herself one night I was waiting for you—maybe the first night I ever addressed a word to her. 'Come into the kitchen outa the cold, Mr. Hefferman,' she says. D'you remember the occasion it was? Late after tea, and you didn't turn up at all. She fried me an egg."

"But, holy Christ, man—"

"It was the same night you did well with the nurse from Dundrum."

FitzPatrick guffawed. A great girl, he said. He repeated a few details, but Heffernan didn't seem interested.

"I was told the whole works in the kitchen, like Jimmy Joyce had it out of her when she was still in her teens. A little gold sovereign was what she fecked for your man."

"But the poor old creature is as honest as the day's long."

"Oh, she took it all right and she still thinks Corley was top of the bill."

"But Corley never existed—"

"Of course he did. Wasn't he for ever entertaining that fine little tart with the witticisms of Master Lenehan?"

The next thing that happened, according to FitzPatrick, was that a bizarre meeting took place. Heffernan approached Professor Flacks with the information that the model for the ill-used girl in Joyce's story "Two Gallants" had come to light in a house in Donnybrook. The Professor displayed considerable excitement, and on a night when Mrs. Maginn was safely at the pictures he was met by Heffernan at the bus stop and led to the kitchen.

He was a frail man in a tweed suit, not at all as FitzPatrick had imagined him. Mrs. Maginn's servant, a woman of about the same age, was slightly deaf and moved slowly owing to rheumatism. Heffernan had bought half a pound of fig-roll biscuits which he arranged on a plate. The old woman poured tea.

Professor Flacks plied her with questions. He asked them gently, with courtesy and diplomacy, without any hint of the tetchiness described so often by Heffernan. It was a polite occasion in the kitchen, Heffernan handing round the fig-rolls, the maid appearing to delight in recalling a romance in her past.

"And later you told Mr. Joyce about this?" prompted Professor Flacks.

"He used to come to the house when I worked in North Frederick Street, sir. A dentist by the name of O'Riordan."

"Mr. Joyce came to get his teeth done?"

"He did, sir."

"And you'd talk to him in the waiting-room, is that it?"

"I'd be lonesome, sir. I'd open the hall door when the bell rang and then there'd be a wait for maybe an hour before it'd ring again, sir. I recollect Mr. Joyce well, sir."

"He was interested in your—ah—association with the fellow you mentioned, was he?"

"It was only just after happening, sir. I was turned out of the place in Baggot Street on account of the bit of trouble. I was upset at the time I knew Mr. Joyce, sir."

"That's most understandable."

"I'd often tell a patient what had happened to me."

"But you've no hard feelings today? You were badly used by the fellow, yet—"

"Ah, it's long ago now, sir."

Heffernan and FitzPatrick saw the Professor on to a bus and, according to FitzPatrick, he was quivering with pleasure. He clambered into a seat, delightedly talking to himself, not noticing when they waved from the pavement. They entered a convenient public house and ordered pints of stout.

"Did you put her up to it?" FitzPatrick inquired.

"The thing about that one, she'd do anything for a scrap of the ready. Didn't you ever notice that about her? She's a right old miser."

It was that that Heffernan had recognized when first he'd paid a visit to Mrs. Maginn's kitchen: the old maid was possessed of a meanness that had become obsessional with her. She spent no money whatsoever, and was clearly keen to add to what she had greedily accumulated. He had paid her a pound to repeat the story he had instructed her in.

"Didn't she say it well? Oh, top of the bill, I'd say she was."

"You'd be sorry for old Flacks."

"Oh, the devil take bloody Mr. Flacks."

Some months went by. Heffernan no longer visited the kitchen in Donnybrook, and he spoke hardly at all of Professor Flacks. In his lazy way FitzPatrick assumed that the falsehoods which had been perpetrated were the be-all and end-all of the affair, that Heffernan's pride—now clearly revealed to him—had somehow been satisfied. But then, one summer's

afternoon while the two idled in Stephen's Green in the hope of picking up girls, Heffernan said: "There's a thing on we might go to next Friday."

"What's that?"

"Mr. Flacks performing. The Society of the Friends of James Joyce."

It was a public lecture, one of several that were to be delivered during a week devoted by the Society to the life and work of the author who was its *raison d'être*. The Society's members came from far afield: from the United States, Germany, Finland, Italy, Australia, France, England and Turkey. Learned academics mingled with less learned enthusiasts. Mr. James Duffy's Chapelizod was visited, and Mr. Power's Dublin Castle. Capel Street and Ely Place were investigated, visits were made to the renowned Martello Tower, to Howth and to Pim's. Betty Bellezza was mentioned, and Val from Skibbereen. The talk was all Joyce talk. For a lively week Joyce reigned in Dublin.

On the appointed evening FitzPatrick accompanied his friend to Professor Flacks's lecture, his premonitions suggesting that the occasion was certain to be tedious. He had no idea what Heffernan was up to, and wasn't prepared to devote energy to speculating. With a bit of luck, he hoped, he'd be able to have a sleep.

Before the main event a woman from the University of Washington spoke briefly about Joyce's use of misprints; a bearded German read a version of "The Holy Office" that had only recently been discovered. Then the tweeded figure of Professor Flacks rose. He sipped at a tumbler of water, and spoke for almost an hour about the model for the servant girl in the story, "Two Gallants." His discovery of that same elderly servant, now employed in a house in Donnybrook, engendered in his audience a whisper of excitement that remained alive while he spoke, and exploded into applause when he finished. A light flush enlivened the paleness of his face as he sat down. It was, as Heffernan remarked to his dozy companion, the old man's finest hour.

It was then that FitzPatrick first became uneasy. The packed lecture-hall had accepted as fact all that had been stated, yet none of it was true. Notes had been taken, questions were now being asked. A voice just behind the two students exclaimed that this remarkable discovery was worth coming two thousand miles to hear about. Mental pictures of James Joyce in a dentist's waiting-room flashed about the hall. North Frederick Street would be visited tomorrow, if not tonight.

"I'd only like to ask," Heffernan shouted above the hubbub, "if I may, a simple little question." He was on his feet. He had caught the attention of Professor Flacks, who was smiling benignly at him. "I'd only like to inquire," Heffernan continued, "if that whole thing

couldn't be a lot of baloney."

"Baloney?" a foreign voice repeated.

"Baloney?" said Professor Flacks.

The buzz of interest hadn't died down. Nobody was much interested in the questions that were being asked except the people who were asking them. A woman near to FitzPatrick said it was extraordinarily moving that the ill-used servant girl, who had been so tellingly presented as an off-stage character by Joyce, should bear no grudge all these years later.

"What I mean, Professor Flacks," said Heffernan, "is I don't think James Joyce ever attended a dentist in North Frederick Street. What I'm suggesting to you, sir, is that the source of your information was only looking for a bit of limelight."

FitzPatrick later described to me the expression that entered Professor Flacks's eyes. "A lost kind of look," he said, "as though someone had poked the living daylights out of him." The old man stared at Heffernan, frowning, not comprehending at first. His relationship with this student had been quite different since the night of the visit to Mrs. Maginn's kitchen: it had been distinguished by a new friendliness, and what had seemed like mutual respect.

"Professor Flacks and myself," continued Heffernan, "heard the old lady together. Only I formed the impression that she was making the entire matter up. I thought, sir, you'd formed that opinion also."

"Oh, but surely now, Mr. Heffernan, the woman wouldn't do that."

"There was never a dentist by the name of O'Riordan that practised in North Frederick Street, sir. That's a fact that can easily be checked."

Heffernan sat down. An uneasy silence gripped the lecture-hall. Eyes turned upon Professor Flacks. Weakly, with a hoarseness in his voice, he said: "But why, Mr. Heffernan, would she have made all that up? A woman of that class would hardly have read the story, she'd hardly have known—"

"It's an unfortunate thing, sir," interrupted Heffernan, standing up again, "but that old one would do anything for a single pound note. She's of a miserly nature. I think what has happened," he went on, his tone changing as he addressed the assembly, "is that a student the Professor failed in an examination took a chance to get his own back. Our friend Jas Joyce," he added, "would definitely have relished that."

In misery Professor Flacks lifted the tumbler of water to his lips, his eyes cast down. You could sense him thinking, FitzPatrick reported, that he was a fool and he had been shown to be a fool. You could sense him thinking that he suddenly appeared to be unreliable, asinine and ridiculous. In front of the people who mattered to him most of all he had been exposed as a fraud he did not feel himself to be. Never again could he hold his head up among the Friends of

James Joyce. Within twenty-four hours his students would know what had occurred.

An embarrassed shuffling broke out in the lecture-hall. People murmured and began to make their way into the aisles. FitzPatrick recalled the occasion in Mrs. Maginn's kitchen, the two elderly puppets on the end of Heffernan's string, the fig-rolls and the tea. He recalled the maid's voice retailing the story that he, because he knew Heffernan so well, had doubted with each word that was uttered. He felt guilty that he hadn't sought the old man out and told him it wasn't true. He glanced through the throng in the lecture-hall at the lone figure in porridgy tweeds, and unhappily reflected that suicide had been known to follow such wretched disgrace. Outside the lecture-hall he told Heffernan to go to hell when a drink in Anne Street was suggested—a remark for which Heffernan never forgave him.

"I mean," FitzPatrick said as we sat in College Park a long time later, "how could anyone be as petty? When all the poor old fellow ever said to him was 'I see you are still with us'?"

I made some kind of reply. Professor Flacks had died a natural death a year after the delivery of his lecture on "Two Gallants." Earlier in his life he had not, as Heffernan had claimed, driven a wife and two sisters mad: he'd been an only child, the obituary said in the *Irish Times*, and a bachelor. It was an awkward kind of obituary, for the gaffe he'd made had become quite famous and was still fresh in Dubliners' minds.

We went on talking about him, FitzPatrick and I, as we watched the cricket in College Park. We spoke of his playful sarcasm and how so vehemently it had affected Heffernan's pride. We marvelled over the love that had caused a girl in a story to steal, and over the miserliness that had persuaded an old woman to be party to a trick. FitzPatrick touched upon his own inordinate laziness, finding a place for that also in our cobweb of human frailty. ♦

Bioko

by *Bill Barich*

Of course we drank too much during the crisis. Everyone did. The country was in shreds, tearing itself apart at the seams. Clubs, machetes, widespread rioting, then rumors of a civil war. A familiar story in the postcolonial age, but new to us. We could've gone home, Emma and I, but we'd forfeit a bonus at the end of the term, so we stayed. Although we could imagine the worst happening, we were too naive to believe it really would.

"This isn't what I signed on for." Emma poured freely, filling a tumbler. Black-market gin, coarse and cheap, was our beverage of choice. We ate sardines on crackers, olives, anchovies. Proper meals were a thing of the past since the school's dining hall had closed. "It's true I wanted an adventure, but I had a different kind in mind."

We were in the parlor of her house. It was built with concrete blocks that nobody had bothered to paint. The ceiling fan whirred, and the sausage flies buzzed and bounced off the walls. "You entertained a noble sense of purpose," I suggested. "You wanted to contribute something."

"I did have a vague notion I could be helpful. Plus, I'd just broken up with the guy I told you about."

"Not again, please." Our conversations tended to revolve in circles. Life itself felt repetitive. The sun, the heat, the dust, the clamor of the little market square, the same every day. "But let's face it, Emma. We're in a rut and need a change of scenery."

"Don't even start. I'm not listening."

So I said, "Bioko."

I'd heard about the island from other expats, and from the Jesuits who ran our school. A former Spanish colony in the Gulf of Guinea with mountains, wildlife, and gorgeous beaches. Hiking, surfing. Good food and wine, Afro-Cuban music, no teeming insect life. Bioko could be reached by ferry from a town at the southern tip of the country. You couldn't buy tickets online. The ferry company had no website. It would be a long, difficult trip, but I was still eager to go. I'd been lobbying Emma to go with me.

"We're both bored. The school's barely functioning," I argued. Half the students had returned to their home villages or were hiding in the bush to avoid being forced to join our region's hastily assembled army. "We'll ask Brother Joseph for a compassionate leave of absence."

"I love the way you string words together! 'Compassionate leave of absence,' that's a real beauty.

No wonder you pretended you'd write a book here. What an original idea!"

"Events conspired to defeat me." Writing had come to seem more pointless than ever. Even reading was a chore, each paragraph another lap in a marathon I lacked the willpower to complete. "Brother Joe will give us some time off. You know he will if you ask him. He fancies you, as they say."

"It's more likely he fancies you."

I often regretted falling for Emma. I knew better, but so did she. Fate had tossed us together like shipwreck survivors. That was a fantasy we indulged in. The only other foreigners on staff were a Bible-thumping couple from Brighton and a closeted Belgian who drank more than anyone. Emma and I were wary of each other at first, but we were lonely and needy and fell into bed despite our misgivings. It was good at the start, a relief from all the tension, and then not so good and then the gin and malaise took over, dread mingling with random bursts of affection.

Emma could be biting, she could be brilliantly haphazard, but she was seldom no fun. We were mates in the end, and I could count on her to cave in and agree to any caper. "All right," she said softly. "I know it's a mistake. But I'll throw caution to the wind. I'll go to Bioko with you."

Brother Joe expressed concern about our safety. He was Irish, a kind man long domiciled in Africa, who seemed almost pained when he dispensed an obligatory piety. "Is it wise to undertake the journey just now?" he counseled us. "Mightn't it be better to postpone it?" The answer was a resounding yes, but we collected our backpacks and took off.

Travel anywhere had become a reckless enterprise. Bands of armed vigilantes roamed the streets, yanking passengers from taxis and buses to interrogate them, relying on brute force for their authority. If they didn't like the look of you, they'd accuse you of being a spy and beat you. They'd been known to kill people. But Emma and I got lucky and slipped out of the village without incident, although not without distress.

We snuck away on a wooden-sided cattle car mounted on a truck chassis, the cheapest form of transport. The car listed from side to side like an amusement park ride. The passengers were crammed together in a fetid crush of humanity, mothers with infants cradled on their backs, farmers with baskets of yams, with chickens and goats, vendors of Fanta or kola nuts or oranges, men shouldering bunches of bananas, the deformed with their raffia begging bowls. In the old days, everyone was friendly to us, viewing our presence as an expression of goodwill, but now they stared and muttered oaths and tried to distance themselves.

"They think we're crazy," Emma whispered.

"You're being paranoid," I warned her. Paranoia was

an ever-present danger to guard against. At times it threatened to swallow me whole. But I looked again and saw what Emma saw. The others thought we were crazy.

"We're a form of bad juju," she said. "You can see it in their eyes. I'm freaking out a little here."

Our destination was the nearest port city. From there we'd catch a riverboat to the town with a ferry. The crossing to Bioko would take only a few hours, I reminded Emma, showing her my guidebook. I held out the island as a promise of salvation, describing, as I'd done so many times before, a round of sundowners on a peerless beach, and she began to get her bearings again.

Things were quiet in the port city. So many expats had fled the chaos that hotel prices had hit rock bottom. We stayed at a five-star called the Viceroy, where prostitutes wandered the halls to service the mercenaries who'd arrived in anticipation of a war, any war. They came from all over, from Israel and Congo and Angola. Emma was quick to point out that not a few wore a black patch over an eye. We created backstories of fantastic intrigue for them as we sipped our G&Ts, ignoring the servers who ignored us and every other customer in the hotel bar. They conversed explosively in their own language, laughing and snapping their fingers, duty bound to deliver a payback for the indignities, real or imagined, they'd endured when there was still a manager to boss them around. I doubted they'd been paid in a long time. They only showed up on the chance that a miracle might occur.

"I wonder what it's like to make it with a mercenary," Emma mused. "Brutal, do you think? Or do they reveal their inner child and seek Mommy's approval?" She rattled the ice in her empty glass. "Couple more of these babies, and I might give it a whirl."

Here was the brash young woman I'd fallen for. But what did I know of Emma, really? Not much. She came from Palm Springs and did film studies at UCLA until she met the guy she broke up with, a lying, cheating computer genius who strung her along for nearly three years before she realized what a creep he was and fell into a deep depression over all that wasted time, sick about the mess she'd made, and desperate to do something meaningful with what was left of her life. She was only twenty-six but insisted on believing her future hours on earth might be limited. It lent her a semitragic air that feckless men like me found appealing.

Oddly, she asked little about my background, beyond the basics. She seemed to think I'd always been at the school waiting for the shipwreck that would land us together. That wasn't far off the mark. In the six months before Emma showed up, I'd only flirted with nightclub hostesses in their gaudy dresses with their

wigs askew, and I was panting for at least the semblance of a relationship.

After a breakfast of lukewarm tea and day-old toast, we boarded the riverboat in the harbor. It was a small, open-air craft with a canvas top striped like an awning and a putt-putt engine that sounded emphysemic when the pilot fired it up. He wore a singlet and ill-fitting trousers and had only one reliable arm. The other ended abruptly in a stump. It was conceivable he'd had a run-in with the vigilantes. He steered with one hand on the wheel.

"I wish he had a parrot on his shoulder," said Emma, ever quick to embroider reality. "That would be so cool."

The day was overcast, muggy. A distant rumble conveyed a hint of thunderstorms. The river moved slowly, swampy and sludge-green. All along the shore, fishermen were casting nets or dragging a seine stretched between two dugout canoes. Smoke rose from cooking fires in the tiny settlements carved from the rainforest, tentative spaces that could vanish in an instant if the oil palms chose to revoke their right to exist. Children emerged from the thatched huts to wave to us as in countless documentaries. We could hear monkeys gibbering in the deepest bush. Soon the river narrowed to the width of a channel, and mangroves began to choke it, thriving on the brackish water of the approaching estuary. The pilot used his good arm to throttle down.

"Up there," he remarked to his five passengers, the first indication he actually noticed us. He gestured toward some cloud-blanketed mountains. "We get gorillas. But you will never see 'em. If you try, they hide. Plenty smart, those gorillas. Used to be many many, but the hunters shoot 'em for bush meat." He rubbed his only thumb and index finger together, the universal sign for making a buck, and fell silent again.

I could feel the weight of the sky. So could Emma. Though it was warm, she hugged herself. We were trapped in a miasma, some weird zone of atmospheric disturbance. The humidity was fierce, and the air felt solid, all of a piece. The nearness of the bush contributed to the sensation of being closed in. For our students, the bush was an animate place, the home of spirits and departed ancestors who could influence their fate, so they sometimes left offerings at shrines or consulted medicine men who treated their complaints with herbal concoctions. At the same time, the students went regularly to Mass and listened attentively when Brother Joe delivered a sermon. They were able to hold both worlds in a fine balance.

The heaviness of the air refused to lift even when the river widened again at the estuary and gave us a welcome glimpse of the ocean. On the docks I saw the usual hangers-on at any point of departure, touts with their petty scams, schoolgirls balancing trays of fruit on their heads, and itinerant dealers in moonstone jewelry

and leather hassocks, their wares displayed on the dusty earth. But there was no sign of any vigilantes or soldiers. I assumed the rebellion hadn't yet reached this distant outpost, and for that I was grateful. The ferry waited in its berth, rocking as the tidal wavelets struck its hull. No one was visible on either of its decks. The captain's bridge rested atop the upper deck with windows all around. It too appeared to be vacant.

Nearby I spotted a ticket booth, its sign hand-lettered. Inside sat a slender, preoccupied man with a name tag identifying him as Ezekiel Diobu, Chief Sales Officer. He amused himself with a game of dominoes against an imaginary opponent. "Can you tell me what time the ferry leaves?" I asked him.

"Not today." Diobu clacked a pair of dominoes together, contemplating his next move. "Only on Friday."

"That can't be right. My guidebook says daily crossings."

"It is right, sir!" He sounded insulted. "I've worked here long time. Never on Tuesday, always on Friday. Same-same every week, never changes."

This was a serious setback. I dared not look at Emma for fear of the face she'd be making. I handed Diobu the fare, and he passed over two tickets of the movie theater variety.

We'd be forced to spend three days and nights in that airless town, consigned to its gloom by what Emma called my "colossal fuckup." Once again I showed her the guidebook with *daily crossings to Bioko* underlined, but she still regarded the glitch as a character flaw, the very one that made me feckless and unable to accomplish any of the goals I set for myself. She was right, of course. All I'd done since college was teach English in foreign lands and hook up with women like her, and I was almost thirty. I blamed the economy, a half-truth at best. But you can only have the same argument so many times before it goes as limp as a dishrag, so instead of squeezing out the last drops of moisture, we booked a room at a no-star hotel and fell asleep in separate beds.

We woke at the cocktail hour, an elastic time frame for us. There being no hotel bar, we wandered along the waterfront. The sky still weighed thousands of pounds, and the rain declined to fall. Emma kicked at the trash, booting orange peels and crushed cigarette packs off a breakwater. A man who resembled Diobu's brother tried to sell us a motor scooter. It was missing a wheel. Huge birds with wingspans like pterodactyls swooped down to scavenge in the filthy shallows of the Atlantic, leaving the pickings on land to rats. I'd never seen such fat ones, the size of raccoons.

I began to suspect I should've taken a shower. A high unpleasant odor came off me. "How do I smell, Emma?"

"Bad. Awful." She continued to be very unhappy about the situation, if not totally infuriated, sulking

when I joked about it and reverting to her Palm Springs origins as the spoiled brat daughter of a Bank of America vice president. My advice to her? Get over it.

The trip was not going well. At last we stumbled on a crumbling old sports club with potted palms out front, a relic of colonial times where British civil servants had sought refuge from the rigors of the tropics. For the equivalent of thirty cents apiece, we became members. Inside several elderly gents sat in wing chairs doing crosswords or reading weeks-old copies of the *Financial Times.* Emma and I decamped to the billiard room with our pink gins. The snooker table was torn and frayed, but we played with great vigor in spite of not knowing how to keep score.

Emma's acrobatics soon attracted an onlooker, a compact fellow in a crisp white shirt, khaki shorts, and knee socks. All he needed was a pith helmet to complete the ensemble. He bounced from one foot to the other, obviously dying for a game, and at last opened his mouth to say, "Bravo! I admire a young woman who flouts the rules. Take nothing for granted. Make it up as you go along. That's the spirit! I hope I'm not intruding?"

But that was already a fait accompli. He extended a hand, and I shook it. The hand was gnarly from a skin rash, common enough below the equator. Edward Heatherton had a yellowish moustache and a plum-colored birthmark beneath his right eye. "Traveling to Bioko, are we?" he asked.

"That's right," said Emma. "How'd you guess?"

"There's no other reason to be here. The only tourists we get are going to the island." I wondered if he'd been to Bioko himself. "I have indeed," he told us. "Lovely place, really. I think highly of the Bubi people. They're not as menacing as they look with those tattoos. I say, how about giving a chap a game?"

Edward played with military precision, a snooker pro. He'd squint and shake his head, then check the lay of the land from another angle. Although he could've won easily, he was too much of a gent and allowed Emma to take a mulligan if she knocked a ball off the table or ripped another tear in the felt with her cue tip. But his pride wouldn't let him throw the match, and he bore down and defeated her handily. "Damned lucky," he pretended, inviting us for drinks in the library, where the shelves sagged under the weight of Kipling, Dickens, and other heavyweights of the empire.

Edward hadn't talked with anybody new for quite a while, maybe for years, or so I gathered. He poured out his life story virtually unedited, pausing only to order another round of pink gins. He described his career as a cultural attaché with the British Council, serving all over Africa, in Gambia and Sierra Leone and Tanzania, before he fetched up in the town where we were, the site of his last posting.

"I never intended to retire here," he confided, and I squirmed a little, wishing he'd cut to the chase, although Emma sat still and looked fascinated. I worried she'd want to hear about the antelopes or whatever in Tanzania. "Oh no, not at all! I'd had enough of the bloody heat to last forever," Edward went on. "Four seasons, that's what I craved. Brandy by the fire on a cold winter night, the sweetness of a spring morning. But I lost my wife, you see, and I never really recovered. We'd been together forty-two years. Imagine that!" I tried, but I couldn't. "Without her it didn't matter where I lived. I'd always be alone, so I decided to stay put. This isn't such a beastly place to wait out the days, is it?"

I felt for Edward. He'd suffered a real tragedy compared to Emma with her computer genius. "No, it's an excellent place," I encouraged him, and he said, "Thank you, dear boy. But you don't lie very well." He was teary-eyed, and Emma reached out to hold his gnarly hand. I envied her ability to listen when someone started venting. My tendency was to excuse myself and head for the door, but you can't correct every flaw in your personality. Sometimes it's best to accept who you are.

"I'm so sorry." Edward put his hankie to good use. "I still find it difficult. Dora meant everything to me. You two must be careful to guard your love. Protect it with all your might. Love is terribly fragile. Take it for granted, and it will wither and die. But I mustn't carry on like this. What an old fool I am! Forgive me, will you? I'm afraid I overindulged."

Edward looked pretty rocky after the crying jag. We enlisted a couple of club members to help him to his car, hoping he wouldn't smash it up on his way home. Emma was tired of snooker, and I'd had my fill of gin. All the talk about how love can wither and die had made us both self-conscious. What in the world were we doing together? That was the question we dared not address. The shipwreck fantasy had begun to lose its velocity. Probably we'd leaned on it to avoid facing any hard truths. Emma acted mopey and quiet, while I wondered if it was humanly possible to love a woman as much as Edward loved Dora.

It was past midnight when we left the club. The waterfront was unlit except by a sliver of moon. Emma started kicking at the trash again, still deep in thought. She was hungry after her snooker workout, so we stopped at Beverly Hills Café and ate a scrawny chicken cooked in a vat of vividly orange palm oil. My stomach began to churn halfway through a leg, but that happened so often I'd learned to ignore it. A pariah dog followed us to our hotel, where our room swarmed with mosquitoes. I couldn't breathe without inhaling one. I managed to kill a few with my sandal before Emma switched off the light and climbed into bed fully clothed.

I did the same, securing myself beneath my only sheet. I managed to drift off for about nine minutes, only to wake drenched in sweat after enduring the whole-white-man-in-the-tropics delirium with horrifying dreams in 3-D and Dolby sound. Though I moaned and cried out, Emma did nothing to ease my psychic pain. She remained snuggled up, her eyes wide open and fixed on the ceiling, and when I calmed down she said, "We need to talk."

I played dumb. It was the sensible thing to do. "About what?"

"You know what. About us. This isn't working anymore. Not really, not for me. I mean, I like you a lot, and we do have fun. But that's not enough, is it? I'm not trying to be critical. You're a great guy in many ways. I'm glad I met you." I wished she'd drop the past tense. I found it unsettling. Maybe I had feelings for her I'd never articulated to myself. "I don't want to go to Bioko. I'm not sure I ever did. But you have a powerful personality, Paul. You're able to convince people to do stuff they wouldn't ordinarily do."

"That's not true."

"Yes, it is. Don't deny it. I'll tell you what's let do. Let's head back to the school tomorrow. I'm ready to call it quits. After that I'm going home."

"Home home? To Palm Springs? You'll forfeit your bonus."

"I don't care. My parents will look after me."

But I wasn't about to let her wriggle out of the trip. When you forge a pact, you're obliged to fulfill it. You can't just abort the mission, so I worked all night to turn her around. We were mates, weren't we? And Emma? You always bitch about Palm Springs and how you're scared you'll wind up in Housewife Jail like your mom. It's a life of adventure you're after. Haven't I heard you admit as much? How many chances will you have to swim in the Gulf of Guinea?

"Please, please, please stop. You win." She put a pillow over her head, muffling her voice. "But I'm still going home after."

In later years, when I was old enough to take stock of my regrets, I ranked this moment near the top. In a country on the brink of civil war, with untold misery visited on people in so many parts of the world, all I cared about was getting to Bioko for my holiday. At times I suspect the madness of the situation must've triggered the same in me, although it's conceivable my madness was a preexisting condition, a last spasm of youth before I became what I am today, a reasonably decent human being with a wife of twenty-four years and two kids in college. I like to think Edward Heatherton would be proud.

Our wait grew longer. Wednesday lasted thirty-two hours, Thursday a record-breaking fifty-two, but Friday came at last, arriving with a crashing storm. The rain fell in drops the size of quarters, nearly deafening as it

battered the hotel's tin roof. Muddy water cascaded down from the hills to flood the storm drains, launching more trash toward the harbor. It was as if the town might wash away. Emma sat yawning on her bed, naked and utterly desirable. But we had no time for that. We had a ferry to catch.

A huge crowd had already gathered at the docks, forming a long line leading to the ferry's gangway. Some travelers hauled old valises stuffed to bursting, held together with a belt or some rope. One trader carried a giant lizard in a wooden cage, its tongue flicking in and out. Dignitaries in ceremonial robes, peasants in rags, a few scruffy backpackers, where would they all fit? The ferry appeared to be nearly full. Passengers were practically hanging off the upper deck. If anybody was in charge, I couldn't find the person, so I thought to consult Ezekiel Diobu.

We found him in his booth. He asked for our tickets and gave them a cursory inspection. "Not today for you," he said, handing them back. "You go next Friday."

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Diobu? I don't understand."

"Next Friday for you. Look here." He indicated the numbers at the bottom of our tickets, 277 and 278. "The ferry will take only two hundred."

"This is fucked," Emma grumbled. "I told you we should have gone back to the school. But no, you never listen."

"Cool it, will you?" I snapped at her. "Work with me here." And to Diobu I said, "You didn't tell us that when we bought the tickets."

"I did tell you."

"You did not." But that game could go on forever, I realized, and Diobu had the home-court advantage. So I tried a different tack. "Would the ferry sink with two hundred and two passengers? Is that what you think, Mr. Diobu? Because I've done the math. The ferry would get to Bioko just fine. You follow?"

"It's not for me to decide. It's up to the captain."

"In that case, I'd better speak with him." I rose into myself, relying on my air of white American privilege to win the day. Diobu yielded to it reluctantly, cupping a hand over his phone as he whispered into it. "You come with me," he beckoned. Emma wanted to tag along, but I was concerned about her safety and urged her to wait. As the perpetrator, I deserved to suffer whatever indignity awaited.

Diobu abandoned me at the gangway. At the top, I met a small, serious-looking boy, no more than eight, who took my hand. He wore a multicolored knit cap and had ritual markings like welts on both cheeks. Without a word, he led me through the mass of passengers to the lower deck, where I almost keeled over from the stench of an overflowing toilet. At the end of the corridor, we came to a closed door. "Captain," the boy said. He knocked and departed.

I had no idea what to expect. All I knew about

captains derived from cruise ship brochures, but it was unlikely this one would be a clean-cut, reassuring presence in dress whites. Instead I confronted a tall, unshaven man who scowled at me as if I'd caused his ferry to spring a leak. If he owned a uniform, he made no move to put it on, not even the cap. He wore ordinary jeans and a T-shirt advertising Estrella beer. Maybe that's why he acted so upset. He hated to be disturbed when he wasn't on duty.

I couldn't tell where he was from. Bioko once belonged to the Spanish, so I guessed he might be a Spaniard, possibly of mixed blood. I began to formulate my argument, focusing on the difference between right and wrong, a universally agreed-on distinction. If Diobu had explained the ticketing system, I contended, I'd have no reason to object, but Diobu had been negligent, and that was wrong. Moreover, he'd lied about his negligence. Only the captain could rectify matters by letting Emma and me aboard as Passengers 201 and 202. I saw it that way, in caps.

He stared at me blankly. It occurred to me to ask, "Do you speak English?"

"Yas, yas, I speak it," he said, waving a hand as if to dismiss a bothersome fly.

I started in again. I threw out a few legal-sounding terms, *class-action suit* and such, but they too fell on deaf ears. I was stumped. "So what's your answer?" I put it to him.

"My answer?" He laughed at me. "Here is my answer." And he rubbed a thumb and index finger together like the riverboat pilot had done. "You pay me some money, understand?"

I couldn't believe this guy. I'd already set out my ethical position, yet he still had the nerve to hit me up for a bribe when I'd already paid for the tickets and also three nights at the no-star, our chicken dinner, and countless drinks, all on the crummy salary I earned as a teacher of English in a foreign land.

"I'm sorry," I said, trying to look as if I wished I could comply, "that's not going to work. I won't bribe you, my friend. It would be wrong, and we're here to make things right. You're going to honor our tickets and let us on that ferry, or I'll demand a refund and report you to the authorities."

Again he laughed. "How you think it work like that? Where you come from, eh? This is not your country. You go away now." He made the fly gesture once more. "Go away, you." He moved closer and shoved me, and I backed up in a hurry. I wasn't ready for hand-to-hand combat in the tropics, certain it would end badly for me, maybe even with my death, so I hurried out of the cabin in a panic and fled from the lower depths to the relative safety of the docks

I wouldn't be traveling to Bioko that day. Probably I'd never visit the island. I'd have to add the trip to the list of goals I'd failed to accomplish. The list was long

and growing longer, but I knew Brother Joe wouldn't give us another week off. If we didn't return soon, he might dock me my bonus, and I needed that money to start over in some tranquil European country, France or maybe Italy, where they had no vigilantes and you could read a book without the words crawling backward on you.

Emma hadn't waited by the ticket booth. Of course not. I found her in the billiard room at the club, several G&Ts to the wind. She didn't rush up to me as a normal woman might, anxious to hear if I'd succeeded. My well-being was of no concern to her. She potted an object ball and said distantly, as if I could be anyone, "No Bioko, right? I can tell by your expression. No Bioko after you dragged me all this way."

"You weren't dragged, Emma. You came along of your own free will."

"Uh-uh. Not so. I was dragged. Because I'm so stupidly dependent on creeps."

"This isn't a therapy session. Do you want to hear what happened or not?"

"No. Yes."

"The captain hardly spoke any English. I pleaded with him, but he wouldn't budge."

"He turned down a bribe?"

"Yeah, he did," I lied. "I offered him almost all my cash, and he pulled a knife on me. I'm lucky to be alive."

I used to wonder at times if Emma and I might still be together if I'd told her the truth. That would've meant I trusted her enough to confess how I'd foolishly stuck to my guns when I could've bought off the captain for ten bucks or so, and since trust is a defining feature of real love, I decided that what we had was at best the bogus type and not intended to last. Our love withered and died, just as Edward had predicted it might.

I ordered a pink gin and grabbed a cue stick, and we shot a best-of-seven match for old time's sake. Two weeks later, Emma was in Palm Springs ignoring my emails, while I sweated in a mud-brick classroom, scolding three students for messing with their phones. I'd heard a rumor that Brother Joe had already hired someone to replace Emma, and I'd be telling lies again if I failed to admit I hoped it would be another pretty young woman like her who enjoyed a bit of fun. ♦

Side by... *...by side*

Nuns Fret Not

by *William* Wordsworth

Nuns fret not at their convent's narrow room;
And hermits are contented with their cells;
And students with their pensive citadels;
Maids at the wheel, the weaver at his loom,
Sit blithe and happy; bees that soar for bloom,
High as the highest Peak of Furness-fells,
Will murmur by the hour in foxglove bells:
In truth the prison, unto which we doom
Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me,
In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound
Within the sonnet's scanty plot of ground;
Pleased if some souls (for such there needs must be)
Who have felt the weight of too much liberty,
Should find brief solace there, as I have found.

Fordítás-változatok

Az apáca nem busong

Az apáca nem busong, ha szobája szűk netán,
A remete elégedett a rendház celláival,
S a deák a skóla fellegvárival.
Cseléd a rokka mellett, takács a szövőszék oldalán
Jámbor jókedvvel ül. S a méhek oly magasan,
Mint a Furness-fells legfelső csúcsai
Órákon át donganak a gyűszűvirág szirmain.
És tény, ahogy a börtön, melyre ítélem önmagam
Nem börtön mégsem, miáltal nekem
A szonett szűkös-gyér kertjében bezártan
Boldog szabadság telt bármely hangulatban –
Úgy bárcsak némely szabadlelkű szerzet,
Kinek a kötöttség súlya szükségeltet,
Röpke vigaszt ott találna, ahol én találtam.

(*Tárnok Attila* fordítása)

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A nővér a kolostoron belül

A nővér a kolostoron belül,
Barát a cellában érzi jól magát,
Padlásszobába bújik a diák,
S a kis fonólány vidáman ül
A rokka mellett. A méh elrepül
Virágporért a Furness-csúcson át,
S órákig zümmög egy gyűszűvirág
Kelyhében. Így bár szűk tér vesz körül,
Nem börtön ez, ha önként vállalom.
Ezért van úgy, hogy nékem élvezet
Olykor, ha köt a zárt szonett-keret,
S kívánom, hogy (sokan vannak, tudom)
Kiket túl nagy szabadság súlya nyom,
Hozzám hasonlón vígaszt leljenek.

(*Papp Gábor Zsigmond* fordítása)

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Apácáknak a zárda tág lakás

Apácáknak a zárda tág lakás,
és nem panaszkodnak a remeték,
hogy kis lakuk kényelme nem elég,
szövőszékénél boldog a takács,
és bár magasra szállhat a darázs,
mint Furness csúcsa, mégis kicsi, kék
virágkelyhekben tölti idejét:
önnön rabságunk kedves, még ha más
szemében börtön is: és így nagyon
sokszor kuksolok én ott boldogan,
hol a szonett aprócska földje van;
s remélem, egy-egy lélek olykoron,
kit a túl sok szabadság súlya nyom,
rövid vigaszt lel ott, mint én magam. ♦

(*Varró Dániel* fordítása)