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BOOK ONE

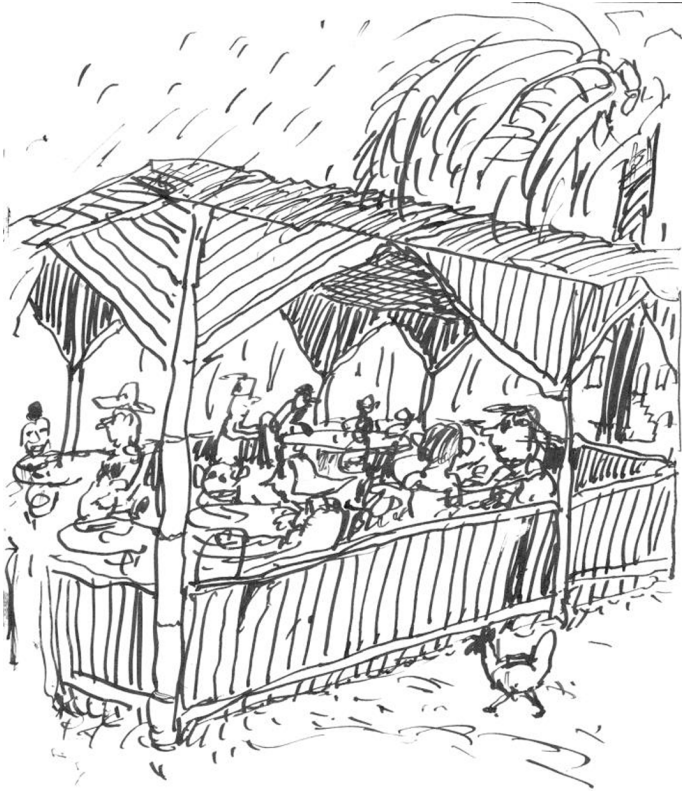
BUMPY LANDINGS

*Tlula Leisure Beach, The People's
Democratic Republic of Bomzawe, West
Africa*



PART ONE

The Beautiful Afreakans



ONE: *A tide in the affairs of men*

The flight from Sydney had been long and arduous. Chipman was not looking his best and the woman at the Embassy front desk was flinty-eyed and uncommunicative. She handed him an envelope and disappeared into a back room

3rd February 1972

Dear Chipman Smith,

Awfully peeved about this. Going to miss you by an hour or more. Have had to whizz up north. Some of our citizenry caught in the tribal cross fire. Back in a day or two. Had digs lined up for you near the Embassy, but my advice is to clear out of Okidoki until everything has blown over. It might take a while but don't worry, it will. This is Bomzawe, not Biafra. I suggest you take a bus to Doggone, the provincial capital and then a trotro (a taxi truck) to Tlula Leisure Beach, a resort near the border. It's a way but you'll find a delightful old hotel right on the water called the Hornbill Palace. All the lobster and prawns you can eat. Relaxation. Fun. Ruined slave castle on the headland. Dutch, very romantic. Best beach in the whole of West Africa. No jelly fish, no undertow, no sharks, no robbers, no rubbish. It's something of a 'hippie' hangout in fact, but there's also a very decent psychotherapist chap I met briefly at a reception here,. His name escapes me but another 'Aussie' in fact. Charming blue blood English wife. Your impending arrival never came up, but I realise now he may be of some assistance in getting you through your little career crisis. I'll give you a tingle when I return to base and we will meet. You'll thank me for this. You're going to have a 'leisurely' time. Sink one for me in the hotel bar. I won't tell Wally. Ha ha!

Cheers, William Oates.

P.S. There's a bus at 11 am from Western Region Transport Hall.

“Psychotherapist?” Chipman queried to himself. What on earth had Wally Whitbread actually said to Oates?



“Everyone love Attah.” Attah Lalwani, manager and chef at the Hornbill Palace Hotel, booked Chipman in, handed back his passport. Lalwani was an oleaginous, middle aged Sindhi with protuberant lips, a stringy moustache and no chin. In profile he looked like a catfish. “My pleasure to carry bag and escort you to your room.”

They entered the first of four rows of slant-roofed bungalows, gaily painted in pastel shades, but dilapidated and under attack from rampaging tropical vegetation. Several gangly birds with bushy eyelashes and enormous ivory-coloured beaks, surmounted by a casque, were wandering unconcernedly about.

“These our famous hornbills,” said Attah, deftly kicking a couple of them high in the air. ORK! ORK! they shrieked, urging themselves off with a creaky flapping of wings. “Those two called Bonnie & Clyde.”

Chipman knew the reference but winced. Large birds made him nervous. He had yet to forgive two black swans who many years ago had attacked him and his best mate Tibor Radovan in their rowing boat on Narrabeen lagoon. Alfie (his father) had parried them away with an oar.

Attah bowed Chipman up some rickety wooden stairs and along a railed verandah which fronted a set of rooms at the back of the main hotel. “No bungalow but an airy repose is yours for the keeping, Mr Chipman Smith. My sorrow it is infinite but we is scrubbing up lovely bungalows for Easter Carnival. I put you next to poor Mr Shaler. Mr Zach.” Half way along the verandah, Attah paused and peered through a jalousie. “He sleeping. I tell you he sleep a lot these last days.” He tapped his temple. “Have a squint but cover your eyes. He has entirely nothing on.”

A man with dark shoulder length hair lay on his back, head towards them on the pillow, one knee raised, concealing his

nakedness. An arm dangled over the edge of the bed. He hadn't shaved for a while. Thirtyish, Chipman's age, his face presenting a sad and wearied look. There was a pale equatorial tan to his skin. A bandage with dried blood stains had been wound around his head. Even as Chipman gazed, the knee went down, Mr Zach's eyes opened and Chipman felt the strength of a wide-awake stare. Hastily, he moved back. He liked the look of the man, and felt there was a reason for that, but was unable to tell himself why. There came Attah's voice again.

"He American Peace Corps worker. Arrive hotel one day and lie around on beach very tragic. He fair to middling gentleman, he read books, but..." Attah twirled a finger above his ear. "There is talk he murder someone long time ago. Now that no good Mr Sanguini come and look after him." Attah let his nostrils flare and eyes to widen in disapproval. His eyeballs had purple discolourations.

The walls of Chipman's room were a faded mustardy colour, the ceiling lowered by being painted indigo. There was a large wardrobe, a small table, a single bed, a couple of frayed canvas chairs. A shower and a flush toilet in a tiled alcove occupied the far end. Attah set an overhead fan wobbling. Tiny dipterous insects were already making themselves at home. Through a gap in the lush foliage he glimpsed the promised 'best beach in all of West Africa' and the ocean, a murky blue under a hazy sky.

The wardrobe was actually a well-finished English rosewood period piece, with a substantial key, and the bed had a bright, Bomzawean patterned coverlet, but to Chipman's mind, the room was not exactly resort accommodations. He would certainly make a complaint when William Oates rang from the Embassy. The price was a bargain, but hot water would be extra and if he wanted Qumqwat or the other girls to clean, that would be extra also. A telephone was available in the hotel office but Attah warned it was difficult for guests to get through to "the infinitely faraway world." And watch out for mambas. "Mr Fangga, the Snake Fetish Priest he cause many to infest bungalow area. We call black mamba the two-step. First step on the snake, second step into the grave."

Chipman assumed that was an exaggeration. He gave Attah a grin, just to humour him. "Ah! I forgot." He handed over three letters from the satchel he had slung over his shoulder. "Josiah Lanfal, the trotro driver gave them to me. The hotel mail."

Attah sifted through them. "I not want this one. You give to Mr Sanguini your sweet self. He ignore my excellent dining room. He make insultations about me and my girls. I high morals professional man. He not even stay at hotel but he ablute here and pay no dues. That performer fellow, his group, they..."

"Where do I find him?"

"Heh heh!" Attah laughed nastily. "He find you beware, Mr Chipman."



The effort to appear sober in front of the manager had taken its toll. Chipman put the vivid coverlet away in the wardrobe and managed to sleep for an hour before rising to take a shower. A slug or two from the first of the bottles of Johnny Walker he had scored at the 'infinitely faraway' Okidoki International Airport, a valium, and he felt ready to face his destiny, or at least his immediate future. Grabbing his Camel Filters, he got himself down the rickety stairs and into the heat of the afternoon.

Almost immediately he was waylaid by a muscular, heavily bearded man. There was the suggestion of a jagged chest scar that disappeared under the beard. A wiry tangle of darkish brown hair stuck out from beneath a tattered baseball cap on which was embroidered in green lettering, ADOLF. A sleek, even gangster looking pair of sunglasses added to the concealing façade. Of average height, with swarthy skin, he was wearing only a pair of blue cotton shorts. His sturdy, nicely haired legs caused a small, unwanted desire to stir in Chipman.

"Dr Salvatore Sanguini. Call me Starry, if you like." There was a forward step and even the suggestion of a curtsy. A smell of seaweed and fresh underarm sweat came wafting

Chipman handed over the letter, feeling he should be giving it to someone who looked more like a real doctor. Italian heritage, he assumed, with a name like a pasta.

Sanguini was a man both impulsive and impatient. He stamped his feet like a brat, swirled theatrically about, sent a post card that was inside the envelope sailing into the shrubbery. What dipsomania had left of the sleuth in Chipman knew instantly that Sanguini was the therapist recommended by William Oates, even though there was nothing grave or distinguished, nothing remotely respectable about him. And what was on that card that required it to be concealed in an envelope?

The glasses had been repaired with gaffer tape and Chipman did wonder what Sanguini might look like behind the beard. He rather liked the man's hawkish nose which created a certain handsomeness, causing him to give his own nose a circumspect squeeze between thumb and forefinger. Chipman was in fact, rather pleased to be (for the first time since his plane touched down in Okidoki), conversing with someone comfortably un-black. Pleased but also aware of Dr Sanguini giving him a hard once-over. Sanguini was in fact assessing him as a future patient, but Chipman took it as a look of envy of his summery, and not inexpensive, David Jones suit, the daring op-art tie he was wearing. Apeing Wally Whitbread, his fashion conscious boss at the Department of the Attorney General and of Justice, had Chipman keeping up with Sydney urban style, as in fact he did even in his drunkest, darkest days back home.

"So who are you?" Dr Sanguini queried, pulling his cap a little lower on his forehead. Not entirely seriously, he added, "I'm not particularly fond of taller men."

Chipman was tired and vulnerable. He handed over the missive he had been given that morning at the British Embassy reception desk. "Chipman? What sort of name is that? I bet I'll be calling you Chip."

"Please don't. It's an old family name. My father was proud of our Scottish American ancestry. After the Californian goldrush..."

Dr Sanguini interrupted. "Australia has no diplomatic representation here of course. Lets London do the dirty work." His voice, of which he was very fond, was a buttery baritone. In the ten years since Sanguini had left Australia, it had become more BBC than any kind of ANZAC. "That communication from Professor bloody Siegfried was the last straw." He rummaged in the shrubbery and retrieved the card. "Did Attah give you a tour of the dreaded bungalow area?"

"He told me about the mambas. The early grave."

"I feel your fear. OK, the bar it is. You want some suncream for that nose of yours? Or even something stronger?" Dr Sanguini snickered at the whisky and more, on Chipman's breath.

"Thank you but it's not burned, and I am not a drunk." After a moment's pause, he added, as he often did to ease his extreme self-consciousness about his nose in new situations. "It inexplicably turned this colour a few months ago. It's a rare condition."

"Still beyond the reach of medical science." Dr Sanguini smiled pleasantly as he pressed an advantage and took hold of Chipman by the elbow. "You are a little unsteady on your feet."

"I'm not. Well, maybe, I'm on leave from my job."

"Who does your hair?"

"It's natural."

"And so very blond."

From the trees above there came an eruption of cicada rattling. It caused Chipman's head to fill with a sublime childhood memory. "Imagine me thinking only Australia has cicadas."

"Couldn't get out of that dreary country quickly enough." Dr Sanguini's hand moved from elbow to a tousling of Chipman's neat little curls. "Let me shout you a cocktail. A Pink Lady perhaps?"

"I don't like cocktails." Privately, Chipman rather did, but he found Dr Sanguini's fingers intrusive and the inference that he was, like that, offensive.

"How could I have got it so wrong?"

The bar was in the main building which seemed unusual in its size for such a remote location, almost like a hangar for small aircraft. It had a wide gable, was lofty and open on all sides to

catch the slightest breeze. The square wooden pillars which held up the corrugated iron roof had decorative capitals, picked out in purple and green, the colours bleached by salt and sun. Two magnificent poincianas overhung the building and there were several varieties of exotic palm in the forecourt. The hotel had been built right on the broad, white sand beach and had a solid feel to it, but like the bungalows, it was in danger of being devoured by the jungle advancing ominously from the hills behind. The national flag, vertical bands of yellow, black and white, a red star in the centre of the black, hung listlessly on a pole.

An early Beatles song was playing on a Dansette. *Love, love me do, You know I love you* ... The bartender, his hands cupped under his chin, elbows on the bar, was clearly asleep. Dr Sanguini dropped him with a rough chop of the hand.

"Excuse me, suh, I forty wink."

"Two Red Star beer, Qwami. And a glass of whisky for the travel weary Mr Chipman Smith here. Your new customer. You don't get many. Take a good look at him."

Qwami was a plumpish youth, of pantherine blackness, like everyone Chipman had met since arriving in Bomzawe. The voluptuous market women who had shared the benches in the trotro from Doggone, had skin so black it was blue. Exotic people, neatly lipped, eared and nosed, pink palmed people crowding in on him from all sides; everyone was very dark – and shiny – indeed.

Qwami was taking his good look and grinning. Beautiful white teeth. Chipman refused to admit that a black person could be sexually attractive, and made himself look away. He was only aroused by the unavailable and older man anyway. As he – with increasing bitterness – was fond of musing.

"Put it on my bill, Qwami." The doctor pushed a coin across the counter. "No need to tip but dash him if you want coldies."

"Thank you, Dr Sanguini," said Chipman as the whisky was handed to him. He was not a man easily able to refuse a drink.

"Qwami is Lilibet Lanfal's eldest, aren't you Qwami? A lady of some substance. Qojo, his younger brother, cooks for us every night

by the sand." Sanguini took a good pull on his beer. "The village girls are required to be virginal unfortunately, but there's accommodating widows, not to mention wives." He paused, eyed the newcomer over his bottle. "The young men are always available of course." Chipman was irritated by yet another lurid inference, but lit up and offered the doctor his pack.

"Tobacco? Don't smoke. You'll soon run out of those here."

The bar was less than busy. Four sunburned Scandinavian men – lank flaxen hair, baggy shorts and rubber thongs – were sprawled around a formica-topped table amid a haze of smoke. A torpid game of poker was in progress. They called for more margaritas. Scarlet the Harlot, a careworn, local 'fancy lady', bare midriff in a short stretch skirt, arrived, doing her nails. She demanded they buy her one too. Smiling sweetly she sat on a welcoming knee. Further off, a couple of teenage boys, licorice torsoes slick with sweat, were immersed in an un leisured game of ping pong. A tall, slender man moving languidly about to The Beatles, and dressed in a turban, a cream coloured djellaba and red leather babouches, was Hamou, a watchman. An exiled Fulani from Chad, he was the one who would change Chipman's money into the local currency.

Dr Sanguini borrowed Qwami's damp bar rag and cooled his brow. Overhead fans swirled sluggishly in the dry air. A fly-specked mural of a large African gentleman fully occupied the area above Qwami's bottles. Splendid in a powder blue tuxedo and spotted bow-tie, he was portrayed with an oily, avuncular obesity, his right hand about to drop a centipede into the gaping mouth of a hornbill. Underneath was a poorly spaced caption:

BE LOVED ULYSSES – FREE DOM FOR ALL BOMZA WEANS.

"Yes, Ulysses Oratorio, Bomzawe's Great Liberator. Close friend of Sylvanus Olimpio in Togo."

"I saw an overturned statue in Okidoki. Bigger than a Greyhound bus. Someone had tried to hack off its head."

"There's been madness in this country ever since the Liberator fled. Five years ago now. President Mguavas is finally doing the

right thing and bringing the great man back from banishment. A misunderstood hero."

The doctor waggled his broad, high-arched feet. His legs were stretched out at right angles from his bar stool. He noticed Chipman's sudden interest and smiled. "Legs! My finest attribute." The bare limbs and shoeless feet had Chipman thinking of Wally Whitbread, and the fact that his ultimatum would have to be faced sooner rather than later. Until the shocking mention of a psychotherapist in William Oates' letter, he had not thought even once about therapy of any kind. In fact, he now found himself hating the idea of it as something entirely debasing. When Wally had confronted him back in Sydney, he had not used the term. Wally, fortunately, had allowed him to be neither a mental case nor – a queer. He was just a drunk.

"You must be surprised to find a hippie haven like this on your trip, Chipman. It's the Hornbill's cheap accommodation. Owned by a tycoon called Henry Kmango. Sir Henry, if you please. A mad Anglophile." The doctor downed more beer, ran a tongue around his somewhat thick lips. "The hotel's been falling apart ever since Ulysses Oratorio got axed. Telephone never works. Kmango subsidises the place from other enterprises, cacao and palm oil plantations, a gold mine, off-shore oil. Newspapers. He has lost interest in it but keeps it going with a skeleton staff. Locals, to keep Tlula village happy."

Qwami changed the music, turned up the volume. Chipman recognized *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, and didn't mind but Dr Sanguini clapped his hands over his ears for a moment and moved away. Chipman bought a couple more beers, downed another whisky (Qwami, he was pleased to note, made no use of a shot glass) and joined the doctor who indicated a thatched pavilion, one of several under the palms, close to the sand and well away from the loudspeakers. The hard-packed pale earth of the area was the domain of many large dozey lizards, grey-backed, sulphur yellow underneath, an orange knob at the end of a long tail. Dr Sanguini, to Chipman's amazement, started stalking one of them. The man lunged and the lizard was up a tree trunk. The

doctor did some low, wide-legged movements in imitation of the fat lizard's waddle and laughed. Chipman, although a discreet and polite man, even when inebriated, let out a derisory exhalation before he could suppress it. "Sorry," he said, an apologetic hand going to his thorax.

"They expend the least effort but always get away!" The doctor smirked. "Like me."

To Chipman's ears, there was something less than inconsequential in the tone of this remark. The quizzical look the doctor then gave him produced the thought that this was a man with a dubious past. But there also came an unexpected determination to overcome any misgivings and take up William Oates' suggestion. He cleared his throat. "Dr Sanguini, about your therapy, I..."

"I have had love affairs with lizards. Australia has goannas and many other wonderful reptiles, as you must know. I've had trouble moving on." At this, there came a wide grin, a facial statement that Sanguini liked to impose in close encounters with others. It revealed that he had a couple of teeth too many, and that there was a snaggle one, protruding on the upper left. Sanguini felt it to be disarming, rather than lascivious which was how Chipman judged it. "Remind me about Australia. I hear koalas are in trouble."

"They've got a virus."

"Aborigines extinct yet?"

"They wish to walk with us. They don't want to walk alone."

"I'd give them a name change. You've got Chinese, Maltese, Portuguese. Call the poor buggers Aborigine. That would give them a bit of a leg up. Ha ha! Opera House finished?"

"It's coming along."

"So suburban, the harbour. What Sydney needs is a truly spectacular feature – a Vesuvius instead of Parramatta or something. That would send whatever imagination's down there soaring."

The doctor stretched for the *Okidoki Post* – left on the pavilion table – and turned the pages. "Here, one of Kmango's rags. Read the editorial. Three days ago, President Mguavas sacked General

Kporpor, Minister for Internal Security and he's retreated to his pomegranate orchard at Larrikini in the Islamic north."

WHAT IS OUR BLACK PEARL OF A COUNTRY COMING TO

"...the palmy days are long gone, but fomentation of ethnic unrest and creation of armed militias is not the answer. Do we want to wind up with jackal packs scouring the streets of our treasured capital? More than any other West African country, perhaps to a fault, we have contrived that our reputation not be tarnished on the world stage, but what has happened to our British friends is an unpardonable crime against humanity and we have to come clean. With the International Committee of the Red Cross reconsidering its guidelines in the light of this outrage, it is time that Bomzawe..."

"A supply convoy on its way from Okidoki to Ouagadougou in Upper Volta was hijacked, medical supplies and 4000 sacks of grain seized, two British aid workers hacked to pieces and burned."

"Oh my God! No wonder William Oates is busy."

"Nothing's going to stop me being here for the big Carnival."

Chipman was relieved to have a change of subject. He had finished his second beer and barely managed to stop himself from taking a swig from the doctor's bottle. "Yes, what is this Carnival? Attah..."

"Sports and entertainment. Many Ye Olde English touches. Cultural detritus from colonial days. This year for some reason, Kmango is restoring the tradition. I'm looking forward to it. Cerisia and I are going to get Sir Henry to hire us both to dance. She can sing too."

Again Dr Sanguini was a surprise. The lizard waddle? Chipman gave way. That, he supposed, was a sort of dance.

"The Honourable Cerisia Twitchley. My wife. You might call our African trip our honeymoon. We were in the tabloids. *The People. The News of the World*"

"You're a dancer as well as a doctor?"

"Jung was yitterbugging way into his dotage."

"Who?"

"Oratorio, the Great Liberator was no wallflower. Most adept at the political polka but it was the sheerest luck he escaped with his life. There's a story."

"I read in the *Daily Telegraph* once, of an amusing scandal involving the Liberator. A dog."

"Yes, on his big visit to Buckingham Palace he sat on one of the Queen's corgis. Killed it. Ha ha! He requested asylum in England, the obvious place for him, but the British Government turned him down. The Queen had something to do with it."

"My taxi driver in Okidoki said that Oratorio looted the Treasury, lives high on the hog in Haiti of all places. Not only that but he stole the world famous Bomzawe Bronzes from the National Museum."

"The old bloke was welcomed there as a guest of Papa Doc Duvalier. Became President of some weird Cricket Club in Port-au-Prince. I hear he's still pissed off about the Westminster treatment and is homesick. Will do anything to be accepted back here. Anything. The Bronzes are still missing. I doubt the Liberator had anything to do with it."

A silence, the first, fell between the two men.

Why on earth had he not done some proper research on Bomzawe before allowing himself to be railroaded into this solution to his 'problem'? was Chipman's thought. He seemed to have walked into the beginnings of a civil war. And the Liberator sounded somewhat disreputable. A wave of paranoia came. Maybe Whitbread had cooked this up with Oates as a discreet means of getting rid of him. He hated to see it that way, but he supposed it had been a terrible thing, spying on Wally's naked sexual activities like that. Closing his eyes, he gave his head some physical attention. Chipman knew a dozen or more shakes and continuous hard massage with his fingers could do it.

Long before Chipman finished dealing with his crisis, Dr Sanguini had abandoned him. By the time the lawyer opened his eyes again, the largest of the lizards had moved close and was casting basilisk eyes at him. It began something that looked like press-ups, a pumping of itself for attack. Chipman was scared but

could not bring himself to give it a good kick. Hastily retreating to the other side of the table he looked around in vain for the absent Sanguini. What the hell; he snatched the doctor's bottle of beer and drained it. It didn't help, and paranoia came engulfing once again.