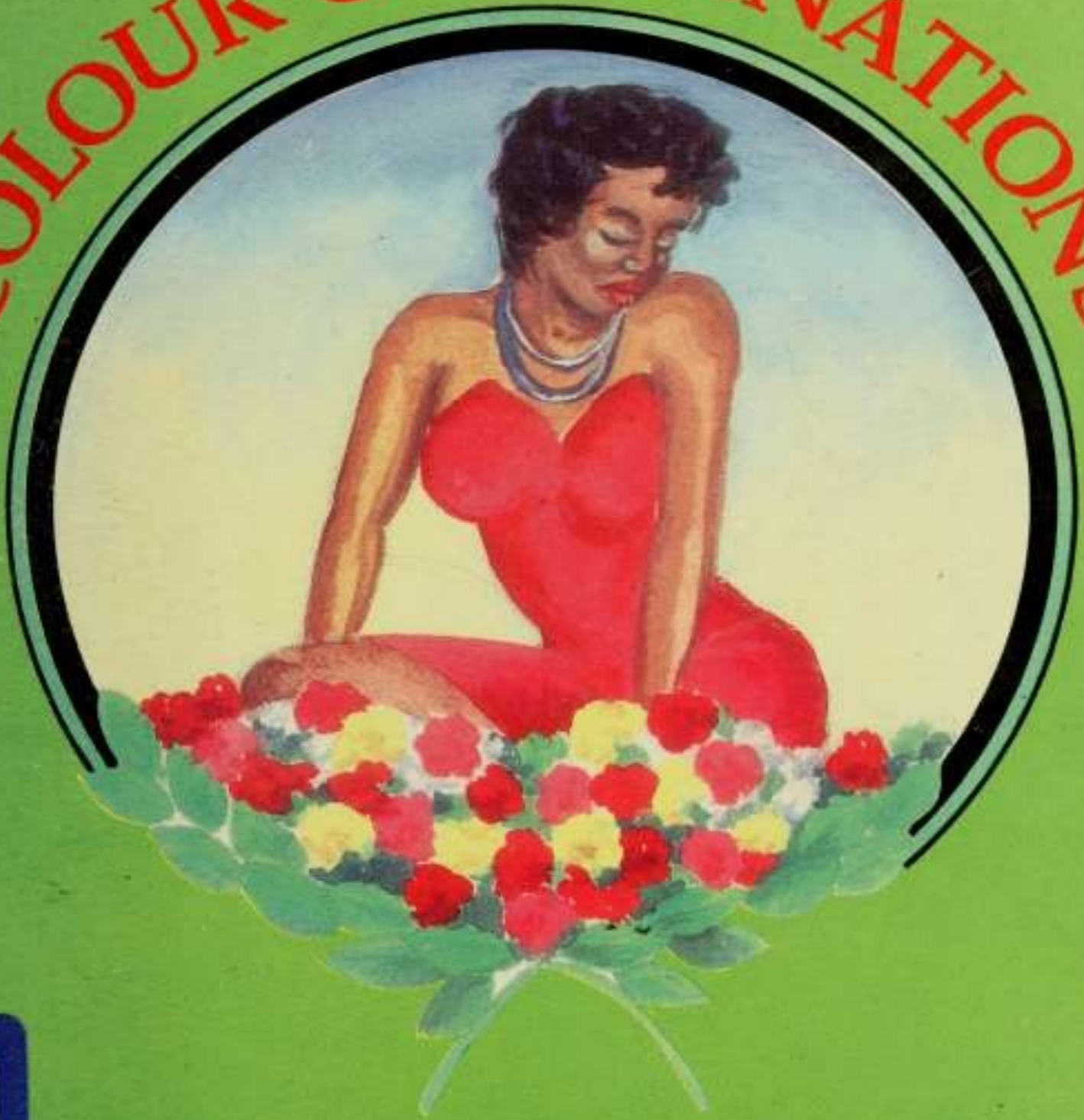
COLOUR OF CARNATIONS



Ayub Ndii

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Colour of Carnations

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Chapter One

It was difficult at first to imagine a relationship, a romantic relationship, between a senior high school girl and a college graduate, twenty-five years old and already working in a big food processing factory as an exports controller. Despite all odds, it was to be, up to the last moment when the cohesive forces could no longer withstand the fission effect, and then the subsequent big bang.

Joelene was a girl I had known briefly, and she was the one 1 had dated that evening. I had asked her to come to my house after work and have dinner with me, chat, and from there to see if we could develop anything mutually beneficial. She was a beautiful girl, of fair complexion, an easy smile and a prolonged laughter on anything said. Her contribution to any discussion was shallow and reflected minimal understanding of current affairs and least of all academic matters. No wonder she had been initially recruited to work on no specific thing — her assignments changed on a daily basis in the laboratory. On the night she came she earned credit from me. I was anxiously waiting for her. It was a first date in my house and I was happy when I heard a knock on the front door exactly at the appointed hour. When I opened the door, however, I was not amused. Joelene was there but so was another girl shabbily dressed in stone-wash jeans, complete with a matching jeans jacket, and an unusually wide leather belt.

"Come on in," I said without showing what I felt inside; my vital date was threatened.

They walked right into the sitting room, and I headed straight to the wall unit and turned on the stereo. There was a brief moment of silence in the room. Then Joelene hastily introduced Libby as a first cousin. Next she introduced me as a

workmate. I repeated my welcoming words and asked them to feel completely at home. 1 suggested to Joelene that we were going to have supper as agreed earlier on but she declined and said that they had already had their dinner. I did not insist.

As usual I was chain smoking, and my attention was drawn to the fact that Libby was smoking more or less at the same rate. I had a couple of Export beers in the house and that was all I could offer them. They appreciated my drinks and my State Express cigarettes.

Following our brief chat, something struck me. I realized that in spite of her rough appearance and carefree presentation, Libby was much younger than Joelene, more intelligent, more informed and very innocent. She was only uneasy on this first meeting. I guessed that her cousin had not given her any indication of what the visit was all about. There was nothing fishy about the visit anyhow. Soon the air in the room became very relaxed.

"Where do you go to school, Libby?" I asked.

"Former Duchess of Wales," she replied.

"What class are you in?"

She hesitated to answer in a way suggestive of the fact that despite her school status she had the right to be where we were and to do what she felt was good. She appeared very confident and sure of herself.

"I am in Form Three, but 1 ought to be in Form Five. School transfers and things like that cost me one year and a repetition in the kindergarten cost me another year — not that 1 was thick, but just because there weren't enough pupils to fill a class."

I was impressed by her answer and I admired her even more. A closer look at her revealed a young beautiful girl, gifted with natural intelligence, and a capacity to learn very fast. My only worry at this stage was one: how much did she know? What had she learned in her short seventeen years, and from whom had she learned whatever she knew?

While Joelene was fast gulping her Export beer, I requested Libby to go to my bedroom and bring me another packet of

cigarettes. I was quick to point out that I only needed a few sticks, and that she could take the rest along when she left. She obliged. And just before she entered the bedroom, 1 was right behind her.

"Hi. Don't you worry," 1 said softly. "1 just wanted to tell you something in private. Don't make a mistake, Joelene is not my lover. She is just a workmate who happens to be a good friend.'

She stood petrified without uttering a word. Then she said in low tones: "But she

told me she was."

"Take my word. She is not. It is you who I am very much thinking of tonight," I assured her. Then I moved closer to her and held her by the waist and made to kiss her. She did not resist. So I held her by the back of her head and gave her a very gentle kiss on the cheek, asking her that we meet the following day-She assured me that she would come at about 8.30 p.m. after doing her homework and I assured her that 1 would be waiting for her.

"Please make sure that you come alone." "Take my word." She looked up and our eyes met. "I shall be here at exactly eight thirty and I shall be alone as I have promised." That was to be the seal of a long and mysterious love affair. I returned to the sitting room as fast as I had followed her and shortly she came in with a packet of State Express cigarettes. Joelene was not amused. She gulped her last beer and said curtly, "It is getting late. We had better get going."

"Don't worry," I said. "1 will walk you up to the end of the street." Libby did not utter a word, and I sensed the evening was getting dull all of a sudden.

"Libby, don't you know we are getting late?" Joelene was getting irritated.

"Alright, we are going now, when everybody is ready/' 1 reassured them.

"We are ready!" they said in unison and we all stood up to leave.

"First we are going to escort Libby up to her parents' driveway to make sure she is safe," Joelene said. Then we agreed that since Joelene lived alone in her private quarters I was going to escort her and ensure that she was also safe.

When we reached their house, Libby knocked on the main door and when it was opened, Joelene and myself turned around and headed back to the main street leading to Joelene's apartment.

How did you like the evening?" I asked her. She did not answer me. Under the street lights I looked at her face and noticed that she was not very happy. I held her hand and I could tell that she was indeed not very pleased but she did not refuse to co-operate with me either.

I deliberately slowed down the walking pace, calculating that it was going to take us thirty minutes to get to her house instead of the usual fifteen minutes.

She did the same.

"How did you like the evening?" 1 asked a second time. She made as if to answer and then hesitated.

"First of all tell me why you had to follow Libby to the bedroom, and why it took you two five minutes saying whatever you two were saying?" We stopped walking and stood still staring at each other in the darkness. I clasped her other hand and drew her closer to me, and she appeared to like it.

"Nothing bad was intended, Joelene. I just thought that Libby would not find the place where I normally keep my cigarettes and 1 did not want her to feel embarrassed."

"Did that have to take five full minutes?" She appeared not satisfied with my simple answer.

"The only thing 1 can tell you for sure is that 1 personally enjoyed the company of your cousin, Libby, and 1 can only hope that another time, another day when you are not too busy and when I am also not too busy, say some time next week we could go out and enjoy some barbecue and have some drinks. How do you like the idea?"

"We will talk about it when the time draws near." Finally she was beginning to feel at ease and my muscles were getting relaxed as well.

I looked at my watch, then I looked at her, and whispered in her ear: "It is not that late. Let us pass by my house and then we can have a word or two just between us."

"That is fine," she said, and we turned into the short street leading to my house.

After every few steps we stood still, silently staring at each other, and the only sounds that could be heard were the smacking of wet lips and whinings like those of a canine in distress.

When we reached my house, I made to reach for the keys to the house, but she refused to let go of my hands. I pulled her closer to me, felt the warmth of her bosom, the tenderness of her lips, the fullness of her legs, and the sweet aromatic scent that emanated from her clothes. I pressed her hard against me and the

verandah wall and when she was convinced that we were just the two of us, she allowed me to open the door. We walked in, locked the door, and the next thing I can recall hearing clearly was the first passenger train from Mombasa which always passed by promptly at seven in the morning.

I spent the whole day shuttling between my office and the giant freezers that were used to store fresh meats for export to foreign countries. I was uneasy and restless each time I tried to concentrate on some reading material in the office. It was refreshing to enter one freezer after another where the temperatures were always sub-zero.

The thought of meeting Libby in the evening could not leave my mind.

"What was 1 going to tell her? What would her parents think of me if they ever knew I was dating their young first born daughter?" But Libby was old enough. She appeared to know as much as I did, and she did not appear to mind the idea. That is what made me feel contented and determined to go ahead with whatever we had agreed on the previous night.

Some minutes to five I returned to my office from my usual inspection rounds. I removed my gumboots and my snow white inspection overalls and hung them on the rack. I was ready to go home at the end of the day, but just before I left the office, a salesman stopped me and requested me to give him an export permit. I returned to the office and it took me another fifteen minutes to have the permit ready.

Joelene was the only one who could type the papers. She typed them, and after I signed them, the salesman left.

Joelene hung on for a while. It was unusual for her to talk to me when I was in the office. She looked at me without saying a word, and I in turn decided to say nothing.

"Did I offend you last night?" she asked in a low voice.

"Why do you ask that, Joelene?"

"Nothing really, it's only that you have been very quiet, unusually quiet all day long. So I thought perhaps you didn't like something about me."

I turned around and made sure that nobody was within earshot, then I said to her, "Nothing is wrong, Joelene. The evening and the night was good but you must have realized that I was extremely busy all day long. I just want to go home and relax. Just remember that next week I will be off duty and we can then sit down and have a serious talk."

"That will be okay with me. Just let me know a day or so in advance," she said.

"Okay ... fine, you have a good night and see you tomorrow morning as usual," I said. After that brief conversation, we parted. I took my newspapers and decided to walk all the way to my house, taking the longer route, rather than the usual short cut that normally by-passed the sportsclub. I reached my house just as the sun was beginning to disappear down the horizon.

When I got to my house I sat on an easy chair and rested my legs on the coffee table. I started reading the newspapers, every once in a while pausing to wonder: what was I up to with Libby? I found myself dozing but shortly, I heard a sharp tap on the door. It was already dark and I had not switched on the lights.

I stood up, put on the lights, and walked to the main door. I opened the door and Libby was there wearing, this time, her school uniform and a very broad smile. She had a small bag, which 1 reckoned to be her school bag.

"I am sorry about coming in my school uniform. 1 decided to skip our house because our school bus broke down on the way and I knew that if 1 went to the house first I would be late/' she said rather apologetically.

"Welcome. It is nice to see you. I was just here waiting for you," I said as I ushered her into the sitting room.

"How was your day in school?"

"Pretty good. Just the usual monotony of school."

"Some tea or coffee?" I asked.

"Any will do," she replied.

"Alright. You are no longer a stranger in this house. 1 will go with you to the kitchen. Everything is there. I can see how you prepare tea. A cup for me and a

cup for you."

She shot up from her seat and freely walked with me to the kitchen without any signs of inhibition. I was amazed to see how much at ease she seemed to be. Yet it was her first time to be alone with me. I could not help asking myself the question: how much does this girl know? What is she up to? Our first date together and already she is in charge.

I opened the oven door and teased her, "I hope you will enjoy my baking." She bent and looked inside, saw the cookies and then looked at me.

"I don't believe you did the baking!" She exclaimed.

"From today, always believe me," I said to her and patted her shoulder. "You see, as a bachelor you must learn to do everything ; cooking , laundry, sewing , anything , just name it. But remember, all that becomes easier when you are two." She stood petrified as if she was filled with sympathy for a lonely and helpless person.

"Don't lie to me. How can you tell me that you are not married at your age?"

How can 1 tell you a lie? How can 1 be married when 1 have not found the right person? Once again I ask you to believe me, from today, whenever 1 tell you something."

She handed me a cup of tea and we walked back to the sitting room. We sat opposite each other across the coffee table sipping our tea slowly, occasionally staring at one another speechlessly. I guess she was trying to study me and I was in turn trying to confirm the observations that I had made the night before: a very well built girl, of dark complexion, afro hair, no make-up, sharp wit and a person with ready answers on just about anything. A very pretty girl indeed.

I lit a cigarette and offered her one. She gladly accepted it, and from the way she was puffing, 1 could tell it was meaAt to suppress some underlying anxiety. On my part 1 was torn between admiration and pity. Either way, Libby did not seem to care. I walked to the far end of the room, removed the album which was playing and replaced it with a music cassette. This was to facilitate uninterrupted music. I did not bother to select the cassette. And as I got back to my seat, the record, 'Don't Fall In Love With a Dreamer' was playing. Those words echoed in my ears — who was a dreamer, me or Libby? I could not tell.

"Did you take Joelene home?" She was quick to ask.

"Yes, I did," I said quickly without elaborating. "And what happened to you for getting home late?"

"Nothing. Dad was not there and my mum has confidence in me."

"Can I have confidence in you as well?" 1 asked.

"Sure, you can as long as I can also have confidence in you," she shot back.

I walked across the coffee table and sat at the edge of her chair. Then I took her arm and placed it on my lap. Using my other hand I felt her hair. She leaned on me and 1 could not help telling her what was on my mind.

"Libby, 1 am going to tell you something. You may like it or you may not. But 1 feel 1 need to tell it to you anyway" She disengaged from my grasp and stared at me dumbfounded, not

sure whether what 1 was about to say was terminal or just an indication of a beginning.

"What is it you want to say? If it is about Joelene don't tell me. Maybe I know already," she said curtly, looking straight into my face motionlessly.

"Nothing to do with Joelene. It is all about you. Maybe we can go to the next room, okay?" I held her arm and without any resistance 1 led her to my bedroom. We sat at the edge of the divan and started kissing wildly like lovers who had not met for a long time.

"Tell me what you wanted to tell me," She was getting impatient.

"Listen, Libby. And listen carefully. All my life I have preferred to speak freely and to tell about things as I perceive them. At my age I would be lying to you by saying that I have not had a loving girl. I have had one or two. I have none at this time."

"What happened? You were jilted? You cheated them or what happened? And what about Joelene?" She was getting irritated.

"At first I asked you that from now on you believe me. It is only that way that you will ever get to understand me. I said to you that 1 have had friends, one after the other, and all these relationships have gone down the drain as a result of mistrust. Maybe I have not made sufficient effort to cultivate a strong relationship. Maybe my friends have not. All that I know and I can tell you now is that I have tried."

"And men tend to talk the same language." She cut in and left me wondering once more whether she was the same seventeen year-old-girl. Which men would she be talking about, unless she had been born a triplet among two other boys, with whom she had spent nine months yapping — she with her song and the boys with their song.

"1 will be happy, Libby, if we can develop a relationship based on trust. And I am sure neither of us will regret in the end. Not that all will be flowers every morning, and even if it were to

be so, don't also forget that even flowers come in different colours. They are all flowers but for some reason some people will go for pink, others for yellow and still others will go for red and so on." She moved closer to me and pressed her head against my chest. I lifted her head up and looked at her face. Her eyes were wet and red like those of someone who had just arisen from sleep.

"1 did not mean to annoy you in any way. Just forgive me if I said anything wrong." She was very apologetic, and her voice had a slight tremor. Then I held her waist reassuringly and said to her, "Libby, don't feel bad and don't be apologetic in any way. We are just having a good evening between us and I find it very fitting to talk very freely with you. You must appreciate that Joelene works in our office. She is not a bad person in my own eyes. Maybe you know her differently. There was nothing wrong in my inviting her for supper just as I would any other friend."

"You may not know but I had noticed you earlier on walking down the street with her, but naturally I could not have been able to talk to you or do anything to draw your attention." I added, "All that I would like you to know from today is that I have no relationship whatsoever with Joelene. She is not a girlfriend. She is not a lover but just a good officemate and no more. 1 am sure when you appreciate all that, what remains is just between us."

"Am. . , am. . ." she made to say something and then halted. Then she held me firmly by the neck. We kissed each other for a minute or so and then continued with what she was trying to say.

"I am not sure who is telling me the truth. You or Joelene."

"Why?" I asked.

"Joelene has been telling me for more than a month that you two have been lovers even before she came to this town. And one time when I jokingly asked her to introduce me to you she warned me that you are married."

"Listen, Libby. Joelene and I have no relationship and 1 am not married. At present, 1 have no affair with any other girl. As

of now, and I mean as of this particular moment, the only relationship I have is with you, here and now. My only request to you is just to believe me. In turn I will believe you and trust you and I am sure all will be fine. But, Libby, there is one thing I am not sure about and I would be happy if you told me." She turned around and faced me like a cat ready to strike.

"Don't feel offended in any way, Libby, but I happen to be very inquisitive. Maybe that is what keeps my heart ticking."

"Just ask me the question," she could not wait a moment longer.

"Alright, Libby. My question is very simple, I hope. All that I would like to know is just a little bit about yourself."

"I knew all along you were going to ask me that question," she said and laughed. She looked up at me and hesitated, then continued, "Like I told you last night, I am seventeen years old. I go to the former Duchess of Wales school. I am in Form Three. I have two other sisters and we are a family of five. My dad works with a corporate bank in town and my mum works in the city as well. We are a close knit family and I being the first born, do enjoy a bit of freedom."

"Does that mean you have the freedom to stay out until late?" "Not necessarily. But today is a special day. I am with you,

and I am happy to be with you."

"Do you mean to tell me that right now your parents are not

worried about where you are?"

She again looked at me and giggled. Then she said, "My younger sister goes to the same school with me. We came in the same school bus and she is aware that I am somewhere around. So somehow they all know I am around."

"Does she have any idea that you could be with me?"

"I guess she does," she replied and looked at me, trying to study my reaction. I was certain that if her sister did know, then her parents were bound to know something I did not want them to at that time.

"Why ask me that question? Are you afraid of my sister?"

"Not at all, Libby. It is just good to know." "And how long have you lived in this town?" "About ten years now." "So you know just about everyone in town?" "You see it is a very small town and after one year you kind of get to know everyone."

"I agree with you. I went to a college which was located in a small town, and within my second year, I knew everybody by name. That happens quite often. Anyway, I hope you are not fed up with my questions, are you?"

"Of course not," she said with a smile.

"Now tell me about your former friends."

"Oh, come on ... " she yelled. "Don't call them friends and don't call them boyfriends. Call them cheats . . ." She started sobbing in a way reminiscent of some bitter memories. She unexpectedly grabbed me so hard that I fell on her. She sunk her tongue in my mouth, literally blocking my breath. I leaned on her without saying a word and she seemed to like the posture despite her low sobs. We started kissing one another so vigorously, caressing each other all over and I forgot that I was with Libby, the seventeen year old senior high school girl. Our sanity vanished for a while, and what remained echoing in my mind were the words: Love me ... Love me ... dear ... dear ... Love me... Love me for ever.

When it was all over nobody wanted to look at the other. Both of us remained

seated at the far edges of the divan. She wrapped a towel around herself and walked to the bathroom. I remained seated on the bed for a while. At first I felt guilty, but after a moment I consoled myself with the fact that Libby was not an amateur. Perhaps she had read too many novels and watched lots of blue movies.

After taking a shower, she returned to the bedroom and dressed quickly without even looking at me. This gave me the opportunity to study her curvatures — indeed a natural beauty.

After dressing up, she walked over to me while I was still lying on my back and sat next to me. She placed her hand on my left side of the chest and said to me, "I would like to know what you think of me. Unfortunately I cannot. You asked me earlier on about myself and it hurt. For now I must go home. I cannot stay a minute longer. And don't bother to dress up. I will be safe. It is not very late. I am happy. Very happy indeed. And if all that you have told me tonight is true then I will have a good night, good sleep and a good day tomorrow. I know I can only believe you and that is why I don't want you to feel bothered how I will get home. Tomorrow is Friday. It is the end of my school week and I would love to spend some time with you after school, say just about the time I came in today."

"That will be very fine, Libby. I will wait for you." She bent low, kissed me and bid me goodbye while I was still in bed. Then, again, before she left, she turned around and kissed me.

"I will answer your questions tomorrow ... all your questions," she said.

Next I heard the door opening and closing with a bang. I stood up, drew the curtains slightly and watched her as she left my compound and onto the main street. I sank back into bed half asleep.

"Can I love this girl? Is she a loving type or is she another loving Samaritan ready to fall in love with anybody? Is she just another nympho? What is she? What is good in me that can attract a girl like a magnet? Supposing she gets pregnant? How does a seventeen year-old-girl have so much freedom? Supposing she is pregnant already, and she knows it. Supposing she doesn't know it? Where do I stand? Could she be another town girl?"

I kept asking myself one question after another until finally I fell asleep.

Chapter Two

At 7.00 p.m. I intentionally left the front door unlocked, and went to take a cold shower. 1 sprinkled myself with water and covered myself with foam. I turned off the water flow and sat on the edge of the bath tub, staying still for a few minutes. My ears were blocked by the soap, and I was enjoying the drumming effect caused by even the slightest distant sound.

Next I heard some footsteps. Then I turned but I saw no one. I stood up in the tub and turned on the tap in order to rinse off all the soap suds from my body. As soon as I turned on the shower, the bathroom door was pushed open and as I turned around I saw Libby moving closer and closer to me, just smiling but saying nothing. She was not embarrassed to find me naked in the bathroom. I was not embarassed either. It only confirmed to me that it was not her first time to see a naked man in the bathroom.

"Can I help you clear up the soap?" Those were her first words.

"I am almost done," I said. "Say hallo first."

"How are you, my dear?" Those words echoed in my ears. I had not been quite dear to any girl for a long time and I felt flattered. I could only afford a sincere smile.

She stretched her arm to feel the temperature of the water, and without saying a word, she left the bathroom. I rinsed myself and then dried my body using a towel. I put on my slippers and, covering myself only with a towel, I went to my bedroom and dressed up in casual attire. I combed my hair neatly as usual and applied a bit of cologne on my neck. I anticipated explosive kisses that night and I wanted to show her that I could be neat and groovy when I wanted to.

As I turned away from the mirror, I almost got into a head-on collision with her. She had stealthily walked right from behind and she was about to grab my neck.

"A kiss sweetheart," she said stretching her arms around my neck. I held her waist against myself and gave her a kiss. I felt nice. Then we held each other's arm and walked to the sitting room.

She had already prepared tea. I noticed, too, that along with tea was a tray full of assorted biscuits which I knew she must have brought along. 1 never bought biscuits in my house.

We sat down and occupied the same large couch, sitting flank to flank as we continued to take tea.

"I felt the temperature of the water when you were taking the shower and I thought you would love a cup of tea," she said.

"That was a lovely idea," I commended her and we continued to enjoy our tea. We were fast getting accustomed to one another and it now seemed like we had been close for a long time. My fears about her tender age were gradually turning into definite courses. But still deep inside me I felt empty vacuoles swaying from side to side depending on the position in which we were seated, how close we were to each other, and the subject of our discussion. I had dealt with girls before and I always felt a winner after the game was over. This relationship was turning to be a different thing. Here was a semi house-wife barely known to me . . . and here was a girl apparently fully in control. Each time 1 looked at her, she appeared like she was clearly looking right inside my mind. 'A decision must be made 7 , I said to myself as I took the last mouthful from my cup of tea. 'Either terminate this association, or water it/ I thought to myself. I knew that to be able to make an unbiased decision I needed a databank.

* * *

"I hope you don't take it as being too inquisitive, but I remember you promised me that you were going to tell me a bit more about yourself."

"Yes, I do. And today I am going to tell you as much as I can remember," she said and then focussed her eyes on the carpet as if she was selecting from a long list what to tell me and what not to tell me. I was very curious to hear something from her mouth rather than ask her anything specific.

"Roger, I will ask you only one thing; that whatever I tell you should be considered as history. If anything happens to be bad in your own judgement, excuse me for it. And if anything turns out to be vulgar, again, excuse me for it. Let us consider anything we are going to talk about tonight as bygone. I know I have now met someone I like. Someone I can love and someone whom I have loved already."

I remained silent as she talked, and when I looked up at her I saw tears in her eyes. I held her arm and whispered to her, "Libby, one thing you will learn from me is that I hate tears. Not that I don't get emotional at times, but simply because

when you allow emotions to overwhelm you everything you say or do becomes very erratic."

She looked at me and our eyes met. Then she wiped off the tears from her face and continued talking.

"You know, Roger, I have grown up in this town. It is a small town. A lot has been said about me, and I know even today a lot is being said about me. Please, Roger, ignore whatever you are bound to hear and let us stick together. I say that because both girls and boys, adult men and women are so idle in this town that all they do is sit around all day and talk about anything that passes in /front of their eyes. I had a boyfriend when I was fourteen. I brought hiir^ home once, and the issue became the talk of the whole neighbourhood. Our friendship did not last for six months. Then I had another one immediately after that. He would give me money, but in reality I never loved him. Again our relationship never lasted not even for three months."

I remained silent, almost dumbfounded. I could not imagine a young girl alternating men like the punches of a heavyweight boxer. Perhaps it was the curiosity of growing up, so I thought.

In all respects, Libby was innocent. Just a bit immature. Her body was big and I could tell this was the biggest bait and her own betrayer.

"When I was fifteen, I met another guy who I liked after meeting at an interschool debate competition. He came from a very rich family and before long we had fallen apart. He always thought about nothing else but sex in posh hotel rooms. His friends and their girlfriends drove their father' cars, and I could see nothing in their heads but high life. On my part I was always broke. I could not afford their life style. So I left Alfred without any bitterness. I must admit that it was a lot of fun as long as it lasted."

She bowed her head and covered her face. I did not interrupt her and when she looked up I saw her face covered in tears. She was sobbing. When she composed herself she went on narrating her brief but explosive past.

"Only late last year I heard that Alfred had shot himself with a gun."

"Why did he have to shoot himself?" I could not resist asking.

"I learned later that it was all a domestic affair. I don't know any details and I would not even want to know."

I held her left hand and drew her closer to me. She was a bit tense. I passed my hand behind her head, and stretching myself nearer to her, I gave her a passionate kiss and we remained glued to each other for a while without uttering a word.

I felt sympathetic about her past. I could see at the same time a charming young girl ready to forget the past and willing to start and proceed on a new path of love. A path which was up to now not clear. I did not want to annoy her and I did not want as yet to get entangled with her.

I could tell she needed a word from me, about what I thought of her and about what was likely to be our relationship. On my part I felt restrained not to appear as if I was exploiting the situation. I felt it would only aggravate her insecurity about men. I knew too well that in a matter of one year she was going

to do her high school examinations. And I knew it would bother me for a long time if I was going to be the cause of any poor performance.

I could not clearly understand why she was ready to give me everything she had before she knew me well, before she even knew what lay ahead of us regarding our relationship. Or could this be what she did to every man after discarding the previous one?

These kind of questions were hard for me. I had not experienced anything like it before with any other girl, younger or older than her. All I could see was her good side: a very promising future, a charming relationship and a tightrope balancing of words and actions.

"I can see it is getting close to midnight, Libby, and I am afraid your parents might set out searching for you," I said as I stood up.

"Never mind, Roger, as long as I am with you ..."

"But I will tell you what, Libby," I interjected. "However much I would love to stay on with you, it is better we call it a night. Tomorrow is Saturday, and I would like to go to a movie in the city with you and we can continue from where we have left."

"I will love that, Roger. There is a very good movie showing at the Twentieth Century. We can go to that one."

"That is fine, Libby, if you like the movie I am sure I will like it too. And since I will be busy most of the morning, I suggest we meet at the lobby of the cinema at 1.00 p.m."

"I like that arrangement. I will have all the time to do my washing in the morning after which I can take a bus to Nairobi. I will be there at exactly 1.00 p.m."

"Just make sure you come alone so that we can have time to continue with our talk."

"I will do exactly as we agree, Roger," she said. We looked at each other for a while and I could feel right inside me that something was really germinating in our hearts. We held our

hands and walking very close to each other, I escorted her right up to the driveway of her home.

Then before we parted I gave her two hundred shillings to make advance bookings and avoid the queue. Then we kissed good night and I returned to my house.

* * *

Before walking up to the lobby I scanned briefly through the movies showing that week and they all seemed quite appealing. The movie for the day was ET. I walked up the flight of stairs, and as I turned to enter the verandah, I was met by the usual broad smile, that was now my identification mark of Libby. I walked straight to where she was seated and joined her. She had two Premium beers in front of her.

As I sat down a waiter walked over to take my order. I looked at my watch and noticed that it was only twenty minutes before the main show started. I declined a fresh order and we decided to share the two remaining beers. It was a hot day indeed and a cold beer was really refreshing.

After finishing our drinks, we walked round the staircase and entered the cinema

hall. We occupied the back row just in time for the main show. I pushed back the armrest separating our seats and this afforded us the closeness we wanted more than anything else. We kept fondling one another all the time and halfway through the show we could not manage any further concentration. For one, each time I looked at the screen I imagined Libby doing one thing or another. I could see her dancing somewhere with someone else. I could see her going for a movie with a bunch of young boys and girls. I could see her walking back to her home alone after visiting me in my house and then inside her classroom dozing after a weary night with me. Yet she was just next to me holding my hand.

"Let us leave. I cannot concentrate anymore," I whispered into her ear and without any hesitation we stood up and left the cinema hall.

Hand in hand we crossed Mama Ngina Street and took a taxi outside the Hilton hotel. We decided to go out of the city centre to the Retreat Hotel in the southern suburbs. Twenty minutes later we reached the suburbs and the cab driver dropped us at the Retreat Hotel. I paid the driver and we entered the bar section of the hotel. We occupied a small table in one corner.

The patrons were few, and except for some low piped music, it was very quiet. The air was still and the general atmosphere was all friendly and conducive to intimate conversations.

An attendant came over and took our order. We asked for two chicken sandwiches and salad. On top of that I asked the waiter to give us four cold Premiums. Shortly, the waiter returned with a tray loaded with the items we had ordered. He opened a bottle for each one of us and courteously filled our tumblers while we devoured our sandwiches. Then he walked away and left us to enjoy ourselves.

"You know what, Libby," I drew her attention by gently tapping her cheek.

"Tell me, dear," she said and smiled at me.

"I want you to guess what is on my mind."

"No, Roger, just tell me. I cannot guess. You are making me curious." She put her glass down and looked at me very inquisitively. She was impatient to hear what I wanted to say.

"Okay, Libby, I will tell you. Your choice of film was very boring ... anyway not boring, I am just kidding. I just wanted to be with you somewhere, just talking to you. And I am glad we are here."

"That is nice, Roger. I was also kind of wishing that the movie gets over quickly and then we could sit down somewhere just the two of us," she said and leaned over to me. I kissed her and then we continued having our drinks.

"I was very happy last night in your company," I said in an effort to introduce our main discussion.

"When you left it took me about two hours before I could get some sleep."

"I thought I left you a bit lonesome, and each time I tried to sleep I felt like I was going to wake up and come back to your house just to give you some company. I could not imagine you sleeping in that big bed all alone. That image kept recurring in my mind until I found myself falling asleep. The night was very long indeed."

"You know, Libby, it is very difficult to suppress affection and love however hard you try. Did you know that?"

"What do you mean by that, Roger?" She looked at me inquisitively, her full attention drawn to me.

"I have no doubt, Roger, that I love you. I really love you," she said in an almost tremulous voice.

I held her palm and noticed that her hands were moist. I looked at her eyes and noticed that she was blinking rather fast. I looked at her rib cage and noticed that she was heaving slightly. I knew she was very anxious to hear from me and this was my turn. I was still not decided what I was going to tell her, but I knew this was the time to talk to her or never. We just could not afford to hang on each other's lips for long without any grips. I looked at her face once more and I saw the same girl who came to my house with her cousin: a dark complexion, smooth face, jet black afro hair, very upright, long legs, long finger nails and wearing cowboy attire. A girl, wittier than her age, and a girl whose size had certainly outgrown her age. She appeared the same beautiful girl both in the night as well as during the day.

"What I am going to tell you today is just about the way I am, it is the way I believe in things and it is the way that I would like us to be for now, and who knows maybe even in the future." She drew herself even closer listening to me intently. I sipped my beer and I reminded her that her beer was getting flat. She took a gulp and held my hand again.

"I don't know what others see in me. I don't know what they like in me and I don't also know what they don't like in me." I continued talking in very low tones forcing her to bring her ears close to my mouth.

"One thing I am certain about is that it is taxing, it requires lots of energy, determination and much more, to be a participant than a spectator... I hope I am clear, my dear."

"Very clear indeed, just continue. I want to hear it all."

I paused and looked again at her only to find her studying

the features on my face. I stretched my hand and held her. Then I

drew her left hand and placed it on my lap.

"Libby, I must tell you that I love you. I must also tell you that my heart has never been penetrated as much by any other person. I must let you know that I have thought over and over about everything that goes with pure love and I am convinced that what I have is nothing but pure love and I am convinced that what I have is nothing but pure love for you. I know I have had friends before, but I must let you know that at no stage was I ever serious. Previously I only selected from a hoard of beautiful faces and legs and that was all. And after it was all said and done that was it for me. I would just move to the next chapter of whatever work lay ahead of me. This is the way I have been through high school and also through my college years. This time I am different. This is my first year of work and I see life a bit, not just a bit, but totally different.

"The only thing which I know you may find rather difficult in learning about me is that I don't show any emotions on my face. But I know I am a very emotional person when the situation demands. I try to suppress my emotions a lot and only talk about them to one who I am sure will understand. Only one previous girl understood me, but we simply could not cope for a whole lot of other reasons. When I love, I know I love. For one, I don't break promises. And as much as

possible I try never to lie. And if I ever do it intentionally or unintentionally, be sure I will apologise later.

"Inside my heart I know I hold some very rigid principles. If my girlfriend breaks a promise deliberately, that is the end. If she lies to me, again deliberately, that is the end. My end to such a relationship is that I scrape her image off my mind. I cancel all our plans with no accountability whatsoever. No animosity

remains between us if we ever meet again. And usually if we never meet again, that is what I prefer. In your case, Libby, I must confess that it is too early to say anything ..."

I paused and looked at her face. She was again filled with tears. I could not understand the depth of her emotions. Her tears, I was to learn later, were very near, always dropping at the slightest change in her sentiments.

I took a sip of beer from my glass and then gently picked up her glass and passed it to her. She took a mouthful and then placed the glass back on the table. I removed my handkerchief from my pocket and asked her to wipe off the tears from her face.

"I will tell you something else, dear ..." I paused again for a few seconds trying to consider how I was going to put the words across to her. "I do love you, Libby, with all my heart and I would like us to remain as such. Do you think you are able to do that, Libby?" I put the question directly to her.

"Sweetheart, that is the question I was wishing for inside my heart. I promise you here and now that from today I will remain with you forever. I will never leave you, I will never betray you, I will trust you and I will love you even more every day."

I kept quiet for a moment. Then I thought, 'Here I am, committing myself to a seventeen-year-old girl/ Then I took another minute of silence. When I looked up I saw that she was looking right into my face. I touched her cheeks and I felt their tenderness and warmth. Then I drew her closer to myself and planted a kiss on her lips. Then I whispered in her ear: "Darling ... from now on, we shall call it 'The Retreat Agreement.'"

She smiled at me and gave me a kiss in return. Then I knew our real love affair had begun.

"Now, sweetheart, I will only ask you one or two things and I am very confident you will do your best to achieve."

"Darling, you just tell me which things and I shall begin right away."

"Very simple indeed," 1 reassured her. "I will love you even more if you do very well in school. I don't even know how you perform in school. But I am sure your performance must be above average. Just do your best now that you are still in school. Not that I will hate you if you do not do well, but don't forget that I am already through with my college and I will be even happier if you do better. Can you make that promise?"

"Sweetheart, everything I promise today I will make all the effort to keep. And again, today I promise to keep everything that we have agreed on."

"I am very happy to hear that, Libby, and I love you very much."

* * *

We boarded the last bus intending to go back home sealing our love accord. The bus was bound for the coastal town of Mombasa and we wanted to alight at the turn off to Arusha but we decided to go to the Small World Club and dance the night away.

We alighted at the Small World Club and paid for temporary membership. Disco music was playing but the resident band would be playing later on beginning at ten o'clock until dawn.

We asked for the menu and after going through it together we decided to have some roasted game meat. Libby confessed that she had never tasted any game meat except rabbit which she never liked. We walked together to the display table and after going across the lineup we chose to have impala meat.

While we waited for the meat to get ready I asked the waiter to give us some cold Premium beers, which we proceeded to take slowly spending more of our time fondling each other. The DJ was playing the latest music, and the atmosphere was indeed romantic. The decor was impressive and there were rotating red, green and blue neon lights in the background of bright purplish lights which provided the lighting for the entire disco-cum-buffet hall. We occupied a table which was strategically placed

and from there we could monitor everyone coming in or leaving the disco hall.

The hall was only half full and people were just beginning to arrive. I looked around the entire hall but I did not recognize anyone. Shortly, the attendant brought the roasted game meat along with baked potatoes and plenty of vegetable salads. The combination looked good to the eye and proved to be very delicious.

"How do you like game meat now?" I asked.

"Oh! It's wonderful. I always thought game meat was very tough to chew. I love it very much. It is very tasty and I find it very tender too. Thank you for bringing me here, my dear," she said and pushed a small piece of meat into my mouth, which I grabbed with my front teeth, laughing loudly as I tried to tilt my head backwards in an effort to have it roll into my mouth. Soon after we were over with our dinner.

The waiter came to collect the dishes. In the process I asked him to serve us with more drinks, and at the same time to check whether any boarding rooms were available. He returned quickly and assured us that there were still enough rooms left. However, to be on the safe side, 1 gave him some money and asked him to pay for a double room, just to ensure that even though we intended to dance the whole night away, we were assured of a place to relax at least for one hour and take a bath in the morning.

He came back with another round of Premium beer and gave us the receipt for our room. 1 passed the receipt to Libby and she slipped it into her handbag. Then we continued to enjoy our beer, as we watched patrons streaming in just when the resident band was beginning to play their own compositions.

They started playing one of their top compositions and virtually everyone in the hall jumped onto the dancing floor. We remained seated, waiting for our favourite music; fast rhythm and freely danceable. There was a whole cross-section of people on the floor. We could see some very young persons, some apparently even younger than Libby by my estimate. And still

others were very old. Too old even to be in a disco hall. But one thing was common among them all. Despite their seemingly advanced years, they were gyrating faster than the disc jockies themselves, keeping up with the pace of the music.

A short recess followed and most people returned to their seats. We continued with our discussion, taking our drinks slowly, occasionally sitting still with our hands clasped together under the table. Then suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder and I looked up.

'Hello, Roger. How are you? When did you come? So you are here to dance the night away with us? And you got a nice babe, man." It was Sollo, a friend of mine. He was with Joelene. I held my breath for a fraction of a second when I saw Joelene. She was standing next to Libby, stretching her hand ready to greet me. I shook her hand and then I turned to Sollo.

"This is my night. I have not treated myself to anything this year and I felt I needed to be in a small world like this." Everyone broke into laughter. Joelene just grinned, trying as much as possible to avoid any eye contact between herself and me. Libby remained quiet and I chose to engage Sollo until they were ready to leave us.

"You have just come in, huh?"

"No, we have been here since late afternoon. We saw you come in. You looked hungry and we decided to let you eat something before interrupting you."

'Good. No more secrets/1 said to myself.

"You saw us that long ago and decided not to talk to us. You just wanted to see what we were up to, and then obtain fitting news headlines for tomorrow .. .you buggers." Sollo could have easily made a news reporter.

"Well, it is nice to know that we are not all by ourselves here," I forced myself to smile for the first time.

"Where are you seated? I can send the attendant to bring you some drinks."

"That is kind of you, Roger. Maybe we can as well join you," Sollo said, almost in a stammer.

"No problem, we can join them later," Joelene interjected.

"Fine, fine, Roger . . . waiter," Sollo beckoned the attendant and I was relieved that they were about to go back to their seats. I was getting irritated.

"I haven't seen you for many days, Roger," he continued to bubble. I was now wishing that I could put him inside an envelope and send him to hell.

"I have been very busy. Next question."

"We are going to dance until 3.00 a.m. How about you? Are you going to spend the night here?"

"No. We intend to dance until dawn, catch a bus and go home in time for breakfast."

"Can we alert you when we are leaving?"

I could not stand Sollo any more.

"We came just the two of us, so there is no problem. Perhaps we can alert you just in case we decide to leave earlier."

"How have you been, Joelene? I hope alright."

"Hakuna matata" she replied and they went back to their table

at the far end of the dancing hall.

Meanwhile, the band was back on the stage and the hall was

reverberating from the boomingt)f the African drums.

"It seems like wherever you go, someone somehow will recognize you," said Libby. "It is very difficult to hide."

I did not say a word. I noticed that she was worried. I turned to her. She was holding her temples. I was not pleased to see her perturbed. I took her arm and called out her name.

"Libby."

"Yes, my dear," she answered and drew herself closer to me.

"Our 'Retreat Agreement' still stands. Today and forever. Here in this dance hall, all that I can see is you and me, nothing else. And what I can hear is only superb

music. Anything else to me is just part of the environment."

"Thank you, sweetheart/' she said and we embraced and held one another closely.

"I will love you forever. I will never leave you for a moment and never leave me. We will have to handle each situation as it comes. True love is difficult to come by, and even more difficult to come by when you are looking for it. And just like diamonds, true love remains true, and true love never dies, it never withers and it remains steady however turbulent the times may become."

"I understand you, honey," she said and swallowed saliva.

We continued taking our drinks slowly and each time I looked across the dance floor, I always noticed Joelene looking at us, leaving Sollo talking to himself.

I took Libby by the hand, and we walked to the dance floor hand in hand. The band was playing some blues and we kept dancing to that, all the time holding one another tightly and obviously very suggestively. Our love was getting intense and everything else was just oblivious to us.

Occasionally I turned my eyes to where Joelene and Sollo were seated and each time I noticed they were just staring at us. Sollo had a big physique and a pot belly. His eyes were as big as ping pong balls and each time I looked at him all I could see were the whites of his eyes: his eyes so wide open, one thought that they looked as if they were going to pop out of their sockets any moment. We decided to ignore them, and we continued dancing without any break. One hour later we returned to our seats.

The tempo in the dance hall was very high. The band was playing the latest numbers and everyone was getting ecstatic, whistling wildy as the music hit the climax. Even the cool Joelene jumped onto the floor leaving Sollo seated alone. But not for long. He also jumped up wildly and caught up with her.

It was our turn to slip out unnoticed. We left the hall and went to our room. We were weary and we needed some sleep. At least for an hour or two but very close to each other.

Chapter Three

I expected Libby to come to my house on Monday after school even if it was going to be for one hour. She did not show up. There was no message delivered in anyway to forewarn me that she would not make it. I thought she would come on Tuesday. Again she did not. I could not bring myself to walk past her house. It was too much for me.

Except Joelene, there was nobody else who I could send to deliver a message to her. Sending Joelene before I knew what was the problem was out of the question.

The weekend was approaching. I had not seen Libby and 1 had not heard a word from her, either verbal or by a written missive. I was very anxious. 'What could have happened to her after we left the Small World Club the previous Sunday?' I kept asking myself, day and night.

Each time the telephone in the office rang I thought she was the one calling. It always turned out not to be so. And each time I heard a knock on my door I paused and asked myself: could that be Libby? I was shattered. I did not know the next move. I did not like the feeling of just hanging, not sure which direction to take. All I knew was that I had fully committed myself to Libby. I did not want to entertain any negative thoughts in my mind; but I found that I could not help it. Not knowing and not sure what was happening.

Come Friday. I went home as early as 5.00 p.m. immediately, after my office time was up. I lay on my bed quite certain that Libby was going to come around any moment. I fetched an old Newsweek magazine containing a very detailed account of space flights and I started reading it, studying all the details of weightlessness and the effects on the human body.

I was rarely in the house on Friday evenings and 1 could not understand why I had to be lying on the bed at that time. I looked at the wall clock and found that it was drawing close to 9.00 p.m. I rose up from the bed and walked to the bathroom. I washed my face, combed my hair and put on a warm jacket. Then I went to the verandah and stood there for a while contemplating what I was going to do that evening. 1 did not want to go to any of my friends' houses because 1 did not want to engage in any serious discussions. I decided to go to the Members Club and play some games. I closed all the windows, drew the curtains and left the lights on. Before I left, I scribbled an anonymous note, and pinned it on the door. The note read in part: T have been looking for you the whole week,

but I could not find you anywhere .. /

I did not address the note to anyone and 1 did not sign it. 1 was sure that if she came around when I was gone, and read it, the message was crystal clear.

'. . . tell me when and where we can meet at any time. Just reply on the back of this note.' I concluded my message. I also made sure that I left a pencil as well. I left the house and followed the main street leading to the Members Club, hoping that 1 could chance to meet her on the way. This was not to be. I arrived at the Members Club and found the main street terrace filled with club members and their guests, drinking merrily. I walked inside, and found the place almost full with whole families watching some video shows. I greeted one or two people and then proceeded to the games room.

Billiards was a favourite game for most club members and I found that the waiting list was very long. I listed myself at number twelve and knew it was going to be hours before my turn to play came.

Meantime I moved to the next room and decided to play table tennis while still waiting for my turn at billiards. 1 was very good at ping pong and playing knockouts, I was sure to keep playing for a long time. After playing a few games, my friend, Jeff, came along. He was my best challenger and I loved playing

with him. Our games were fast and vigorous and we always played on bets. He was a teetotaller and for every game I beat him he had to part with two bottles of beer. And if he beat me I had to part with two bottles of coke. Such was our deal always and I was very happy when he came in.

My concentration was bad during the first game and I lost two cokes to him. All I could see during the entire game were images of Libby instead of the ball jumping to and fro across the net. Then I regained my concentration during the second game and I won two beers from Jeff. I gulped them fast during our first break. I felt stimulated. Then we got to the second set which I again won, scoring the entire set by a knockout. After that I found I had plenty of beers on my table.

"Hey! Roger, I must give you a bonus today," said Jeff. "You have never thrashed me so badly like today. What is the revenge all about?" he asked and burst into loud laughter.

"No revenge, buddy. I have always told you over and over again, that I am made of stuff that does not remain constant but appreciates geometrically with time and age."

Jeff was an economist, very humorous, and he laughed himself hoarse when I mentioned that. I had never beaten him in the game like that before.

While waiting for our next challenge game, I found myself drinking beer unusually fast. I stood up to go to the gents and I felt that my balance was not at its best. I knew that I could not sustain two more games. It was time to go and play billiards, a steady and cool game. Jeff never played billiards, and I did not want to leave him without a challenge.

"Hey, Jeff," I drew his attention. "Look at my table and count the beers ... I know this is usually one of your strategies when you want to beat me. Today you must accept that you need to attend my coaching classes if you want to improve."

He was in a very jovial mood and he burst into laughter, beckoning the waiter to come over.

"Please bring me a cold Coca-Cola, and two more beers to Roger, because at least I must thrash him one game if I am going

to have any sleep at all." The waiter went away and brought the drinks as ordered.

"Jeff, 1 will tell you what. I am going to play a rematch with you and I will play you at my best but I want to make sure you win, at least one game so that you can get yourself a Coke ..."

He looked at me scornfully without saying any word. Then I said to him, "I am going to play with my left hand."

* * *

Exhausted from playing table tennis, I retired to billiards. The list of players was getting longer and longer, and I knew addicts of the game could play the game until dawn. I was still far down the list and I gave up. I gave my listing number to the last person on the list and I returned to the hall ready to drink my head off while at the same time watching some late night shows on the video. It was

already past midnight and most patrons had already left for their homes. Others were just coming in, mostly couples arriving back from the city. The main overhead lights were turned off and the beerhall was dimly lit except for an occasional bright flash from the video screen.

While still sitting alone I heard some sharp footsteps coming from behind me. They were typical footsteps of a woman wearing some high heeled shoes. I turned around, just in time to see Rosa entering the cloakrooms. I wished she had not seen me. I dreaded her company at that hour. She was very pushy and very inquisitive. I was not in any mood for that.

I was wrong. Two minutes later she came right on and sat next to me without even bothering to find out whether I was alone. She appeared tipsy and she was a real bitch when she was drunk. She only drank Campari wine and nothing else. And she was capable of gobbling a whole bottle before starting to emit anything that was on her mind at the highest pitched voice that she could reach. I looked at her eyes and she appeared fairly composed.

"Why are you sitting alone, Roger?" she asked. "You look lonely and frustrated. Is your world ending? If so why don't you

apply to come and join us?" She continued bursting into hysterical laughter.

Her questions were penetrating my mind like gamma rays going past and only wreaking havoc and confusion. She was only a casual friend. A good friend at times, fairly pretty but having a disadvantage of showing signs of old age prominently on her face, arms and even legs.

1 did not utter a word, because I did not want to entertain any discussion with her. She was very argumentative and vexatious.

"If you don't want to tell me anything, Roger, then a couple of shots of Campari from you will be as good as an hour's talk," she said.

"Where are you seated? Can I join you?" I asked without meaning it.

"We are seated inside the tennis room. There is just me and my friend Paula and both of us are taking Campari. Do you know Paula?" she asked sarcastically.

"No, I don't," I said without showing any further interest.

"Well, she is more or less like myself. Quite beautiful and very proportional. She is about ten years younger than I. She has a light brown complexion and a curly perm. The only difference is that she is much ... much ... more beautiful than I. But watch out, Roger, because I know you well. I read in today's editorial of the village daily that there is a veterinary surgeon who is weaning daughters from their mothers before they have finished taking colostrum." I felt a chill run down my spine and a cold sweat wet my pants. My voicebox became numb and my voice became hoarse.

"Let me clear these beers and then I will join you over in the tennis room. Meanwhile 1 am sending the waiter to bring you a drink."

I hastily summoned Yuda, the counter man to come over. I instructed him to take a whole bottle of Campari to the table where Rosa and her friend Paula were seated, and to emphasize

once again that I was soon joining them. He did exactly that and returned with acknowledgements and a confirmation of my instructions. I needed a few moments of silence. I needed to go over the words that she had just spoken, in my head. I gulped one whole glass of beer and refilled it. Then I gulped it again continuously and placed the empty glass on the table.

'What did Rosa mean?' I asked myself. 'What does she know? And from whom could she have learned anything about my affairs.' I had no doubt in my mind that she was referring to Libby. 'Who else other than Sollo and Joelene could have seen us at the country club?' I kept asking myself. 'Did someone who knew us see us leave the club in the morning? Or did we spend our voluptuous night under the search lights of a peeping Tom?' I looked up into the ceiling and then I remembered one thing that Rosa had told me when I first met her: she was a secretary at the Corporate Bank. Then my mind saw a distant light. She must know Libby's father. I knew she was a gossip, and was the type who got thrilled when there was trouble. I at once resolved that I would not ask her anything. Otherwise I would only be confirming her wild and lunatic expectations.

I filled another glass of beer and just as I was about to gobble it, Sollo walked in.

"Hi, buddy. How are you? Welcome," I said and pushed a chair to him.

"Hi, Roger. I am just arriving from Nairobi. I went there fairly early in the morning as I had a couple of things to do. And after doing away with all that, I

decided to go to my country home and see my folks."

"How are they?"

"Pretty good. I have just arrived this minute. Being a Friday I decided to come and have some beers before I retire for the night."

"That is good. I was also killing time here having a few drinks. I played some games with Jeff, but for some reason I felt very worn out, very early today. So I decided just to drink and watch the video."

"It is unusual. I have seen you and Jeff play on for hours and hours without getting exhausted."

"I don't know why I simply didn't feel like it today. Anyway, have a drink on my account."

"Thank you very much. I will have it."

Yuda brought two Tuskers and I opened one for Sollo. We cheered and got down to drink, swallowing one beer after another. Sollo had lived in the same town, working with the Health Inspectorate for more than five years. I knew he was very conversant with everything in the town and I also knew that he knew virtually everybody in the town. I was aware that he and Joelene were the only people I talked to at the Small World Club, and apart from that I was certain that he was coming to the Club deliberately to see me, for reasons, I could only guess. He always talked loosely and freely about anything, and a stranger could easily condemn him. But once you got used to him, you could easily tell that in all his utterances he never meant any harm to anyone.

"Did you pass by my house?" I asked, trying to get the subject that was bothering my mind started.

"No. I felt it was too late an hour to call at anybody's house. I would probably have checked on you tomorrow morning."

"Anything needing some urgent attention?"

"Not really ... But you know when men are seated together they can exchange a lot of ideas both in times of war and in times of peace," he said and we broke

into laughter. At least I was getting relaxed.

"What times are we in now? Peace or war?" I asked jokingly. Then he laughed and shot back, "Whatever phase we may be in, I do not think we are usually the type to be swayed by the slightest winds."

"You are right, Sollo."

"You know Rosa?" I asked.

"Everyone in town knows her," he replied. "I would correctly describe her as the chief gossip in town. One bad thing about her

is that she gossips a lot with both men and women. Another thing is that I don't know where she gathers her information from but she is always right. Ask her who is new in town and she will tell you where he comes from. Ask her who is pregnant in town and she will tell you. Ask her who dates who and she has the answer. If you want to know which couple is about to divorce she will tell you. And she is always right. She is just like that. A thorn in the flesh with a sweet itch. You just need to know the way she is and you will get on well. Just let her talk... anyway, she is a parrot by her own right. But never let her get any information from you. Never let her know anything about your private life."

"Well, I asked that question intentionally. She is here in the tennis room with her friend drinking Campari. I just bought them a bottle. So you better lower your voice a bit."

"I didn't know she was around. Anyway, it does not matter."

"You know Libby?"

"Very well. I have known her for more than five years. I guess I came to know her parents when she was about ten years or so. Last weekend I saw you two dancing very well. I knew something was going on. But of course I could not interfere with your plans. Joelene is her cousin. I didn't have much to do with her other than companionship. But after you disappeared she told me a lot."

"Well we are not in any hurry. You will brief me step by step. Incidentally Rosa said something just before you came in and I was not amused at all."

"Regarding Libby?"

"Yes and no. I say yes because by implication she meant Libby, and I say no because she did not mention her by name. She said something to the effect that I am weaning little girls from their mother..."

"Oh dear," Sollo exclaimed. "That single sentence tells a lot."

"Anyway, how is Libby as a girl? What do you know about her?" I was getting more and more curious.

"Roger, I will tell you one thing, before I tell you anything specific about Libby. This is a small town where everyone knows the other person by name if not physically. People live in the same quarters and many of them go to work in the same offices. You therefore expect a lot of gossip. It is a place where you hear a lot about rape, incest, adultery and all sorts of sexual crimes. One thing is certain: violence is unheard of. When I first came here, 1 did not bring my family and I used to roam a lot at night. That is the time I used to imagine how a mini Sodom and Gomorrah is like. Of late, I have witnessed a lot of changes. The place is becoming quiet, and there is a general improvement in public courtesy. You no longer hear insults being thrown across the streets or even vulgar language being spoken by youngsters on their way from school."

"That sounds interesting. I didn't know all that," I said.

"Well, you would not know all that too soon. In any case you are fairly new in this place."

"Let us now turn to Libby. Where would you place her."

"Again what I am going to tell you, Roger, is very independent of whether she is your girl or not. Whether she is yours or not, I think I know her much better than you. And time will prove me right."

"Just proceed. She could be mine today, and tomorrow she could be my friend's. And my friend could ask me something about her tomorrow. I guess life is always like that."

"Libby is a very good girl. She is beautiful and she is very young as you might have known already. I consider her quite brilliant in school. But she is very

foolish in all other ways. I don't know whether to call her foolish, thick, dumb or what. But she is. I would not consider it to be age because even fourteen-year-olds do exhibit a bit of maturity and a sense of responsibility when they happen to be girls. Her case is different — completely different.

"She appears to have been brought up recklessly, by a reckless guardian in a reckless neighbourhood. She is the eldest in a family, I reckon of four or five ... I am not sure of the size of

her family. I think no maternal effects have been instilled in her growing up, regarding a girl's privacy. She is the type who has grown up putting money ahead of everything else. And because of that I would say she has been badly brought up. I would even say very spoilt, to such an extent that only a drastic change of heart can change her way of life. You know when children grow up spiritually bankrupt it is usually very difficult to fill up the missing gaps later on in life.

I have watched girls grow up to maturity and I have always seen that they usually end up very miserably in such cases compared to boys. Why the differences, I don't know. So your dear Libby fits into the category, judging according to my revised gospel."

I began feeling sympathy for Libby. At the same time I realized that this was a good moment to learn what I might otherwise have known when it was too late. I could at the same time imagine her seated somewhere alone, searching through her past mistakes and at once I felt like I could walk out, go fetch her and console her wounded heart. Then I looked the other way round and 1 imagined her, jumping up and down in a disco hall and I concluded: 'peace be with me now, for tomorrow can wait'.

"Which is your second category and how does she fit in that one?"

"There is no need, Roger, to tell you half truths. I think I had better tell you all and then later you can prove for yourself. But Joelene will be joining me here later on and she can tell you a bit more. If you are afraid to ask her, I can ask her indirectly and you can hear for yourself. First hand information from a first cousin."

'But cousins are not saints. Libby would need to be around to defend herself,' I said to myself.

"Libby is known all around here to like the company of those fellows with money. She likes cars a lot and if you have one you are sure of drawing her attention. This is a big weakness that I already know about. To crown it all, I have evidence that her

first abortion was carried out when she was fourteen. When she started dating and bedding men, I am cock-sure she also cannot remember."

I was amazed, horrified and unable to make any comment. I felt torn between sympathy and condemnation. I swallowed a glass of beer and quickly flashed over my mind all that Sollo had just told me. I had to make a decision, if anything a temporary decision. I realized that I had not seen Libby for a whole week and we had not communicated in any way. I could not tell whether she was having a problem somewhere or whether she was just having a good time. 1 simply could not judge her, and I at once resolved in my heart that I was going to stick to our 'Retreat Agreement', until I personally proved otherwise.

"Roger, that is what we call life. Whenever everything comes the way you always want it, the way you imagine and plan, then it is doubtful whether you are living or just strolling towards your own grave. Endurance is the word."

"I get you very loud and clear, Sollo. Those are good points that you have told me."

He ordered another round of beer and we continued drinking as we watched a musical video show by Madonna.

* * *

Joelene walked in at 1.15 a.m. clad in a heavy fur coat. She started smiling the moment she spotted us and seemed to be in a jovial mood. Friday tended to be a very happy day for everyone.

"How are you, Roger?" she asked me as she proceeded to occupy a seat between me and Sollo. "How come today you are alone? It is unusual for you on a Friday," she said rather ruefully.

"Nothing unusual, Joelene. I just decided to have this day as a special dedication to myself for all the work I have done over the week."

"And you like it?"

"So much that I decided I must drink as much beer as 1 possibly can and then go to sleep, hoping and trusting with a lot of faith that the sun shall rise as usual and all my wet clothes shall dry."

I was starting to feel a bit tipsy.

"Have a drink on me, Joelene. What are you taking .. . don't worry, it's a Friday," I said to her,

"Gin and tonic with a piece of lemon will be good for me," she said and at once I asked Yuda to give us two shots of gin. Before she finished her first round I ordered a second one. It was essential that she attain a frequency closer to ours, otherwise we were going to have difficulties communicating.

"You have been very infrequent in the office, Roger. Why?" she asked.

"Not as such, Joelene. You know I am involved in the water research project. This means at times I have had to leave the office very early in the morning and at times returning with my samples when the office is already closed. It has been a very hectic week for me. I am happy it is now over. And how was your week?"

"just like any other. My work is always the same. Sometimes I wish we could exchange duties even if only for one day. You seem to enjoy your work always/'

"Not really. 1 would say it all depends on the mood you are in most of the time. Your working mood counts a lot."

"Why didn't you bring Libby along?" She asked looking directly into my eyes. Her question caught me unawares and I could not think of an instant reply.

"Why? I haven't seen her for many days," I said. "It is good you asked me that question. How is she? Have you seen her this week?"

"Yes. I was with her earlier today and I am not very happy with her."

"Why unhappy? I thought she is your cousin. You should be able to sort out any differences between yourselves."

"It is true she is my cousin. But at times cousins can be worse than strangers. That is what I have realized."

"What happened?" I asked curiously. "Maybe I can help."

"Roger, I am saying here right in front of Sollo because I want him to hear and correct me where I go wrong: Libby is having a big crisis at her home, and I can assure you that it is not the first one. I know you have something going on with her and I know she is your friend, but I can assure you that you really know nothing about her. Nothing at all. I caution you in advance that you need to be a bit careful. And please excuse me if I appear to be getting in between you and her. I am simply, just not that type."

At once I sensed that there was much more than I had imagined. And I was now more eager than before to hear it all.

"When I first came here we were very good friends and each time I was not at work we would spend most of the time together, either at her home or at my house. After sometimes I came to learn that some girls would come in big cars driven by men and they would go away together all night. Each time she would tell my aunt she had spent the night at my house. I remember things came to light early last year when she was expelled from school after it was discovered that she was pregnant. My aunt came to my house scolding me for nothing and I had to get my mum to intervene. My aunt accused me of bringing men to Libby each time she came to sleep in my house. I protested and she had to confess. She apologised to me as well.

"I waited for six months before going to their house and I can say that she was lucky to be admitted back to school after she had had an abortion. I am sure you know about that case, Sollo. I remember it was the talk of the whole town."

"Yes, I remember hearing something like that. But I know you are more conversant with the details. Just tell Roger all that you know. He can then analyse the rest for himself."

"Over the last week I have been rather unhappy again about Libby. On Monday she did not sleep at her home, and on Tuesday she did not go to school either. Her mum was furious.

She came to my house looking for her, saying that I had taken Libby for a disco

over the weekend. I became so mad, especially when I remembered last year's incident, that I insulted my aunt. I told her on the face that Libby, being about my size, was too heavy for me to carry on my back along with her menfriends. I thought that was the only language my aunt would understand. Then she left me without uttering another word."

We all broke into laughter.

"Now, Roger, you must get me right," she continued.

"1 am with you, Joelene, carry on. I understand your plight," I said.

"Libby is my cousin and I honestly like her as an individual. But I must confess that she has led me through some dark alleys and I would hate to have a repeat. I have told her over and over again to stick to one man or have none at all. But it seems by the time she is out with one, another one has already stepped in. Sometimes I pity her. Maybe, Roger, you might influence her and change her life."

"Joelene, that is sensible talk. Talking sense helps a lot," I commended her for her seeming sincerity.

"What I know, Roger, is that Libby will not be able to have any sleep tonight. We passed by your house and found a note stuck on the door. We just left it in place. Her worry was that she must see you tomorrow preferably in the morning hours. I advised her to check on you at about ten o'clock, so I know she will pass by your house around that time."

"I guess we can have another round before calling it a day." Sollo offered a double gin for Joelene, two beers for me and two beers for himself. My head was already heavy. Not only because of the beer, but I had a feeling that there was a lot more I needed to know and that only Libby could clarify.

Chapter Four

I was listening to the nine o'clock news broadcast when 1 heard a loud knock on the door. I lifted my head and I felt like there was a boulder inside it. I had a bad hangover and I just wanted to continue sleeping. I sat on the edge of the bed and looked into the side mirror. My hair was ruffled, my eyes were swollen and they were very red. I could not recall fighting with anybody in my dreams. I slipped

on my night gown and walked to the door. I pushed the curtain aside as I opened the mortice lock, and standing outside was Libby, holding a package wrapped in aluminium foil

"Hi. Come in, lost one," I said as I stretched my hand to greet her.

"Hi. Don't tell me you are still in bed, my dear."

"Yes, I am. I stayed out very late last night and I am only trying to catch up with my sleep. Please come in and lock the door."

I walked back to the bedroom and she proceeded to the kitchen to keep the package which she was carrying. Then she followed me to the bedroom. I looked at her without saying a word, and I saw that she was worried about something. She was not in her usual jolly mood. I took her arm and pulled her towards me and when she leaned on me I planted a kiss on her lips. She managed a smile and then asked me whether I needed breakfast in bed. 1 asked her to give me orange juice first and then we could have breakfast later.

She went to the kitchen and brought me a glass of passion juice instead. I was feeling dehydrated and after gulping it I asked her to give me another one. It was quite refreshing. She came back with a second glass and placed it on the sideboard.

"What did you bring me for breakfast?" I teased her.

Then she looked at me and said, "I tried to imagine what I could bring you, but I was unable to choose. I only brought you some pancakes and some fresh fruits. Do you like fruits in the morning?"

"Yes, a lot. Not only in the morning. I can thrive on fruits alone."

"Can I give you some right now?"

"No. I am okay with the juice for the time being. We can have fruits later when we take breakfast."

"Where did you go last night?" she asked.

"I waited for you, and when I realised you were not coming, I got bored just

staying alone in the house, so I decided to go and play some games at the club. I played for quite sometime and later I started drinking with some friends, until very late into the night. In fact I came home at about 3.00 in the morning. That is why you found me looking tired and sleepy."

"I can tell you really need some more sleep. Let me leave you to have some sleep and in the meantime I can wash your clothes, clean the house and if you are still not awake, I can start preparing some lunch."

"That is a good idea, sweetheart ... I know I need just an hour or two and all my sleep will be gone."

She left the room, but her image remained with me. I tried to get some sleep but I was unable to get any deep sleep. Too many questions kept flashing through my mind.

I felt by now I had had enough; stories upon stories and all bad stories about my dear Libby. I was now convinced that a lot of it was true. I had to decide whose fault it was, what role she had played in the whole mess and whether that was her nature or whether she was willing and capable of changing.

In my mind I had no doubt that I was really in love with Libby. What I did not know was how much in love she was. Whether I could ignore her past and assume that all was going to be alright was a difficult decision for me. Although I knew I had

make that decision once and for all, I was not sure how I was going to do it. I tried to push those thoughts out of my mind but it was difficult. Sleep would not come and I tossed around in bed.

'Why did Joelene tell me so much about Libby? Is she not happy about our relationship? Could she be jealous about her cousin? If Libby has slipped into all those pitfalls before, can she avoid them in the future?' For my part, I knew that I had made numerous and grave errors before and my remedy had always turned out to be realising the errors and avoiding a repetition.

Again Libby's image flashed across my mind. 'Does she realise that she has made many grave errors in the past? Does she realise that if the same trend persists, things can be difficult later on? Was I ready to be her advisor or her sweetheart? I was not ready to play the combined role. All I was sure of was that

I wanted us to remain together. Perhaps I was taking a big gamble but at the same time I did not want to break our initial promises. I knew that if I had managed to change some of my bad ways, she was also capable of forgetting and abandoning her past.

But how would 1 ever know if she had changed or whether she would ever change? I had no formula but I thought the best way out of it was to give her all the time and freedom. For the time being she needed to concentrate on her studies and I did not want to antagonise her at all

I thought about her past once again and concluded that we could not dwell on the past. Then I closed my eyes feeling contented and I fell fast asleep.

* * *

When I woke up it was already midday. It was another sunny day, and temperatures were bound to climb at that time of the day during that time of the year. I took a quick cold shower and dressed up. I went to the front yard for a few minutes of sun bathing and then returned to the house to peruse the morning papers.

After a while, Libby came to announce that lunch was ready. I scanned quickly through the second newspaper and then went to the dining room. Food was already on the dinning table. There was chicken curry prepared with green peas, carrots, potato chips and cauliflower, to go along with mashed bananas. The food appeared quite appetising. There was also a bowl of salad comprising thinly sliced cucumber, lettuce, capsicums and a little trace of onions together with grated carrots. On top of all that was another bowl of fruit salad made up of a wide range of fruits, among them pawpaws, ripe bananas, pineapples, passion, peaches and strawberries all soaked in thick mango juice.

"I love your fruit combination, dear," I commended her.

"Thanks. 1 realised that you needed to replenish your lost energy. 1 also realised that I had not come in for a whole week at least to cook for you one good meal. I want to see you eat as much as possible today and compensate," she said, as she piled my plate with drumsticks and a heap of mashed bananas.

"Stop there my dear, that is too much to start with," I protested. "I will keep on adding bit by bit until I am completely full," I said, and then we got down to

enjoy the food.

After lunch we moved to the verandah and sat on a mattress. The verandah was situated on the westen side of the house and from there we could see airplanes landing and taking off from the JK International Airport. All planes from Mombasa were passing overhead and we could follow a plane from the minute it passed overhead until it touched down at the airport. We kept timing each aircraft and found on the average, each plane took about fifteen minutes to descend and land. It was fun but my mind was not at ease. I was still not quite certain how I was going to introduce the subject, but I also knew this was the best opportunity.

I turned around and our eyes met. Then we looked at each other without saying a word. It seemed like we were both trying to tell each other something, but words would not go beyond our lips.

"How did you like my lunch?" Libby asked rather in an effort to start a conversation.

"It was wonderful ... I wish you would always be around to prepare such food for me. I guess I would add a kilogram a day," I joked.

"Some day I will cook for you, until you no longer want my food anymore."

"Maybe after a thousand years," I said, and she burst into a forced laughter. Then she kept quiet suddenly, as if her power lines had been cut. Then she held my hand tightly and moved closer to me and said very softly, "Sweetheart, I want to spend the whole day with you in the house. I don't want you to go anywhere. I just want to be with you because there are very many things that I would like you to know."

"That is fine, dear, I didn't intend to go anywhere and I am sure it is even lovelier when we are together," I assured her.

"Maybe we can go to the bedroom and chat there, it is getting too hot outside here," I said.

"That is a good idea, sweetheart," she said and we rose to enter the house. I did not want any disturbances once inside the house. I locked the main door, and took the small portable cassette player to the bedroom. We lay prostrate on the

bed at first just listening to music and then without realising we found ourselves embracing, kissing and caressing wildly like people who were having time together for the first time.

It was unusually hot and we had to put a sheet between us to avoid any body contact.

"Sweetheart, come closer," she said to me in low tones. Then I moved closer to her and held her shoulder.

"I am sorry I was not able to come and see you for the whole of the past week, although I missed you a lot," she said with her eyes focused on the wall. "It has not been one of my best moments in life. My mind was tortured each time I remembered what we talked about at the Retreat. I had difficulty sleeping and I kept waking up at night sweating. I was not able to concentrate

in the classroom, and I kept imagining that you had given up on

me."

"Why did you have to imagine that? Last time we parted happily and we did not communicate in between, for the whole week. So why have bad feelings? If anything , I only kept wishing that you could spare a few einutes to come around and say heldo. You well know that I cannot come to your house at this stage."

"I understand, sweetheart. Afd I am sorry about it."

"Never mind, dear ... soon everything will be fine," I said to her reassuringly.

"I have thought about our relationship over and over again, and I have come up with only one solution: that I love you dearly and I don't want to lose you. I know I am still in school and again I don't know whether you will wait for me. But whatever you want me to do I will for your sake."

"One thing is certain, Libby, as far as I am concerned. My love for you is real and it is deep. I know once I get committed to something I really get carried away. Don't expect my love to wane. One thing which you must do, that will make me love you even more is to concentrate on your studies for as long as you can. I can assure you that I will not get tired of waiting for you as long as we are sincere to each other."

"I will do my best to achieve that, and 1 promise from the deepest part of my heart, that I will endeavour to do my best"

"I am happy to hear that, my dear, from your own lips. Let me give you a kiss."

"Now I have something else to tell you. Ii don't know whether you will get annoyed and stop loving me, and I am not sure whether you will love me again the same way."

Her voice was once more filled with emotion and I had to re-assure her.

"Once my love is given, it is given. And once I have opened my heart to someone I love, I usually leave it to that person to close it when the love is gone. I never close my heart to someone

I have committed my love to. Don't expect me to change, my dear, as long as we are together."

"I am glad to hear that assurance, sweetheart, and now I must tell you the whole story backwards."

"Why backwards, Libby?" I asked.

"Because that way I will be able to give you all the facts from the recent past which I can remember vividly up to the early days when my memory and intellect become dim and obscure. Those are the early days when I could not be able to relate one thing to the other. They were the days when I rated everything, whether living or non-living, as either good or bad. I did not have room fotborder line cases at that time."

"Whichever way you want to tell me, my dear, I will listen and I know I will understand. Firstly, because I want to understand you, and secondly, because you want me to understand you as well. You wouldn't tell me if you didn't want to. So just go ahead, I am listening."

"When I left you last Sunday I went home and met my mum and dad alone in the house. 1 greeted them and neither of them answered back. Immediately 1 smelt a rat. I walked straight to my bedroom and sat on my bed. I was confused. I did not know what to do next.

"After half an hour my mum came and told me that Dad wanted to talk to me. I went to the sitting room and sat down. Then he bombarded me with questions.

"The first question was where I had been for the whole weekend. I did not answer. 1 stared at Mum. He asked me a second time and I remained silent. Then he stood up and made as if he was going to slap me but my mum stopped him. Then he started shouting at me calling me all sorts of names. He told me that I was letting him down as a daughter and that I did not even deserve to be called his daughter. He accused me of abandoning school and resorting to a life of nightclubs, something that is simply not true. He said that I was seen at the country club dancing and drinking and that I left the following day with you."

"Does he know me?" I was perplexed.

"I guess he knows you. Or somebody might have pointed you to him and given him your details, because he was talking very confidently. He scolded me for moving around with you saying that you were married when you were in college and that you have two children. 1 got so irritated that I found myself shouting back at him, telling him that 1 knew you better and you were not married. At least you had told me so."

"You were right. And that was good of you."

"He got so worked up when 1 defended you that he hit me with his leather belt, and was about to hit me a second time when Mum intercepted him and held the belt. I decided at once that enough was enough. I jumped out through the window, took a bus and went to my aunt's house in Nairobi. On Monday 1 did not go to school because I did not have my school uniform. My aunt is Dad's sister and 1 explained everything freely to her. Then on Monday evening she drove me here and called my parents outside. They sat inside the car for a long time and I couldn't guess what they were talking about. She did not even enter the house to take some tea," she said and shifted her position slightly before she continued.

"Finally, before she drove off, she called me aside and advised me to concentrate only on my studies, and that affairs of friendship always fell in place naturally. Then she gave me one hundred shillings and told me to buy the best book that I needed. I felt so good. At least I felt one person was finally able to understand me.

"For the rest of the week 1 did not want to leave the house once I came in after school. I am now happy that all my assignments are done. And I am even happier that I am here with you."

I looked at her face and 1 could easily tell that she was indeed quite happy. Her eyes were sparkling white and only radiating love and warmth.

"Do you think your parents have any idea that you come to see me?"

"By now I can bet they know. One cannot hide anything in this town for long."

"What do you think that means, as far as we are concerned?"

"Sweetheart, all that I know is that 1 love you and that is enough. I love you very much, and if you love me the way 1 do, nothing can come between us."

"As far as our love is concerned, I hope we are very clear about that, but don't forget that we cannot ignore those who are around us and those who are about us ..."

"We will find a place for them. At least not between us," she concluded, and gave me a forceful kiss.

"The next episode, sweetheart, is very sad, very sad indeed, but again I am sure that you will give me your attention, and you are free to judge me. It always makes me shed tears when I recall those events."

"Don't shed any tears, and don't feel sad. I am with you now and for ever/' 1 consoled her. Then I held her palm and she was trembling. She looked at me sorrowfully and begged me to bear with her. She seemed to be sinking into a trance and recovering fast.

"1 remember early last year, when we opened school for the second term, I was discovered to be pregnant following the usual school screening. At first, I was given a letter to take to my parents after the screening and later I realised that the letter contained an ultimatum which read in part: Tt has always been our school's policy not to waste public funds on mothers and also not to encourage any sort of motherhood among our female students. Libby is two and a half months pregnant and you are hereby urged to report to the office of the headmistress as soon as possible ...'

"The letter was brought to me at the end of the day by the class mistress personally. She did not say a word to me. At once, I sensed that something was terribly wrong. I slipped the letter inside my school bag and I immediately left for home. 1 did not wait for my friends to tell them that I was gone. I just wanted to get home as fast as possible. I reached home at about six thirty in

the evening and this was unusually early for me since I routinely got home at seven thirty.

"My mum was there and so was my dad. I found them talking and laughing and after greeting them 1 went to my bedroom to remove my school uniform. I unpacked my school bag and removed the letter which I had been instructed to take to my parents and not to dare open. I looked at the envelope and then tried to figure out what wrong 1 could have done. I could not think of anything. I went to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. On returning to join them in the sitting room, I found my dad about to finish reading the letter. When he finished, he tossed the letter to my mum and furiously left the house, without talking to anybody; he banged the door and disappeared. I had never seen him act like that and I felt scared.

"I watched the expression on the face of my mum as she read the letter and for the first time I saw her shed a tear. She bowed and sank her face into her hands holding the letter firmly. Then all of a sudden she stood up and went to her bedroom. She did not come out for a long time. 1 was left all alone in the sitting room.

"A room that was filled with laughter a few minutes earlier had suddenly become eerie. 1 felt very lonely and helpless. I had no idea of the contents of the letter and I did not have the courage to ask. I was certain about one thing: the contents of the letter were not good and it all concerned me."

She looked at me and found me listening intently. Then she continued: "I sat for a while considering what to do next. I picked up a book and attempted to read, but I found I had no concentration at all. I just stayed there looking from one corner of the room to the other."

"To minimize my anxiety and tension 1 went to the kitchen and busied myself by washing dishes. When that job was over, I sat down and started peeling potatoes in readiness for dinner. I had to keep doing something to reduce my nervousness.

"1 heard a slight push on the door, and when 1 looked up 1 saw my mum looking hard at me. I looked back at her and

noticed that her eyes were red and swollen. At once I knew she had been crying in her bedroom and I felt pity. I could not dare to ask her anything, but was very anxious to hear something from her.

* * *

"'Do you want to continue with school or don't you?'" my mum thundered, her voice almost breaking. I was unable to answer.

"When did you become pregnant?'" she asked and 1 felt shattered. My biggest worry was confirmed.

M/ Who is responsible?'"

"I was unable to comment. I had a trail of boyfriends and I could not be able to pin anyone in particular. Rather than blame my boyfriends, I started blaming my girlfriends. They were all older than me. Most of them were one or two classes ahead of me, and they always introduced me to older boys who only cared for you as long as you were going to spend the night together. Then plenty of whisky and lots of pop music would be provided. Accommodation was always in the most luxurious hotels. I particularly blamed my friend Jane. She always acted for her older brother and left us when I was trapped.

"I guess my mum realised scolding me was not going to help and finally asked me to go and do my homework. Then I left her cooking, I went to the sitting room and took a novel. I started reading but after forcing myself through the first page I started feeling dizzy. I turned the book upside down and rushed to my bedroom. I lay on my back and within no time I was fast asleep. The next thing I recall hearing was my younger sister calling me to wake up and eat food. 1 declined and went back to sleep. Then I overheard her asking mum: Ts Libby sick?' To which my mum answered in the affirmative. But was I really sick? It was a harrowing experience. I had never felt anything like it before.

"Later I heard the bedroom door open. I looked up and saw my mum looking hard at me. 'Don't take the early morning bus tomorrow. I will go with you. Do you understand?' Yes, I said

and went back to sleep into a night that was going to be very long.

"When 1 woke up the following morning, 1 found that everyone had gone to school, and there was only me and my mum in the house. She was taking a shower in the bathroom.

"I went to the sink and washed my face. Then I put on my school uniform as usual and sat down to take tea. When my mum came where I was, 1 was unable to look into her face. I felt very ashamed. I remained quiet, fixing my eyes on the floor. She took her handbag, and from the corner of my eye, I saw her put my hospital card into the small pouch. She asked me to change my school uniform and put on casual wear. Then I knew for sure that 1 was not going to school that day."

She shifted her gaze and after a brief pause, continued: "We took the ten o'clock bus to the city and when we reached Nairobi we headed straight for the Family Health Centre. Dr. Wachira was our family doctor and I knew he had his consultancy office there. 'What was going to happen there?' That was my biggest question. I was trembling all over.

"My mum left me in the waiting room and walked into Dr. Wachira's office. They talked for a few minutes and then she came back to me and said, 'Dr. Wachira will call you in shortly, just wait here for your turn. I am going to see your headmistress. After that I will be back.' Then she left.

"The headmistress of my school and my mum had attended the same high school and I knew they were on good terms. That was my only consolation. I was optimistic that my chances of continuing school were not totally lost, but I was afraid of losing a whole year and the shame that was due to follow. Later on, I guess months later, I learned that my mother had been told by the headmistress to warn and caution me on the following: smoking, big spending whose source of money no-one knew, associating only with well-to-do children, not taking my work seriously, shunning games and deserting the school compound at the sound of the last bell. All that was true."

I remained quiet, listening. Libby was very eloquent and there was no trace of exaggeration in her narration of her former experiences. Her memory was vivid but was frequently laced with bitterness and strong emotions. At other times her eyes were filled with tears, which she quickly wiped off.

"What happened at the Family Health Centre?" I asked. Then without a word she closed her eyes and cried. I persuaded her to stop crying and assured her that what had already happened could not be undone, but could be avoided in the future. She regained her composure and continued to narrate to me what happened at the Family Health Clinic.

"A nurse called my name and asked me to follow her to an inside office. She led me to Dr. Wachira's office and then left me and the doctor together. The doctor knew me from my previous visits and after greeting me, offered me a seat. Without wasting any time he started asking me some piercing questions one after another, after cautioning me that all questions must be answered truthfully.

"He asked me to lie on the examination table on my back and he proceeded to examine me. He felt my stomach with his hands starting from the lower abdomen, gradually moving his hands up to my sternum. He examined my breasts and then squeezed the teats to see if they exuded any discharge. He checked my heartbeat using a stethoscope and then took my blood pressure. He asked me to extrude my tongue and after looking at it briefly, he asked me to sit down. He lifted my eyelids and carefully looked inside. When he was satisfied he asked me to return to the seat. Then he started asking me further questions and counselling me at the same time. He asked me how often I had sex and I told him that I had no definite pattern. I also told him that I never kept any dates.

"Further he asked me if I had a regular partner and I told him that I never had a steady boyfriend."

After she had said this she looked at me to see my reaction, then smiled and added, "But now I have."

"That was a good answer you gave him."

"All along he was taking notes, but I was unable to see what he was jotting down. His handwriting was kind of Chinese. I could not tell one character from the other.

"After he finished questioning me, he looked at me sternly over his eye glasses and started talking to me in a changed and rather harsh tone. He said: 'Libby, you are a young girl, and it is very easy to see yourself looking older than your grandmother in a short period of time if this is going to be your way of life. You already smoke, and you drink beer and what have you. This is not proper. You

will shortly be doing your finals and what you need at this time is to pass your exams and not to fail. You are a first born and you ought to be the pride of your parents and not a disgrace. Think a lot about yourself. You will have no one to blame later. 1 can see from your hospital card that you have been treated before for neisseria infection, and that is bad enough.

"'I must let you know that you are two months pregnant. I discussed with your mother and father over the telephone last night, and we all had to decide on one thing. Yours is a hopeless case if your pregnancy is allowed to continue to term. You are not even ready to be a mother. It would be a typical case of a child begetting a child. You have no idea who could possibly be the father of your child. Another sign of hopelessness. And you are yet to complete your school. The only solution to all this is that your pregnancy must be terminated. It is going to be a simple operation. But remember, simple or not simple, an operation is an operation. The bottom line is that your ways must change forthwith, and they must change for the better/"

"1 had never before felt my privacy invaded so much. I only got courage from knowing that I was desperate. I had no alternative, but to bear whatever was going to come.

"'Do you understand what I have told you?' he thundered. Then softly I said, yes, looking shyly at my shoes.

"'Go to the next room and the sister there will show you what to do,' he said.

"Once I got to the next room I felt a bit relaxed. The nurse was very friendly, but I was scared by the sight of the machines

all around and the strong lights overhead. I looked at the wall clock and saw that it was already eleven o'clock. We were just the two of us in the theatre and I gathered some courage to ask the nurse how long it was going to take and whether the operation was painful. She refused to answer me directly, only telling me that there was nothing to worry about.

"She asked me to remove all my clothes and lie on my back on yet another type of table. She strapped my legs by the knees using some metallic clamps and proceeded to wash my entire pubic region with a very strong smelling antiseptic.

After rinsing me, she placed a green shround over my belly, and then summoned the doctor to come in.

"He walked in from an adjacent office all dressed in white. He took a syringe from a stainless steel dish and affixed a needle. Then he filled die syringe with a colourless liquid from a bottle. Next he soaked a pad of cotton wool in some methylated spirit, stretched my arm out and cleansed the area around my wrist. I felt the cold as the spirit evaporated. He sank the long needle into one of the veins and kept talking to me as he injected the colourless liquid into my arm. The thing I can recall him asking me was my age. After that I passed out. I don't know what was done to me, how it was done or how long it took. I only remember that when I regained consciousness, I was in a different room lying on a bed, covered with a heavy blanket. There were three other patients in the room. They were about my age, and I felt relieved to realise that they were in the same plight as 1 was. For the first time I felt that I was not alone.

"The nurse came around and asked me how 1 was feeling. I told her I felt fine but was a little dizzy. She gave me my clothes and asked me to go to the bathroom and dress up. I did that and when I returned, I found her and my mum standing next to the bed I had been sleeping in.

"My mum did not talk to me. She just looked at me expressionless. Then we all went to the doctor's office. The doctor began lecturing me all over again and I felt nauseated. He warned me of all sorts of diseases acquired through

permissiveness, and in particular, he cautioned me against many more diseases that never manifest themselves until all the damage has been done. I felt scared. However, he assured me that my health was excellent and that I needed to safeguard it now more than ever before. He gave me some medicine to take as instructed and ordered me to remain in bed for at least three days.

"After that my mum hired a taxi to take us home where 1 went straight to bed. I did not wake up until the following day. Before leaving for work the next day, my mum brought me hot chocolate in a thermos flask, some scrambled eggs and some fruits. She instructed the house girl to remain around the house all the time and to supply anything I needed. I took a cup of chocolate, ate the eggs and one orange. I took my medicine and then went back to sleep. I did not have any pains except some mild cramps in my lower abdomen. All day my urine was red with blood but the doctor had cautioned me to expect that during the first day. So I

was not worried.

"I spent the whole day in bed, most of the time deep asleep. I asked the house girl not to let any visitor inside my room. Only my mum came in briefly to check how I was fairing. Later, my younger sister came in and after assuring them that I was fine they left me to continue with my sleep.

"Instead of going to sleep, I sat on the chair and looked at the ceiling. 1 felt deserted, tormented and cheated and I started cursing myself. I felt tired all over, and yet I had spent the whole day in bed. I was distressed to know that all my friends were in the classroom, and they did not care where I was.

"Gently, 1 opened my suitcase, and took out a big khaki envelope where I kept my collection of love letters and pictures of my former friends. 1 removed all the pictures of the boys and men that I had had affairs with and all letters that they had written to me. Then I selected a few pictures among those of my girlfriends who I considered to have deceived me and 1 placed them aside.

"Then slowly, using a pair of scissors, I sliced them into fine pieces. I put them in an envelope and went to the toilet. Then I flushed them away. I did not hesitate and I felt good after doing that. I flushed the toilet twice to make sure that nothing remained. I was avenged. At least I had a good feeling that I had been avenged a little for my pain and pride. I went back to my bedroom and I started crying. The cries were inside my heart but tears were flowing down my cheeks like small streams. All of a sudden I felt a wave pass right down my stomach and I felt terrified. Then I stopped crying and sank back on my bed. I felt stronger under the blankets and after a short prayer to God, I started passing my own resolutions, without thinking twice about any of them. Finally, I woke up again and listed them all down on a piece of paper;

I was never going to make love to any man until I got married.

I was not going to have a boyfriend until I finished school.

1 was not going to drink beer any more.

I was going to cut links with all my girlfriends who insisted on going to discos.

That all my spare time and weekends were to be spent reading books or knitting or embroidering.

I was not going to kiss any man except my husband.

I was never, never going to sleep out except with mum's permission, and strictly not with my friends at their places or anywhere else.

Every Sunday, I would attend the church service.

And lastly, 1 was not going to read any pornographic materials or attend any sexually explicit films.

I kept going through all my resolutions day and night until the following week when I resumed school, a completely different person."

I felt that was quite a testimony and I did not ask for any explanations about anything that she had told me.

I turned over and looked at Libby directly into her face at close range. I continued looking at her for a while without saying anything, and inside her, I saw a brave woman. I pulled her towards me, and I felt a lot of warmth. Not from her body, but from inside herself as a person. I felt very confident being with her. Just lying there and talking.

"Have you kept all those resolutions?" I asked.

"I know I have broken some, but each time I have broken any one of them I have regretted. I have cursed myself and thereafter I have endeavoured to keep the resolutions."

"Which in particular have you broken? 1 know it is always easy to make resolutions but it is not usually as easy to observe them. I have personally made many, very many times but I have always flouted them."

"In particular I have smoked on occasions and I know I have gone on drinking sprees a number of times. This has been so especially recently before I met you. I got hooked to being with my cousin Joelene most of the time, and she has tempted me on a number of occasions to give her company under circumstances that I had no control over. I have therefore ended up doing things I did not intend to do in the first place."

"Let me ask you one more thing, Libby."

"Go ahead, sweetheart."

"Have you ever used any pills?"

"Never," she said emphatically. "Why?" She was quick to ask.

"No reason in particular, I just asked."

"No, I have never used them. I have only seen them with my mum. But I have never bothered to know anything about them."

"I will repeat one thing to you, Libby, and all I want you to do is just to observe it always: my love for you is deep, and gets deeper each time I am with you, and that way we shall have fewer regrets. From today I want us to stick to our Retreat Agreement. Forget all the past and do not harbour any bitterness about anything or anyone who ever offended you in the past. Just let us look into the future, because all I can see is brightness

ahead of us. Visit me as often as you can, and don't be afraid of anyone. Our love, my dear, is no longer a secret."

Chapter Five

For the next two and a half months before her final examinations we used to meet at least for half an hour every other day. We would spend whole days over the weekends listening to music, watching videos or just lying in bed talking. On some weekends we would go for shows in town or we would go to the discos and dance the weekends away.

Sometimes Libby would come along with her younger sister and at times could all go and visit my friends in the city. By now I was aware that her parents knew about our relationship. But I no longer cared. She did not care either.

During the last weeks before her finals I had to ask her to stay away until her examinations were over, but despite my request and urging, she always found time to come around and tell me how a certain paper was after doing away with it. I was unable to completely fence her off. My annual leave was due in early December, and I had not planned anything special for my vacation.

By the end of November, Libby had finished all her examinations. She was

going to have the whole of December, January and February free while waiting for her results. There was the whole of December free between us. On the day she sat for her final paper, she came rushing to my house carrying all the question papers which she had sat for and we went through them together, although it was some years since I had done similar exams. Looking at her model answers, I was confident that she was going to pass and 1 felt satisfied. We hugged and kissed and I promised her a three days trip to Malindi on condition that she would obtain permission. She assured me she would definitely get permission and I had to leave that to her.

My vacation was commencing Monday the following week and we proposed to leave for Malindi that Friday and return on Monday, the following week. It was a rather hasty arrangement but we did not require elaborate preparations. Her kiondo was adequate luggage for us. It could carry an extra dress for her and any of her vital necessities. For my part, I knew the coastal town of Malindi was always hot, and I did not require any extra clothes except my swimming trucks and underwear. One pair of sandals was adequate for me

1 confirmed my annual leave and the next morning, she came and confirmed that she also had been granted permission to come along with me. Immediately our preparations got under way. I could not hide my excitement about the trip, although her excitement was more noticeable. Her younger sister, Julie, was there and she seemed to be very excited too, and openly envious.

"Can I come with you, Roger?" she asked politely. She had become very free with me and very friendly too.

"Next year, Julie, same time, when you are through with your examinations and passed."

"Ooh.. .that is a long time to go!" she exclaimed.

"You will be surprised how time flies and how things can change in a short time. The other day you were just a kid to me. Now I see you are just about to become another woman."

"Stop it, Roger. . ." she giggled. "I am still a teenager," she protested and ran into the house.

Libby assigned her some work in the house, and then came over to the verandah

and sat next to me. The sun was bright, but not overhead as yet. It was a beautiful day. Sky blue, moderately warm, but not unbearably hot. It had rained heavily the night before and the air was filled with a strong aromatic fragrance coming from the blooming lilies and roses in the backyard garden.

"1 hope you did not miss another biology paper," I teased her by reminding her about her biology paper one which she missed when we were eating hamburgers at a Wimpy restaurant wrongly thinking that the paper was to be done in the afternoon,

while other students were busy doing the paper in the morning section, the same day.

"That is gone, sweetheart, and gone for ever," she said.

"Never mind, dear, I was just joking. I realised your majors are art subjects, and whether you did biology or not makes no difference. Anyway, you haven't told me how you managed to get permission to come with me." I really wanted to know the details to be able to know and weigh how our relationship was swaying in relation to her parents. I wanted to be cautious not to evoke any wrath between them and myself. But the situation now was such that we could not remain underground.

"At first my dad was against the idea. Mum did not comment when I asked her for permission. Then afterwards, she reminded me that I was now growing up and she could not keep me tethered. She said it was up to me to take care of myself, and to talk to them if there was any trouble. Then finally my dad said he sees nothing wrong with you, except that you spend too much time at the Members Club."

I laughed on hearing that and retorted, "Next time he says that, tell him that I don't have a wife like him, and I cannot talk to wardrobes in my bedroom."

She burst into laughter and promised she would convey the message whenever the atmosphere was right.

"Incidentally, my mother also knows you very well. She says she has met you a number of times, and that you don't talk to people and that her friends tell her you are very harsh in the factory regarding hygiene. That you send people with torn overalls away and also that you keep demanding health certificates all the

time."

"Tell her, if that was not done, most workers would be spending more time at the health centre instead of going to work."

"In short, they told me that we could go and visit your friends in Malindi and take care of ourselves. Then my mum gave me one hundred shillings to buy some mangoes on my way back."

That is good. My biggest worry is now gone. I did not know what to do in case they refused you permission."

"I was confident right from the beginning they would not refuse."

In the afternoon I went to the offices of Malindi Taxis and made two bookings for the 10.00 a.m. bus to Malindi. After getting the tickets I walked over to Crocodile Tours and Safaris and made a booking for two at the Eden Rock Hotel. The booking was confirmed. Then I walked to Kilimanjaro Pharmacists and bought some anti-malaria tablets. Finally I bought two rolls of colour films and returned home, just in time for the afternoon tea.

1 gave the tickets, the films and the medicine to Libby to keep in a strategic place lest we forgot them. She slipped them in her handbag and I knew they were in good hands.

Before they left for home I called Julie aside and gave her five pounds. I knew she was going to miss Libby a lot when we were gone. I asked her to go and watch a film if the weekend proved too long for her. She was very happy for that.

* * *

At 9.45 a.m. passengers started boarding the bus. Malindi Taxis were famed for punctuality and at exactly 10.05 a.m. the bus rolled off the parking bay. It was a new coach fitted with very comfortable seats. We occupied our seats at the near end of the bus from where I knew we had an added advantage of viewing wild game as we traversed the vast Tsavo National Park.

Twenty minutes after leaving the busy bus park, we were on the Mombasa highway cruising at 100 k.p.h. Shortly after, the sight of the Nairobi skyscrapers

was gone and all we could see ahead of us on both sides was the open vastness of the Nyika Plains stretching to the farthest horizon that the eye could see.

I loaded my Honeywell Pentax with a 35mm film and affixed zoom lens. We wanted to record on film exciting moments of our safari. It was Libby's first time to go to the coast and she was

very excited. I gave her the binoculars, which were powerful enough, to bring to close view tiny ants climbing an anthill in the distance.

During the first eighty miles or so we only saw herds of gazelles, antelopes, zebras, giraffes and ostriches. We made sure we captured each one of them, using very high shutter speeds.

From Nairobi, the drive was a very gradual descent towards the coastal lowlands, and one could easily feel the change of climate, turning from the cold highland climate to the warmer lowland climate as we travelled. The scenery had now changed and we were crossing some thick forests which were interspersed with giant baobab trees that stood out elegantly. By now many passengers were already asleep on their seats. We were also a bit weary, more so from the rising temperatures rather than exhaustion. The air conditioning inside the bus was not good and it was getting a bit uncomfortable. I reclined our seats and we decided to take a nap. Within minutes we were both snoring.

When we woke up, we had already reached Mtito Andei and it was time to rest and have lunch. We were halfway through the journey and it was three in the afternoon. All passengers disembarked and went to different hotels for their meals and refreshments.

We walked across the road holding hands and went to the New Tsavo Restaurant. I had been there before and I knew it was the best hotel in that town and they served very good food and fresh fruits. We were not very hungry and we chose to have a very light meal and plenty of fruit salad which was served ice-cold. After lunch we had twenty minutes before continuing the journey and we chose to take a brief stroll around the same town. We found the town very clean, and its people very courteous. Each person we met appeared very busy with one thing or the other — selling all sorts of merchandise. Some were selling beads made into beautiful patterns, others were selling Ostrich feathers while others were still busy peddling cowrie shells and wooden carvings, all at a bargain

price.

We did not have much time to enter into bargains, and after reaching the end of the main street we returned to the bus ready to continue with the remaining part of our journey. The scenery for the rest of the way was more spectacular. It was marked by hill upon hill in the distant horizon to the west. The small hills were shaped in such a way as to give an impression of architectural works rather than designs of nature itself. Still others appeared like giant boulders placed one upon the other.

The area was marked by vast open grasslands interspersed here and there by the growth of tufts of short shrubs and cacti. We kept coming across herds of elephants walking single file or just grazing and we could also see prides of lions resting atop big stones and at other times we could see another pride of lions feeding on a fallen giraffe or zebra.

Every time we came across such a scenery either Libby or I made sure we took photographs. The bus kept rolling down the highway at high speed, and again we found ourselves falling asleep due to the rising temperatures inside and outside the bus.

When I finally opened my eyes, I saw the Indian Ocean at a distance. The giant port cranes were discernible and I estimated we had another thirty minutes to go before reaching Mombasa. From there the scenery changed. It was very beautiful. The roadside was adorned with green palms and coconut trees and the architecture of the houses could easily tell you that you were in a totally different part of the country. I shook Libby and she woke up. I did not want her to miss any of the beautiful landscape.

She rose up from her inclined seat and immediately started taking some snapshots. The peoples' way of dressing was also different. Their clothing was loose and scanty, with most girls and women wearing black buibuis while the men sufficed with just a kanga around their loins and either loose T-shirts or nothing to cover their chests.

We were now entering Mombasa Island through the Makupa Causeway and were just in good time to see a bit of Mombasa during daytime. The sun was sinking into the horizon and the

street lights were already on. It was beginning to get dark. Five minutes later we

arrived at the bus terminus. I looked at the City Clock outside the bus terminus and saw it was six o'clock. We had two hours to relax before continuing to Malindi.

Malindi was about eighty miles away and I reckoned that if the ferry service across Kilifi Creek was good, we would be arriving in Malindi at about 8.00 p.m. We listed our names at the departure office and decided to stroll and stretch our legs. We had been sitting for very many hours and we still had another two hours to go.

We took Moi Avenue and entered the Castle Hotel. We asked for coffee and sat in the verandah watching the tumultuous movement of people going up and down the busy street. This was the high tourist season, and foreign tourists were everywhere. Some were walking with only their swimming trunks on, in order to cool off the heat of the day and maximize on the evening breeze coming from the sea.

The twilight girls were easy to notice. They were positioned at strategic corners, wearing huge wigs on their heads, thick make-up and mini pants. They were quick to hiss like vipers at every man passing by alone. But they did not bother with any paired couples.

We finished our coffee and walked back to the bus terminus. The bus for Malindi was next on the line and the driver was just revving the engine. We boarded the bus and were happy to be on the last leg of our journey. A few minutes later we departed, and shortly, were on the Mombasa-Malindi highway cruising at a moderate speed.

When we arrived at the Kilifi creek, we found the ferry was on the other side of the channel. Fortunately, the line-up was not long. We were about the tenth and before long, another ten vehicles were lined up behind us. The ferry arrived from the opposite side and our bus climbed over the rump. The next vehicle followed and soon the ferry was full. The doors were lifted up and we crossed the channel in just fifteen minutes. Soon, we were speeding towards Malindi. It was already dark,

and we sat quietly listening to some Taarab music which was the only entertainment provided in the bus.

At eight sharp we arrived at the Malindi bus terminus. We were delighted to

reach our destination according to the bus schedule. We took our bags and hired a taxi to drop us at the Eden Rock hotel. It was just a ten minutes' drive but we did not dare to walk at night in a strange town.

The cab dropped us at the reception area and we walked over to the reception desk. We gave our names and we found our bookings had been reserved. We were warmly received and a porter led us to our room, carrying our bags. He led us to a nice double room on the third floor, with a balcony and it was very refreshing to feel the cool breeze from the ocean, and also to listen to the sound of the roaring ocean waves.

There was a full moon, and its reflection on the ocean surface over the undulating waves was a beautiful spectacle. I could not help commenting on the wonders of creation. I said to Libby: "If only God came one day and called all the people on the face of the earth together, and gave us only one lecture on how he created all these wonders, and then left, I am certain he would leave us like brothers and sisters, all as one family."

I looked up and saw the numerous stars, some bright and others dim.. Some small and some bigger than the others. Then I continued, "Just imagine that we are sitting on something which is floating in an empty space. Imagine all that water you see, and suppose what would happen if the ocean broke loose."

"Don't scare me, sweetheart," Libby said. I try to imagine those things and I feel like my head is going to crack. I see what you tell me but I am now not worried at all. I am confident with you. I know you can't let me be washed into the sea."

We were in high spirits, and we hugged each other, feeling invigorated. Then we decided it was time to take a shower before going down for dinner. Libby held me by the arm and said we were going to shower together. So we undressed and went into the bathroom, which was lined with marble.

* * *

After showering we went to the dining room. Our table was reserved but virtually all the other tables were occupied by both local and foreign visitors. A wide choice of food was available. There was an oriental cuisine and a western cuisine, but we wanted something different. The African dish was our speciality upcountry, so we chose an exclusive dish of sea foods. A waiter brought a bottle of red wine to our table and after filling our glasses, he told us to go ahead and

enjoy ourselves.

"You can ask for another bottle of wine if you wish," he told us with a smile and proceeded to the next table. I swallowed the first glass quickly and filled it again up to the brim. It was quite refreshing.

A while later the waiter returned with a trolley loaded with an assortment of sea foods. That is what we had chosen as our special dinner. He lit a candle. In order to keep the food hot he placed the stainless steel dishes on top of the mini-oven. I examined the contents closely and could not help salivating. The food looked very appetising.

"Can I serve you, dear?" I asked.

"No, let me serve you instead. I know you like sea food and I know you haven't eaten anything substantial all day long."

She took a plate and started putting each and every item that was provided.

"Just tell me when to stop adding," she said, as she kept piling my plate with oysters, crabs and shrimps.

"Enough, enough ..." I said. Then she began serving herself, taking only half as much.

We ate slowly, taking our time, while watching a video show showing the endangered species of wild life around the world. It included a documentary on the plight of the cheetah which is hunted for its beautiful skin. Then we saw the elephant being slaughtered in the thousands for ivory and then, to our horror, the predicament of the rhino which was said to be nearing extinction simply because of its horn. There was a brief mention of the Giant Panda of China, but no explanation was given as to why it was threatened with extinction.

When we finished eating, I signed the bills and asked the waiter to take one bottle of Mateus Rose to our room.

We left the dining room and went for a walk along the beach, which was well lit by the full moon and powerful searchlights, making the entire beach-head appear like it was daytime.

We walked up to the end of the hotel compound along the beach, and then returned to the seats which were kept in the small hotel park.

We sat there for a long time talking and kissing wildly like it was going to be the end of the world for us.

At midnight we returned to our room, feeling very relaxed but a little tired from the long journey. I opened the bottle of wine and filled two glasses. We had a toast to our continued love ana went on to enjoy our drink. After my fourth glass, I was already feeling high, very relaxed and extra-ordinarily happy. We remained glued to the couch drinking one glass after another until we cleared the whole bottle. That is when I realised that I was getting tipsy.

Libby was unable to finish her last glass. She could barely stand up. 1 helped her to the bed and assisted her to undress, removing one piece of clothing at a time, until she had nothing on. She kept mumbling "I love you, I love you, sweetheart". She appeared very beautiful in the dim light. More beautiful than before.

i sat on the edge of the bed and undressed. I removed all my clothes and threw them on the chair in a corner at the end of the room. But when I tried to pull Libby towards me, I found she was already dead asleep. She was lying on her stomach, unable to do anything else, I lay there on the bed staring at the ceiling, with no one to talk to. Then, I too, fell asleep.

* * *

The night seemed very short. When I opened my eyes, I saw Libby staring at me. It was already nine o'clock in the morning.

"Why did you go to sleep before me last night?"

"You must be joking, my dear. You fell asleep so suddenly I was left thinking you would never wake up." "Really?"

"That is exactly what you did. You did not even finish your wine. Look at your glass over there. I tried waking you up but it was impossible. So how was your night?"

"I had a very quiet night. No dreams at all, till this morning when I dreamt I was

seeing you go away leaving me alone. Then suddenly 1 got up and saw you by my side."

We smiled at each other and moved closer together. Her body was very hot, but she said mine was hotter. We had missed each other the whole night, and I felt 1 needed to compensate for my lost night. We did not have time to find out whose body was hotter. I just pulled myself over to her and we sank back into the bed winding around one another, breathing in unison, and only her groaning could be heard over and above the roaring ocean. Soon we were exhausted, but we were not in a hurry to wake up. Once again, we fell into deep sleep.

At eleven o'clock we went downstairs to the dining room for a late breakfast. And after breakfast we walked to town to sightsee, finally ending up at the Aqua Sailing Club.

I suggested we hire a motorboat for an hour or two, but Libby wouldn't hear of that. She did not know how to swim and the sight of the big ocean waves made her tremble. I could not tell whether she suffered from sea phobia or she was simply scared because she did not know how to swim. She did not want to hear the idea of only the two of us riding in a boat alone. But I really wanted her to have the best at that time. I knew she would end up loving sailing.

I persuaded her and we jbined a group of tourists who were sailing in a group and in a bigger motorboat and she reluctantly agreed. I enquired from the skipper whether there was any room for two and he was glad to have us in his group. We rushed to the changing rooms and put on our swimming costumes. The ocean tour was going to take an hour and a half, and we were going to the deep sea to watch the merchant ships sailing along

their designated sea corridors. He informed us that there was an American Carrier Warship anchored somewhere and that we would also have the opportunity to see it.

When the time came to embark onto the motorboat, Libby would not let go of my hand. Then the boat swayed from side to side as it moved away from the quay and she almost screamed. I had an arduous task reassuring her all the time that the boat was equipped with all emergency apparatus and we were all safe. Finally she calmed down, but made sure my hand was always within her reach.

When we reached the deep sea the waves got bigger and bigger, and each time

one was about to strike the boat, she would close her eyes and grip my hand very firmly. The dry land was now out of sight and she kept asking how far we were going,

"Not very far, my dear, we are about to return." It became a chorus.

We came closer to a Greek merchant ship and I drew her attention. It was a giant of a ship and Libby became visibly excited. She smiled and I reckoned she now believed that we were not the only ones in the sea. Others too were there ready to come to our assistance if the need arose.

Twenty minutes later, sailing due south east, we spotted the giant American Warship. From a distance it appeared like it was moving, but the skipper assured us that it was not. It was anchored and what seemed to our eyes to be movements were actually the effects of the ocean waves. He told us that he was on radio contact with the ship, and the captain had granted us permission to pass up to within two hundred meters of the Carrier. That way we could have the best view and those with cameras were free to take pictures.

I kept looking at Libby, and I was happy now that she was completely relaxed and could now appreciate everything she saw in the sea. She had now qualified as a seafaring companion.

The skipper steered the boat towards the Carrier and then communicated with the ship's captain through his radio. He

then changed the boat's direction. It was only after a while that we realised that he was giving us a treat by driving us around the giant Carrier. I had always been fascinated by carriers and this trip gave me a marvelous opportunity to study one from close range. Sailing round it was like going around an island. Looking at its huge guns was like approaching a fortress, and watching the fighter planes on deck was like visiting an airforce base. The carrier was a marvel in itself. The giant radio antennae and the entire communications gear made the ship look like a weather station. On its side was marked in bold letters, 'USS SARATOGA'.

The sea had now calmed down. There was another ship coming from the northeast and heading southwest, but it was too far away to be identified. We could not tell whether it was an oil tanker or just another merchant ship.

On our way back to Malindi the skipper directed us to look to the right side of

the boat. He was pointing at something which was not apparent to us at first. Then he accelerated the boat a little and we were lucky to spot, momentarily, two giant sharks trailing one another, before they finally dived into the water. He informed us that sharks were common in that part of the ocean, and that they were always following large ships, and warships in particular because they always got something to eat from the discarded food. He explained further to us that the shark was the only dangerous creature in the sea, but that fortunately, it was only found in the deep sea.

I had read a lot about sharks and their savage attacks on human beings and for the first time, I felt scared. I did not let Libby know that I was scared although I was. I looked at the faces of the other passengers on board and found they were expressionless. The rest of them except the skipper and us were Italian and German tourists and we could not understand a word of what they were saying.

Minutes later, we arrived at the Aqua Sailing Club. The motorboat docked and was quickly moored to the poles. Libby was the first one to jump out. Then I followed her. We walked to

the club park and took a rest on the wooden chairs laid out nicely under coconut trees, where a cool breeze was blowing gently from the sea.

We had lunch at the Aqua Club and in the afternoon, when the sun started to go down, we hired an open tourer, just to go sight-seeing around town. We visited some old ruins in the outskirts of the town which had by now been converted to national archives. We also visited other Portuguese monuments that had been built during the fifteenth century.

We were astounded by their robustness, and we could not understand how metal could withstand weather denudation for so many hundreds of years. The buildings appeared intact and showed no signs of wear and tear. They gave the impression of being haunted dens that were occupied at night by the spirits of the early explorers. We toured the whole compound guideless, and we could see wells scattered all over the compound at strategic corners. When we threw stones inside, we could hear them falling on hard surfaces and we wondered where the water had gone.

We tried to estimate the depth of one well by dropping a stone and timing how long it would take to hit the bottom of the well. We did this five times and on the

average we found it took two and a half seconds. We calculated that at free fall, the stone would travel about ten metres per second. Then we came up with an average depth of twenty five metres. That was a very deep well. We tried another and came up with a free fall of three seconds. Then we kept testing other wells in sequence, noting down our observations. In the end we found the deepest well to be forty five metres deep, using this method.

We could not help wondering whether indeed they were, or used to be water wells or some sort of graves.

The ruins were unkempt, and mangrove trees and other wild vegetation were left growing all over. It was very quiet, eerily quiet, and a look at the canon guns and canon balls which had been abandoned over the ages gave the place an awe-inspiring feeling; a mixture of curiosity and fear.

"Suppose some ghosts just appeared from the wells and grabbed one of us deep into the wells," I said jokingly and Libby screamed.

"There are no neighbours around, mind you," I continued.

"Roger, let us get out of this place immediately," she said emphatically.

We did not delay. We took some photographs and then climbed onto the open tourer ready to drive back to Malindi. We needed to have a rest in our hotel room before going out in die evening for a topless show and dance at the Watamu Beach Hotel.

* * *

We arrived at the Watamu Beach at ten o'clock. The second show was on. We paid our way in and found the hall packed to capacity. We moved around the hall and finally got ourselves a vantage position from where we could see the entire show.

It was the session for local traditional dancers and they were dancing to folk music which was characterised by heavy drumming, whistling and a lot of ululations. The crowd was very thrilled and almost hysterical. Female dancers were scantily dressed in sisal skirts and their tops were bare except for chalk painting in imitation of bras and blouses.

They were jumping and gyrating as if they were boneless and this was sufficient to overwhelm the crowds. Their style of dancing was incredible. How long it took to master the movements no one had any idea.

The waiter serving our table came around and I ordered four bottles of Premium beer — two bottles for each one of us. It was so refreshing. We continued

watching the show and drinking at a fast pace. The sounds of the drums, laced with the ululations also from the ecstatic crowd was so loud that it was getting difficult to even talk. So we just sat drinking, beer after beer. The acrobatic troupe followed and the whistling intensified even more.lt was like a jamboree.

When the second show was over, an interlude of disco music followed and many people rushed to the floor. And just as suddenly, a foreign tourist speaking with heavy German accent walked over to our table and begged to dance with Libby. I did not say a word. Libby looked at me and I just said it was fine. Both of them left to go and dance and I remained at the table alone just drinking and studying the dancers who were dancing wildly.

When the first song was over another one followed immediately, and Libby and the German tourist continued to dance. I kept watching them, and I was beginning to get a feeling of deprivation. I went to the cloakrooms, and on my return I found them doing a slow dance. They were holding one another very intimately and they appeared to be just talking instead of dancing. I felt threatened for the first time. I ordered more beer and I increased my rate of drinking.

A short interval followed. The floor cleared and the beach boys' band took over the stage. Libby came over with sweat dripping from her face. She excused herself to go to the cloakroom. And to my surprise, I noticed that the German tourist was waiting for her at the far end of the dancing hall. As Libby walked past, he slipped what appeared to be a small card into her hand and she accepted it. I was not amused by that action. I did not become overly suspicious at all, and I decided that I was not going to ask anything unless I was voluntarily told. Shortly, she returned from the cloakroom and joined me at the table. We continued drinking, taking to the floor for a dance. The floor was packed most of the time and there was no pleasure dancing over very small confines. It was only good for the purpose of sweating the beer off. The stench of deodorants and burning cigars and cigarettes was making the air in the room rattier nauseating. And one had to keep going outside every once in a while to get a breath of some fresh air.

As we sat quietly, a different waiter came over to our table carrying a tray full of beers and placed them in front of us. I had not ordered anything.

"This is not our order my friend," I told him before he left.

"It is yours, sir," he said very humbly. "I was asked to deliver it to you and your madame by Judmaier."

"Who is Judmaier?" I asked curiously.

"He is our associate manager from Germany who is here for two months."

"Okay, tell him thank you. Tell him we appreciate his hospitality." The waiter placed all the eight beers on the table and left after opening two bottles for us.

All this time, Libby remained quiet. She appeared absent-minded. She was gulping her beer and gaping at the people dancing on the floor. This gave me a very bad feeling. The evening did not turn out being as groovy as I had thought it would be when we chose to come to Watamu. I felt very low and we could not continue staying out too late into the night. We planned to spend most of Sunday in Mombasa and then take the evening train for Nairobi.

Beer was taking a heavy toll on me and I could not take any more. We took to the floor and danced the last song. Then we left Watamu and returned to our hotel. We had only a few hours to sleep before waking up again in order to catch the twelve o'clock hotel coach for Mombasa.

* * *

We checked out of the Eden Rock Hotel at 11.30 a.m. The coach to Mombasa was due at the hotel at midday. There was a group of tourists also travelling to Mombasa by the same bus. All of us sat in the lounge waiting for the bus. I kept myself busy reading the day's newspaper.

I concentrated on foreign news while Libby busied herself perusing through some travel brochures. When I looked up, the bus had not yet arrived. I noticed from the far end of the lounge a man who was staring at me ceaselessly. I did not bother about him. I concentrated on reading my newspaper. A while later I heard the roar of a bus and when I looked up, I saw the hotel

coach. In the process of boarding the bus I got a chance to study the man who had been watching me constantly. He was middle aged and about forty years old. He had a long moustache and a small gap in his upper teeth. He had a dull expression but his look was piercing. I looked at him a second time, and I noticed that he was now concentrating on Libby. I looked at him again and at

once I remembered it was Judmaier, the man who had danced with Libby for a long time and then bought us some beer. Still I did not bother with him. He did not board the bus and as we sped away he remained in the lounge staring at the bus as it disappeared from the hotel park.

I had no idea what they had talked with Libby about but since neither of them volunteered anything, I did not feel obliged to say even hello. We left Malindi behind us; a city so rich in entertainment. I felt relaxed and satisfied as we drove along the smooth highway linking Malindi and Mombasa.

December was always sunny and hot, and it was already becoming extremely hot. The scenery most of the way was monotonous. There were no settlements along the way and, except for some vast sisal plantations, it was all thick jungle on either side of the road. I started dozing. When we reached Kilifi, we found ourselves behind a line of vehicles which stretched for more than half a kilometre. I knew at once it was going to take us a while to get to the other side of the channel. Very many earth movers were operating around the creek, preparing the ground for the construction of a bridge to replace the ferry services. That was the cause of the massive congestion at the ferry.

We left the bus and decided to take a walk towards the ferry, while the driver was forced to follow the queue. Other passengers did the same. It was getting intensely hot, and I was forced to remove my shirt. I could see Libby and the other women passengers were also in distress. We tried to have soft drinks, but it did not help to cool us down. We just sat at the edge of the water taking snapshots of anything that seemed interesting. It took us two good hours to get to the other side of the ferry.

Finally we boarded the bus and we were happy to realise that soon we would be in Mombasa. There were no more ferries to cross. I knew it was a smooth ride all the way.

We arrived in Mombasa at 3.30 p.m., two hours behind schedule. 1 was disappointed because we did not have time to visit all the places we wanted to see. Libby had some shopping to do, and the evening train was departing at 7.30 p.m.

After alighting from the bus we went straight to the offices of Avis car hire and bargained for half a day's rate. The manager of the car hire was very reasonable,

and he agreed to charge us half rate. He gave us a Toyota Starlet and first we drove to the town centre from where Libby bought a cartonful of coconuts, mangoes, oranges and grape-fruits. Then from the market we drove to Nyerere Avenue and did a bit more of her shopping which included decorated beads and oyster shells. She also bought a pair of Arabic sandals and some imported fabrics from the Orient and packed them all into one carton.

We labelled both cartons clearly and then drove to the railway station. We confirmed our bookings and then left our cartons in safe custody. We were to take them when we were about to leave. Time was running out quite fast but Libby insisted we must go and see Fort Jesus. So we drove up to Fort Jesus and paid our way in. It had been years since I last visited Fort Jesus and I found that it had been refurbished. I found myself in a completely different place from what I knew it to be. It was now a very modern museum and quite beautiful. All ancient things; pottery, cutlery and other wooden items brought to the eastern coast by the early visitors from Asia Minor and the Far East were nicely labelled and dated according to the C.14 method. I spent most of my time at the fort reading its brief history which was pinned at the entrance. A whole day was necessary to go through it and to read the history of each and every item that was put up on display.

At 6.00 p.m. the museum was closing its doors to the public. We left hurriedly in order to have time to go and return the rental car and walk to the station to catch the train. We drove

back to the Avis offices, returned the keys and after paying the rental fees, we left their offices and walked down the street hand in hand all the way. Mombasa was lovelier at night than during the day, and there was a feeling of nostalgia when one was leaving Mombasa at night. We would have liked to see a bit more of the town, but it was now time to go and catch the last train to fsJairobi.

Chapter Six

At 8.30 in the morning the train halted at the Nairobi railway station, and we were now back home. The night train was an express one and, on the average, it always took twelve hours to cover the distance from Mombasa to Nairobi. It was an overnight travel and the only good thing about it was that one could sleep all night comfortably and wake up very fresh in the morning, feeling as if one had not travelled at all. There were single beds in special coaches and they provided

very good meals.

Momentarily, the platform was jammed with the arriving passengers and many people coming to meet their friends and relatives. Nobody was meeting us. We had to take a taxi home. We took our cartons and walked over to the Kenatco taxi stand. We hired a taxi and paid two hundred shillings. It was a twenty minutes' drive to the meat cannery and after a while we were approaching the gates of the factory. I asked the cab driver to drop me at my house first and then drop Libby at her parents' house. I did not have the freedom to visit her home as yet, but since she was returning after a successful tour of the coast, I was happy to think that all was well at her home. She was very excited to be back and was unable to hide it. I reached for her face and kissed her. She kissed me back and the taxi drove off.

"See you later," I said and proceeded to my house. I opened the front door and I was met by a heap of newspapers and magazines which were always delivered on a monthly basis. Beneath the newspapers I found a letter which I reckoned must have been delivered on the same day we left. I looked at the envelope and I realised at once that it had been posted from my office headquarters. I became curious. I slit the envelope open and I quickly scanned through the contents of the letter. It had

been signed by the deputy director and it was marked urgent. Then I sat down to read it in detail:

'It is realised that you are supposed to be on your annual leave, but duty calls that you have to cut your leave short and carry forward the remaining days of your leave/

'Nakuru district needs a veterinary officer for relief duties in the area of veterinary public health, and accordingly, you are required to report to that station by December the twenty second, and to inform this office immediately you get there/

I never expected such a dramatic change. Why pick on me? And why cancel my leave? I was aware that everyone liked to take his annual leave in December because of the numerous holidays falling in the month, and I knew very well that I had no way out. At that stage I could not alter anything. I walked to the office and met the secretary. I altered my leave dates and wrote myself a travel warrant.

Then 1 returned to my house.

I sat in the sitting room for a while reading the daily newspapers, and later I went to my bedroom to read my copy of Newsweek. I expected Libby to come in anytime and I had to think of a way out of this mess that had just cropped up. I had presumed the month of December would be a very good opportunity to spend a lot of time with Libby, to study her and to get to know her well. But now it looked like this was not going to be the case.

I decided that whatever the case, there had to be a way out. I thought about our trip to the coast, and I felt satisfied about it. I had noticed only one thing which I did not like. Libby seemed to be a very impressionable person. I rated her as one who was obsessed with anything that glitters, but I dismissed the notion, assuming that it was all a question of fascination aggravated by her youth and I thought it was going to pass with time.

In particular, I did not like her habit of stopping to chat with every person who just wanted to talk for the sake of talking. At least not when I was around. I was certain that a note had been slipped into her hand at the Watamu Beach, but so far she had not mentioned anything of the sort to me. I was not going to ask

her what it was all about I was going to wait until I was told one day.

I remembered what Joelene had said to me at one time, 'She likes high life and she likes high spending'. I felt a chill pass through me but I did not want to entertain any negative thoughts in my mind. I loved Libby. I had enjoyed my coastal trip with her and it was my deep conviction that any slight deviation could always be rectified. There was time to change for the better, I said to myself, and continued reading my magazine. I could not remember the last time I had slept well and I did not realize I had fallen asleep.

When I woke up I found Libby sitting next to me. It was already three in the afternoon. I was feeling tired and my mind was sort of confused.

"When did you come in?" I asked.

"Almost an hour ago," she replied.

"You can't be serious. Normally I don't go into such deep sleep that I can't hear when the door is opened."

"This time you did. You didn't hear me opening the door. You must have travelled back to Malindi during your short sleep and then come back very tired."

"I guess you are right, dear. You know it is not a short journey. At least now you have the experience."

"You are right, sweetheart. No wonder then you went back to sleep."

"How did you find everybody at home?"

"They are quite fine. They commended my shopping. And they liked everything I bought for them."

"I am glad to hear that. Please, can you switch on the boiler? I would like to take a hot bath when I wake up."

She went to the main switch and flipped on the switch. A few minutes later the water was reasonably hot. I rose up and went to the bathroom. I turned on the shower and sprinkled myself all over. When I finished showering I put on some loose clothing and joined Libby in the sitting room. I was not in the

mood of talking and I did not want to go anywhere. I needed to stay at home. I did not have anything interesting to tell Libby yet her presence made me feel whole and complete. There was a small drizzle and the weather was dull. Only the distant rainbow, radiant with its beautiful and brilliant colours, streaked across the northern horizon.

"Sweetheart, you look dull today," Libby said to me. "Are you still exhausted from the long hours of travelling?"

It was unusual for me to remain quiet for a long time when I was with someone, especially at this time when I was with someone I was really in love with.

"Yes, my dear. I am still feeling rather tired, and not only my body but my mind as well. I will tell you why in a short while."

I went to the bedroom and returned with the letter from my deputy director.

"Please read this letter and you will probably understand why I appear very dull

and tired." I tossed the letter to her and went to the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. On returning I found Libby crying.

"There is no need to shed any tears, my dear," I said to her. "Sometimes you plan a thing and you get the opposite results."

"But why did they have to do this to you? They knew you had already started your annual leave. Are you the only one out of all the vets in your department?"

"I cannot comment on that. Our kind of work can sometimes force us to go to a place where we cannot find a shop, leave alone a place to sleep. Nakuru is a big town. I have friends and many relatives there. I am sure my stay there will not be bad. After all it is only a relief assignment."

My explanation was convincing and finally she accepted that it was probably the best thing that befell us. She would be waiting for her exam results during the months of January and February, and after my tour of duty in the Rift Valley, I would soon join her either in late January or early February for the rest of my annual leave.

"When do they want you to leave?" she became inquisitive.

"They expect me to be on duty by next Monday. I don't know the size of the staff or even their work schedules. So in order to make my work and my stay easy and enjoyable, I plan to rest here tomorrow for the whole day. Then on Thursday morning I travel to Nakuru, in order to secure myself a place to lodge for about a month. Most likely I will spend the whole period in a midtown hotel."

"What will happen to your house here, and your belongings?"

"I will request the office to assign a guard to check on my house at night. If you do not mind I can leave one key with you. And whenever you can, always come round and check whether all is in order."

"I won't mind doing that. I will try to come as often as I can. At least I know I will be able to come around every weekend."

* * *

On Thursday morning, Libby came to my house fairly early. She looked very

depressed and she kept asking me whether I would remember her when I was away. I kept telling her she would always be on my mind. Her question became a chorus. It made me feel like I was being sent to a place where I was never going to return. I hated that feeling. But I knew one month was not a very long time especially now that I was going to be quite busy.

She packed my clothes in one travelling bag and then stashed my reference books in the side compartment. I did not require many things. I checked my travelling warrant and I confirmed that it was in good order. I was going to live in a hotel and what was in my bag was enough for my stay. I had enough money for my expenses although I knew I was going to get compensated. I did not want to risk the delays that often accompanied such compensations, and I did not wish to get stranded anywhere.

I lifted my bag and I felt it was not heavy. It was about the right weight for a traveller going to a new place for a short period of time. I kept the bag in the verandah and we sat down to have breakfast together. She had prepared toasted bread and omelette. Then there was tea and some pawpaw. After breakfast we went to the verandah and sat down on the stairs while I waited for the driver who was coming to take me to Nairobi.

"What do you intend to do during this month?" I asked.

"All I know is that I will be very lonely without you."

"And what plans do you have for Christmas?"

"None at all. I had thought you would be around and I had also thought that we would sing some Christmas carols together. Since I grew up, I have always spent my Christmas day at home. I have never been away from home. Look, this year again I am forced to be at home. Do you think you can make it here? It is a long weekend. Christmas day falls on Thursday. Friday is boxing day. Then we have Saturday and Sunday ... it really is a long weekend." I had not thought about it.

"We will see what we can do, Libby," I said passively.

A while later I heard the screeching of a car grinding to a halt. I looked in that direction and saw it was the official car which was to escort me to Nairobi. I took my travelling bag and kept it on the back seat. Then I asked the driver to hang on for a few minutes while I closed the windows and the doors. I turned to

Libby and found she had started crying again. Her tears were like water from an artesian well, always ready to flow. I had now got used to her tears.

"If only we maintain our promises, there is nothing to worry about, dear," I tried to comfort her, holding her close to myself.

"But I will not see you for a long time," she protested.

"Four weeks is a very short time, and remember I told you I will do my best to come and see you whenever I can."

She did not appear convinced. I looked at her and she appeared very confused. She started crying again, clinging to me forcefully.

"What is it, Libby?" I could not understand what else was really bothering her. She did not want to listen to anything I said. I had never seen her being so stubborn. She was not saying anything either. My time was running out and I had to go.

I embraced her and kissed her, holding her tightly against my body. I could detect her sobs vibrating inside her. I tried to calm her down but it looked as if there was something else troubling her, not just my leaving. I persuaded her to tell me but all she kept saying was that I should not go. That was not enough.

It was very depressing to think there was something else which she did not want to tell me. All I could think of was that she had not briefed me in detail regarding her parents' reaction about our trip to the coast. But I thought if anything was amiss there had been ample time to let me know. I held her again and pressed her bosom hard, then I kissed her again and whispered in her ears: "Take these keys. Whenever you can, do come around and ensure that the house is all safe." Then I gave her two hundred shillings to buy herself a present in case I was not able to see her over Christmas. I noted down the pooled provincial address in Nakuru for her, then I kissed her goodbye and left with the driver for Nairobi.

That morning was unusually cloudy and there was a slight drizzle. It was also unusually chilly and it was going to be a very dull day unless the weather changed. This was quite unusual for the month of December.

When we arrived at the offices of Rift Valley Peugeot Services, I presented my travel warrant and my seat was confirmed. The minibus was leaving in fifteen

minutes. I put my bag in the boot and crossed the street to buy a pack of cigarettes. I bought two packets. I gave one packet to the driver, bid him goodbye and he left. I then bought two daily papers to keep me busy during the one and a half hours' journey. Then I boarded the minibus. I occupied a solitary seat at the back. 1 did not want to be disturbed by passengers climbing in or alighting. I needed a quiet place where I could read my papers and recapitulate the

many things on my mind. I felt my head needed some sort of reconciliation, and this was a good moment for that.

The minibus followed the new Limuru road through Muthaiga and Gigiri and soon we were cruising through the vast tea plantations and dairy farms which were frequently interspersed by some coffee plantations. Before long we merged with the new Mombasa-Lagos highway and we had now began to climb the long and non-stop scenic drive into the Rift Valley. The road was very smooth and dangerously so, when it was wet. It was full of giant bends, some of which were cut right through spurs and others right at the edge of the escarpment providing a very beautiful view.

The driver stopped briefly on the escarpment. The sight way below at the bottom of the valley was a wonder in itself. We could see the satellite antennae at the earth station. The giant discs were facing the opposite direction. They appeared to be miles and miles way down in the flat bottom of the valley. Also at the centre of the valley we could see Mount Longonot whose enormous crater was clearly visible from above. I looked at a Coca-Cola billboard and noticed that we were already at an elevation of eight thousand feet above sea level.

We did not stop there for long. We started off again, climbing steadily towards the next view point. Here the driver did not stop and we drove on. We had now started descending towards the bottom of the valley passing close by Lake Naivasha, a fresh water lake at the bottom of the Rift Valley. 1 turned back to my newspapers but 1 found my concentration was gone. My mind kept going back to Libby. Each time I tried getting her out of my mind, her image kept reappearing vividly I could not get her out of my head.

Some questions were already bugging me. I needed an answer but there was no one to provide them. I had to address the questions and answer them myself. It was not easy. Then 1 started addressing the questions one after the other before

thinking about my answers:

'How is it that Libby got pregnant at that very early age? Was she a promiscous girl from the time of birth? Was abortion the best prescription? Was it really her first abortion? Was she an honest person or just a smart pretender? Why is she given all the freedom? Which other men does she know and what type of people were they? When did she learn the value of money and from whom? Who taught her to smoke and to drink? And where did she get the money to do all those things'?

My questions were endless. 1 paused to think and then 1 remembered Joelene's words: 'She likes the company of people with money. She likes the company of anybody driving a posh car. She likes discos and any kind of high life. She likes the company of those who come from well-to-do families. At times she does not sleep at home. She lies to her mother and she lies even at school.'

I could not think of any judgement. But I had already made my own observations: High life was not new to her. She was very well informed about people and places. She knew too many people, and she was equally very well known. She drank too much for her age and status. She got easily carried away especially after drinking and cried very easily. She was dominant in her home and her parents had very little control over her. She was very frank but could easily be deceitful.

1 had already committed myself to her, and there was no turning back on my part. 1 realised I was genuinely in love with her and it was my desire that i remain so. But I also realised that I could not remain with unanswered questions on my mind for a long time. And that the more I thought about it, the more the questions kept flashing across my mind. At times I felt she was not the right girl for me. And at other times I felt that she was just the right type of person for me. I knew it was going to be quite a while before I came to a sensible and reasonable compromise within myself. Then I resolved that it was going to be better sooner rather than later.

* * *

I did not realise when we crossed the boundaries of Nakuru municipality. I just looked out of the window and noticed that we were driving through the midst of tall buildings. Then we were already in the middle of the town. I alighted at the

Midland Hotel. 1 picked my luggage and walked to the reception where 1 checked in indefinitely. It was lunch time already. I left my bag at the concierge's and 1 went to the dining room for a light meal.

After lunch I went to my hotel room. I had some notes to read. I also needed to draw a working schedule for the four weeks. At 2.00 p.m. when the offices opened I made a telephone call to the district offices and asked to talk to the officer in-charge of the entire district operations. Luckily, he had not left for the field. We knew each other and he was delighted to hear my voice. He had been expecting me as he was in receipt of a copy of my letter from the Deputy Director. I enquired about temporary housing but he informed me there was none. He told me, however, that provisions were there for my hotel accommodation for a whole month, which was equally good. I informed him that I was already at the Midland Hotel, where I had just checked in. I said though, that I was a bit tired and wanted to rest in the afternoon. He promised me that he would send a driver to pick me up the following morning.

I sat on the bed and unpacked my clothes, hanging them neatly in the wardrobe. Finally I took my inspectorate notes and district inspectorate map which I had brought along just in case one was not available in Nakuru, moved to the table and laid down the map in order to study the inspection routes in detail. Nakuru was one of the largest districts and I was aware the operations there were very intricate. There was a squad of twenty inspectors using cycles, motorbikes, and ten permanent stations covering the entire district. I knew the most difficult part of it was always in the event of a motor-cycle breaking down and the time it took to get a replacement. A situation like that is what I had to avoid anytime. I knew in the event of such a situation, I would be forced to drive at night to distant places to authorise consumption or destruction of the uninspected meat products. This was always the nastiest experience in field

operations. I only wished nothing of the sort would come my way during my short stay.

After going through my notes, I switched on the TV and remained in my room watching the afternoon shows. At 6.00 p.m. I watched the news and later took a bath and went out to have a short walk. An hour later, 1 returned to the hotel and went to have my dinner. I wanted to have a good meal and then retire early. I also wanted to wake up fairly early the following day.

By 7.30 in the morning I had taken my breakfast. Then I sat in the reception area reading the morning papers. At 8.00 o'clock, Gerishon walked in wearing his characteristic smile.

"Mzaitunil" he exclaimed. "Welcome to our world."

We shook hands vigorously. It was a long time since we were last together and it was a very happy reunion. 'Mzaituni' was our mutual nickname when we were at the veterinary school.

"Welcome to the very bottom of the Rift Valley," he continued.

"And if you like your stay, you can go even deeper into the valley. Menengai Crater is only a kilometre away from here and 1 guess another kilometre below where we are standing. But don't worry, you will see all these things during your stay and you will have ample time to choose what you like best. Are you exporting a lot of meat this time?" he asked.

"At present there are more orders for fresh meats than canned beef. Most of the orders come from the Middle East. The EEC countries are not taking as much corned beef as they used to previously. I don't know why, but I guess the commission salesmen can answer that question. But 1 overheard the other day that Botswana Meat Commission has penetrated deeply into our markets. But that is probably just an excuse for our own failure."

We got into the Land Rover and drove to his office. He took me around for a brief introduction and then went to the main conference room. All the inspectors were assembled there,

patiently waiting for me. Outside, I noticed about twenty motorcycles parked. On each motorcycle there was a kit comprising a raincoat, a pair of gumboots, a safety helmet and a small box containing an inspection knife, a roller stamp, a pad of edible ink, an inspection certificate book and sets of transport permits. I was delighted at once to see that I was going to work with such a dedicated team.

"Gentlemen, you were notified during the last meeting that Doctor Irene would be away for four weeks and you were also assured that everything would be taken care of. No problems were anticipated and none are bound to arise. Meet Roger, a professional colleague. He will be with you for four to six weeks. I

therefore kindly ask you to give him maximum co-operation during his stay. Meanwhile, all your requirements regarding meat inspection should be directed to him. Roger, that is your entire team," he said and left.

"Gentlemen and ladies, I do not think there is much 1 need to talk about at this stage, because looking around I notice that I have worked with some of you before at the meat cannery and I have met many of you in the exam panels that I have participated in. 1 am confident we should be able to maintain the standard of our operations and deal successfully with any shortcomings that may arise from time to time. Taking that there are no problems right now, I am going to set you free to proceed with your daily routine as usual. During this first week I will tour the entire district and I will visit each one of you in your areas of operation to see how you are fairing on. I have no set timetable, so you don't need to wait for me. The only other thing that I would ask of you is to be prompt in submitting your weekly reports.

Let me always have them every Monday morning on my desk. And in the event of coming across a notifiable disease, that information should be communicated on the same day. I will be residing at the Midland Hotel and any emergencies occuring after office hours can be communicated to me there. So good luck in your operations."

Our meeting ended and a few minutes later the entire compound was filled with the noise of twenty motorcycles roaring at the same time. They left one after the other and just as it had started, the noise died down quickly and it was quiet once again.

I returned to the office and asked the secretary to give me all the personal files. I perused through each one of them and I was satisfied with the team's standard of work. I studied the existing network of operations running across the district and 1 saw no need to make any alterations. Three days were sufficient for me to cover all the routes.

* * *

At 8 p.m. Gerishon came to pick me up at the hotel as we had arranged during the day. Friday was a good day for revelling and he knew the town, its people and the lovely nightspots very well. We entered his Subaru and drove to a house in the Milimani suburbs.

Without knocking he opened the door and we entered. He offered me a seat and proceeded to the bedroom calling aloud for Agnes. I knew his girlfriend, Agnes, who came to greet me. She was still in her gown and I guessed she must have been taking a bath.

"We have come at long last," said Gerishon.

"We thought you would be here earlier. We have been waiting for you since five thirty," she answered and once more I knew Gerishon had played his cards well. Another girl emerged from the bedroom, and I was startled by her looks. She had a very light complexion and unusually long hair. She had big eyes and a very penetrating gaze. She was a bit plump, and had a budding double chin. That did not minimise her beauty even an iota. She sat next to me and I noticed that she was a bit shy.

"Halima, this is Roger," Gerishon said as he introduced me. "He is the gentleman 1 have been telling you about all the time. He is the guy who has been looking for a Halima for ten years now. So ladies and gentlemen, from today 1 declare Halima and

Roger as man and wife." He was very humorous and we all burst into laughter.

"Halima, I know you will come to like Roger, but if you don't you must return him to me in one whole piece/' again we broke into laughter.

In the meantime, Agnes changed into an evening dress and we were ready to go out for the evening. I sat at the back of the car with Halima and we went to the Lake View Lodge which is situated in Lake Nakuru National Park. When we got there we went to the main bar and occupied one table facing the fire place. We ordered barbecued meat and salads and, in the meantime, asked for some drinks.

Everyone chose their drink and 1 decided to have some whisky that day. I ordered a double shot for everybody and we said cheers. I noticed that everyone was taking Gin and instead of ordering tot after tot, I asked the waiter to give us a whole bottle of Booth's Dry Gin together with adequate lemon and ice. We could then drink at our pace. I diverted my whole attention to Halima.

"What is your full name?" 1 asked.

"Halima Wambui," she answered with her melodious voice.

"Where do you work, Halima?"

"Oh, this is my first year since I started working, and all this time I have been with the Pyrethrum Board, I trained as a secretary and that is what I do at the Board."

"How do you like working with the Pyrethrum Board? Do you do the same kind of work all the time?"

"No. There is always something new coming up. We get a lot of communication from the outside world and we have to keep them informed especially on any advancements within the pyrethrum industry. There are synthetic analogues being manufactured every now and then and we always receive samples for comparative studies and we must keep in touch all the time. You may not find it easy to believe, but at times I am called to work on Saturdays and even Sundays."

"I now understand you. Your schedule of work can easily compare with the kind of work we do at times, quite often at very odd hours."

"That is true. The difference is that we never have to work at night. Gerishon tells me that he is woken up during the night at times. And he has been telling me that your station is even worse. That being an export facility, you must physically see everything that is being exported, whatever the hour of the night. I pity you. He had told me so much about you that every time I close my eyes I could see a Roger dressed like an Eskimo going to make final inspections in the freezing coldrooms."

She was very free when speaking and she seemed to know more about me than I knew her. She was a very confident girl. Her teeth were snow white and shiny and her free and easy smile was overwhelming and tantalising.

"Where does your family live?" I was determined to know as much as I could about her.

"I was born and brought up here in Nakuru. I am the last born in a family of four children. My other sister is married and my brothers are working in Kisumu and Nairobi. And once in a while I go to visit my brother who is in Kisumu. He is married and they have a very beautiful daughter."

"It is your turn to have one now for yourself," I teased her.

"Come on, Roger," she slapped my shoulder and I felt good.

"No war, no war, stop the war ..." Gerishon interjected with a humorous outburst. Then we burst out laughing as well. He was getting a bit tipsy, and I knew he cracked more jokes when he was tipsy.

"Halima, this is time to make love not to make war. Time is too short. And we don't know whether we will see the sun tomorrow."

The company was becoming more and more lively and I could tell it was going to end up a very jovial night out.

I turned to Halima and we continued with our discussion, talking in low tones meant for just the two of us. I held her palm,

and I could feel the warmth and the tenderness. She looked at me piercingly and said nothing. Then she smiled and I knew I had secured her approval to present all my credentials.

"How long have you worked at the Meat Commission?"

"About a year and a half."

"Where were you working before?" she continued.

"For a while I worked with the Artificial Insemination Department, but I didn't like it. It was so monotonous, just like having to eat the same kind of food everyday of the week, for a month, for the whole year. Can you imagine? It is awful, particularly when you have no interest."

"What didn't you like about artificial insemination?"

"Just the entire stuff."

She looked at me with a cunning smile and said,"Roger, you think you are very clever, huh? ... I can see . . . you don't like working with images ... artificial stuff and things like that." We broke into laughter. I could now tell she was also becoming a bit tipsy and I realised that I had to control myself, if my cards were

to be played well.

"Do you live with your family?" I asked.

"No. Gerishon didn't tell you?" she was quick to ask. "And yet he told me so much about you."

"It was a very busy day for me and I guess we didn't have much time to talk." I replied.

"Well, I share a house with Agnes. We have been friends since high school, and I also prefer to live freely away from home. I do, however, visit my parents every other day. You see there is only my mum and dad. And you can imagine how bored I would be just sitting with them everyday."

"I agree with you, Halima. However much you love them, you would be bored."

"Gerishon told me that you were in the same class all way through college. Is that so?"

"Actually it is more than that. We met when we went to fifth form. That is quite some time back. We happened to have a lot in common, and that is how we have managed to keep in touch."

"His children are big now, how come you did not get married around the same time?" She was beginning to probe into my protected areas and I had to be cautious with my answers.

"You see, Halima, when it comes to marrying, it is usually a serious matter, and you don't want to jump into a bandwagon simply because others are doing so."

"I agree with you, Roger. I totally agree."

"My approach is that once I get married, that is the end of the story. I do not think some situations in life require trials and repeats. It can be disastrous, distressing, demoralising, and worse still, it can lead you to clinical depression. I would rather remain alone to take care of my loneliness."

"Tell me, Roger, since you say all that, are you ever lonely?"

"The answer is no. Because I spend most of my time thinking about how I can come across someone like you. And when none comes my way I don't even realise when falling asleep."

"Don't flatter me, Roger. I know if I walked into the slums of Nairobi I would definitely come across many little Rogers asking for a shilling," she said and we burst out laughing.

"I cannot deny that, Halima, but don't forget we are all created in the image of God."

"I didn't think you knew that. Anyway, I was just joking," she said apologetically, and leaned on my lap.

"No offence, Halima. Feel very free with me. That is just the way I am," I said, and sank a kiss onto her cheek. She kissed me back and I continued holding her onto my lap. She seemed to enjoy that posture, and I liked it too.

I began to feel very secure with her.

"I can see you are just the perfect couple," said Gerishon.

"Surely you are," Agnes added. "I envy you."

Gerishon ordered another bottle of Gin, and I realised we would not be leaving soon. In any case, there was no hurry. It

was Friday and no one had any commitments the next day. There was the whole weekend to nurse any hangovers.

I put some ice and lemon in the glass and then filled it with Gin. Then I gave it to Halima. She looked at me with her piercing eyes. She smiled and I smiled back at her. Then we moved closer and kissed on the lips. I took away her glass and placed it on the table, then I held her with my hands. She in turn held me tightly and we leaned back on the sofa, kissing wildly.

"Tonight, Roger, I want to ask you something. Only one thing."

"Feel free, Halima. I am here, just with you and all because of you," I assured her.

"I repeat the same question. Are you married?"

"No," I said very emphatically.

"Remember what you are going to tell me now is what I will stick to from now on. And remember everything you tell me is all from your own lips."

"Halima, I am not married. Take that from me. I never lie, and rather than lie to you, I would better not talk to you or, even better, not get so far."

"I like your sincerity, Roger. Please keep it up."

* * *

We drove very slowly to town. We remained huddled together in the back seat, holding each others's arms like we were going to remain like that forever. And when we reached Midland Hotel I got out with Halima. Then Agnes and Gerishon drove away. It was already 2.00 a.m., and it was very chilly outside. We entered the hotel and I took the key to my room from the reception. Then we proceeded to my air-conditioned room.

We sat on the bed and this time I got the best chance to look at Halima closely. And what I could see in her was just natural beauty. She had some prominent Hermitic features, especially her hair, nose and even eyes and I thought one of her parents must be of mixed blood. My observation was right as she came

to tell me later that her maternal grandparents were Rendile from southern Ethiopia.

I removed my clothes ready to sleep, and then suddenly I saw the image of Libby appear in my mind. I felt terrified and rather guilty. I tried as much as possible to hide it from Halima, but she was too quick and she noticed a slight change in my attitude. She looked up into my eyes and said: "Roger, there is one thing I asked you at the lodge, you remember?"

"Of course, Halima, I remember. From the way you emphasised, I cannot forget," 1 said and she calmed down. She removed her clothes and joined me in the bed. I pulled her close to myself. She drew herself very close and then stopped only a little away from me. She dropped her anchor there.

"From what I had heard about you, I was very eager to meet you. And I must confess that I am very happy to be with you," she said, holding my wrist with her left hand. "Also from what we have discussed tonight I must say that I really like you very much. And like I told you, I do not have a steady boyfriend, but I do have very many casual friends. But don't mistake me. I am not a flirt."

"Do you ever think of settling down with one man, and maybe, finally getting married and raising a family?" I asked curiously.

"Just like I told you, I know that is every woman's wish. For now I wish I could settle down with you. But I am not sure whether you are the type to settle down soon."

"Don't judge me, Halima. Rather than wishing like you, I am from today onwards going to do my best so that we can get to know one another more intimately. I know I am one type of person who hates or likes a woman the first time I see her, and we couldn't be here if I hadn't liked you. I can sincerely tell you that I fell for you the first time we spoke to each other. I can only beg you one thing. Be always sincere to me and my strength and my affection for you will always be threefold."

"I will promise all that you ask of me, Roger, and 1 would like you in turn to keep safely all that 1 give you, and to give me back whenever I ask you: love and affection."

I did not comment. I pushed myself closer to her and we kissed on the lips very tenderly. I could hear my heart pounding hard against my chest wall, and I could feel the warmth of her breasts like radiant heat from an oven.

She moved slightly backwards and away from me and then whispered close to my ears, "I know how you feel. But just don't hate me for that. I wasn't prepared for it, but I do love you very much, Roger." Then we kissed good night.

Chapter Seven

Everyday I spoke to Halima about three times on the phone from the office. If I failed to call her she made sure she kept calling until she got hold of me. Whenever I was away, I found lots of messages on my desk upon my return and also at my hotel. Our romance had now reached a crescendo. I was not even sure if it was a romance or a dangerous love affair.

It had now developed into a pattern. We either slept at Midland or in her house. There was not a single day on which I did not think about Libby. Even when I was sleeping in the same bed with Halima, her image kept crawling inside my head. At times, I would just lie still until Halima would ask me what I was thinking about, to which I always said, "Just thinking of you."

On Monday of the third week I was sitting in the office studying the inspection report for the previous week. Then I heard a slight knock and the door was pushed open. I looked up and saw Loise, the secretary, standing in front of me.

"This is your letter, Roger. It came in last week but I didn't find you on Thursday or Friday."

"No problem, Loise. Thanks a lot," I said.

I looked at the postmark and noticed that it had been posted from Nairobi. There was no return address on the envelope. I proceeded to open the letter. It was a very short letter. It was simply addressed 'Sweetheart' and then signed off, 'Your darling Libby'. I read the letter once, and then I stood up and walked around the table. Then I sat down and read the letter once again, this time, word by word.

'. . . I want you to come urgently. Please come as soon as possible. It is a grave matter, and there is no one else I can talk

to. And if you cannot make it please confirm by return that I can come and see you/

I could not figure out what was going on. All I knew was that this had nothing to do with the security of my house. The police inspector of the area lived two blocks away and I knew for sure that the security in the neighbourhood was quite good.

Her coming to Nakuru was out of question. I had two more weeks to go before returning to my station of work. But Libby wanted to see me urgently. I sat back in my chair and thought about it for a while. But the more I thought about it the more muddled up my mind got. I did not like suspense at all. I could not relax fully until I got an answer.

The telephone rang, but I hesitated to pick it. Then it rang again, I lifted it slowly, and then I heard the usual soft voice. It was Halima.

"Why don't you want to pick the phone, my dear?"

"Please excuse me, I was standing at the other end of the room."

"You sound like you are in low spirits, why?" I don't know how she knew.But she was right. "Mondays are bad days for me in the office. I have too much on the table and I don't know where to start," I said. "I'm also required to travel to Nairobi tomorrow for a meeting and I thought the best thing would be to sit here in the office and compile the bi-monthly report so that I can take it along with me. Otherwise I will have nothing to talk about." This was a lie, and I told it without thinking twice.

"Well, I cannot help you, darling. I only wish I could." "It's okay, my dear. I know I will finish it before the end of the day."

"I just wanted to invite you for lunch, but I think I am not going to, so that you can have plenty of time to work on your report."

"Thanks a lot, Halima. I will see you in the evening. Just wait for me in your office, I will be there at five or thereabout."

"Okay then, I will wait for you, and have a good day." I replaced the receiver and held my head with both my hands. I realised that I had told Halima a lie and I felt very bad. I had no report to make and there was nothing like a meeting. For a moment I hated myself. The thought of Libby was beginning to get to my nerves. Why didn't she give me an indication of the urgency of the situation? For the first time I felt negative about her.

I walked out of the office and summoned the driver to come in for instructions. He was an old man, very polite and obedient.

"Go to the transport office and arrange with the transport officer to allocate you a small car for tomorrow, say Mazda 323. Tell him that he can hang on to the Landrover for the whole day. We will travel to Nairobi tomorrow and I would like us to leave very early in the morning in order to return in the early afternoon. You make sure the car is well checked and that it has enough fuel. And since I am going to leave the office now, you will come to pick me at the hotel at 7.30 in the morning.

"I will do that, sir," he said and left.

I took out the letter and read it again. I found nothing special in it. I shredded it and dumped it into the waste paper basket.

I did not do anything else in the office. I entered the Landrover and drove to the municipal abattoir. I made an inspection of the sewerage system and the water supply and after a brief talk with the supervisor, I left. I did not want to go back to the office. I wanted to spend sometime alone. I drove to the eastern edge of Menengai Crater and sat on the edge of the crater.

I remained there, wondering in awe at the enormous width and depth of the crater. The bottom of the crater was covered with bushes and all vegetation appeared bluish in colour to the eye. I could not think of a reason for that. 1 just sat there staring right inside the crater endlessly.

My mind was very restless. I thought about Libby and then thought to myself, 'Yes, I love Libby and I don't seem to understand her'.

I reasoned that I had to see her the following day and assess her once again. My biggest fear was to think of her as a flirt and a trickster. Too good when I was around and a cheat when I was gone. I did not want to have such doubts on my mind. But they kept coming.

Then I thought about Halima. She was more beautiful by looks, but she was rather too shy. She was a working girl and she did not have any demands. She was a bit more mature and more understanding. She was very eager to share whatever she had. I did not know her background, but this time I felt I did not need to know. So long as I was at ease with her was all I needed. She understood the nature of my work and that was good for me.

At 4.30 p.m. I drove back to the office. I parked the Landrover in the yard and returned the keys to the transport office. Then I left the office compound and started walking towards the Pyrethrum Board office complex, arriving there shortly after five. Most of the offices were closed and people had already left.

I entered the elevator and went up to the fourth floor. It was quiet and deserted, and the only sounds were those of my shoes echoing from one end of the corridor to the other. Suddenly a door flung open and Halima jumped out smiling.

"I knew you would be here any time. Come right in," she said.

I walked in and sat down, on my usual seat.

"It is so quiet in here. I felt like I was walking all alone in an underground tunnel."

"That is correct. The entire building becomes very quiet and serene when all the offices close down and people are gone. But I find it the best time to do all my serious work. No interruptions, no telephones coming in and no visitors. At times I come on Saturdays to do my private work and studies here. I concentrate best at that time."

"That's true. It is a nice place for that kind of work," I said.

"I can tell you had a taxing day. You look tired," she said leaning forward to kiss me.

"Not so much work as such, but puzzles and puzzles needing to be set right by me, and me alone. Some days are just too bad for me."

"Don't worry, my dear, you will be alright. Tell me anytime you need my assistance, I am all yours."

"Do you have much work left to finish?" I enquired.

"Oh no. Let me just finish this letter and then we can leave," she said and sat behind her electronic typewriter.

A while later we left her office and walked to the supermarket . She had some shopping to do. We went inside together and I helped her push the cart while she selected the items she needed. When she was through with her shopping, we took a taxi and went to her house. I helped her unload her shopping and took it to the house. Immediately, she started preparing dinner while I lay on the couch watching T.V. Agnes was not home yet. I had come to realize that most of the time she came home late, and at times she did not come at all.

Halima was a very good cook and I loved her meals very much. I loved it even more when we were just the two of us. I felt very much at home. While she cooked in the kitchen she gave me her photo album to see her pictures.

After supper we did not stay for long in her house. She called the city cabs office

and ten minutes later a taxi came over.

She changed her clothes and we drove off to Midland Hotel. We went straight to my room. It was cold and I turned the heater on. Then we sat on the bed and continued watching television.

"What are you going to do in Nairobi tomorrow?" she asked.

"Certainly I know there is going to be a meeting. What I don't know for sure is who will be in attendance. I also don't know for sure what the subject matter will be. I didn't know about it until this morning when I received the letter," 1 said and then remembered the letter from Libby which I had shred to pieces.

"Will you stay overnight?" she asked.

"No, I will certainly be back before you close your offices. Maybe even earlier, unless we are delayed by factors beyond our control, which I do not foresee."

"Well, all I want is for you to come back in one piece. Don't drive too fast. The new highway is very tempting."

"I can't do that, my dear. I love my life and I also need to be with you for a long time. In any case I will be travelling with my driver and there is no wearing myself out.

"I have something to tell you, Roger," she began and then looked at me.Then she smiled.

"Last night I had a dream which made me wake up screaming. I was embarrassed at first. Then 1 sank into a very deep sleep. You know there was me and you in my dream. We had been married for just nine years and then we had this beautiful baby girl who was just beginning to crawl. We were relaxing in our country house, out in the verandah watching the orange glow of the sun as it sunk into the horizon. I left you and the baby playing together and then I went to the house. While I was in the kitchen warming some milk, I heard her crying in a very shrill voice. I jumped out of the kitchen dropping everything which I was holding and ran very fast to the verandah. Your seat was empty but the baby was there crying, pointing towards the gate. When I looked towards the direction of the gate I saw you disappearing into the darkness. Then I called out loudly, 'Roger! Roger, my darling!' You did not answer and you disappeared completely

into the darkness. The baby continued crying and we cried together then suddenly I got up and found myself alone in bed. Oh, it was such an awful feeling. I had sweat all over. It was hell. I switched on the bedside light, took your photograph and kissed it and then I returned to sleep."

"That was quite a dream. You should have telephoned me and I could have come over to share the bed with you. I know dreams can be sweet at times and terrifying at other times. I for one have sunk to the bottom of the oceans many times and I

have come up alive with lots and lots of artifacts, and other items dating way back to the middle ages. But dreams are dreams. Do your dreams ever come true?" I asked her.

"I don't keep a diary because I don't like to associate my life with dreams."

"I don't either. I like to plan what I desire, whether the plan works or fails, and then leave everything else to fate. I do have wishful thinking which I normally engage in quite often before going to sleep. And of late I have been wishing that our love flourishes and shortly I will tell you the plan which I have."

"Tell me just now. I want to hear it," she insisted.

"First tell me, in your life, what do you think is remaining for you to accomplish?"

"That is a very difficult question, Roger, isn't it? So far I have accomplished very little. And I guess what lies ahead of me is monumental. I haven't found a man who loves me, and this I feel is the biggest hurdle yet to skip."

"Don't say that when I am around here, Halima. You are only putting me off."

"Not really putting you off, but you asked me a question and I am answering you to the point. Just listen. I have tried to be serious once or twice before but nothing worked out. The man I set out to love the first time was only out to prove how much he had and how comfortably he could keep me but he had no love. I never saw him or communicated with him again. I was out for love and not golden junks. It has always been my strong conviction that the kind of love I yearn for is one where material things don't come in at all, and it is a kind of love that always bounces back to the same position like a pendulum, whether you

quarrel, fight or do anything to one another. That is my vision of real love. The moment I get that, I will have crossed my biggest hurdle, and I can then relax and quietly wait for any others. I know it can be very lonely when you stay alone, away from home. But I have also learned from my friends that it becomes more disastrous when you move from one man to another, and from one house to another. Soon you become a whore without

realising it. In such a situation I would rather go back to my mother's house and confide in her to look for a man for me if I couldn't do without one."

"Life can be very tempting, Halima. And very tempting when you are looking for something seriously. I have fallen into such traps before. Shortly after I started working I was very deeply involved with a lady, and I was almost on the verge of moving in with her. Then one day I learned that she had a two-year-old child with another man, and all along she used to tell me she was single. She only admitted it when she discovered that I had found out. I thought that was too silly of her to disown her innocent child, and that was the end of our affair."

All the time Halima was listening to me very intently, and of course I knew she was gauging me, weighing every word that came from my mouth.

"Can you promise and are you able to keep promises," I asked her. She kept quiet for a while and then faced me.

"Yes I can. I know I can keep promises for a long time. I know I have broken promises before but all that aside, everything we say together, what we promise each other is what I shall safeguard all the time."

"1 won't ask for too much of you darling, but I would like you to be sincere and honest to me always, and defend me where I am not present. I will in turn do the same for you. And I will uphold similar promises for you. Love me and I will love you twice as much, and you will always be on my mind. I cannot ask you for anything else darling. I will love you for ever, and I want you to be with me all the time in your heart."

I embraced her, holding her bare chest against my bushy ribs and she kissed me hard thrusting her fingers into my ears and her big tongue inside my mouth almost chocking me. Then we sank into the wide bed and started speaking in foreign languages.

* * *

At 7.30 in the morning the intercom rang in my room. 1 picked the phone and the receptionist came on the line. "Your driver is here," he said.

Thanks. Give him coffee and tell him I will be down in a few minutes."

I looked at Halima who was still asleep. I went to the bathroom and took a quick shower. Then I came back and started dressing up.

In the meantime Halima had already woken up. She reported to office at nine o'clock so she still had a lot of time to go. I called the reception and asked to be given one breakfast and a newspaper. I had to leave her taking breakfast. My time was running out fast.

"My driver is waiting for me outside, so I am going to leave you to continue with your breakfast. I will see you as soon as I come back."

"Have a nice trip, darling, and take care," she said. Then I kissed her and left.

I went to the dining room and took two eggs and a cup of tea. I bought two newspapers and set off for Nairobi with my driver.

When we reached Lanet we encountered a very heavy downpour. It was a bit misty and visibility was very poor. We had to slow down considerably. I turned on the heater and warm air started blowing to my feet which were already cold. The rain intensified and it turned into hailstones by the time we reached Lake Elmentaita. It was impossible to overtake and we had to travel at a snail's pace behind a fleet of Trans-Ocean Hauliers, which were carrying coffee and tea from the Central African countries.

When we began climbing the escarpment it become worse. The rain had subsided but the fog was unbearable. It was laced with tiny raindrops and visibility was a mere twenty feet, with full lights on. It was not unusual for this part of the road. There

was nothing to see from outside and I concentrated on my newspapers.

I picked my file from the back seat and I looked at he provisions I needed from Nairobi. 1 found that 1 needed pairs of gumboots, and plenty of white coats for

the inspectors for the new year.

When we arrived in Nairobi I went to the head office first. I obtained the necessary requisitions and left the driver to fetch all the items we needed from various stores. Meantime, I walked to the office of the poultry pathologist for a casual talk. From there 1 managed to call Joelene at the meat cannery. Immediately, she came on the line and I was happy to hear her voice.

This is Roger. How are you?"

"Fine, and you?"

'Quite well, Joelene. I am calling from the head office here in Nairobi, and I would like you to do me a favour. Tell the stores controller to pack three dozen white coats and two dozen gumboots and as many macintosh coats as can fit in a medium size carton. I will be there shortly before lunch time, but I have very little time left.

"1 will do that, Roger," she said.

"And one more thing. How is Lib by? Is she still there?"

"She is still around, I saw her yesterday," she said and started laughing,

"Please go to her place, and tell her that I would like to see her before returning to Nakuru. You know I cannot go to her house, so please ask her to meet me in my house at two o'clock. Will you also do that for me? Of course I will have to come to the office first and collect my stores. So expect me around twelve or shortly before twelve. I don't expect to stay here for long."

Before long the driver had already secured all the items which we needed from the head office. He had already packed them in the car and was waiting for my next instructions. It was approaching noon and we had to rush out of the city centre to avoid being caught up in the traffic jam. We manoeuvred our

way out of the business district and were soon driving on the Mombasa Road.

I asked the driver to drive non-stop up to the hill-top township which was a small town on the border of Machakos and Kajiado districts. We stopped and went to the Hearts of Gold Motel for our lunch. 1 did not intend to have my

lunch right away. 1 asked for an Export beer and drenched my throat very fast. I recognised that the biggest and most critical part of my mission had began and I did not want to return to Nakuru before it was accomplished.

I asked the head waiter to prepare mutton with fried onions, tomatoes and some little green peppers. Then I asked the driver to give me the car keys and I gave him the liberty to have whatever he wanted and to continue with the lunch just in case I delayed. I drove fast to the office and found that people had already gone for lunch. But Joelene was waiting for me in her office. It was already twelve thirty.

"You can't keep me waiting all that long, Roger," she screamed.

"I am very sorry, Joelene. I got caught up at the head office. Are my stores ready?"

"Yes, they are already packed."

"Very good. Let me put them in the car and then I can buy you lunch at the officers' mess. It was my fault to hold you in the office and I know you won't have time to go home and prepare your lunch."

"That is very kind of you," she said, and proceeded to help me load the cartons in the boot of the car. I did not have to see the officer on duty, and we went for our lunch at the mess. They had a fixed menu for each day of the week and all we needed to do was to sit and get served. I excused myself from lunch saying I would be fine with only a bowl of soup and fruit salad.

"How do you like Nakuru?" she asked.

"The work is fine. But being such a large district you have to travel a lot once in a while. The town is not very big and the

activity is much less compared to Nairobi. There is simply no comparison. But the town is very clean and beautiful."

"Did you manage to see Libby?"

"Yes, 1 saw her," she replied hesitantly.

"I hope you gave her my message."

"Yes, 1 did."

"Is she coming?"

"She told me she will," she said and then laughed. It was a sinister laughter and at once I knew there was something strange behind that kind of laughter.

I hid my feelings deep inside me, and asked her in a cool manner, "What's up again, Joelene?"

She looked at me and then said, "I hope everything 1 tell you won't be repeated to Libby. She is still my cousin and 1 would not like to create any enmity between her and me or between you and her."

"That is not like me, Joelene. If we discuss something between us that is the end of the story. You can always tell her anything you want but that is not my business," I said emphatically.

"Sometimes, Roger, I look at Libby and I tend to think she is a very confused person. One who doesn't know where she is going nor where she is coming from. I would rather say she doesn't know what she wants. You know this time she is very idle. She is always in town with her friends. She is never at home and ..." She hesitated again and then continued.

"The other day she came to my house very excited, and I asked her whether you were around. She said, 'no, though I miss him a lot'. So I asked her why she was so excited and she reached for her trouser's pocket and showed me a letter that she had just received. In the letter, there was a passport size photograph of a mzungu, then there was foreign money. I was amazed. There was forty deutschmarks. I asked her whose letter it was and she quipped, 'just a friend'. I looked at the photograph again and I saw it was autographed, 'With love, Judmaier.' 1 did not ask

further questions and I was told nothing more after that. She just wanted to know what to do with the foreign money. I advised her not to risk going to the bank, but to talk to the factory accountant who would know better. From there I don't know what happened. But I do know during the last few days she has been riding very high. She cautioned me not to tell you about it." "Well, Joelene, thanks a lot

for letting me know that. Such information is not bad when it is shared among friends who are out to help one another. I like you very much for that. At times I tend to believe that it is easier to tame a lion's cub than a woman who is a rogue. You well know about my relationship with Libby. All I can do is just maintain my side of life very constantly. I don't mind her being the variable. What I know is that when it becomes a hide and seek game, it is bound to become a long and tedious journey. Otherwise, how is Sollo?"

"He is fine. He had left for an early lunch as he was in the early morning group."

"Since my time is limited, just say hi to him. Tell him 1 will try and contact him over the phone from Nakuru. Meanwhile 1 will just pass by my house and see Libby briefly and later I will go back to Nakuru. Once again thanks a lot, Joelene, for everything."

We got into the car and left the officers' mess. 1 dropped her at her office and drove off fast towards my house.

* * *

As I drove I suddenly felt depressed. I thought about the deutschmarks, the letter and the photograph, and I saw in my mind's eye Libby and the tourist going towards the cloakrooms at the Watamu Beach Hotel. Then I felt a cold sweat run down my spine.

"What type of a girl is Libby? Was I in love with a female devil or a close relative of the lot? I couldn't help feeling jealous and very cheated. She did not tell me a thing about what they had discussed with her new found tourist friend and 1 had resolved not to ask anything about it. She did not tell me that

they had exchanged addresses, but then I thought that was her personal address. Nevertheless, I felt betrayed. Again I recalled her letter: 'I want to see you urgently/

I slowed down as I approached the entrance to my house. Then I mastered my normal composure. I stopped the car in the parking lot, went round the house to the front yard and found Libby seated on the stairs reading a copy of Penthouse. She was visibly thrilled to see me. She dropped the magazine and walked towards me. We hugged and kissed passionately as if there was nothing. Then we walked to the house.

"I have missed you very much, sweetheart," she said clasping my hand tightly. I cannot believe it is only two weeks that you have been away. It seems like two months to me. How have you been all this time?"

"Pretty fine," I said. "I have missed you a lot too."

"Did you find a house to live in?"

"No, I have been putting up at a hotel."

"It must cost you a lot of money, I know."

"That is true. It is quite a bit of money but the department will pay that for me because that is not my permanent station. What is new around this place? I also feel like I have been away for a long time."

"Nothing really. It is the same old town with the same old people."

"I hope you are enjoying your long vacation while waiting for your results?"

"I try as much as possible not to think about those exams. I just sit around and read novels and magazines that I can lay my hands on."

"Why don't you try something like knitting? That should keep you fully occupied and you can see the fruits of your work when you have finished a pattern at the end of the day."

"Knitting has never entered my blood," she replied with a laughter only confirming what I had observed about her fairly

early; that she doesn't like any chores requiring manual work except cooking.

We sat on the sofa and started kissing once more. I looked at her face and I saw the same pretty face. I could feel the same voluptuous curves hidden under a thin pink nylon dress. She had no bra and the feel of her small but firm breasts was tantalising. I felt ecstatic and for a moment I forgot all my worries about her activities and soon we found ourselves on the bed making love like wild animals, forgetting even to close the front door.

I had already forgotten the meat I had ordered at the Hearts of Gold Motel and I

was almost forgetting that we had to return to Nakuru. Suddenly, I looked up and saw that it was already 4.30 p.m. I had not even commented about her letter. We just wanted to continue holding each other.

I lay still on the bed for a while and suddenly I felt depressed when I remembered what Joelene had just told me earlier on. But I had resolved not to ask Libby unless she volunteered to tell me everything.

Thanks for your letter," I said, trying to break the ice between us. I could tell she was having difficulty in starting. "How did you find out my new address?"

"I asked Joelene and she got it from your office."

"That was clever of you because later, I realised that I had left you with the pooled provincial address where letters can take weeks before you received them," I said.

"Roger," she called me and then closed her eyes. I looked at her and saw tear drops running down her eyes. I was now immune to seeing her cry.

"What is the matter, Libby," I asked but she kept quiet. Then she burst out crying loudly. Then I knew there must be something deeper this time.

"It can't be you, Libby," I said gently. "Tell me what is the matter." I kept pressing her. Finally she calmed down and

started talking in a very low voice barely audible at that close range.

"I am so sorry, sweetheart, so sorry and I don't know what to tell you," she was already trembling.

"My dear, don't be afraid. Tell me everything you want to tell me. It is the best way you can overcome fears," I kept reassuring her.

"I am so ashamed of myself and I don't know whether you will like me again."

"Just tell me what the matter is, Libby. You see I don't know what is on your mind. All I know is that I truly love you and I can only trust that it is the same in your case."

She gripped my hand and placed it on her lower abdomen, with my fingers stretched out. I felt her belly gently and I felt a hard area the size of a tennis ball. It was strange, but I had palpated a similar thing before.

"I am pregnant again," she said and broke down crying.

I did not comment. It was certain that she was two months pregnant.

"When did you come to know about it?" I asked.

"Just the other day," she replied.

"Did you know about it before I left?" I enquired of her.

She paused for a moment and then she said, "I suspected something was wrong, but I chose not to tell you at that time."

"And how do you know for sure now, that you are pregnant?"

"I went and saw the doctor in town. He examined me and said that I was three months pregnant. I also bought a test kit from a chemist and I confirmed, indeed, that I was pregnant.

I was stunned. This was not the time for me to discuss anything that was going to strain my nerves. I never kept a diary to know when we made love, which dates, which months. I was also not convinced that for three months she did not know what changes were taking place inside her body. This was all a set up, I said to myself. And instantly, I was convinced she was now

making bad use of me. I decided I was not entering into any contest with her. Then I looked at her and felt pity. Yes, I felt I loved her very much. I could also tell that she loved me. But what I could not tell was which others she also loved.

I was not ready to have my mind under constant torture. I was now convinced that she was capable of doing a lot of things behind my back and only resurfacing when things got out of control. So far she didn't realise that I knew anything about her dirty dealings with a tourist. She didn't think I knew anything about her money links. And even as we were now, she wasn't willing to tell me anything to that effect.

"I am very sorry, sweetheart, I am very sorry," she kept repeating.

'Sorry about what,' I asked myself. I was not happy at all. I was starting to have second thoughts about her. I looked at her and for the first time I saw her as someone who was capable of telling dangerous lies. I detested that. Even though I felt I still loved her, my biggest worry now was whether she could change.

I did not care whether I was responsible for her pregnancy. All I knew was that I was already involved with either a very careless girl or a very intelligent and callous town girl who knew her game to perfection. She was young and she enjoyed my benefits of doubt. I had all the hope in me that in time she would change and stabilise. That was now the only bond binding us.

"Do your parents know about it?" I asked.

"I have not told them, but I think my mum is suspicious."

That was another barb inside my head. Our affair was already known. But even though, I was not ready to be forced into an early marriage by circumstances. I thought about all the possibilities, and of each one of them, I found myself pushed into a tight corner. I did not have time to resolve anything that crossed my mind. It was already 5.00 p.m.

I knew my driver was now worried. There was still the long journey to make. I just wanted to leave. I did not have any suggestion to make to Libby. I just wanted to be on my way as soon as possible.

"I guess since I am already late, I will leave you now and then I will see what we can do."

"When are you coming back?" she asked.

"I don't know," I replied in a monotone and stood up ready to leave. "Do you still have the keys I left you with?"

"Yes, you want to take them away?"

"Not as such, but next week, my colleague will be coming here as the head of a farmers' delegation and I promised him that he can put up in my house for the three days they will be touring the factory."

She gave me the keys reluctantly and we entered into the car. Inside me, I felt that my love and my trust for her was declining, and still I did not want to feel indebted to her in any way. I felt she should not retain my key and the freedom to my house. I had sufficient proof now that she was hiding far too much from me and the fear of the unknown was thus my biggest worry.

I drove out of the compound and closed the gates behind me. I entered the main street and stopped the car when I reached the end of the street. Then I switched off the car. I looked at her face for a while and then I held her hand. Then I said to her, "My dear Libby, take time and think seriously about yourself and also about me. Know that there is a difference between infatuation and love. I love you dearly but I don't know whether you love me. Know that good love is always reinforced by mutual trust. I do trust you but again I don't know whether you trust me.

"What I know, my dear Libby, is that once trust is shaken love also stands shaken twice as much and that sets off a chain reaction which can be very difficult to stop. And even more difficult to reverse. Do your best all the time and I will try my best always."

I slipped my hand into my coat pocket and gave her three hundred shillings. Then I started the car. She moved out of the car and came round to my window. Then we kissed goodbye and I drove off towards the hill top to pick my driver for our onward journey back to Nakuru.

* * *

My driver was patiently waiting for me. I apologised for being late, but there was no fuss about it. I settled the bill for the meat and drinks and I was ready to go on.

"Your meat is still in the oven," the manager shouted at me.

"Thank you very much, but we have a long way to go. Save it for next time."

1 had no appetite and 1 just wanted to sit and relax. I occupied the back seat feeling very depressed. It was already getting dark and I estimated that if there was no rain or fog on the way, we would be in Nakuru between 9.30 and 10.00 p.m.

In Nairobi we stopped at a Caltex petrol station and topped up the car with gasoline. Then we had all our tyres checked. It was already dark and we did not want to leave anything to chance. In the meantime, I walked to a pay-phone outside the petrol station and called Halima. I found her in the house and she was excited to hear my voice.

"Hey, Roger, hi! Where are you?"

"Believe me or not, we are still in Nairobi and just starting off for Nakuru."

"Goodness me," she exclaimed. "I can't believe it. It is already after seven."

"That is right and we are still coming. I am only feeling very hungry. What are you cooking?"

"Poor thing. I can imagine that you haven't had anything to bite all day. I pity you. I am going to prepare the best meal I can think of and I will not taste it until I see you. Okay. Come soon and take care."

"Thanks, darling, I am on my way. I just called to let you know that I am fine," I said and replaced the phone. Then we set off taking the old great north road up to Naivasha. I knew at this hour there was virtually no traffic on that section of the road and a fog was non-existent.

All the way I kept dozing in the back seat, awakening only when we hit a deep pothole. Soon afterwards I realised we had

reached Naivasha. We rejoined the new highway which was as smooth as a carpet, and we were able to gather speed.

Once again I fell asleep but my sleep was instantly interrupted by hallucinative images of Libby with a bulge on her stomach. It was terrible for me and very uncomfortable to have such feelings constantly. I decided to resist any more temptations to go to sleep.

There were only two choices available to Libby. Either carry her pregnancy to term and have a baby or terminate her pregnancy- 1 was not sure yet what my role was going to be in the whole quagmire and I was not fully decided if there was any role for me to play

1 realised she was in dire need of help. But if no help was going to come from me who else? I asked myself. I found I had no ready answer.

I thought about the dangers and complications of an abortion and then I thought about a baby and the resulting tug of war, and I decided I was not going to have a baby.

1 felt obliged to assist, but again I felt there had to be a limit. I did not want to get wholly involved in a game which I was now convinced she was better at than me. But again I could visualise her plight. Still I had not yet abandoned her. She was still my sweetheart, maybe with more spices this time.

Out of the blue an idea came into my mind, and without further consideration, I settled for it. I was not going to see her again until I was sure what type of person she was. I was not going to keep up with unanswered questions. And I was not going to be haunted by things which I did not fully understand. I estimated the cost of an abortion in a hospital to be about one hundred pounds. Then I concluded that I was going to mail two hundred pounds without giving her any instructions or any guidance on what to do. Then I would leave her to make her own decision as to what to do with or without her peers' guidance. I had to do that as soon as possible. My mind was made up, and I felt relieved and lighter.

We reached Milimani estate at ten o'clock. As soon as Halima saw the lights of the car she switched on the security light and opened the door. Then I alighted and asked the driver to pick me up at nine in the morning.

I was delighted to see Halima come over to meet me. She was alone in the house. She removed my coat and took it to her bedroom. Then she came back and brought me a pair of sandals. She gave me her gown and I proceeded to the bathroom for a hot shower. I knew I was going to have a comfortable night, which I so much needed.

Chapter Eight

Halima had one day off-duty. Her boss was attending a week's conference on pesticides in Addis Ababa and she had very little to do with her time. I wished 1 could take a day off as well. My mind needed a break. But there was a lot of work in the office which needed my attention.

When I finally woke up it was half past ten. I felt very lethargic and I wanted to continue sleeping. During the night my sleep was repeatedly punctuated by endless dreams and thoughts about Libby.

Halima woke up to prepare breakfast and I went to the bathroom to wash and dress up. Fifteen minutes later I was ready for breakfast. We took cereals, bacon and cheese. There was also orange juice and tea.

As we enjoyed our breakfast I looked at her and she smiled back at me without saying a word. Suddenly I felt a twitch on my forehead and I felt as if she was reading my mind by applying some strange force.

She looked at me again, this time blinking and said, "Roger, whether you say yes or no, I am certain there is something that didn't go very well in Nairobi with you."

"Why, my dear?" I asked.

"You kept waking up so often during the night. At times you would wake up with sweat all over. Then you would suddenly throw away all the blankets and fall asleep again. I had to keep covering you all the time."

"Nothing really happened. It's only that when you visit those big offices things do not end up the way you want them to be all the time. At times you find someone doing something awful

deliberately. And that can be very irritating. Also don't forget that was a long trip. The weather was bad and in the end you are bound to be very tired."

She looked at me again and I knew she was not satisfied with my simple answer. I did not want to dwell on that subject. I looked out of the window and saw my driver seated in the car waiting for me. It was time to go to the office. I stood up and she walked me to the door holding my hand.

"What would you like for lunch?" she asked.

I hesitated for a moment. 1 wanted to have time alone, but at the same time, I did not want her to have any bad feelings or think I was hiding something from her, which I definitely was.

"You haven't prepared pizza for me, dear. How about that?" "Good choice. What would you prefer on it?" "Put bacon, beef, mutton, chicken, mushrooms, hot pepper and anything else except anchovies."

She burst into laughter and fell on my shoulder.

"I know what you mean," she said. "What time do I expect you?"

"One o'clock as usual. If I have to be late I will give you a call," I said. Then I kissed her lips and left.

When I reached my office I looked at my desk and saw a heap of files packed in both my incoming and outgoing trays. Immediately I sat down, the secretary walked in. We greeted each other. Then she told me that there was an early morning call from the Deputy Director.

"What time did he call?" I asked.

"It was at 8.30, shortly after I came in."

"What was the message?"

"He said you call him back as soon as you can. And that if he will not have received your call by eleven o'clock he will send his driver, so you remain in the office. He also emphasized that you make sure you wait for the driver because he will be bringing some vital operational documents. He also said that he will be out of the country for a fortnight and that should you

require any clarification, you should call him at eight thirty tomorrow morning or earlier when the telephones are not engaged."

"Thank you, Loise, I hope you know I don't have very many days left now. So we will shortly be compiling the station report which I would like to be ready as soon as possible."

"There is very little work on my desk and it will probably take me a day and a half to complete the report."

"Ok. That is good. I will send you the draft as soon as I have put it together."

I looked at my watch and saw it was already past eleven. There was no need to call the head office. If the driver had left Nairobi already, it would only be one and a half hours before he arrived. I decided to wait for him. I began going through all the files but I found I had no concentration at all.

I signed all the letters due for despatch and passed them over to the secretary. Then I returned to my seat and started reading my newspapers. I could not figure out what the director needed from me and I found it unnecessary to bother myself. I had more on my mind to think about regarding Libby and Halima Wambui.

I felt more attached to Libby than Halima. At the same time, I was scared to imagine that Libby was easygoing and prone to easy and cheap manoeuvers. I tried in my mind to excuse her for her youth, but again I thought she was not prepared to change. My resolution was to abandon her for a while without any explanation. I had to find excuses for my sudden silence. I would send no letters to her and I would not give her my address. But I was aware too that she was clever enough to page out any new address. I also knew it would be very easy for her to trace my movements.

Halima excelled in all ways. She was already settled and very homely. She was very understanding. I was afraid, however, because she seemed only to be set for a marriage at the earliest opportunity. I liked everything about her. But I was not ready to marry her so soon. I felt completely torn apart. I needed

to make a decision. And the decision I made had to be fair to every one of us. I did not want to retain the feeling of guilt. I did not want to be the beast of burden, to carry their wishes. It had to be Halima or Libby or none of them.

Each time I thought about Libby, the thought and picture came to my mind. I could see her crying, telling me, 'I will never do it again, please forgive me ... I will never do it again .. /

I could also visualise Halima saying softly, 'Roger, dear, I have no ill feelings at all. All you need is to make up your mind ,. /

1 hated such thoughts; putting myself into Libby's shoes and then changing suddenly into Halima's shoes. The thoughts and the inner feeling became very uncomfortable. But the thought kept recurring. I was totally uneasy and very restless.

My telephone buzzed. I lifted the phone and the secretary informed me that Halima was on the line.

"Hi. Any changes, my dear?" She asked. Then I looked at my watch. It was one o'clock already. 1 did not think twice. Then I said, "I will be with you in fifteen minutes," and replaced the phone.

I was feeling very tense all over. I left the office and drove to Halima's apartment. 1 found her waiting for me at the doorway. She kissed me and we entered the house. She took my coat as usual and hung it up. Then we proceeded to the dining table. Lunch was ready and laid out in buffet style. It looked delicious and it made me forget my dilemma for a while.

I served myself a sizeable piece of pizza and a similar piece for her. Then I filled two glasses with milk, one for her and one for myself. She was amused to see me serving her for the first time.

"This must be my great day," she commented and patted my shoulder.

There was a musical show on the video and I tried to avoid a lot of talking by concentrating on the variety show. After lunch, I moved over to the couch and decided to have a brief siesta. But just before I dozed off, the phone rang. Halima picked it up and

then placed it down covering the mouth piece. Then she walked over to me and bent directly over my face. Then she whispered: "I hate them. I hate them. They want you in the office right away. They say it is urgent. Do you want to speak to them or will I tell them that you are going?"

"Let me hear what they have to say."

I stood up and walked over to the telephone stand. I lifted the receiver and found Loise on the line.

"What is so urgent, Loise?" I asked curiously.

"Nothing urgent as such, but the driver from the head office is here and there are some parcels for which you are required to acknowledge receipt personally before he leaves."

"Okay. I am on my way," I said and replaced the phone.

I became more curious to know what was going on. I asked Halima to give me my coat then hurriedly bid her goodbye and drove fast back to the office.

I found Loise and the driver seated under the shade of a pawpaw tree chatting and laughing. I walked into my office and sat down. They followed me. She gave me two large brown envelopes and a delivery register.

"The director instructed me to deliver these two parcels to you personally, and he also instructed me that you acknowledge receipt by signing the delivery book," the driver said, and at once I knew they must be very important documents.

I looked at the two large envelopes and found that they were specifically addressed to me. I slit them open and I saw that no reply was required. So I countersigned the delivery book and set free the driver.

I asked the secretary to get me the general file and I sat back on my chair to read the letters in detail. I found a two page letter which began:

To Roger's attention,

... The directorate has decided that all veterinary public health operations must come under the umbrella of this department. You are required to proceed to

Central Province headquarters immediately and assume the take over duties as soon as you arrive there.

A team of thirty inspectors will be joining you right away, and you are hereby instructed to pass through this office and collect all the necessary items for such an arduous task. Only one district in Central Province remains to be taken over and that will be your prime task.

It has already been surveyed and it is anticipated that you and your team should not encounter any undue difficulties or hardships.

The Provincial Director and the administration have been notified already and you are assured of all their assistance. A district survey map is also provided under a separate cover for ease of movement for you and your cadre in the course of your travels.

Good luck and happy new year.

'Signed Deputy Director/

I opened the second envelope and found a detailed map of the Nyeri district road network. I looked at it for a while and then put it back into the envelope.

I looked at the calendar hanging on the wall and counted the days remaining before the end of the year. I saw there was no time to do anything. The earliest date possible for me to be in Nyeri was the day immediately after the new year's holiday. I had no way out of it and this had to be done according to schedule.

I left the office and walked about the compound trying to stabilise my head. I felt I needed some breathing space. But there was no room for appeal. Then I resolved that in the absence of a given formula, I had to let matters sort themselves out. I had to try my best and that was all that I was prepared to sacrifice.

I returned to my office and sat at my desk again, not sure where to begin. I took a scribbling pad and tried to list down my priorities. But each time I listed some items I found that each and

every item was a priority in itself. I had to convince Halima that I had to leave for the unknown at the earliest possible time. I knew very well that she would not understand and I knew she would be hesitant to believe me.

Then I imagined the hardship that Libby might be going through and I felt I was worthy of condemnation. But then there was myself to think about. I felt like a comet moving endlessly in empty space. A space where there were only still objects that could not respond to me. I felt isolated. I picked the scribbling pad again and wrote a short letter.

To all meat inspectorate staff:

Some urgent changes in our operations have been effected from the head office. In effect the changes mean that you will continue operating in your designated areas as usual until another officer arrives to take over my position in a couple of days.

I commend you all for your devotion to duty and I trust that you will all keep it

up. Tomorrow will be my last day in the office and because of your nature of work, I will not be able to see you. However, I wish you all a very happy new year.

Dr Roger 7 I instructed Loise to type the letter quickly so that I could sign it before leaving the office that afternoon. Ten minutes later she brought it back and exclaimed, "You cannot leave us so soon, Doc."

"Loise, I wish I had a say. But you see at times changes occur unannounced and they supersede all planned events. Sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse and even at times for the unknown. You just pin the letter on the notice board and put one copy in the correspondence file."

"What time do you leave tomorrow?" she asked.

"I have no idea about the hour. But I reckon there isn't much left for me to do in the office. In any case I will see you before I leave for Nairobi."

Next I picked the phone and dialed Halima's house number. She picked the phone immediately and was happy to hear my voice after leaving her abruptly after lunch.

"Hello, dear. Nice to hear your sweet voice."

"How are you?" 1 asked in a neutral voice.

"Just missing you. I wish you were here with me. I am watching a very good movie."

"I envy you. But I will be there with you in the next few minutes."

"Good. I will be waiting for you."

I called Loise and gave her all the outstanding files and letters. Then I drafted a revolving duty roster, which I was certain would ensure continuity of duty in my absence. I then called the driver and asked him to drop me at Halima's apartment.

* * *

I entered Halima's house and went to the bedroom right away. Halima looked at me worriedly and she followed me into the bedroom. Then we sat on the bed holding hands in silence.

"What is the matter, dear?" she asked ruefully. I did not answer. I was speechless. I didn't know what to say or where to begin. I lit a cigarette and kept blowing continuously heavy billows of smoke into the air.

"Do you have some whisky?" I asked.

"What brand do you want, my dear?"

"Johnnie Walker would be good at this time. Do you have any?"

"Yes. Any ice?"

"Just a cube or two, along with some soda."

I swallowed two gulps and emptied the glass. I filled another glass and placed it on the stool.

"I am feeling so tired and worn out yet I have done nothing to make me feel like that."

"Why is that so, my darling?" she asked me with a lot of concern. "Do you need a massage?"

"That won't help, my dear. My mind feels clogged up and I don't think a massage will help any great deal. I have so much crossing my mind and I don't know how 1 am going to go about it"

"Tell me, my dear. Perhaps I can help you. Please tell me," she begged.

"I am not sure whether you will like it. And I don't want us to feel the same. One of us must comfort the other."

I looked at her and all I could see were her sparkling eyes.

"I am sorry, my darling, but I must tell you early enough ..." I could not gather courage to tell her what was on my mind. Yet I needed some sort of outlet and

this was a good time to tell her about the imminent changes.

"I have been instructed to report to the Central Provincial Headquarters as soon as possible. And these are directives from the headquarters."

On hearing that, she got into a quandary. She was unable to talk or even comment. She remained still, looking hard at me as if she was searching for the right words, which were not available.

"Our new year's arrangements are now shattered. That was the message which was delivered to me personally this afternoon when I was called to the office. This means I must leave tomorrow."

"They can't be that mean to us. They can't do this to us," she rose saying with a trembling voice. "You will not go. I won't let you go," she continued holding my hand firmly.

"I am very disappointed and very distressed. But there seems to be no way out of it. They made me sign the delivery register as a way to ensure that I comply with the instructions and it leaves me with no way out of it. There is no room for protest or any excuses. You see, there is only tomorrow and the day after. I can travel to Nairobi and get my things organized. Then the

following day I can travel to Nyeri and report at the provincial office. Then there is the new year holiday, and the day after 1 can begin work. It is such a hectic programme and I find that I have no time left."

I swallowed another glass of whisky and lay still on the bed trying to bring into focus some pictures hanging on the far end of the wall.

"Roger, I feel afraid. I feel there is a person or some force that doesn't like us being together. I am afraid that when you go you will never come back. It's like someone is always lurking somewhere behind us and pulling you away when I need you so much."

"I do understand you very well, Halima, but I hope you also understand my position."

"1 understand that, Roger, but I don't want you to leave me. I will become lonely again."

"You won't need to feel lonely. So long as you are in my heart and I am in your heart I know somehow things will work out nicely."

I picked my glass of whisky and we went to the lounge. We sat close together, staring blankly into the setting sun. She filled another glass for me, changed the video cassette and disappeared into the kitchen to prepare supper. I could see she was also disturbed by the sudden change of events. I could see the reason but I could not change a thing.

I kept debating within myself what was best for me, but I could not find a good answer. Libby's shadow was always in front of my eyes. I had not communicated with her yet, and I had a feeling she was not all that well. I was deeply anxious to know how she was faring but I was not willing to meet her. I felt more at ease with Halima, but again I had to leave and go to a new station.

Halima came over and lifted me up from the couch.

"Food is ready, darling," she said.

I had no appetite and I had to force myself to eat a little. I only wanted to drink more whisky. She refused to eat food and ate a bowl of soup and a piece of bread and butter. I managed a piece of tilapia and that was enough for my supper. After supper we returned to the lounge and I resumed drinking. I was at a loss for words and I didn't know what to say. We remained quiet, simply looking at each other, holding hands like space walkers left alone in the distant empty space.

"When you leave will I see you again?" Her question pierced my mind like a harpoon. I did not know when I would see her again. And I could not guess the answer. I kept quiet for a while and then she repeated her question demanding an answer.

"Darling Roger, tell me, when you leave will you come back to see me?"

"Honey, the best thing I can do for now is to leave you with all the love in my heart. All I need from you is your love, dear. That way I will not be lonely wherever I will be, though I know I will miss you terribly. I will miss your warmth, your tenderness and your closeness. I will miss your good food, and I know I will miss your company and will always yearn to be in your tender arms. But you will always be in my dreams when I am away."

I leaned on her and we both fell down on the couch oblivious of what lay ahead. The room fell silent and the sounds from the video also seemed to fade away.

* * *

At 10.30 a.m. I checked out of Midland Hotel. I took the payment vouchers to the district accountant and after taking my operation manual from the office, I bid goodbye to my secretary and left for Nairobi with the driver.

After scanning through the morning newspapers, I took out the director's letter and the map. I studied them carefully once more. The instructions in the letter were firm and categorical. The road network on the map was bizarre, and I realised that was going to be my only handicap in my new station. But I was not bothered by it. I had to find my way out.

I put the letter and the map back in the envelope and looked out of the window. In the distance I could see the pinkish hue of flamingoes hovering over the lake and I felt very nostalgic. I remembered that I had left Halima behind, sleeping. She did not know when I would be coming back to see her. I did not know either. I could clearly visualise her eyes very red and soaked in tears as I left her, and I could also feel and taste the saltiness in her tears as I kissed her goodbye.

Now I wanted her picture to go out of my mind so that I could think properly and plan my work in the new station. I was aware of the enormous task in a new station and I knew I needed a lot of concentration and much less distraction.

I took my diary and started noting down all the essential things I required and at once, I found it was going to be a gigantic task to get organized in the new station. I had to report to the new station first and know the state of affairs there.

We arrived at the head office shortly before lunch break and I went to see the executive officer. He informed me that there was no official house available and that meant staying in a hotel for a month or two. The previous officer had already left and that meant I had to travel the following day at the latest. He gave me an imprest of five thousand shillings and then 1 left. I had no more business in town, and I instructed the driver to drive straight to the meat factory. In thirty minutes we arrived at the factory.

We stopped at my house before proceeding into the factory. I found all the things intact. I drew the curtains aside and opened all the windows to let in some fresh

air. Then I sat down with my eyes glued to a dead wasp which was lying still on the tiled floor.

I lifted the intercom to the office, but just before the operator answered I replaced the phone. I was in an indecisive state of mind. I wanted to talk to Joelene. But I knew I would not be able to talk to her freely in her crowded office. I wanted to know how Libby was. But I was not convinced that I should go through Joelene each time I wanted to know something about Libby. I felt

I had to talk to Libby before I left, but I could not gather the courage to walk to her house. I was not as yet brave enough to want to meet her. Yet that was the only way to be certain about anything that I needed to know. I was not ready to take any half truths. I still felt that deep in my heart I loved Libby despite the few drawbacks.

I also felt that she should be ready to bear some of the blame. I lifted the telephone again and the line got clear. It rang once but before I got an answer I placed the receiver down and left the house. I asked the driver to unload my personal effects and then we drove on to the office. The main office had no one but I perceived Joelene was inside the secretary's office. I left the driver looking for a parking space and I proceeded to the main office. The senior officer had already gone for lunch. As I sat down to wait for him Joelene walked in smiling broadly. "Hi! Roger, how are you? You are back again? How is Nakuru?" She was firing one question after another, in her usual manner.

"All has been quite good. I enjoyed my stay there."

"Sometimes I pity you, Roger. It now seems you are not going to rest the whole of this year. I saw a copy of your letter which came here instructing you to proceed to Central Province. And it seems they want you there immediately."

"It looks like it, Joelene. That is why I am here today."

"It also seems like that one is going to be a permanent transfer," she said.

"As of now, Joelene, it no longer matters if I am asked to go to Venus. I am ready for anything."

"Poor boy," she said. "They should have picked someone else this time."

"Never mind, Joelene. It is good to face things as they come. Does Libby know anything about it?"

"Yes. I mentioned it in passing when I saw the letter. She couldn't believe it, and implied that I was trying to put a wedge between you two. She is crazy. She said she was going to come to Nakuru and I told her she was free to."

"Anyway, how is she otherwise?"

"Roger, whether Libby is my cousin or not, there is something I do not understand about her."

"Like what?" I was anxious to know.

"Sometimes we talk a lot of crazy stuff when we are alone. Then later I hear the same verbatim from other people. I think that is wrong. I would rate her as one who is always yearning for the next thing, while holding the other one with die other hand. She lacks secrets and I think that is her biggest weakness and one that will ruin her in the end regarding her love affairs. She seems to tell her parents everything, good or bad. Maybe you will be able to tolerate her."

I was not pleased with Joelene's description of Libby. I had already learned that she would never say anything good about Libby, and the more she talked ill of Libby the closer to her I felt and the more I felt the need to meet with her.

I understood clearly that she grew up in an ordinary family but like a royal child until it was too late when she realised that resources were not in abundance. Hence an acquired need to exaggerate had developed in her. 1 was convinced that this was not a natural trait and that it would eventually disappear if the tap root had not gone too deep, I decided it was essential that I see her.

"Do you know if she could be at home?"

"Unless she has gone to town for a movie, which is her routine these days, I guess she could be at home."

"Please go with my driver to her house, and if she is there, tell her I am around until tomorrow, and ask her if she can make it to come to my house at seven in the evening. If she is not in, just leave a message in a sealed envelope. When you have done that, give me a reply via the intercom. I will be playing some games at

the Members Club. Also remember to tell the driver to bring me the car at the Club. I will need it in the evening in order to sort out a number of things before I leave early tomorrow."

"All right, Roger, I will do that," she said and left with the driver.

I listed down the main items I needed right away and I left the list with the typist, with instructions to have them ready the next morning. Then I walked towards the Members Club to play snooker solitaire.

There were few people in the club and most of them were sunbathing. I went to the snooker room and arranged the balls. I removed my favourite cue from the rack and started playing alone, awarding myself for every score and penalising myself for every foul. The room was very quiet and for the first time I felt relaxed. The first game took me forty minutes, which was a record for me.

As I was arranging the balls for the second game, the intercom for the club rang. A minute later, the clubman walked over to me and told me it was my call. I went over to the next room and answered the phone. It was Joelene.

"We are back," she said. "Libby was not in at first. So we had to wait for a while, and hence our delay."

"That is alright, Joelene."

"Anyway, I gave her your message and she assured me that she will be there at seven in the evening."

"Anything else?" I asked. She burst into a sinister laughter, said no, then hang up.

I returned to the snooker table and continued playing the game alone. At four-thirty, club members started arriving from their offices. The room was full to capacity. This was the time for competitive games. I chose not to pair up and I withdrew from the table.

I ordered a cold beer and remained in the room watching the experts play. I was not in a mood to talk so I sat idly, drinking my beer slowly. Some minutes to six, my driver walked in and gave me the keys for the car. I asked him to prepare overnight for a week's safari and to be ready at about noon the next day. Then we

left the club together. I dropped him at the main gate to

the offices, and proceeded to my house. I had very little packing to do, so I sat in the lounge and turned on the television to watch the news briefs. I switched on the percolator and made myself a cup of black coffee.

A while later I heard some footsteps outside. Then a characteristic tap on the door followed. I had not locked the door and I heard it swing open. When I turned around I saw Libby walking in. She was wearing an oversize dress and despite her usual smile, she lacked her normal confidence. She walked right in and sat next to me.

'Are you not happy to see me?" she asked scornfully.

"Greet me first," I retorted. Then she moved closer and kissed me.

"I got your message from Joelene. How was your stay in Nakuru? It seemed to me as if you had been away for ages. I missed you a lot."

"Really?" I asked. "I had so many things happening all at once, and at times I felt like my head was spinning. You won't believe me if I tell you that I left about twenty percent of the work untouched."

"How come, sweetheart? Will you go back again?"

"I don't think so. It appears like I no longer have any say regarding what I want to do. I no longer have a say over where I would like to be, or even when to do what I want to do. I seem to be reaching a stage of desperation."

"Don't despair. I know things will be okay in the end." "Well, don't worry about me. We will just sit and wait to see how things are going to unfold."

"How is everybody at home?"

"They are all fine."

"There is some coffee in the percolator. You can make yourself a cup if you wish."

"I won't mind a cup," she said and went to the kitchen to fetch a cup. I watched

her from the back as she walked and I could tell that she was very tense.

She came back with a cup of coffee and sat close to me. We remained quiet for a while. I did not know where to begin and I was not sure what I wanted to tell her or even ask her. She appeared to be in a similar dilemma. I had been yearning to see her all day, and now that she was here with me I found I had no words. We remained like two dummies put together.

"When are your results going to be out?"

"In a month's time."

"Have you made any arrangements for anything when the results are out? Say some sort of training?"

"Nothing. The grades I get will determine what I can do. So I am just waiting."

I looked at her closely and found that she had a faint tremble. She was afraid of something. It was not like her to keep quiet. Both of us could not remain quiet. We had to clear the air somehow.

"Libby, there is something that has been bothering me very much since I last saw you. I have thought very much about it, and the more I have thought about it, the more I get disturbed and restless. Of late, I must confess to you I am not as happy as I used to be before. I feel it is important we discuss the matter so that we can understand where we are going wrong."

I opened my briefcase and took out the two letters of my redeployment. Then I passed them over to her and asked her to read them. Meanwhile I went to my bedroom and sat on the bed quietly.

I looked into the side mirror and I saw myself very clearly: a very confused and undecided person. I lit a cigarette and puffed hard. I had to speak my mind out. I could not afford to remain hanging in the balance, not sure which side was going to sway. I lit another cigarette and walked back to the lounge. I found Libby still reading the letter.

"Like you see, Libby, I really don't have a moment of rest. That is just the nature of my work. It is not easy, but it gets extremely difficult if extraneous factors aggravate it. You will

remember we made some fundamental accords at The Retreat and we promised each other that we were going to keep the promises. You promised that what had been bad before was to be forgotten and that we were set to begin a completely new way of life. In my heart that was a promise. But I am not sure what you decided in your heart. I told you at that time that loving somebody means dying for them and I also told you that real love never dies off . . . You promised to uphold all those promises but Libby, I must now tell you that I am not convinced that has been so. There is nothing I fear more than someone who I cannot trust. I cannot, as you know, be by your side all the time and it is such a bad experience to keep wondering how my dear Libby is all the time. I am not also sure whether we are moving closer together or whether we are drifting apart. That is my genuine worry, my dear."

"I am very sorry, sweetheart. I will change my ways ..." She began talking and then burst out crying.

"No need of crying, my dear. What I am saying is very simple and I know you know yourself better."

"I am sure Joelene has been telling you bad things about me. All along I thought I could confide in her everything about myself but later I discovered she was using all that information to slander me, and I know she has already told you everything. I hate her."

"That is not the issue, Libby. Being in love does not mean that you become a prisoner, but what you do knowingly or unknowingly is what matters. You are supposed to be my defender wherever you are and 1 am supposed to be your defender all the time. It is so simple. My trust in you is not gone at all but I am afraid it is very threatened. Can we save it."

"Sweetheart, I know I have offended you and I am sorry. I have done some things that I know you don't like. But all that is temptation. You know I am pregnant and I don't know what to do. I am so confused. God help." She sunk her face into her hands.

"Libby, do not exhaust yourself. If we make a mistake, all we need to do is simply not to repeat the same mistake or similar mistakes. I am ready to forget all that, Libby, but remember all that we have spoken always. 1 made up my mind the first time we talked about our relationship. If your mind cannot be

made up, this would be a good time for you to let me know. We won't become enemies."

"Sweetheart, I want to be with you forever. I will be careful and I will keep our promises. And whatever I do in the future will only be for our own good."

We embraced but it was not our usual warm embrace. I could feel a gap between us. I had already detected in her talk that she did not want to dwell on any one subject, or any assumed wrongdoing and I decided also not to ask her anything specific. If she got my message, well and good.

"As you saw in the letter, I am travelling again tomorrow. There is this new district to be taken over and that is going to be quite a task for me to accomplish. I don't know how soon I will be back. I am leaving with nothing except my clothes. I am informed that there will be no official house in the beginning and this means for the first few days I will be staying in a hotel."

"Can I see you off tomorrow?"

"I would like you to, but the travel arrangement is very haphazard and I don't even know precisely when I should leave. Perhaps I can see you off now and then I can have time to go and see my colleagues in case I don't have any time tomorrow."

She stood up, and we walked to the verandah. We embraced again and kissed just for the sake of kissing — with no emotions at all. Then she started weeping again.

"How about our baby?" she asked and broke down.

I felt a flash go through my stomach. I did not want to answer that question. We had not planned to have a baby anytime and I was definitely not ready for it. This had to be her decision. That is what I had resolved. I was not going to play any active part in any way. That was my bottom line.

"For now, Libby, let us not go into that. I have so much in my head. I will try very much to be around by the new year, but just in case I am not able to, just buy yourself a present and remember to buy one for Julie."

I had bought her a new year card and in it I had stashed two thousand shillings

and no message. This was her time to wake up and see what was good for her. 1 drove her up to the end of the street near her home. Then I kissed her goodnight and 1 proceeded to the club to have a midnight beer before going back home to sleep.

Chapter Nine

I checked in at the White Rhino Hotel, which is at the centre of town, for the first few days after my arrival in Nyeri town. The hotel was only ten minutes' walk from the office and it had all the facilities included in the tariff. They had a tennis lawn, swimming pool and many indoor games, all provided free to the hotel residents. I was happy, there was something for me to do in the evenings before I could make new friends.

For the first week, I spent three hours each day meeting the butchers, meat traders and the previous inspectors who were under the impression that I had arrived to usurp their prestigious positions. I realised later that it was not easy to convince them that my goal was the same: the health of the consumer. We all had the responsibility of protecting the consumer against any health hazards. Still the rivalry was too much, often turning into physical fights. I had to intervene each time a similar situation arose and this meant 1 had to be within reach all the time, during the day. I ruled out any night duties whatever the circumstances.

There were forty-five check points scattered over the district and I had to visit each one of them personally during the second week. It was not an easy task. I did not know the locations, and 1 had to rely on the map which I had been provided with. At the end of the week I had covered only a half of them. I needed another week.

At the end of my inspection tour 1 found there were more problems than 1 anticipated. The slaughter slabs were non-existent in some areas. In some other places cows and goats were slaughtered in the open. Disposal pits were not available and potable water was as rare as a negative blood group. The traders were used to that and to change this was going to take a

long time. They were simply not willing to change. At times violent clashes were reported and the police had to intervene in some of them. I had never experienced a hostile situation like that before. I took over routine inspection of

the most volatile routes.

I had to set off at six in the morning and visit all the seven inspection points before 10.00 a.m. Each time I spent considerable time explaining the need to change, and gradually our efforts began to bear fruit. In the end the relationship was very good and my work became enjoyable.

By mid-February, I was confident that even the most ignorant traders now appreciated our work and our new system. Our initial target of total inspection by noon throughout the district had been achieved and exceeded. I was very happy indeed. I was now able to attend to office matters.

My Out-tray was always full of letters. I had not even replied to Libby's letter and I had spoken to Halima only a few times. I felt very indebted. But I also felt justified because of what I encountered at the new station.

My initial report was already late and I had not even started compiling it. All the data was mixed up and I did not know where to begin. Two reports were needed. The first one had to cover all the difficulties encountered and actions recommended; and the second one, the most important one, was to outline the disease patterns. All this had to be done as soon as possible. I needed two whole days, without any interruptions, to compile both reports.

* * *

The senior registry clerk walked into my office and found me talking on the telephone. He placed two personal letters on my desk and left. I picked them and noticed from the writing that one letter was from Libby and the other one was from the University of California. I remembered at once that my name had been forwarded sometime back for selection for graduate

studies. Selections were normally done at the headquarters and candidates were picked in August.

I put that letter aside and slit open the first one. It was a long letter and inside there was a picture of Libby. I kept it aside and continued talking on the phone. When I finished talking, I picked Libby's letter and started reading it, searching the meaning of each and every word.

'My sweetheart Roger,

I have not heard from you, despite the fact that it is two weeks now since I wrote to you. I hope and pray that you are just fine. I also hope that it is only work which has prevented you from writing to me. And as I am writing to you now I also hope that I find your letter in the mailbox. That is the life I now lead. Hoping and only hoping, never being certain about anything.

After you left me, I went and thought over and over about what we had discussed and I was convinced that I have not done enough to nourish our relationship. I talked to Joelene and she confessed everything that she had told you. I admit that all she told you is true. And I ask you to forgive me. I don't want to lose you. I feel it was wrong for me not to tell you everything, thus creating an air of suspicion, but I pray that you will understand. I have no doubt that you will forget all that. I am ready to change. Just give me another chance. I will be a changed person.

Everyday I wake up in the middle of the night thinking about you, and each time I dream of you leaving me. I cannot concentrate on anything. I just spend most of my time sleeping. I really don't know what to do. Please help me before I break down. Just advise me what I should do. I squeeze my teats and a milky secretion comes out. Should I have the baby? And what about school? How will I care for the baby? Where shall I be staying — me and our baby ... I have no answer to any of these questions ... It is already after

midnight. Everybody in the house is asleep. We ate dinner five hours ago and I have been tossing in bed all that time. The radio station is closed down, and my small transistor does not have a short wave. The room is very quiet and I am lonely and scared. I wish I could talk to you. 1 wish you were here with me, but you are so far away.

I also feel very tired. But I have no sleep. So I will try to finish this letter first and then continue with a novel until I can get some sleep. Last night I had a similar experience. I stayed up until the first cock crew. But today I feel a bit better after writing to you. Please write back quickly. At least send a card . . . sweetheart come soon.

Libby.'

I folded the letter and put it in my pocket. I felt very touched. I had not even sent a greetings card to her. I felt remorseful. I felt deep inside me an urge to see her

immediately, but I was aware that was only a sentiment. We were very close at heart and yet so far apart.

I took the letter and perused it again. Two things were implied in it and a decision had to be reached by me: first, to have the baby or not was the issue. That was a crucial decision. It was the determinant of what was going to happen next. The second implication was that the decision had to come from me. But I was not ready to make that decision. I felt our relationship had loopholes and I was not prepared to bear the brunt of it. I was still convinced that a lot of vital information was being withheld from me deliberately, and I was not impressed by the freedom given to her by her parents, knowing too well that we had a close relationship. I was also not impressed by the fact that I was getting the bad side of news from extraneous sources before she told me. And when she realised that I had discovered, that is when she came confessing. That was not healthy for me.

I had already decided that I was not going to tell her what to do and whatever the decision, it was not going to come from me.

I had deliberately given her enough money to procure an abortion, but I was not ready to tell her to go for one. she had had an abortion before, and I was not a party to it then. I don't know how that decision had been reached. All I know was that she had found it to be a kind of an alternative. I despised the notion of terminating a pregnancy and I knew I had spent considerable time trying to impress that on her. I had to communicate my feelings and my stand to her, but I did not know which was the best method. I looked at my watch and it was lunch time. I picked up my newspaper and the letter from California and I left for lunch at the White Rhino. I felt I needed a nap after lunch.

When I finished having my lunch, I went to my room and lay on the bed. I opened the other letter and saw that it was posted from the dean's office, at the University of California. It was post marked Sacramento. I read the first page and then moved to the second one. To my shock and surprise I found my name listed for classes commencing in the spring quarter. I turned to the third page, and got even more surprised. The spring quarter classes were beginning in April. I turned to the calendar on the wall and I felt numb all over. I got a mental block. I looked at the dates given in the letter and saw they tallied with those on my calendar. It was for real. This was to be the shock of my life.

I was expected in Washington DC in two weeks time; there I had to undergo a

two weeks orientation. Seminars and classes would begin thereafter, upon arriving at the respective campus. I did not have any idea where to begin.

I had no passport. I had no birth certificate either, and I did not have a health certificate. My personal things were scattered all over the place. Some were in Nairobi while others were in my country home. Two weeks was too short to prepare for a trip to a foreign country adequately, a trip whose duration I did not know.

Yet that was all the time I had in which to prepare and leave the country for the U.S.A. It was a bombshell dropped right on target. There was no retreat and there was no surrender.

1 had not made any progress report. My only consolation was that the inspection operation was proceeding smoothly. I realised from that moment that every decision I made was going to be critical. Precision and speed of action were going to count heavily.

I got up and returned to the office at two o'clock. I asked the telephone operator to get me the Deputy Director at once. Fortunately he was the one who answered the telephone. I explained to him clearly the dramatic turn of events and he too was amazed. Nobody expected such drastic changes so soon. I assured him that the inspection which was the critical area of operation was running smoothly and he was happy. He understood my dilemma and he consented to my request that I take an urgent leave and begin preparing for my trip. I telefaxed all copies of the letters from California to him and some minutes later he confirmed receipt of the letter and gave approval for my leave.

I called the secretary and dictated a short letter which I needed to have typed straight away and copied to all inspectors: 'Your attention is drawn to the fact that every inspector will have to operate on the assigned route and check points for the next four weeks. No changes or alterations are permitted during that period. In case of an emergency, the general district head will be notified immediately. An emergency is deemed to mean total incapacitation or inability to ride a motorcycle. Further changes are anticipated shortly and you will be notified accordingly.

Head Supervisor, Roger'

I called the driver and instructed him to take the car for inspection that afternoon

and to be ready for a trip early the next day. I signed all the daily letters and then returned to my hotel to

try and get my head organised. I was weary and rather confused. 1 needed at least one hour's sleep.

I lay on my bed, and a few minutes later, fell asleep.

* * *

By the time I got up it was already dark. I took a hot bath and went to the dining room for my supper. After supper I ordered coffee in a thermos flask and returned to my room.

I opened the wardrobe and took some writing material. That was the best opportunity to write to Libby. My time was no longer under my control and I had to tell her at least something, to cool her down. I booked a telephone call to Halima but I found the telephone lines in Nakuru very engaged. I requested the operator to keep trying and to call me when he got a free line. Some few minutes later the telephone rang. 1 picked it and Halima was on the line with her voice very clear and crisp.

"This is Roger. How are you, my dear?"

"Very well, honey. And how are you? You have been too quiet, why? Too much work? Where are you calling from?"

"Believe it or not, but 1 am right on the slopes of the snowcapped mountain. I am still residing at the White Rhino. I don't have a house yet and I don't think I am ever going to get one here soon."

"Why, my dear, are there no houses in Nyeri?"

"Not really, I will tell you in a minute. But first tell me about yourself. How are you fairing? I miss you very much. I miss your bed, I miss your food and long for your company very much. I am rather lonely here, no friends, and the town is very small and there is no place to go to. 1 have too much work and a lot of changes are taking place in my life. Today 1 received a letter and I was shattered. All my plans have been derailed."

"Which letter is that? Please read it over to me, honey. 1 don't want to feel bad alone when I am here to share with you all your troubles. Please read it to me."

" It is a very long letter and all I can do is to summarise it for you. I am not sure you will like it, but I will explain everything to you."

"Just do that right away, 1 am eager to hear the contents. 1 will bear with whatever is in it"

"Okay- The letter comes from the United States of America and it concerns my further training"

"That can't be a bad letter, Roger," She interjected and 1 could hear the sigh of relief.

"I am required to be in Washington DC in two weeks time. I don't have a birth certificate, a passport or anything. I am really caught up unawares. Right now I don't even know where to begin and what to begin with."

"That sounds real bad for me, honey, but I know it is good for you. Maybe good for us two in the end, who knows? We don't know what the future holds for us. What I do know is that I will miss you, and I don't know whether you will remember me when you are gone."

"I really don't have any details yet. Tomorrow I will travel to Nairobi and from there, I will have a good perspective regarding the whole thing; departure date, the airline, destinations and so forth."

"I would like to see you before you leave. Maybe I could see you at the airport."

"That would be fantastic. I definitely would love to be with you before I leave. I guess as soon as I know the itinerary tomorrow I will let you know and then we can be able to work out something."

"Make sure you call me as soon as you have the details."

"1 will, dear. Sleep well and good night."

I had no way of contacting Libby. She had no telephone contact. So I decided to write her a letter instead. I took the writing pad and moved over to the writing

desk.

'My dear Libby,

I have not been at peace with myself since the time I came over here. The work has been exhausting and it has taken me unusually long to settle. 1 don't have a house yet and life in a hotel has not been one of the best. I received your letter, but 1 was not able to reply on time. Then 1 got your second letter today and 1 felt I must write back to you before I sleep. Please accept my apologies for the delay in writing. A lot of things are happening every day of my life and I feel I am at crossroads. This is one time when 1 feel that 1 cannot be able to make all our decisions alone. Your participation will be crucial this time.

For a long time now I have thought a lot about our relationship and the more I have taken time to think about it, the further away I appear from getting an answer. Maybe the separation is a contributing factor, but I am afraid even when of late we are together 1 felt a bit inhibited. All along 1 have tried to be as open as possible to you but I think you have not done the same to me. We agreed that it was good to forget the past, but you always seem to sink into the past and sometimes 1 am left wondering whether you can change. I think you can if you really want to. But that is if you really want to.

Now you say you are pregnant and you don't know what to do. If you don't take care of yourself I again don't know who will. I cannot be with you all the time, to be able to know what you are doing all the time, but like I have said time and again, I believe in equality and freedom. Whether you are a woman or a man the entire responsibility should be shared equally. We should be open to consultation, but then we should be willing to maintain whatever we resolve. Again I see you going back on your word. 1 am not really happy about that.

Many times 1 have told you that our secrets are our secrets. You do not seem to keep our secrets and I am afraid about that.

Regarding your pregnancy, I sincerely don't know what to say. It is not your first one, and I am not being sarcastic. At this point in life I have so much going on around me and I feel I also need help. All I can say is this, whatever decision you make, I will stand by you. If you need assistance, I will offer you what I can afford. My only wish for you now is that you will learn to be able to make your own decisions in future. I say this because once you are the decision maker, there

remains no room for regret. Just know that my love for you still stands. It has not changed a bit, of course, unless you are going to change it. When I told you earlier that I was never going to leave you, that was a decision made.

Right now, in front of me, I have a letter which came to me by surprise. It is a letter from the University of California. I got it today, and I know its contents will shock you as well — I am required to be in Washington DC in two weeks' time. I realised I don't have a passport or even a health certificate. I don't know whether I will succeed in getting all the travel documents in time. I hope you can therefore understand the position I am in. I only wish I were with you. Perhaps you could offer me some suggestions. But now I am seated here alone, in my hotel room trying to figure out where to begin. I must make all the decisions alone, and I am sure you can now understand when I tell you that you must learn to make strong decisions by yourself and stick to them.

For the time being, what I am going to do is keep applying for travel documents and I know most of the time I will be shuttling between Nairobi and Nyeri. As often as possible, time permitting, 1 will come over to see you during one of these trips, but if I am unable please bear with me. I know it will be difficult to get me in the office by telephone. But you can always leave a message.

My hotel telephone number is 717-2002.1 am usually in after 8.00 p.m. You can also leave a message at the

switchboard and indicate when you would call next so that I wait in the room.

As you can see, my dear, I am going through a very strenuous time and I can only hope that every requirement will be fulfilled in good time. Remember it is all for the good of us both. Let me sign off and say goodbye, my dear darling.

Roger.' * * *

My knowledge about international travel was very limited, I had never travelled out of the country before and 1 needed someone who had the experience, especially in view of the time limit. I knew the Tourist Bureau had the best information desk, and as soon as we got to Nairobi the following day, I went straight to the tourist information desk at Utalii House. I explained my case to the clerk on duty and I got very useful information. The clerk was also astonished at the short notice-

"1 can only hope that you will make it within the time there is," she said after looking at my documents. "Your case however is different because you are travelling on a government scholarship. Do you have a passport?"

"No," 1 replied.

"Goodness!" she exclaimed.

"Have you filled the forms?"

"No."

"Then you need to act very fast. The easiest way for you as things stand now, is commence looking for a passport right away. Go to the immigration, they will assist you. Next go to your department head or ministry. There you will be bonded and they will advise you accordingly. Then go to the City Hall clinic and obtain the health certificate and the necessary vaccinations, and once you are armed with all those documents, go to the American Embassy and apply for a visa. You should have no problem with that. Remember to make your case clear at

every stage, otherwise it will be difficult to achieve that in ten days. If you are stuck at any stage we can help you by giving you further information and advise but you have got to do your own talking. That is what you will find out when you go to America. Just explain yourself very clearly, and ask again if you are not certain about anything."

"Thank you very much, madam."

I left the Tourist Bureau armed with the right information and it was now my turn to begin the arduous task of climbing up and down the staircase and lifts in the tall administrative buildings in the city centre.

I completed my passport forms at the immigration office after explaining my position and 1 was asked to check after five days instead of the usual fortnight. Then I filled my immigration bonds and I was asked to go with my passport to collect them anytime. 1 filled my ticket request forms and, there too, I was asked to go with my passport. Finally I went to the City Hall where I was vaccinated and got my health certificate. I was vaccinated against yellow fever only. There was no cholera in the country and smallpox had been eradicated world wide. 1 was very happy to get that certificate. I felt that I was getting somewhere at last.

Five days of waiting for a passport seemed a long time. But I found 1 could not proceed without it. I felt a bit discouraged but at the same time 1 thought I could return to my station and continue with my daily routine of work. I had no further business in the city and we headed back for Nyeri.

We arrived at seven in the evening and I went to my office. I checked the daily reports and I was pleased to find everything in order. I signed the letters due for posting the next day and then I walked to my hotel for the night.

There was very heavy rain outside. This, coupled with a very strong wind blowing from the snowy mountain to the east, was making my hotel room chilly. I filled the bath tub with hot water and taking with me a copy of the Travellers' Guide, I submerged myself in the bath tub and started reading my guide book which

was given to me at the Tourist Information Office. It was such a good feeling being inside the tub of hot water.

The Travellers' Guide was a small booklet written very clearly and it had pictures and maps of foreign countries. The advice was brief and to the point:

(i) If this is your first travel overseas, carry as little luggage as possible — preferably only one suitcase.

(ii) Don't carry a lot of money in cash. Use travellers' cheques instead. But always have some convertible currency. You might require to hire a taxi or sleep in a hotel where cheques are not accepted.

(ii]) Always make sure your travel documents are in one place.

(lv ' As much as possible obtain a map of the city you are going to and learn to use it.

' v ' Be careful always when you talk to strangers. And be even more careful when a stranger approaches you to talk.

(vl) Keep a small diary and enter into it all important dates and addresses.

v vu) Always ensure there is a tag bearing your name on each and every piece of your luggage. Don't forget your address.

(viii) If you are a man be careful about whispers at street corners. Some pimps operate that way. I was getting lost in the language of the international traveller. But the Travellers' Guide was proving to be quite interesting. There were some invaluable tips in it. I put it down and finished washing. Then I put on my casual wear ready to go for supper. I left the heater on and went to the dining room.

I ordered supper and was served with grilled leg of lamb, French beans, boiled carrots, onions and tomatoes with baked potatoes. I had not eaten the whole day and I was determined to eat as much as 1 could to make up. A bottle of wine was placed before me and after taking one glass I sat back to enjoy my

dinner, occasionally perusing my guide book. There was some background music playing, which was barely audible against the rattling of hailstones hitting the roof and the huge glass windows. A very strong easterly wind was blowing, bringing with it even more rain. It seemed like there was going to be another Noah's flood.

After supper, I shifted to the main bar and sat at the counter. I occupied a stool at the edge of the counter overlooking the main entrance. The bar was full but more patrons were still coming in, some of them simply to escape from the heavy rain outside. I ordered a beer and then I turned to my guide book. It was getting more and more interesting as I read on and I was literally getting obsessed with it.

Suddenly I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. I turned abruptly and met face to face with Purity, the secretary at the office.

"Hello, how are you? Have you just come in or what?" I asked.

"No, I was seated with some friends on the other side of the lounge taking some coffee. Then I saw you and I decided to come over and say hello."

"That was good of you. Please sit down and have a drink."

"TTianks. I can do with a cold Premium," she said and drew a stool closer to me.

"You didn't come to the office the whole day."

"No, 1 was busy in Nairobi the whole day. In actual fact I never made it back here until seven. But 1 did go briefly to the office. 1 signed all the letters and then left. I did not find anything needing my attention or was there any?"

"Not really. There were only two calls, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. They all came from the Pyrethrum Board in Nakuru, but no message was left on both occasions."

"Well, thanks. I will see what to do tomorrow."

From the moment I spotted her in the office I had never stopped eyeing her enviously. She had a very sweet voice and was very attractive. She had a refined afro which extended way down to her temples like side burns, then curled backwards to conceal the ear lobes leaving only her elongated ear-rings visible. She had unusually thin lips which were always shaded pink, closely matching her complexion.

"Do you live far from town?" I asked.

"No, just a few minutes walk from here, a little further up from the Outspan

Hotel. I always walk."

"Who do you live with?"

She looked at me shyly and gave me a cunning smile.

"Why? I have always lived away from home since 1 went to high school," she said, and smiled incitingly.

"How come?"

"I spent all my time in army barracks when I was in high school, and when 1 started working 1 felt I didn't want to go back and stay at home. 1 am now used to that kind of life. But my parents' home is also around here and I do go to see them quite often. Sometimes I spend a night or two with them."

"And when did you start working."

"This is my first posting. I have never worked before. It's my sixth month."

She was very charming out of the office and her company was quite entertaining.

"You must be bored when you get home after work."

"Sometimes, not always. 1 like reading and knitting and when 1 don't have anything to do 1 just sit and watch TV or sleep."

"Sleep?"

"Of course, what is wrong with that?"

"Alone?"

"Stop it, Roger. Is that surprising?"

"Yes. That represents a lot of wastage of useful bed space."

"Oh, come on, Roger," she said and burst out laughing. "I must book space tonight," I joked. "Am I welcome?" "If you wish," she said shyly. "Good."

I asked for another round of beers for us, and just before I finished placing the

order, the telephone operator came over to me and whispered, "There is a trunk call from Nakuru, sir. Would you like to take it on the extension in the hallway or should I put it through to your room?"

"Please put it through to my room."

"Just a minute, Purity." I excused myself and went to my room. I picked the receiver and the operator put me through to the caller.

"Hello," I said.

"This is Halima. How are you, my dear? I have been holding for a long time, where were you?"

"Hi. Sorry, my dear. I was having my dinner on the other side of the hotel. I hadn't eaten the whole day and I was starving. I spent the whole day in Nairobi, but I accomplished nothing."

"Don't tell me that. You make me feel bad. Can I help in any way?"

"Yes, by loving me all the time, even more. That way my spirit will get invigorated and I will be more determined to achieve more, however hard."

"How far did you go anyway?"

"I completed all the necessary forms and I was asked to check after five days, starting from today. But see, in five days time I will have only two days left before flying out. So I reckon what I will do is to keep going there virtually every day from tomorrow to check on the progress. I was going to call you before going to sleep. So thanks a lot for calling first. At times I feel like every one is running away from me the moment I need them."

"Don't say that, darling, otherwise you will make me trek up to that place via Thompson Falls."

"Well, Halima, you know I don't mean it. I only miss you very much. And all I can do for now is to send you an electronic kiss. You get it?"

"Yes, I get it, darling. Have mine too, and sweet dreams also. And please keep me informed on your progress."

"I will, my dear. Sleep well and good night."

I replaced the telephone and walked back to the bar. Purity was still there sipping her beer slowly and quietly.

"Sorry for leaving you. It was a trunk call. But anyhow, just have another drink. I don't think even taxis are moving in this rain. I can see floods all over the place. I am sure any attempt to drive will only lead to the car stalling when the water enters the engine."

"I am in no rush," she said and topped up her glass of beer.

"Tell me, Roger, I overheard a talk in the central registry that you will be leaving us fairly soon. Is that true?"

"Who did you hear it from?"

"Well, just tell me whether it is true or not."

"Maybe someone in that registry doesn't like to see my face in that station."

"It has nothing to do with liking faces. It was rumoured that you might be leaving the country for further training. Such things can never be kept secret for a day. All registries in the country act like a spy network, and nothing can be hidden for a long time."

"Well, that is likely. But I am also eagerly waiting for a final word."

"Where are you going to leave your family?" she asked ruefully.

"I foresee no problem with that. My father is retired and I think they live fairly comfortably with my mother on their one-acre country home. I noticed that my father collects his pension after two months and sometimes never does for a long time. So I reckon my family won't have any problems at all when I am away."

"You are kidding. You know I don't mean your parents. I mean your wife and kids."

"You must be joking, Purity. Who said I have a wife and kids? That can only be gossip since there is no grain of truth in it. I am not married, not unless some girl

in that registry, and I know there are many of them, married me in her dreams the moment I arrived. And then we got kids real fast."

"You are right, the tall brown girl in the registry was telling me so just the other day."

"In actual fact, I don't have a family. I am not married, but that doesn't mean I hate girls or that I won't marry some day."

I moved closer to her and held her arm. I felt the softness of her skin, the fulness in her arm and the warmth emanating from her entire body. I decided at once that the offices were closed down, and the prevailing occasion had nothing to do with secretarial or veterinary duties.

"Can we have some more drinks in my hotel suite?" I asked.

"What do you mean in your hotel suite?"

"Come on, I am sorry, I mean my hotel room. I can ask them to give us more drinks there after they close down the bar. It is also becoming chilly outside here, don't you think so?"

"No problem, but let us have another round of drinks here. And in the meantime I can see my friends off. They stay across the street and I know they cannot stay any longer whether it continues to rain like this or not."

"That is quite in order. I will just be here." She slid down from the elevated stool and walked to the far end of the lounge. I watched her gait, and I was impressed by her manner of walk, coupled with the coordinated sway or her meticulously curved hips. I was convinced it was worthwhile staying up late whatever the consequences.

She came back with her friends and introduced them to me simply as her former college mates. Then she walked them over to the hallway and they left.

She came back and sat closer to me than before. I quickly swallowed my remaining beer and asked the barman to deliver a few more bottles to my room. Then I took her arm and we followed the barman to the room.

The heater was still on and the room was warm. I locked the door and we sat on

my bed.

"How shall we leave this place in the morning?"

"It does not matter, Purity. This is an international hotel."

"Yes, but you see we are in the same office," she protested.

"That is no hassle, Purity. You will have your breakfast as usual and then proceed to the office. I won't have to come along with you. Maybe I will not come until later in the morning, after doing some work here. I know you will need to change clothes in the morning but that again is quite simple. You will just take a taxi outside to take you to your house. After that you can ask the taxi driver to drop you at the office. All that can be done in fifteen minutes."

I took the glass of beer in her hand and put it on the floor. Then I removed her sandals and threw them across the room. She moved over to the far end of the divan and I moved right next to her. She was rather shy and kept covering her eyes. I switched off the bright overhead lamp and turned on the yellow faint bulb. She appeared more secure in that shade. Then she began to unhook the small clips on her brassiere, while I was busy pulling down her slip and her tight j ink pants, as the rain continued to pound heavily on the roof.

Chapter Ten

Exactly on the fifth day as promised, I returned to the immigration department. 1 took an elevator and went up to the third floor of the immigration building. I walked into the passport control office and I found a long queue of people waiting to get their passports.

I took my position at the end of the queue which kept swelling every minute. It was advancing at a snail's speed and one hour later I was nowhere near the counter. A sign board hanging loosely on the wall indicated that the office always closed at 3.00 p.m. There was no sign that I would be served before lunch time. There was no chance at all. My only consolation was seeing more people behind me than there were in front of me.

At a quarter to one, a clerk came round giving slips of papers marked with numbers. Shortly after, the counter closed. We had to line up precisely in the same order indicated on the slips of papers when the offices reopened at 2.00

p.m. Then we all broke for lunch.

At two o'clock I was outside the main door holding my slip of paper firmly in my hand. The doors opened and people gushed in with gusto. They formed a similar queue like before. No new applications were being accepted and the line was moving faster this time. My turn came and I gave in my slip of paper. The clerk pulled a file and I saw my name on the folder. He looked at me and asked if I was the one. I said yes. He looked at the file again and shook his head.

"Your passport is not ready. And I can see you are supposed to travel on Saturday night."

"That is right," I said humbly.

"You definitely will not be able to get it today. I can see it is placed under special clearance, and I would suggest you come in tomorrow morning. I will take a personal initiative on this group of files but I do notice that your case is rather peculiar, rather urgent. The offices here open at ten o'clock. But you come to my office at 8 a.m in the morning, and I'll see what we can do about it. Otherwise tomorrow being a Friday you may never accomplish anything."

"Thank you very much, sir. 1 will be here at exactly eight in the morning." I said and left the hall. I found myself in a state of quandary again.

I went to the bureau-de-change and enquired about the exchange rates and limitations. I was told the maximum I could change was two thousand shillings only, for travel allowance. But I had to produce my passport and a return ticket. I did not have either of those. I left the bank and went down to the coffee shop at the Hilton hotel. I ordered some coffee and took out my Traveller's Guide. It had now become my regular companion.

I opened the centre pages and I found the subject to be almost directed to me: '. . . when it is almost the time for your departure and you realise that you have not done half of what you are supposed to have done:

0) You find that you have not been immunised.

(ii) You find that you have not changed your money.

(iii) You find that you do not have a visa in case you are travelling to a non-

commonwealth country.

(iv) You find that you have not collected your ticket from

the airline, (v) You find that you have not bought a travellers' bag. (vi) You find that the hands of the clock are moving faster

than usual.'

The guide book was correct in every way. I had done nothing. I had achieved so little and time was running out so fast. I thought about what was remaining and I felt a chill run down my spine.

I asked for another cup of coffee and I sat back on the chair pondering my next move. My passport was the key to every move. I found I could not do anything without it. Time was also running out against me. The picture of Libby entered my mind. And for the first time, I felt she was the one who occupied die greatest part of my heart. Despite the odds between us, I felt she was die one closest to me. I looked at my watch and saw it was getting to five o'clock. There was no point in driving back to Nyeri. I decided to spend the night in town.

I walked to the phone booth outside and called Joelene. She answered the telephone and I asked her to tell Libby to meet me at Studio 45 at 7.00 p.m. Then I returned to my seat and sat there blankly staring at a flower pot in front of me.

I removed a pad from my briefcase and I decided to write a letter to Halima rather than talk to her on telephone. I knew a telephone conversation at that time was only going to create a lot of anxiety and bad feelings. Speedpost would ensure she got the letter the following day in the evening.

'My dear Halima:

I am seated at the Hilton Hotel coffee shop, not sure what to do next. I have been in town since early in the morning, and once again I have not accomplished anything as yet. I was promised that I might get the passport tomorrow morning, and as you know tomorrow is the last working day of the week, and my only full day left to do everything that I am supposed to do if I have to make it on Saturday night. The only hope I am left with is to get the passport early tomorrow.

I intend to spend the night here in town so that I can begin my hectic day early enough. I feel pushed right into a corner and I miss you a lot. I don't even know whether I will be able to see you before I leave, and that gives me a very bad feeling. As of now I don't even know what will happen next. I am just seated here taking one cup of coffee after another.

So far I don't know how long my training will take. I don't know whether it will be one year, two or three years. But I am determined to face whatever comes along. I know tomorrow is your birthday, and I am sad because I will not be there to give you flowers. But please accept my parcel which is on the way, and which I hope will reach you before you blow your candles. For now I am only enclosing some cards and a few of my recent photographs and those which we took at the crater the last time we were there. I hope you will get them in good time.

I plan to spend the whole day tomorrow here in town and hopefully by the end of the day I will be able to give you a sensible outcome.

Roger.'

At 6.00 p.m. I drove to Sagret Equatorial Hotel and booked a room for the night. Then I drove to Studio 45 for my appointment with Libby, arriving there shortly before nightfall. Immediately a waiter came over, as I found myself a seat, and I asked him to give me the menu and a quarter bottle of vodka and lemonade. He went and came back with vodka, ice and lemonade. I filled my glass to the brim and started looking at the menu. As I was in the process of thinking what to eat, a taxi pulled up outside and I saw Libby step out, dressed in jeans and a heavy overcoat. She came over to where I was seated and fell on my shoulders. We hugged and kissed and then she sat next to me. It was a happy reunion. She was conspicuously delighted.

"All day I have been thinking of you. Somehow I had this strange feeling that I was going to see you before I got word from Joelene that you had called. I am very happy to see you, sweetheart."

"It is nice to hear that, dear. I was also longing to see you. Actually I was very busy today, and I have just arrived. This is my first drink. I haven't even chosen what to eat. So you can go ahead and make a selection from the menu."

"How about some chicken?"

"That is pretty fine. I have not eaten chicken for a long time. In the meantime what would you like for a drink?"

"Today I don't want to have anything alcoholic. I can only share what you have in your glass."

"Sharing has always been my idea. You might find my vodka a bit too strong."

"No. I will just sip once, then I can settle for an ale. After that I will be okay for today."

"How far have you gone with your travel arrangements?" she was quick to ask.

"I can say confidently that I have done my part, but nobody has done his part as far as actual travelling is concerned. I don't have a passport yet. And everything else depends wholly on the passport. Without it I cannot do anything. I cannot get any foreign money, a visa or even obtain a ticket. Tomorrow is a crucial day if I have to achieve everything on time. Surprisingly the day of travel is supposed to be Saturday night. And tomorrow is Friday, the last full working day of the week."

"How did all this come to happen so fast, and without any prior knowledge? I was also shocked. At first I did not appreciate the seriousness, but now I do understand what it all means. When I received your letter, I couldn't believe my eyes. I read the letter two times and I thought about it the whole night. In the morning when I was very fresh I read it again, and I came face to face with the truth for the first time. Since then I have been dreaming every night, being at the airport with you, kissing you goodbye and then watching the plan disappear into die clouds. The final words in your letter were so comforting that from that day I have been very much at peace with myself. I feel very good when I remember what you wrote."

I looked into her eyes and at once I felt really sad. I could see her pitted against all the odds, which she would have to face alone. I was however happy to hear her voice and to learn that she had developed a strong determination.

"I have similarly been thinking hard about what to do. I have been wondering what will happen to you now, particularly at

this time when I know so much will be at crossroads. But I also realised that I

will be going to strange places where I don't know anybody. It will take you and me perseverance, and a lot of mutual trust. It will be a very trying period for both of us. I will try hard and I am confident we shall get over it in the end."

"What do you think about our baby?" she asked. I did not have a ready answer. Yet that issue is what had been bugging me more than anything else.

"Does your mum know about it?"

"The other day she asked me about it and I found I had no way out of it. My tummy is already showing and there is no way I could continue concealing it."

"What did she say about it?"

"She scorned me and said she was fed up. She said emphatically that there was no way she could have two mothers in the same house."

"What was your interpretation of that?"

"It was an express way of telling me to seek abortion," she said and cried, and I felt pity for her. "What do you think about it, sweetheart?" she asked.

"I personally stand for sanctity of human life. Deep inside me I am pro-life ... but this case is different. I stand for good life but not one of desolation, hopelessness and squalor. As of now you are through with school, you have no means to earn your own living, leave alone that one of the baby, and I see only one way out of it..." I paused and thought hard before continuing. "I can only see a miserable life with a baby and no parents to care for it. I only see misery for you and even more misery for the baby. I see a lot of turmoil in your home and a lot of turbulence for you and a baby all staying at your home," I said, and looked into her blank face.

"But, Libby, I fear one thing. I fear the complications of habitual abortion and I also fear the possible fibrositis of the uterus that can result from such manipulations. Abortion is illegal and you can't sue anybody. I also fear the inherent moral

decadence, and the loss of the unique touch between the living and the unborn. But now we do not have a lot of choice and very reluctantly, I must say we have only one way out of it Let's share all die blame equally between ourselves and

look into the future together, with renewed commitment and dedication."

"Thank you, sweetheart. 1 feel completely whole again. I will love you forever and I will never betray or leave you."

"I am glad, Libby, to see that we are quite agreed on that aspect. I don't feel tormented in any way by our decision. Just remember that the promises we make today, and the words we say today, will become our tests later in life."

We embraced and kissed passionately, sealing once more our total commitment to each other. Meantime, the waiter brought our order of barbecued chicken hot from the oven together with an assortment of oriental sauces. On top of that he also served us with a basket of tropical fruits, plenty of salads and a small medallion pinned into a sliced cantaloupe with some words engraved on it: 'Studio 45 — The land of Bees' Honey Beer'.

* * *

At 7.45 a.m. I was standing outside the immigration building waiting for the doors to open. Soon there was a crowd miling around me. At 8.00 a.m. the doors opened and people rushed in to form queues at their respective counters. I did not bother to jostle for a position. I was rather disheartened. I was either going to get my passport in good time or I had to abandon everything until the following week. I remained patient and went ahead reading my newspaper. Then I saw a gentleman walk over to where I was standing.

"Excuse me, sir," he called out. "Are you Roger?"

"Yes," I said.

"Please come with me." I followed him right to his office.

"Take a seat," he said, and opened my file. "I am sorry that you have such short notice to get yourself ready to travel, but I

can see it is nobody's fault. Sometimes things happen so abruptly that you just have to make the best you can out of a bad situation. Here is your passport duly signed, and properly endorsed. Because of the time limit, and tomorrow being a non-working day, I would advise you to start with the respective government offices. There are usually very many people in those offices and the pace is

always slow. Try and clear with them preferably by noon. After that you will have plenty of time at the US embassy for your visa, and also enough time to change your money. So my friend, good luck and have a good time in the States."

"Thank you very much, sir. Your assistance has been tremendous and I appreciate. Thank you once again."

I slipped my passport inside my coat's innerpocket and 1 walked hurriedly down the staircase. It was still fairly early and I reckoned I had enough time to visit all the necessary offices.

1 walked to Harambee House and signed my immigration bonds. Then I collected my allowance cheque and cashed it at the Central Bank across the street. From the bank I drove to the Central Training Institute and presented my letters of admission, my immigration bonds duly signed and my passport. The training officer called Kenya Airways and requested a one-way ticket, Nairobi-London, for me at the earliest possible time. 1 was cautioned against any use of drugs, and I was also warned against getting married while still in the process of pursuing my studies. This advice was irrelevant to me and I felt infuriated. I was satisfied in thinking that Libby would be waiting for me. I was then advised to be a good ambassador and to report my progress back to his office at regular intervals.

Finally, I was given my plane ticket, and my first month's allowance of fifteen hundred dollars in travellers' cheques.

At last 1 was getting somewhere. I looked at my watch and found it was half past noon. Time was really flying. I went to Barclays Bank of Kenyatta Avenue and bought a further two hundred dollars. It did not take long at the bank.

There was still the visa to collect at the American embassy. I took my notebook and check-listed all the important things. I ticked all the ones I had successfully done and noticed that the visa was the only thing remaining. I walked to Sapra Studios and took some photographs for my visa. Then I proceeded to the American embassy. I filled the application forms and presented them to the visa applications section. Then I sat down with the other applicants and continued reading my newspaper.

Some few minutes to three my name was called out. I went to the counter and

presented my passport. Then it was stamped and passed back to me. I looked at my visa and found that I had been given a students' visa for two years. I felt very happy and I knew that the first battle had been won. I noticed that I had slightly more than twenty four hours before leaving the country.

I walked back to the car, and put all my documents in the briefcase. 1 found I had no more business in the city, and I drove out of Nairobi heading back to Nyeri. I estimated that it was going to take me about two hours of moderate driving and I expected to get there at about six in the evening.

When I arrived, I went to the office first. I had not been there for two days and I had to sign off officially. The staff had left their offices and only the security guards were left patrolling the compound. I got into the office and switched on the lights. There was a pile of official letters and a heap of files awaiting me. I sat down and went through all the files in detail, putting my initials on each one of them. No special action was needed and finally I put them back in the cabinet.

I examined the letters and once again found that no action was needed from me. I returned them in the mail tray for future attention from the officer who would come after me. There was nothing else for me. I locked the office and gave the keys to the chief security officer, then walked to my hotel. I collected the key from the reception and went to my room. 1 was feeling tired and 1 decided to take a hot bath before doing anything else. 1 found three pieces of paper in my room containing messages, but 1

decided to ignore them until I had taken a bath. I had a good guess as to the source of the messages and even the contents.

As I sat relaxing in the bath-tub, the room telephone rang. I ignored it. Then it rang on the door. I also ignored it. Shortly after, I heard a knock on the door. I also ignored it. I had locked the door from inside and an attempt was made to open it. So I realised that is was yet another message for me. An envelope was slipped under the door and that confirmed it.

After bathing, I put on the heater and sat on the bed. I picked the messages and went through them one after another. The contents were the same. And they were all from Halima: 'Roger -call me as soon as you come in - 9.30 a.m.'

'. . . I called in again but once more you were not in - 2.30 p.m/

T am leaving the office. Please call me at home - 5.30 p.m.'

T have just called again, but you cannot be found. 1 don't know what is happening. Please call me as soon as you get my message. I will also keep calling before I go to sleep - 8.00 p.m.'

I opened my briefcase and laid out on the bed all my travel documents. I wanted to double check each and every document to avoid any last minute disappointment. Then I listed them in my diary:

(i) Passport - valid for five years.

(ii) American visa - valid for two years,

(iii) Health certificate - valid for three years.

0 V) Study leave authority - two years,

(v) Itinerary - Nairobi-London-Washington.

All the travel documents were properly endorsed and I put them in a side compartment of my briefcase. I counted all the foreign money I had, totalling one thousand five hundred dollars in travellers cheques and two hundred dollars in cash bills of all denominations. I kept the travellers cheques in my briefcase, and stashed the dollar bills in my wallet.

Next I removed my itinerary from my briefcase and studied it in detail, to ensure that I had all the information at my

fingertips. I would be taking a Kenya Airways flight from Nairobi to London via Rome and Frankfurt. From London I was going to take British Airways to Washington DC, a non-stop flight across the Atlantic. Details of what I was required to do once I reached Washington DC were given on the itinerary. A map of the city was also attached.

'. . . an official from Washington International Center will meet you at the airport to welcome you. He will be available to assist you if you have any problems with the immigration. But if you have no problems, you will take a bus right outside the airport and you will drop at the Presidential Hotel where you have already been booked/

This made no sense to me. I had never been to Washington and now I was being advised to take a bus in the capital to America, and alight at the Presidential Hotel. This was all Greek to me. I needed someone to help me interpret what they meant. 1 looked around my hotel room and realised I was all alone. Libby was not there. She was the only one who 1 felt could understand me at this time.

I looked at the map of Washington DC which was attached to my itinerary but 1 could not decipher anything at first. The National Airport was marked in bold letters. So was the Presidential Hotel. The rest of the map to me was a grid network of straight lines crossing at right angles, and all the lines were either marked alphabetically or numerically. I was used to calling streets by name, and the grid system was a new thing to me.

I continued reading the notes provided: Temperatures are expected to be low at this time and warm clothing is advisable. The day after arrival you will take a taxi cab to the International Centre and after the formal welcome, you will be given all the other details concerning your stay in the United States'.

1 folded the map and the copy of my itinerary and I kept them with the rest of the documents inside the briefcase.

I looked at Halima's messages and I felt I did not want to make any calls at that time, until I was almost going to sleep. But

I knew she would call any time. I had not decided what to tell her. I also expected Libby to call, and I was sure we would talk for a long time if she chanced to find me in the room at that hour.

1 dressed up and went to the main bar, with instructions to the telephone operator to take any message for me, record the caller's number and to tell whoever called to expect my return call any time-

I had no appetite and I decided to settle for some whisky, all the time thinking what it would be like to be away in a foreign country for so long, while the one I loved was so many miles away. It was not a comfortable thought, and each time it came to my mind, I kept it away by telling myself that I had not even left the country.

While I was sitting at the counter the operator came over to me and gave me another message: '. . .call Libby on telephone 552022, before midnight or very

early tomorrow morning'. I still didn't know what I wanted to tell her. For one, I did not want her to come to the airport. I knew her emotions well, and I was aware that she would not withstand to see me go away. I also felt it would hurt me to leave her like that especially now that she was faced with a dilemma. I had to think of a way which would leave us both satisfied and happy.

A few minutes later the operator came again with another message: '. . . Halima has called two times this evening. Please call her at her house anytime you come back, whatever the hour of the night'. I read the message and I felt compelled to conclude the issue. There was no doubt that I was leaving the next day. I had all the necessary things with me. There was no turning back. But one problem remained. What was I going to tell Halima? I did not want to cheat her because she had been very kind to me. Yet I needed to be very frank with her. Libby had taken more of my heart, yet Halima had given all her heart to me. She had given all of herself to me, and she was ready to do anything for me. I could not contemplate anything that would hurt her feelings. I would get hurt twice as much. I was unable to think

further by myself. And yet it was time to return her call. I had to find words to tell her not to wait for me when I was gone, but 1 knew that whatever the words, however sweet, they were bound to hurt.

It was getting close to midnight. Still I had not called Libby and I was afraid she must have been waiting for my call at a neighbour's house. I could imagine the poor pregnant girl on the sofa waiting for a call which she was not sure was ever going to come. I finished my last bit of whisky and I went back to my room. 1 picked up the telephone and asked the operator to give me Libby's number. He got the number right away and put me through. A strange voice answered the phone, and I kindly asked to speak with Libby, after making an apology for calling at such a late hour.

"No problem. She will be with you shortly," the man on the other end said and placed the phone down. Shortly Libby came on the line.

"Sweetheart, I have been trying to call you all day without success. I am so happy to hear your voice at last. How are you and where are you at this time?"

"I am pretty fine, just very tired and sleepy, I had a very busy day and 1 arrived back in Nyeri shortly after nightfall. Right now I am calling from my hotel

room."

"How did you fair today? Any progress so far?"

"Yes, indeed, 1 managed to get everything. 1 have all my travel documents with me. The only thing remaining is to make a reservation for the flight tomorrow night."

"That is good of you. I am glad to hear that, but so sad to think of you leaving me. What time are you supposed to leave?" I could detect the sudden change in her voice.

"Unless some changes crop up, something that I do not foresee, the plane is supposed to leave at 23.00 hours. But I will have to reconfirm that tomorrow."

"What arrangements do you have for me? Can I come to the airport to see you off?" she asked with a tremulous voice sounding very unsure of herself.

"For now, my dear, I would suggest we wait until tomorrow, when I will have made all the confirmations, then we can see what to do. I have not even packed and 1 don't even have a travelling bag or suitcase except my small briefcase. Whose telephone is that?"

"1 am in my aunt's house. You can call me anytime. I intend to be here for the whole weekend until 1 know what happens to you."

"And how are you otherwise?"

"1 am fine. 1 just want to be with you."

"Just take everything easy, my dear, by knowing that I really love you. This is a difficult time for us, but 1 am certain you do understand our situation. Just be brave. And for now sleep well and think of me. I will think of you as well. Tomorrow, when I have confirmed everything, I will call you. All that you need to know is that even if it takes a million years to complete my training, no one will ever take your special place in my heart."

"Sweetheart, I love you. And I promise to remain true to you all my life."

"Thank you, Libby. I am happy to hear that from your own lips. And for now I

guess we say good night and wait to see how tomorrow turns out to be. Good night, my dear sweetheart."

"Good night, darling. 1 love you," she said, and that was it for the night.

I disconnected the call, but I did not replace the receiver. I knew Halima's call would come in any moment. I needed a break to review what I had just said to Libby. I lit a cigarette and lay with my back on the bed staring at the ceiling.

If I asked Halima to come to the airport and see me off, 1 was certain she would drive all the way from Nakuru to come and see me. I did not want her to come and see me off either. It

would also end up hurting. 1 did not want anyone of us to get hurt and I had to find suitable words for her.

I picked up the phone and buzzed the operator. He connected me as soon as the telephone started ringing. It rang about four times without any answer. Then I looked at my watch and saw that it was already one o'clock. Then all of a sudden, a frail voice said hello. It was Halima waking up from deep sleep. I answered back and she recognised my voice.

"How are you, darling? I am sorry I was in the middle of a dream. I saw you enter a plane and when I tried to follow you they wouldn't let me into the plane. Where are you? I have been calling your office and your hotel all day. You were nowhere to be found and nobody seemed to know anything about you. I am very happy to hear from you."

"I came in a bit late after a hectic day in Nairobi. I received all your messages and I said I must call you before going to bed. I am very happy I managed to get all my travel papers."

"I am pleased to hear that, it is wonderful. When do you leave?"

"I am supposed to fly out tomorrow night, but that is subject to confirmation. I will call the airline in the morning to confirm my departure. But I do not foresee any changes."

"Have you packed your things yet?"

"You must be kidding, my dear. I don't even have a suitcase. I haven't bought one yet."

"What do you intend to do? I wish you were here, then I would help you with everything. I know packing can be a hassle.

"Thanks, my dear. This seems to be like a trip to hell No sufficient notice and no time to make any preparations. Would you believe that nobody at home knows that am leaving tomorrow and for so long? I don't know how I am going to contact them. There is no telephone at home, and I really feel in bad shape. I will not be surprised to find myself all alone in the departure lounge with no one to escort me."

"Don't say that, darling. You will make me travel all night and camp at the airport."

"Whatever it is, Halima, I know I am in for a real test. I will inform you about everything during the morning hours, 1 will try and accomplish as much as I can. After all that is done and the flight is confirmed, I will spend the rest of the day making phone calls, because I know I cannot manage to see all the people that I would like to see before I leave. But I must tell you, darling, that I still can't believe that I will be leaving you. I cannot imagine going away for that long without seeing you, but we must accept that sometimes things happen that way; unfavourable and even disappointing. I cannot imagine myself without you. I will be very lonely."

J'JHow will I know the outcome of your plans?" "As soon as everything is confirmed I will give you a call. And if time will permit, I shall be very glad to hold you tightly and to kiss you goodbye at the airport."

"I really would love to see you before you go. But just remember that all my love is yours," she said with a faint voice.

"I love you, Halima, and I miss you. Have a good night and accept my kiss."

"Good night, darling, and have sweet dreams."

* * *

I got up from bed at 10.00 o'clock. The sun was already up and it seemed the day

was going to be a bright and sunny one. I took a shower and got dressed. Then I went to the dining room to have breakfast, after which I bought all the day's newspapers and sat outside in the shade to read, 1 was not excited at all about my going, and nobody knew precisely when 1 was supposed to be leaving. I had made up my mind not to invite anybody, or bother anyone with hurried arrangements just to come to the airport to see me off. 1 found it unnecessary.

I had no luggage, and I did not even need my driver to escort me to the airport. After lunch I signed my hotel bills which were

to be paid by my district office and I checked out of the White Rhino Hotel. I took my briefcase and went to the taxi stand. There I found an RVP Peugeot and I boarded it, taking the co-driver's seat. I wanted to have a last good view along the road on which I had driven day and night during my search for a passport.

As we drove along, I felt satisfied and happy to realise that all my travelling documents were safely in my briefcase. At 4.00 p.m we arrived in Nairobi and I alighted outside the Nation House. I needed to buy a shoulder bag, a pair of shoes and at least one heavy jacket. I still remembered the caution that winter was not yet over. 1 also needed a shaving kit and some toiletries.

I walked down Moi Avenue, stopping to buy one item or the other. Finally I ended up in the Bata shoe shop on Kenyatta Avenue. I settled for a pair of boots which I immediately put on. I had no use for my old shoes. So I wrapped them nicely and marked the parcel 'used shoes - for donation', then I put them in the donations box and left. I was now set for my travel to the unknown. I crossed Muindi Mbingu Street and went to the Six Eighty Hotel terrace bar to have some drinks as well as to kill time before going to the airport.

Checking in time was 20.00 hours and I found I had plenty of time. It was now five thirty. I walked down to the gift shop and bought a bunch of post cards. Then I returned to my table and continued taking my drinks,

I picked the first card and addressed it to Halima:

'... as things stand now, I am afraid I will not be able to have your farewell kiss before I go. I have one hour before reporting at the departure desk and I can see the sun is already going down the horizon. Now I must rush down and take a taxi.,.

Be good as ever. Roger.' I took another card and addressed it to Libby:

'. . . 1 know no words will ever convince you, but now my time has come for me to leave the country. I can't believe that I am leaving before seeing you for the

last time, but I hope you will bear with me. At last I have confirmed everything, and I am now on my way to the airport. I couldn't get through to the number you gave me and I hope you will accept my apologies. I have no one to see me off because I was not able to contact anyone. Believe it or not no one from home knows that I am leaving tonight. Similarly I will just send them a card and a letter later. How 1 wish you could be here with me ... I am alone but I will face every challenge like a pilgrim. All I beg of you is to be courageous. Work hard in all endeavours and keep our covenants.

I will remember you always and I will write to you as soon as I get settled down.

Ever yours, Roger.'

I affixed some stamps and put the cards into the street postbox as I walked down to catch a taxi to take me to the airport. It was already seven and dark.

At eight o'clock I arrived at the airport. It was chilly and a cold wind was blowing strongly from the east. I put on my jacket and proceeded to the check-in counter at unit two. I had no weighing-in luggage. I gave in my ticket and asked for a seat in the smoking zone. I was given a boarding pass and told to remain around as boarding the plane would be in one hour's time. 1 left the counter and went to the coffee bar where I ordered a cup of black coffee. I sat there watching excited children who were travelling with their parents and families running up and down the slippery floor. I looked around but all the faces I saw were strange to me. I did not recognise anyone.

At 22.00 hours, passengers travelling to Rome and Frankfurt, and those continuing on to London, were asked to start boarding and people started moving towards the KQ boarding gate. As I had no luggage, I stayed behind until all the passengers with luggage all had been attended to. Then a final announcement came through the public address. I proceeded through the customs, security and then immigration. I got an exit visa and

got onto the escalator which took me to the transit lounge. I joined the other passengers in the lounge and a few minutes later, the climbing chute was brought

and fixed to the lounge door. Then we were instructed to start boarding, according to our seat numbers. I was among the last ones to board.

It was a good feeling to be inside the plane after a hectic search for travel documents, and now looking forward to an even more hectic travel schedule. I looked back at my last days and realised that I had not rested for about two months. I had been moving from one station to another, and now I was destined for yet another station. This time it was a continental transfer. I felt very relaxed for the first time after a long time of shuttling across the country.

A beep sounded and an illuminated sign lit up: 'Fasten your seat belts. No smoking'. We were welcomed aboard. After a demonstration of safety procedures by the flight attendants, the plane began to taxi on the runway. The captain told us it was time to take off. He put the engines on full throttle and the plane rolled off at a very high speed. Shortly, we were airborne. I looked out of the window and all I could see were small green and red lights geometrically placed on the ground to mark the runways. Some minutes later, no lights could be seen on the ground and I realised we were already up in the clouds. Another beep sounded and the captain's voice was heard in the public address once again. "This is your captain," he said. "Welcome aboard Kenya Airways. We will be flying at an altitude of thirty-thousand feet. The weather is reported to be fine all the way and our first stop will be at Fiumicino International Airport in Rome. We hope you enjoy your flight. Thank you."

Shortly after we were served with food. I opted to eat turkey after which I took a cup of coffee. I then read through a Swara magazine which was provided on every seat, then took a blanket, covered myself and soon fell asleep on my inclined seat.

When I woke up, we were already in Rome. No passengers embarked in Rome and none disembarked there. After refueling, the plane continued to Frankfurt where many passengers

disembarked and a few boarded for Heathrow Airport in London. It was a brief stop, and after one hour we were airborne again. It was morning in Frankfurt and time for breakfast.

At eleven o'clock local time, we touched down at Heathrow International Airport. Every passenger disembarked and went to the transit area. I checked my

ticket and found that I had a five hour stopover. At 16.00 hours I would take British Airways, a non-stop flight to Washington DC National Airport. Five hours was going to be a long time for me and I did not know what to do with all that time. I went to the British Airways counter and checked the flight details. The plane was a 747 Jumbo and the flight was on time. I listed my name and went to the cafeteria. I bought some coffee and a newspaper, and I sat there for a while reading international and local news.

Later, I decided to go to the duty free shops in an attempt to pass time. There were many electronic items on sale, at reduced prices, but I was not looking for anything in particular. Finally I bought a flintless, quartz gas lighter as a souvenir. I also bought a packet of Marlboro cigarettes and returned to the transit lounge. I was tired and my eyes were feeling heavy and I fell asleep on the lounge seat. When I woke up it was time to board. I went to the boarding gate and presented my pass. I was anxious to continue with my journey across the Atlantic.

Chapter Eleven

The flight across the Atlantic was very smooth. The Jumbo jet was very spacious, giving it the atmosphere of a hotel lounge rather than a jet plane, high up in the skies. There were no clouds all the way and it was a monotonous journey. Every time I looked through the window, the scene below and above was the same. There was nothing to see. There was only the blackness of the ocean below and the blue of the skies above. Once in a while 1 spotted an ocean vessel below, but what was discernible was the spectacular trail of spreading ripples along the path left behind.

Most of the time the sun beat hard against my window but because the plane was full to capacity I could not change my seat. I pulled down my window blind. Five and a half hours later, we were descending towards Washington National Airport, where we finally landed at 6.00 p.m. local time. As the plane slowed to a stop, I checked my travel papers to make sure they were safe and readily available. I removed them from my briefcase and got to the aisle moving slowly towards the exit door. In no time, I reached the luggage hall. I did not have any luggage to collect and I proceeded to the immigration area. I found two reception desks, one for returning-US citizens and another for immigrants. I joined the queue for immigrants and after my documents were scrutinised, I got an entry stamp on my passport and I was once more a free person, but this time in another

country.

After going through the immigration checks, a young man, probably in his late teens, approached me. He flashed a card bearing my name and when I answered he came over and greeted me very warmly.

"Hi, Roger. Welcome to the United States. My name is Beckman and I am from the Washington International Centre."

"Nice to meet you, Beckman."

"How was your flight?"

"Pretty good. Just long and tiring."

"Good. We are here to meet about one hundred visitors who are coming to the U.S.A., and we are happy to see you. You are among them and incidentally you happen to be the first one to arrive. From here you are going to take a bus outside and drop off on the thirteenth street. Then walk one building back and that is the Presidential Hotel. It is about twenty minutes by bus, much faster by taxi, but taxis are very expensive. It is much cheaper when you travel by bus. There is a bus here every fifteen minutes and right now one is due in about five minutes."

He gave me a card bearing his address and telephone number.

"You can call this number toll-free in case of any difficulty. There will always be someone in the office twenty four hours a day."

"Thanks a lot, Beckman," I said and walked to the bus stop as directed. A metro bus came shortly and stopped at the bus stop. I boarded the bus and sat in front near the driver, where I got a clear view and I was able to count the streets. At the intersection of Thirteenth Street, the bus stopped, and I alighted. It was getting dark and the neon lights were on in many places. I walked back one building as instructed, and looking up I saw the glittering red neon light marked, 'Presidential Hotel'. I felt thrilled as I walked to the reception and gave my name. I signed the register, and I was given the key to my room. I took the lift to the fifth floor and located my room. It was very neat and clean and had a TV and a telephone beside the twin bed. I felt nostalgic as I remembered Libby and I at the Eden Rock Hotel. I wished she was around to share the night with me and to

keep me company. I missed her very much.

There was no one to talk to in the room, and there was no one I could telephone to relate my experience of the flight across

half of Africa, Western Europe, and finally across the Atlantic ocean, into the new found land. Therefore 1 turned on the television set and moved the knob from one channel to the other. The programmes were virtually the same. 1 settled on ABC to watch some world news but all 1 got were headline news.

Next I tried the radio and moved the dial from one end to the other. It was all music. Country music, rock music, gospel music. Each radio station had its own type of music and that fascinated me. I felt quite alienated from the home setting. Again there was no one around who I could relate to.

From my briefcase I removed my itinerary and programme. I studied the programme in detail and marked all the important details visibly in red. I had one week in Washington DC. Three days were for seminars and another three days were reserved for guided tours around some historic places in Washington. There was a special day to visit the Supreme Court in session. There was another day to visit the Congress also in session, and some time was also allocated to visit the Library of Congress, the Statue of Liberty and the Space Museum.

This time was meant to introduce us to the American way of life. Later, however, I realised that one week was not enough. At the end of the seminar I had more questions than answers. I never understood the grid system roads, avenues and streets. I was not confident with the underground transportation system, but I was very much at ease with the people. That is what 1 needed most.

On the eve of my departure to the west coast I had my final session with my training specialist. I had to brief her about my orientation, any difficulties encountered and anything else 1 felt needed her attention. Her name was Sandra but she asked me to simply call her Cindy. She was middle-aged, very charming and she made me feel at home and quite welcome. She assured me that I would soon be assimilated into the American way of life and she praised me for picking up so fast. I felt elated and confident. She told me I was lucky to go to one of the best universities, and also to be going to one of the states with good

climate. Then she gave me a manual to read later and a ticket for my remaining journey. Before I left her office she joked, "When our presidents retire, many of

them go to the west coast". Then we bid each other goodbye and I left the agriculture building. I took Pennsylvania Avenue and returned to my hotel.

In the hotel I perused the manual which 1 was given and I found it contained the requirements for my stay in the US. It was very detailed and quite bulky, and a quick glance was all I could afford for the time being. The vital things were listed distinctly:

(i) Whenever in need, call this number provided.

(ii) Your medical expenses will be re-imbursed in full.

(iii) Your tuition fees will be mailed to your college.

(iv) A monthly stipend will be sent directly to you every month.

(v) Kathleen will be your official contact when you are on campus.

(vi) You are not supposed to take up any paying job during your stay.

(vii) Special arrangements will be made for you to visit conferences and seminars during summer time.

(viii) You will forward your progress report at the end of every quarter.

(ix)

The list was long. Finally I looked at my ticket. It was not like any that I had seen before. It was marked GTR, which I later learnt meant Government Ticket Request. I was supposed to leave Washington DC through Dulles airport at 10.00 a.m. the next day, by United Airlines up to Los Angeles. From there 1 would change to Pacific Northwest to take me to Sacramento, which was my final destination. From Sacramento I was to take a bus to the City of Davis, the location of my college. I looked at the map of North America and saw that I still had a long way to go. I located the city of Los Angeles on the map and then I saw

Sacramento. Both cities were close to the Pacific ocean. It was going to be another transcontinental flight.

I took a card bearing die Statue of Liberty and addressed it to Libby. 'It is now ten days since I last saw your face and yet it seems like ten weeks. I am writing this card from Washington DC, and I still have about one third of the way to go before reaching my destination. I have finished my orientation seminar and tomorrow I go to the west coast which is about four thousand miles away. I am always alone in my hotel room with no one to talk to. I can only read newspapers, watch TV or listen to the radio. How I wish you could be around. I will write to you a full letter when I get there.

Take care. Roger'

I went down to the concierge, affixed a stamp and posted the card on my way to the Italian Pizza Palace down the street to have a late supper before going to bed.

At seven in the morning I was up. The night was long and I was looking forward to reaching my destination. I took a shower and dressed up, then went downstairs to have coffee and buy a newspaper. On my way back, I enquired about the time it would take to get to Dulles airport by taxi and I was told thirty minutes. I returned to my room, tuned on to a musical show on TV and sat there reading the Washington Post Newspaper.

At 9.30 a.m., I checked out of the hotel.

I stood by the side of the street and within minutes a taxi appeared. I signalled it to stop and it ground to a halt. I jumped in and asked the driver to take me to Dulles airport. The taxi drove straight to the airport and arrived just in time to catch the plane. The passengers had already boarded and I was the last one in. Luckily I had no luggage. I took my seat, and after the normal pre-departure briefing, the plane was soon airborne.

The weather was fine, and from my window seat I could see what appeared like vast plains below me characterised by huge

and expansive rectangular blocks, demarcated by straight lines. Later I learned that what I was seeing were large farms which were all green and clearly visible from the air during spring time. I could also see clusters of houses in definite patterns, roads lined with trees and cars on them appearing like ants crawling along. The urban centres were also quite distinct. The scene below was beautiful and memorable. Big rivers like the Mississippi and the Colorado were also very distinct. The captain was good enough to tilt the plane to one side for the

passengers to have a good view of the Grand Canyon from the air as we were crossing the Colorado river.

It was already 6.00 p.m. pacific time when we landed in Los Angeles. I had a forty-five minutes' stopover before catching the PSA flight to Sacramento. I checked in and confirmed that the plane was on time and would depart at exactly seven. I walked around the terminal for a while and then sat at the coffee shop taking some coffee while waiting for the boarding call.

At 7.00 p.m. the passengers boarded the tri-star jet for the one-hour flight to Sacramento, my final destination and the end of my flight across half the world. I was excited when I got to Sacramento, though nervous because it was already night time. It was the first time for me to be in a foreign city at night without any companion and I had not enquired at the seminar what to do in such a case. I opened my itinerary and quickly looked at the final paragraph, '. . . depending on the time you arrive in Sacramento call Linda. She will give you directions on how to get to the city of Davis. It is about thirty minutes by Greyhound/ Two telephone numbers were given below: one for the office and the other for the house.

I looked at my watch and saw it was going to nine. No office could be open at that hour. Even so I went to the phone and dialled the first number. I got no reply. I tried again but still got no reply. I looked at the other number, and noticed that both were in the same area code (916). I also noticed that her home telephone shared the same exchange (758). I felt relieved. I lifted the receiver but before dialling I replaced the handset. What was I going to tell her? I didn't even know where to catch the bus,

and I didn't know whether any buses were available at that hour. Would she get annoyed for calling her so late? However, despite all these misgivings I knew I had no alternative. So I lifted the receiver and dialled Linda's home number. The telephone rang but there was no reply. I had to think of something else.

I had enough money in the pocket but then 1 remembered that taxis could be very expensive. I did not even know where I would go to at that hour of the night!

I went out of the airport and walked to the taxi-stand. I approached a cab driver and asked him if there were any buses going to Davis. He emphatically told me

to forget it. Then he realised that I was a visitor in Sacramento, and he urged me not to take a taxi. He told me it would be prohibitively expensive at that hour of the night. He appeared quite genuine. I asked him about motels around and he assured me they were plenty and reasonable. I opted for a motel. I asked him to take me to a fairly priced motel. He chuckled to himself but didn't reply. I asked him the average cost for a reasonable motel. He laughed and I thought there was something sinister about his incomplete laughter.

"Well, young man, this is Sacramento city, the capital of California, the golden state. If this is your first visit, you don't need to go to the cheapest motel. And again, if you are a student, you don't need to go to an expensive motel. On the average, you will need about twenty-five bucks, if you are gonna sleep alone . . . maybe another twenty bucks, if you need a girl for the night."

"Twenty five dollars is okay," I said.

"No gal, buddy?" he insisted and laughed again. "Sacramento can be cold at night," he continued and laughed. I cut him short.

"Well, I am very tired. I have been flying all day." "Okay, buddy, five dollars for the cab," he said as he came to a stop. This will be your motel tonight. Good night."

I gave him a five dollar bill and walked into the motel. 1 registered and paid for one night. I was shown the room. I went in and kept my little luggage. I then walked across the street to a

pizza palace for supper. I ordered for spaghetti carulla and I was served with spaghetti, melted cheese, stew and a lot of chicken gizzards and livers. It was not to my expectation. The food was bitter and it had almonds. I was unable to eat even half of it. Disappointed, I took a cup of coffee and went back to the motel to sleep. It was already midnight.

* * *

After breakfast I went to a telephone booth outside the motel and called Linda's office.

"This is Linda," a low soft voice answered the phone.

"My name is Roger, participant number 300- 1-P, from Nairobi."

"Oh, how are you, Roger? We were expecting you yesterday."

"That is right. I arrived in Sacramento at about 8.30 last night and I was kind of stranded. I called your office number but got no reply. Then I called your house, but still got no reply. So I decided to go and sleep in a motel downtown."

"Where are you?"

"I am still in Sacramento."

"Oh dear! Tell you what? Ask the owner of the motel to direct you to the central Greyhound bus station. All buses going via Davis pass through the central station. It is now ten o'clock. There is a bus at ten-thirty but if you cannot catch that one, there is one after every thirty minutes. It is a five minutes walk from the bus stop to my office. So I will see you when you arrive here. Bye."

I went back to the motel and asked the receptionist to give me directions to the Greyhound bus station. Then the elderly lady walked outside with me, and quickly gave me the directions before returning to her desk: "This is the eighth street on which we are standing. Go down the street without turning. Keep walking until you hit 'J' street. Turn to your right and keep walking. You won't need to ask anybody and you will see a big

billboard with a giant painting of a real greyhound. That is the station." She was perfect in her directions. I left the motel and within no time I located the main terminus, and was in time for the 10.30 bus. I bought the ticket right away and boarded the bus.

The bus was enroute to San Francisco, and in half an hour's time, 1 alighted at the City of Davis. No one else alighted or boarded in Davis. I stood there for a while and watched the bus make a loop and re-enter the highway. Then I looked around and saw many buildings all over. I found myself at a main street's inter-section and I did not know which direction to take. 1 stood still for a while looking for someone who could give me directions but I couldn't find any pedestrians. Virtually every person was riding a bicycle. I had never seen anything like it before: a swarm of bicycles moving like a chain. I stood motionless for a while, just admiring what I could see. Up to four bicycles travelling shoulder to shoulder, and never at all touching one another. It was a

real spectacle. I stopped an old man who seemed to be taking a leisure walk and asked him to direct me to the Foreign Students' Centre. He smiled at me and said, "You got it. It is in that big brick building. Don't ask anyone, just walk in", I was thrilled. "Thank you very much," I said and walked confidently towards the huge building housing the foreign students' offices. 1 took a lift and went to the third floor. There I found the main reception area and a group of people seated there. I knew I was in the right place. I was asked to sit and wait to be attended to.

When my turn came I introduced myself. Then I was warmly welcomed and shown Linda's office. She was happy to see me and she welcomed me with a bar of chocolate. I was delighted to be in her office. And at once I felt really at home. "This is the campus where you will be based during your studies. I will be your co-ordinator during your stay here, and each time you need my assistance you are free to come to my office any time. It is a very huge campus and before long you will find that you need to buy a bicycle to move from one class to another. We call it the city of bicycles and you must have seen a lot of them outside."

"Yes, I did and I was amazed/' I said.

"That is how it is, Roger. Young and old, each one has a bicycle in this city. You rarely need to take a bus unless you are going out of town. Cars are a luxury in this city. For now I know you would like to know about housing. There are two categories: you can opt to stay in a dormitory or you can stay in privately rented apartments. The only difference is that in a dormitory there are the usual restrictions and they are good for undergraduates. In your case an apartment would be the better choice."

"Are apartments readily available?" I asked.

"Yes, there will always be a place. At times you may have to share, or you may as well find a family willing to let their guest house."

"For the time being, I won't mind a place where I can settle for a month or two after which I will be able to look for a permanent place."

"You are right, that is the best thing to do right now," she said, and picked up the place at the Americana Arms Apartments. She drove me there and I liked the apartment. I paid one month's rent and she left me to try and settle down,

promising to see me the next day.

1 entered the apartment to see what was provided and what was not. I found a bed and mattress, a gas cooker and a fridge. There was a centralised heating system and electricity was provided. The apartment was very clean, and that was all there was. I opened the window and looked outside. There was a grass lawn at the back and a swimming pool. The place was very quiet and the first notable thing was an absence of little children. Apparently the apartments were exclusively for single persons or those without any families.

I sat on the sofa provided and looked all around the room. It was very quiet and at first I felt like I was in the middle of Antarctica where there was no one to talk to except the penguins. The flowers in the garden were in full bloom and that was the only thing which caught my attention. There were no

cooking pots in the apartment. There was neither a cup nor a glass that I could use. Since I had to eat and drink to survive, I would have to work that out and acquire a few utensils.

I took the city directory from under the telephone and looked for supermarkets. I found a big listing. Then I took the city map and looked for those grocers nearest to the Americana Arms Apartments and found Albertsons and Safeway Stores. Albertsons was the nearest and I decided to walk there. Before leaving, I took my diary and listed down everything I needed to keep me going at least for one week, hoping that by then I would have learnt a little bit more about the city and the way of life there. First, I needed a small pan for all my cooking. I also needed a spoon, a knife and a fork. I would also require a cup and a plate and that would be enough cutlery for my apartment. I remembered Libby and I felt very lonely. I thought if she were around, it would have been easier for me because she would not have any difficulty turning the apartment into a lovely home. "Oh my dear Libby," I said aloud and left the apartment to go and do my first shopping.

I had no difficulty finding the supermarket. At first I was amazed to see the glass doors open automatically when I neared them. I had not seen anything like it before.

I walked past the doors and they closed after I entered the supermarket. I was again fascinated by the variety of things available. I spent about an hour just

looking around, contemplating on what I was going to buy. Finally I picked a cart and began moving along the aisles slowly picking every item I needed. In the end I found that I had much more than I needed to keep me going: I had chipolatas, totillas, chocolate, milk, oranges and more paper plates than I could ever use, and all at a reasonable price. I also bought more writing materials and a Newsweek magazine to read that night. Then I left the supermarket and walked back to my new apartment.

I sat on the sofa and tried to read the magazine, but I could not because I was very drowsy. My eyes were unable to stay open for long. The jet lag and the disruption of my circadian

rhythm were taking a toll on me. I looked at my watch and it was only three in the afternoon. There was a time difference of nine hours with Nairobi, and I realised it was already midnight back home when I was supposed to be fast asleep. I tore the wrapping off the sheets I had just bought and spread the sheets on the bed. Then I lay down and within no time I was fast asleep.

When I finally woke up it was already dark. I turned on the lights and found it was already nine o'clock. I got out of bed and washed my face. I turned on my pocket radio and tuned FM 102. It was the clearest station and there was very good uninterrupted rock music on it. Soon it became my favourite station. I then went to the little kitchen and cooked myself an omelette then warmed two totillas in the oven and made a cup of chocolate. That was going to be sufficient supper for me.

After eating I took my writting pad and started writing a letter to Libby. As I wrote, I felt like I was telling her a story and the feeling inside me was like I was with her in the apartment. 1 had nothing else to occupy me.

'. . . there has not been any single day that I have not thought about you. I can tell you, that I never knew and I never imagined before, how it feels to be separated from someone you love, someone you really care for and feel you can give everything you have to, and one you feel you can die fighting for. Someone who can make you dive into the ocean to save from sinking. That is the kind of situation I am in.

I try to divert my thoughts from you for a little while by doing some reading, but I can honestly tell you that it is not easy. How I wish you could come and join

me here. When I feel low, I take your picture, look at it and kiss your lips. Then I place it beside me and I feel whole again. That is how I have managed these few days. I have not made any friends yet. And my days have been unusually long.

Right now I have just taken a meal of eggs, a pancake and some hot chocolate. I have a one-bedroomed apartment with a fridge, a cooker and a bed. 1 have to buy my own utensils and 1 am supposed to cook for myself. Today 1 went to the supermarket and bought a few provisions.

I haven't seen much of the city, but so far I like what I have seen. I was told it is called the city of bicycles, because as you walk along the streets you come across more bicycles than cars. It is a completely different way of life here/

Whatever words I put down were very important. They could end up hurting me more in the future. This was not the time for it. I needed love more than anything else, and without a second thought I tore off the piece of paper from the writing pad and threw it into the trash can. A letter would force me to tell too much and it meant commitment, which I wasn't ready for at this stage. I wanted to leave everything in abeyance because I knew with time things would sort themselves out gradually. But I had to drop her a line anyhow before going to bed.

I took all the postcards in my briefcase and spread them out on the bed. I had to choose the most beautiful of them all. I picked one with a panoramic view of the San Franscisco Bay Bridge and addressed it to her:

'. . . these are the sort of wonders I have been seeing since I left you. Day after day, I see a new wonder. Doors open when you approach and then close when you go away. I have just finished cooking. This is also another wonder especially when I know you may be alone. I don't know whether I shall make it through, but as ever, I will keep on trying hard. I miss your love and all.. /

Chapter Twelve

The spring quarter was very short and my timetable was very congested, meaning I rarely had any free time. I had not been exposed to the quarter system before, and I had a difficult time at first, trying to adjust. In spite of the tight schedule, I made sure that I took some time off to go to disco in Sacramento over the weekends. Every Friday evening, I became a regular patron of Mr. B's, a lively pub in Davis with a disco on Fridays and Saturdays. It was located on the second street, and a bicycle ride from my apartment was all I needed to get there.

Any time I became very tipsy I would chain my bicycle to the roadside rails and collect it the following day. That was the best method. Nobody would bother to touch the bicycle since all outgoing people were used to that.

After meeting Debra in Stockton during a field visit to the San Joaquin Valley, I had a difficult time getting across my inner feelings to her, and I thought she had a similar crisis. I had a hard time understanding the American girl, and she also appeared not to understand anything about me and my feelings. Her parents lived in Oakland and she drove there nearly every weekend. When she did not go away we spent most of the time together. She really loved horses and always dragged me to the horse stables to go watch and play with them. I had an aversion for horses and sometimes I succeeded in enticing her to go into sport fishing on the American river which was only a thirty minutes' drive from the campus. Debra was very active and was always ready to go on with the next activity. She loved swimming and at times we would spend very many hours in the gymnasium. She was an undergraduate and was planning to major in photography and ceramics. She carried a camera all the time and an assortment of lenses whenever we went out of town.

By the end of the spring we had become very intimate, and we spent whole weekends either in my apartment or her's. She loved cooking and I enjoyed it a lot when she was around. She used a cookbook and every time she tried a new dish it came out perfectly. I teased her about taking a chef's course, to which she retorted, "Why take the course if I can follow the manual".

My summer vacation was due after my last exams. I had nothing planned for a period of two and a half months. A three day conference was planned in Kansas City and I was one of the participants. I was free to attend or skip it and attend another one later at another place. Fortunately my exams were ending one week ahead of Debra's so we compromised on that. I would fly to Missouri and return by the time she was finishing her last paper. Then she would go and visit her family and come back. We planned to spend as much of the summer-time together as possible.

An old friend, Anthony, lived in Wichita. He had immigrated to the States about ten years back. I also knew his brother. Michael lived in Kansas City, but I did not have either of their addresses. This was a golden opportunity to combine two things at the same time: attend the conference and also have a chance to see my old friends. I went through my diary, page after page, but I could not see any of

their addresses. We used to write to each other quite often when I was back home but I had since misplaced their addresses. I mentioned that to Debra and she came up with an answer straight away.

"We are going to call information in Both Wichita and Kansas. Then we will give the last name and they will do a search for us."

We started by calling Wichita and within a few minutes Anthony was on the line. I could not believe my ears when I heard his voice. He too could not believe it. We talked at length and he promised to visit me sometime during the summer. Then he gave me his brother's telephone number, and promised to call him right away.

We were delighted to get their contact so quickly. In a short while the telephone rang. Debra picked it and passed it to me.

"Bwana Roger, how are you? This is Michael calling from Kansas. I can't believe you are in California. Anthony called me a few minutes ago and gave me your telephone number. I didn't waste any time in calling you."

"Great, Mike. I am here in California, and this is my third month. I came in a rather hushed manner and I did not have time to get well organised. I knew your last address to be in Kansas City, but I could not locate your address. I have written home twice but no one there seemed to have your address. It's only today that my friend Debbie came up with a very bright idea. We called information in both Wichita and Kansas, and Anthony was found first. I couldn't believe it when I heard his voice. It's wonderful."

"I must come there very soon, Roger. Its great to hear from you. How long are you going to be in the US?"

"I have been given two years, but I am made to understand that my particular programme can range from twelve to eighteen months all depending on the type of study project. For now I don't know for sure the duration of my course. Tell me, Mike, I am scheduled to attend a conference in Kansas beginning on Tuesday next week, that is the day after tomorrow. It will run for three days. I have the option to skip it and attend another one elsewhere at a later date. What do you think about that?

"That is great. You can even come earlier. You will stay with me before the conference starts and you will also stay on after the conference, for as long as you wish. I have plenty of room and you can come along with Debbie ..."

"Debbie, do you hear that?" I said loudly for her to hear. "He tells me that you can come along with me."

"Tell him next time. We have something different this summer."

"She says next time."

"No problem. I would suggest that whether you come here on Monday or Tuesday, all you need to do is call me anytime. I have a toll free number in the office or you can call me in the house. At any one time my wife or myself will be in the house. I am sure she will be delighted to see you. I have told her a lot about our boyhood days and she thinks you can tell her exactly how I looked like when I was a little boy — a big head, big tummy and very thin legs." We laughed aloud and 1 became very eager to meet him. He would tell me more about America from his first hand experience.

* * *

On Monday morning I called Eastern Airlines and they told me there was a flight at 2.00 p.m. the same day, and a second one at 6.00 p.m. every other day of the week except Wednesday and Thursday. I made a reservation for the 2.00 p.m. flight. Debra had one examination that day and she was going to drive me to the airport. Moments later she came in and I gave her the news. We agreed I could spend the weekend after the conference at Michael's place. She would in turn go down to Oakland after her last paper on Thursday, spend the weekend there and come back next Thursday. My plane would arrive the same night and she would meet me at the airport.

"You don't need to carry anything, do you?"

"I guess one set of clothing will be sufficient. I don't even need to carry my briefcase. My small satchel should be enough. I have disposable tooth brushes and I really need nothing else. Just get me anything you think I might need while I am in Michael's house."

"Well, I can see it is coming to noon. Perhaps we can go and have a light early

lunch at the airport restaurant while waiting for your plane," she suggested.

"That is a good idea, Debbie."

I locked the door and we walked down the stairs to the parking lot. We got into her Pontiac and drove on the freeway to Sacramento Airport. We arrived there some minutes before one

o'clock and after parking the car, we went to the airport restaurant. I ordered a medium sized pizza and two glasses of grape juice. Then we moved to the glassed-in balcony and sat there watching planes landing and taking off at regular intervals.

"Are you going to miss me while you are away?" she asked and held my hand.

"Very much. Were it not for the sake of seeing my friend as well, 1 would have preferred to remain around until you finish your exams."

"I will miss you too but I am happy my exams will keep me fairly busy the whole of this week."

Shortly before two, the boarding call was made and both of us proceeded to the gate. I gave my ticket and got a boarding pass. Then I turned around and held Debbie by the shoulder. She moved closer and we embraced. We kissed and I whispered to her: "I love you and I will miss you". She looked back at me blankly and whispered back: "I love you, Roger, I will miss you too. Make sure you call me when you get there". I waved at her and went past the boarding gate. I went and took my seat, and after take off, I remained glued to a magazine on space exploration during the last twenty years.

There was a two-hour time difference between the time zones, and I estimated we would be arriving just as darkness was setting in. The plane was half full and I decided to take a nap across all the three seats next to me. There was a lot of turbulence during the flight and I was unable to take my nap. I picked the space magazine and kept reading it until we arrived in Kansas City.

The plane touched down at 7.00 p.m. There were no immigration checks and the first thing I wanted was to get in touch with Michael. I walked to the payphone and called his house. The phone rang once and he picked it.

"Guess where I am," 1 said.

"No guesses, Roger, just tell me where you are then 1 can come right away."

"I am at the airport right here in Kansas. I have just arrived aboard Eastern Airlines."

"That is great. Hang on in the lounge. I will be there in twenty minutes."

I replaced the phone and took a seat near the telephone booth. Barely fifteen minutes later, Michael walked in with a smiling young lady. I stood up and we shook hands.

"This is my wife, Joy."

"Hello," she said after the short introduction. "Welcome to Kansas City," she continued.

"I am happy to meet you, Joy."

We left the lounge and walked to the parking lot. Then we got into their car and drove to their house, for about fifteen minutes from the airport. They had a beautiful duplex with a splendid lawn at the back. It was situated on a raised ground and I could see the imposing high rise buildings in the east marked by very brilliant neon lights.

Michael walked to the kitchen and came back with a six pack of beer from the fridge. He offered me a can and re-assured me to feel at home. The beer was ice-cold and quite refreshing. The weather was fairly warm from the rising summer temperatures and we had to come out into the patio overlooking the distant city. We sat there for a long time and discussed everything under the sun.

"When I came here for the first time, I had more difficulties than I ever faced back home," he recollected his first days after arrival.

"You remember, I came on my own with a one way ticket. I had very little money and I did not even have enough for tuition. I did not know anyone who could help, and those I knew were not willing to help. At times I felt like my creator had forgotten that I was no longer at my usual address. It was really hard for me to survive. Fortunately I had a different kind of visa. I could do some odd

jobs here and there and end up with an extra buck. By the end of the first year, I had become a member of the

Baptist Church, and there I can say I got a lot of spiritual help and strength. Even today I am still a member, and whenever I get a chance I go to pray in the same church, and to greet some old friends."

"1 cannot recall your ever being a very staunch believer," I joked.

"I realised at that time that we are all very strong believers when the need arises. What we lack is consistence. I have since leamt to be consistent."

"That is very good," I said.

"You may not believe it, but I can tell you that I met Joy there, and she has been a tremendous source of inspiration to me. I first met her when I was learning to play the piano and we became friends. Within one year we got married in the same church and this is our seventh year together. Don't ask where the kids are. This is America."

I laughed and asked, "So where are they?"

"Zero population growth is becoming more and more popular here. But you can see we are still young. There is plenty of time to replicate ourselves before we are gone."

"Well, that is quite a philosophy," I said.

Later Joy came and joined us. She was a very jolly woman and very well informed about current affairs around the world. She was very pleasant to talk to.

"The greatest thing that Michael has given me since we got married is a full lesson of reading, writing and speaking Swahili. I never need him around me all the time when we visit East Africa. 1 can go and do my shopping alone in the market when I am in Nairobi, I am often able to get very good bargains all conducted in Swahili."

'That is really wonderful. I cannot manage to teach a language to an individual."

"That is where I give him credit. All my Swahili has been perfected in this

house. How come you have stayed for so long

without getting married? It is very unusual back in your country," she said.

"You are right. We have a tendency to marry quickly and at an early age. Personally, I have not thought about it seriously. I have had numerous friends who wanted to get married, right away, but my approach has always been rather different. I have been searching for not only a girl to marry, but one who would combine the characteristics of a friend as well. Such a combination is rare you know. I don't want to be a dictator in my house or be dictated to either. That approach has delayed me. Nevertheless I don't suffer because I don't want to be committed to someone who is not ready to get committed as well. I tend to think it can be very frustrating. I don't have that experience yet, but I have seen it amongst my friends."

"Have you thought about getting married here?" she asked with a broad smile.

"I am sure by now you must have met a good American flower," Michael interjected, and we burst into laughter.

"Really, I don't have any reservations about who I marry. All that matters as far as I am concerned is just mutual understanding. I have a very good friend called Debra who we get along with very well. But we haven't talked about getting married now or in the future."

"Is she white or black?" Joy was getting more inquisitive. "And do you find any differences between the two?"

"She is of Dutch descent. Really, I see no difference between white Americans and black Americans. I find them basically the same. Except of course for their skin colour. But again I don't find a clear-cut line between the two. I guess here in America you find all sorts of people and you really cannot draw a borderline."

"You are quite right, Roger," said Michael. "Someone once told me that you can be what you want to be in America, and you can find whatever you set out looking for here in America. Today I look back and the same words echo in my mind."

"So you are looking forward to marrying an American?" Joy's questions were a bit trenchant.

"Frankly, I have a girl I really love back home. We made solid promises before I left and I don't think I would want to hurt her."

"Do you think she will continue to be loyal to you when she is so far away?"

"I think she can if she wants to. If I can, why can't she?" I retorted. I looked at her and found her looking hard at me. Then I continued, "I guess most of our lives are based on hope. But I always like to leave the future blank."

"That is a good stand," said Michael.

"What is your conference programme like?"

"Tomorrow at six in the evening, we will register at the Haberdasherry Hotel. Participants will stay in the hotel for two nights. The conference ends at noon on the third day and I am free to leave for California anytime thereafter.

"That is a good programme," said Michael. "We will have plenty of time to take you around. There are very many interesting places to visit."

* * *

The conference was for foreign students only. They came from Africa, Latin America and Asia. It was conducted by instructors from Northwest University and it was all about communication.

We had participants from Zimbabwe, Zambia, Tanzania, Uganda and Malawi from Eastern Africa. We also had participants from Nigeria, Ghana and The Gambia from West Africa. There were some from india, Nepal and Pakistan from Asia and finally a few from Costa Rica, Venezuela and Argentina in Latin America.

The first day of the conference was very exciting as we interacted, introducing ourselves and getting to know each other as well as our countries of origin. Soon after it appeared like we

had been together for a long time, simply because of talking freely and getting to know each other's needs and ways of life.

Later I realised that coffee, tea and biscuits were deliberately offered in less

amounts while the cups were always more than enough.

On the closing day of the seminar it was disclosed that the exercise of more cups and little tea and coffee was intended to encourage sharing whatever little there was. I never forget that aspect and I always thought about Libby and sharing our love and everything else we had.

At the end of the seminar we were treated to a small farewell party at the hotel. We were given commemorative plaques and certificates of attendance and the conference ended at noon.

As had been earlier arranged, I called Michael after the seminar and he came to pick me up at the hotel. We drove together to the eastern side of the city.

We went to a tavern which he told me was the most popular place with foreign students. He ordered a beer and we had a toast to our re-union. Then we walked out of the tavern and sat in the sun.

"Let me tell you brother," he drew my attention. "I call you brother because we literally shared everything as we grew up. I also call you brother now, because I know we have not ceased to share what we have, be it material, wisdom or even experience. During the ten years that I have been here, I have gone through what you can call thick and thin. At times I felt I would rather have no food to eat but have a home at least. I did not believe I was going to finish my first degree. I had to wash dishes, baby sit and do any other odd job to make money. Now I have an office suite from where I operate and I can comfortably say that I am fairly happy. I can confidently tell you that Joy has been a great inspiration to me. Without her I don't think I would be in this country today. Her family has been very supportive to us. They blessed our marriage and ever since we have been living a very full and happy life."

"Do you go home often?" I asked.

"We have been there a couple of times, but don't forget it can be quite expensive."

"Do you ever consider going back home to Kenya for your retirement?" I was eager to know.

"For the time being I don't. But who really knows about the future? As long as I

am happy here I don't feel bothered about going home. At present, I consider this to be my home."

"Well, 1 can see that it takes quite some determination to make such a move. Did you have any considerations at first before you made all those decisions?"

"Like I have just told you, life was like hell in the beginning and when I saw things changing for the better, I had to accept it that way."

"In other words, your situation was more or less circumstantial and not really a calculated and planned move?"

"I would say yes, but remember many times we make very good plans and the results just turn out wrong. Sometimes I say life is a gamble. At times I tell Joy that if we never met, perhaps she would never have set foot in Africa. And she agrees. Last time you told me you had a sweetheart back home. Then you also told me that you have a good friend in California. Now whi£(i is which, man?"

We broke into a laughter and he called for more beers.

"Like you have just said, life at times looks like a gamble. Anyway, to put everything in a nutshell, I can tell you that I don't intend to marry very soon whether here or back home. Right now I cannot rule out anything. Back at home I have a girl called Libby. I know I love her deeply and I am convinced she loves me as well. But like they say, a bird in hand is worth two in the bush. Right now I am in Missouri and she is way back in Kenya. She doesn't know what I am doing here and I don't know what she is doing either. But we must have that trust and faith that all will end up well." I paused for a while and thought about Libby. "In California, I met a girl called Debra. For sometime now we have grown very close and very intimate. But surprisingly, either for the good or for the worst, we have never

talked about marriage. Yet sometimes we live together for a whole week. At least we talk everyday when she is around. She is a student in the same campus and she is really nice, very social and understanding."

"Why don't you propose to her?"

"Hey man, don't rush me," 1 said and we laughed.

"Do you have her photograph?"

"Yes, I do have one," I opened my wallet and took out her photograph. He studied it for a while and commended me for a good choice.

"If faces always reflected the heart, that is a good girl, a real flower, man?" I removed Libby's picture and also gave it to him.

" That is Libby about the time I left her."

" Oh boy," he exclaimed. "That is a very good picture. No wonder they say the beautiful ones are not yet born."

Soon we were joined by a group whom I was introduced to as residents from Senegal. I didn't understand what the difference between a resident and an immigrant was. Then I was told that a resident did not need a visa to re-enter the country. He had a special green card which enabled him to remain in the U.S. An immigrant was more like a visitor whose period of stay was limited but could be extended or terminated depending on various circumstances.

We took a few more beers and then excused ourselves. We did not want to stay up too late that day. Michael and Joy had made arrangements for us to go camping beside the lake for a few days. I wanted to be relaxed the next day. I bought two rolls of film and we drove back to his house just in time for dinner.

* * *

On Thursday morning I took Eastern Airlines and flew back to California. I arrived in Sacramento at 11.00 o'clock and found Debra waiting for me. I was quite happy to see her. We kissed and then walked to the car. It was a joyous moment to be together once again. We drove downtown and did some

shopping. Then we took interstate 1-80 and drove back to Davis. The summer heat was on and as soon as we arrived we changed and went to the swimming pool to cool off.

"How was your trip?" Debbie asked.

"I enjoyed it a lot. Michael and his wife came for me from the airport and we went to their house on the first day. I stayed with them for the first night and we

had a good time together. On the second day I went to the conference which lasted three days. I stayed in the hotel where the conference was being held.

"On the fourth day, after the conference, Michael and Joy took me out camping and sightseeing and it was only yesterday that we returned to their home. They hired a cottage somewhere in the mountains and we did a lot of walking and sailing in an artificial lake. It was fun and I enjoyed myself very much. They don't have any kids yet and there was just the three of us. I missed you quite a lot."

"I missed you too. As soon as my last exam was over, I packed a few things and left for Oakland. I stayed there over the weekend.

"Then on Monday and Tuesday I went to see some friends in Valejo. We visited San Francisco and then on Wednesday, that is yesterday, I returned home. I haven't been to my apartment. I drove straight from Oakland this morning to Sacramento to pick you."

"How is everyone back home?"

"They are quite fine. It is also a bit cooler there because of the ocean," she said, and looked at me. Then she continued, "You know what Roger?"

"No, tell me," I said and raised my head. I found her looking hard at me through her deep bluish eyes.

"I mentioned to my mum that we are going to spend most of the summer together."

"That was nice of you. What was her reaction?"

"She is quite understanding. She just asked me where you come from, and what you study. I showed her your picture and

she said she would be happy to meet you, any time we are able to go and visit my home in Oakland. I love her for one thing. She does not care where one comes from. She always says that right here in America, if everyone was to go by his or her original nationality, we could have a thousand republics. She is very liberal, and has a lot of confidence in me. I have never let her down."

"What about your dad?"

"I rate him as rather conservative. The only good thing about him is that he really doesn't care about anything. He says each one has his life to lead, and a lot to account for in life. I know he would be least bothered with what I did with my life as long as I am alive, and well."

I knew at last she was driving me into a subject which I had avoided all along. It seemed now I had to say something. I realised that I had given all indications but I had literally said nothing. I then remembered that I had picked up a couple of newsletters and magazines in my mailbox, and remembered having seen an air letter bearing Libby's handwriting, and which I had deliberately opted not to open until later when I was alone. I knew Debra was the type to insist on reading any letter that I received from overseas and I knew I would not be able to resist. We had such a cool no-restriction relationship.

I hesitated before making any comment and I realised that she was very eager to hear something from me. She kept pulling my hair one tuft at a time until it came off. It was in the meantime becoming very hot.

"Let us get into the water first, and then I will tell you a story. But meanwhile let me rush upstairs and get a towel. I also need my sunglasses. Can I bring yours as well?"

"That will be very kind of you. Mine are in the car but it is not locked."

"All right, Debbie, I will be right back." I scurried upstairs into my apartment and picked up the airletter. There was no senders' address, but I could tell from the

handwriting that it was from Libby. I slit it open, and quickly scanned through the contents. The language was as usual: 'Dear sweetheart,

.. . sometimes I miss you, and I feel like I am going to die. At other times I am tempted to think that you got yourself another girl and I cease to miss you. I know that is usually the time that I am desperate.

... of late I cannot get any sleep until after midnight. I don't know whether I have developed insomnia. I am now fully recovered from my operation and I have vowed never again. I have resolved just to wait for you however long it takes ...

at times I get nightmares after seeing you going down the aisle in a chapel hand in hand with another girl who refused to shake my hand. Then I cry and sit up only to find that I was dreaming.

... may it never be so. Ever loving, Libby/

I folded the letter and put it away deep in my drawer, where I was sure Debbie would not easily see it unless she was specifically looking for it. But I knew she was not snoopy.

I took a towel and my sunglasses, then I went over to her car and took her's as well, and returned to the swimming pool. I dived into the water and swam two lengths of the pool before going back to the pavement where the concrete was very warm. We lay on our stomachs directly facing each other.

I slipped on my sunglasses and looked at her. She smiled back at me and without warning, snatched my sunglasses. She put them on and held my wrists tightly.

"You promised me that you were going to tell me a story before you left. You must tell me now before I can give you back your glasses."

"Okay. Let's begin very systematically. How old are you?" I asked with a smile.

She smiled back and retorted, "You thought I was under eighteen all that time we have been together? By now you should have known a bit of the California statutes."

"Don't worry, Debbie, I was only joking. I have always known you will be forty seven on your next birthday."

"Stop it, Roger." She slyly took a handful of water and splashed it across my face and we laughed it off.

"Anyway, Debbie, jokes aside now. I have been thinking very much about you of late. And the more I think about you, the closer to you I feel but I will tell you something about myself. I don't know whether it is part of my unconscious strength or my dire weakness. The thing is that it takes me a long time to get really involved with someone. But when I finally get fully involved, I find it very distressing if the relationship breaks, or when I want to get out of such a relationship and by that I am talking about my old experiences. You must have

noticed that I was very shy and sluggish when I first met you."

"I was about to comment on that," she said and smiled knowingly. Then we smiled at each other without saying a word. "You know a lot has been said about mixed marriages, but that doesn't affect me. I really see a man as a man, whatever the colour of the skin. I guess I was brought up without any emphasis on such trivial differences. And now my thoughts have been revolving on how you personally view such relationships. I knew I was going to ask you that some time. But you know, the exams and so forth couldn't let us sit down together nicely like now."

"You are right, Debbie. At times I have also thought seriously about that. But I was afraid to ask. I didn't know how you would take it."

"Personally I must say that, very sincerely, I have no room for what you would call racial prejudice. But I also know very well that as long as you live you cannot pretend or ignore the things around you, unless of course you are living in an imaginary world of your own. What I mean precisely is that you are Roger, an African and I am Debra, an American. Right now we are in America and there are very many white Americans and also many African Americans. Next time we will be in your country where we will find the opposite to hold true. Can we

then really ignore that and whatever it means? I positively think that we cannot. Because we shall be interacting always, it is simply a fact of life."

"That is correct, Debbie, but let us take one case at a time. Suppose our relationship grows so intense, that we must get married out of our love for each other, what do you think about that?"

"For one, Roger, I must tell you that love knows no barriers. In that case I think anything can follow," she said without any hesitation. She seemed to have her answers ready.

"And suppose indeed we went ahead and got married, again out of sheer love, would you wish that we settle here in America, the land of plenty and affluence or would you like that we go to my country, fairly undeveloped, a land of scarcity and climatic unpredictability—just another developing country."

"Well, to be very frank, it would be good to sit down and consider that."

"And if we indeed went to my country, and you found the way of life unbearable, would you consider staying on and bearing whatever came along or might you want us to come back here?"

"That is really difficult to answer, because it actually borders on talking about tomorrow or the future for that matter and surely who knows what lies ahead. If we had a definite answer, we probably wouldn't be here talking to each other."

"That is also true, Debbie."

"Tell me another thing, Roger, is it true that it is only women who go to fetch water? I have seen some documentaries on TV showing women walking for miles with babies strapped on their backs going to fetch water. I have seen others showing women and children as the tillers of the land."

"What you have seen is true but things are changing very slowly and that is why someone like me came here to learn and take the little knowledge back home — that is also why you

would probably go a long way to show how," I said and we broke into a short laughter.

"I am sure I wouldn't be of any help. I would only be another rain drop in the ocean. Another tiling, Roger," she continued, "you remember my friend Anita? The Filipino-American girl we met at the American River when we were fishing."

"Oh yes, I remember her very well," I said.

"She told me the other day that nearly all the African men she has met and befriended turned out to have a wife back home, and that it is normal for African men to have as many wives as possible. Is that true?"

I laughed and answered her.

"The answer is precisely yes and no. I say that because the kind of answer you are likely to get is either true or not true, and it all depends on the man you are talking to. Africa is diverse and cultures are so varied that I know very little about other countries or even other parts of my own country. I tend to think that every man should be proud of his wife and should not hide it. If one needs a

second one that should also not be a hassle. It should be for him and the girl to talk about. But I know you want to know about me, personally."

"You got it, Roger. That question is directed personally to you and it is posted to you by Debbie who is sitting right here with you . . . carry on, Roger. I want to hear that from you," she smiled and smacked my lips.

"Personally, I abhor the idea of marrying more than one wife. I know I am not restricted back home by any law, but I simply cannot stand the practice. Essentially, it is an individual's inclination. So rule me out of that category. At the same time I detest men who forsake their wives back home, maybe to win a temporary favour from a girl. I consider that to be deceit both to the girl and to the wife. I believe it is better and even less troublesome to tell it like it is. As for me, I am not married, and if ever it will be it will have to be based on what I would call a space-age cocktail: a little love, and a little tolerance, a little

freedom and a little suspicion, a little trust and a little hope and probably unlimited uncertainty."

Debra seemed to be getting confused and she remained quiet, staring right into my eyes like she was looking at something in particular.

"Before I came here I had a girlfriend called Libby. I loved that girl very much and I can say I still love her even to this day. But whether she is here or not, I can tell that there were some deep cracks in our relationship and whether those cracks can be redeemed or whether they are redeemable I don't know."

"When shall you ever know? And how shall you ever know when you are so far away," she asked candidly.

"At the end of the winter quarter, I will be going back home for six weeks to collect data for a project and I will square everything at that time. Now that I am away, only a little hope can help me. For the time being, Debbie, I know I am obsessed with you and I would like to remain that way for ever. I really don't know what to do."

We embraced and kissed wildly and almost rolled^nto the swimming pool. The summer sun was already disappearing behind the distant hills and the whole horizon was a beautiful orange curtain. We continued kissing wildly, rolling over again and again on the concrete pavefrient. None of us seemed to remember that

my apartment was upstairs, until tine manageress' little poodle came running towards us barking at its loudest which was but only a shriek. Then we covered ourselves with towels and ran up the flight of stairs to my apartment.

Chapter Thirteen

During the fall, Libby's frequency in writing to me had declined. All her letters were short and lacking as much affection as they always had been before. And each time I wrote to her, the delay in replying had become longer. I could not explain the reason for the drastic change and I did not want to think about it. She did not bother to explain and she never apologised at any time. Yet my love and affection for her intensified. That did not change even during the next winter quarter.

By the end of the winter, my basic instructional courses ended. What remained was my research proposal. For my project, I selected a retrospective study project which involved analysing thousands of data going back for a period of ten years. The project required that I travel back to Kenya where 1 would stay for about six weeks.

I knew where to obtain my data from and I was enthusiastic to begin working on my research project as soon as possible. My research proposal was accepted and my co-ordinator started working on my travel plans. He decided that he would not accompany me. This meant that I had to do most of the work myself. I reckoned that data collection would be quite tedious but I was very excited as to when I would begin feeding the computer with the data in order to see the actual meaning of my research.

I received my return ticket and my travel allowance in the second week of March and all I had to do was choose the convenient dates for my travelling.

I telephoned Debra and she came over to my apartment. We discussed my travel, and she was delighted about my going too. She congratulated me for passing all my basic courses. This

meant that if I was able to write my desertation without any hitch, we could have plenty of time at the end of my training to tour the very many places that we had always wished to visit. I was also happy to have an air ticket that was open for two months.

I could travel on any airline up to New York and from there I had to take Pan Am to Nairobi, a flight through West African countries.

There were two weekly flights out of New York and I scheduled myself for the Tuesday flight. That meant I had to leave Sacramento on Monday night. I called Eastern Airlines and they agreed to honour my GTR ticket. The flight was to leave Sacramento at 00.30 hours, and that again meant I had to be at the Metro airport at about midnight on Monday. Everything was confirmed.

The whole weekend we did not move out of town. We spent most of the time indoors clutched together in bed away from the chilly winds blowing from the north.

On Monday morning I went to the supermarket and bought slide films as well as some ordinary colour films. I was supposed to take many slides for my project. I also bought a few personal items, and besides that I had very little else to carry with me. Debra had classes all day, and after her last class in the evening, she came straight to my apartment. As promised earlier in the day, I had prepared an African dish of potatoes, green bananas, green maize and green peas all boiled together and mashed with butter and then served with beef stew and green salads. She enjoyed my cooking, and she always ate a lot whenever I cooked an African dish.

"I will miss your dishes very much when you are away," she commented.

"I will miss your's too. But five to six weeks is not a long time. I even wonder whether I will have finished collecting all the data I am supposed to."

"I am confident you will," she gave me the extra confidence which I really needed at that time.

"Yes, I know I will Debbie — thanks for your moral support/' I said and kissed her lips.

At 11.00 p.m. she took my briefcase and we were ready to go. I picked up my jacket and my camera and after locking my apartment we went down to the parking lot. We entered her car and drove down to the airport. It was a thirty minutes' drive by-passing the metro district.

When we arrived at the airport, we sat in the car caressing and fondling until it

was only twenty minutes before boarding. Then we kissed goodbye. I picked up my briefcase and proceeded to the airport terminal. She reversed the car out of the parking bay and we waved again.Then she drove away.

I went to the departure section and presented my ticket. I got a boarding pass and went straight to the plane. I took a seat in the rear smoking area and sat there waiting for the plane to take off. We had fifteen minutes before take off, during which the usual pre-departure briefings were given. Then at exactly 00.30 hours the plane took off for New York's JFK International Airport going via O'Hare International in Chicago.

I had three seats to myself and after taking a cup of coffee, I reclined all the three seats and spread myself across them, using two pillows to support my head.

I removed Obby's last letter from the briefcase and went through it in detail. It was full of complaints.

'. . . you appear to have lost any interest in me. Maybe you don't receive my letters, I don't know. But whether you receive them or not, you could still write to me. I have not changed my address, maybe you have and that is why perhaps you don't get my letters and I presume that is your reason for not writing to me often.

'... maybe when you feel like writing to me you will tell me what went wrong. I am still the Libby you knew. I opted to major in languages at the Memorial Academy and I have been doing quite well in Linguistics. I am very happy with my performance so far... and lastly you had indicated in your last letter that you would be coming

back for your research briefing and then go back. When is that going to be? This time I hope you will tell me in good time so that I can meet you at the airport.

Ever yours, Libby/

I folded the letter and returned it in my briefcase. It was a very cold letter. It sounded like she was getting fed up with me, or as if she was forcing herself to write the letter. It did not bother me very much. I asked for two cans of beer and after drinking, I slept for the remainder of the journey to Chicago.

After a brief stop at O'Hare International, I changed planes and continued to

New York, arriving there in the morning. My next flight would not be on until six in the evening and I realised that I had a lot of time in between. I took a cab to go sightseeing in the bustling business district of New York. It was my first visit to New York and I was astounded by the pace at which every thing seemed to be moving. The streets were full of people walking at a fast pace in all directions. And the cars were moving bumper to bumper. I was impressed by the architecture of the city. I stopped at the State Empire building and I was fascinated by its height. I saw an airblown statue at the top of the building swaying from side to side according to the wind direction and the sight of it attracted many people who just stood below the building for hours on end admiring the sight.

I found New York more congested than any other city I had visited so far but I also found it the most exciting. By late afternoon it was hot and humid. I joined a group of people for a guided tour of the city which also took us to the New York harbour. We paid ten dollars each and I found the guided tour much more exciting. I did not even realise that time was running out for me. One hour later the tour guide drove us back to our starting point at the empire building. I found I had forty-five minutes before checking in at the airport. I took a tube and went back to JFK International Airport just in good time, for checking in.

I went to the Pan Am counter and gave my coupon. I asked for a seat in the smoking area and then moved on to the immigration where I presented my passport. I got an exit visa and a boarding pass and moved to the transit lounge.

After the final boarding call, I proceeded to the plane and took my seat at the rear of the aircraft. The Jumbo was fully booked with Nigerian visitors returning home from touring and shopping in the U.S.

At exactly 18.00 hours the Jumbo 747 took position in the queue of planes awaiting clearance from the control tower to take off. Ten minutes later we got clearance. In another ten minutes we were airborne, and climbing higher and higher over the Atlantic. I could see the setting sun through my window and the skyscrapers of New York far behind getting smaller and smaller before finally going out of sight.

* * *

After a short stopover in Dakar, we headed for the Robertfield International

Airport in Monrovia for another short stop, before going on to our last stop in Lagos, Nigeria. When we arrived in Lagos all the passengers including those travelling on, left the plane and went to the transit lounge. The plane needed refueling and cleaning up, and this allowed us a two-hour stopover. We could not leave the airport, however. I bought two newspapers and went to the airport restaurant to have some coffee. It was raining very heavily outside and from the restaurant, I could see airport workers running frantically up and down with heavy mackintosh coats hanging over their heads. Some were busy loading crates of cargo from the tractors while others were busy off-loading cargo from planes and putting it on to the automated conveyors for delivery to the warehouses. A last call was made for all passengers travelling to Nairobi to proceed to the boarding gate. I was anxious to get to Nairobi although nobody was expecting me. I had not bothered to inform anyone because I did not want to create any anxiety, with hordes of people

coming to meet me at the airport, when my studies were far from complete. I looked at my ticket and saw that we would arrive at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport at 10.00 p.m. local time. That was a reasonable hour in a city where I was not a stranger. Besides I had no luggage to worry about. I was still weary and tired from the long hours of flying, having had no sleep for almost two days.

We boarded the plane and shortly after, we were airborne. It was the smoothest part of my entire flight, and I never knew which countries we were overflying until when the captain announced that we were finally descending in preparation to land. I had been asleep most of the time.

After passing through immigration and the customs, I went out of the arrivals lounge, and took a taxi to the city. I asked the driver to take me to Serena Hotel, where I booked a room for two nights. I called room service and ordered some coffee. In the meantime, I took a warm bath. Before going to sleep, I needed to draw T up my work programme, so that I could commence work immediately and take the minimum number of days. Finally, I called Libby's aunt and asked about Libby without introducing myself. I was told Libby had not been there for more than one month.

The next morning I called the cannery and got through to Joelene. She was surprised to hear my voice. She was even more surprised to hear that I was calling from Nairobi.

"You seem to be travelling from country to country without giving any notice," she lamented.

"It is just the nature of work. This time I am going to be around for a while, indeed, several weeks during which time I will be collecting data for my project. Then I will go back to the States to complete my write-up. How is everybody down there?"

"We are fine, but I would take a whole day to brief you on everything."

As usual I knew there was a lot she was going to tell me.

"When are you coming here?" she asked.

"I intend to begin my work as soon as possible, probably on Monday, so I have only today and tomorrow fairly free. When do you want me to come?"

"You are welcome anytime, Roger."

"Suppose we meet this afternoon? I know you are able to give yourself a couple of hours off. How is that?" "Where can I meet you?"

"Let's put it this way. Since I have a rented car, I can pick you up at the main bus terminus. Is that okay?"

"Yes, that's fine with me," she said.

"Keep time and make sure you come alone."

Next I picked up the phone and called Gerishon. Luckily he was home and was very happy to hear from me. He was also surprised to hear that I was calling from Nairobi.

"You cannot be serious, Roger. After your first card, you decided to cut off any communication. It is well over one year and no one knows for sure whether you are still alive or not. When are you coming this way?"

"Well, this is a small world especially with all the communication. I have a few weeks around during which I must gather a lot of data for my research project. I have a lot of travelling to do. But certainly we will have enough time to sit down

and talk. How is Halima?"

"Forget that one, Roger. She started cursing you a long time ago. Initially you wrote her a few greetings cards and that was all. You never communicated again. She told me she could not wait for the unknown. I can bet she gave up. I haven't met her for a while, but all I know is that if she is not officially married already, she has a baby. I have not been following her case with any interest. I do know that is the state of affairs. Sometime back she used to call me quite often to find out about you, whether you had written or communicated otherwise. But every time I told her no. I guess she lost hope and gave up."

"Well, I will tell you what. For the first ten days or so I will be around here in town, then I will travel to the coast. But before

going down to the coast I will make a point of coming to see you, maybe for a day or two."

"Okay, Roger, I'll look forward to seeing you. You may want to call beforehand, but if you are unable to, I am still residing in the same house."

At 11.30 a.m. I went to Alvis Car Hire and rented a Suzuki Sierra. I then drove to the city bus terminus and parked the car near the City Clock tower. Shortly before noon, I got out of the car and sat on the bonnet. From a distance I spotted Joelene leaning on a guard rail. I walked towards her and when I got close to her I removed my sunglasses and said hello. She turned and looked at me in disbelief and then smiled. We shook hands and walked to the car.

We drove off the bus park and headed towards Safari Park Hotel along Thika road. The day was sunny and very bright and when we got to the hotel we decided to sit outside in the garden and enjoy the beautiful sun.

"What would you like for lunch?" I asked her.

"Anything will be fine with me," she replied.

I asked the waiter to serve us with turkey and give us a bottle of gin.

"Why didn't you inform us that you were coming?"

"I simply decided not to. I just wanted to come and find you the way you

normally live."

"And how is life in the States?"

"Generally there isn't much to compare. That is a very advanced country, but human beings are basically the same everywhere."

"How long are you going to be here?"

"About five to seven weeks. But it all depends on how soon I finish my project here. If I am able to do that quickly then I will have some free time at the end during which I can visit some of my friends. In the meantime, my priority is to collect data. How is my dear Libby?"

"Don't make me laugh at you, Roger. You still call her your dear?" The words and the tone in her voice sent a shock wave through my mind. I held my breath for a second and then commented, "Well, she hasn't stopped me from calling her so."

"Maybe that has become her universal name because I think she has too many dear ones. Roger, I am convinced that is the way she is."

"What has happened this time?" I asked. "You know one thing, Joelene, unless a friend like you gives me some details, I will never get to know some things, and I only end up getting hurt."

"I will tell you something, Roger. And it is better you make judgement for yourself. I surely don't know what type of person Libby is. 1 am completely unable to understand her. Today she is here, tomorrow she is there. When you are with her she is very good. When you are gone, another person takes your place. She has been expelled from the Memorial Academy twice because of sleeping outside the women's hostel. She came to stay with me and we almost fought when she brought a man to my house and they had the guts to sleep in my bed. She later apologised and I forgave her. Then she repeated it and I warned her that I would inform you as soon as we met. She drinks a lot, smokes heavily and I know of late she has an IUD. I know that this is none of my business and I have nothing to gain out of the whole matter, but as a friend I feel obliged to let you know. I feel she has let you down completely. One time she is telling people about her man in the States and the next time she is seen leaving a man's house in the morning. It appears as if she has won an unprecedented war of liberation

from her parents who no longer seem bothered about what goes on. 1 really pity you, Roger."

"Well, Joelene, I like you for being very free and frank with me. I know if you did not care about me and Libby you would never tell me that. I am really grateful for that. And I will tell you one thing today. I do not hate Libby. But on the other hand I think she is making bad use of my cool nature. I gave her all the freedom to be herself, but she only takes advantage of it and this

may be disastrous. Today, after telling me all that, I don't think I hate her, but I do wonder, for how long it can go on like that. I have my own feelings and I know I am not pure. Far from that. The question is how far can I also go without offending her? Sometimes when I am away I think a lot about her, and I pity her but 1 also ask myself, what our relationship should be like. For now I guess what I need to do is to sit down and talk to her. I do not want to be the one breaking my promise to her, but all will depend on her. At present, I know I will not be able to learn a lot about her, when she knows that I am around. But I know in time everything will come to light."

"If you want to ask her anything that I have told you, simply tell her that I am the one who told you. I am just sick of her."

"No, Joelene. I will never need to ask her. But with time I am positive I will get to know everything. Will you see her tonight?"

"Yes, I know she is on vacation. And I know she is at home." "That is fine. Tell her I will be waiting for her at the Country Club tomorrow at 2.00 p.m. I know there are usually fewer people on Sunday afternoon. Please ask her to keep time."

* * *

I took a late breakfast on Sunday morning. At 11.00 o'clock I loaded my camera with a film. Then I drove to the animal orphanage and took some slides of the big cats. I also took some slides of the spotted hyena and of the jackal. They were part of my research project. After that I drove into the Nairobi National Park to take some more slides of the same animals in their natural habitat. One and a half hours later, I had taken enough slides. Finally I left the park through the eastern gate and drove leisurely towards Small World Country Club. I arrived there some minutes before two o'clock. It was sunny and the air was very still

making the atmosphere rather sultry. I took my Sunday papers from the car and sat outside at a small table built around a small acacia tree, where I could read the papers under some shade. I ordered some gin and sat there idling, listening to some taped music coming from some speakers mounted on a tree

branch. Patrons were just beginning to arrive for the afternoon shows.

At exactly two o'clock I saw Libby walk in and head to where I was seated. She greeted me with a cold smile. She appeared lethargic and seemed to lack confidence.

"How come you don't even kiss me after such a long time?" I couldn't help asking. Then nervously she leaned over to me and planted a kiss on my lips. "Have things changed? Why did you hesitate to kiss me?" I asked curtly.

She was ready with an answer, "Because each time Joelene meets you first, I feel like we have to begin everything all over again. I know she always tells you a lot of stuff and sometimes I feel afraid."

"You don't need to be afraid, Libby. Never when we are together. Just have any drink you want. For now you should know for sure that what matters is just you and me. There are many wedges trying to go in between you and me and you can either let or stop them."

"That is true but 1 also know that I have not been honest. That is why I feel guilty."

"Who says I have been honest myself?"

"Maybe you haven't, maybe you have, but I can only talk for myself. I also know that we did make a promise. That is another thing that makes me feel sad because I know that I have broken it. I was even afraid of coming to see you."

"But why do you have to be afraid of what you do out of your own wish?"

"Because I know it hurt me later and will hurt you even more when you get to know about it."

"Suppose I don't get to know it... does it hurt you?"

"Well I . . ." She started and then closed her eyes like somebody in pain. "... I think I have a major problem and I don't know where I can get help. I don't know whether you will continue to love me or you already don't. I just don't know what

to do. I feel I should tell you everything and then you can tell me what to do. I cannot live with that load on my mind."

"Libby, you know yourself. I promised you right at the beginning that I was not going to be the first to break the promise. I think it is up to you to decide what you want. I know I have been free with you and a lot depends on you. You can tell me anything you want, true or not. Again that is up to you. But certainly 1 see no need to have a relationship that is permanently on the balance."

She looked up at my eyes and then looked down shyly. She was getting more and more nervous and her voice was becoming a bit slurred.

"Things changed the moment you left. When you failed to call me, I sat in bed and cried almost the whole night. The next day I went to visit my cousin and told her about the whole thing. I guess she gave me the wrong advise. She took me out and we went to have a drink with her friends. She told me to forget you. She said when a man crosses the ocean, the best thing is to put him in the backyard. That night we drank a lot of beer. I found myself smoking and the next day when I woke up, I was in bed with a strange man. It is my cousin . . ." she said and started sobbing.

"You don't need to cry, Libby. It was you and not your cousin who was wrong. We simply cannot go back to that time."

"Then as time went on, I found you didn't write to me very often and I became addicted to drinking and smoking, something I regret so much. I must confess that I have done many things everywhere which I know you detest. I sub-consciously intended to hurt you, but now I realise I have got hurt in the end."

"From what you say, it is difficult to say or to tell how serious you are. One thing I know for sure is that we have discussed just about everything. Every good thing we do is for our good. While every bad thing we do comes to us finally.

"One thing that disturbs me a lot, Libby, is that every time I am not with you, you do something behind my back, then you

come to me and tearfully apologise. We patch up our differences, but you immediately do something similar. For how long, my dear, can this life go on?"

"I am sorry, my sweetheart. I am very sorry. I really don't know what is wrong with my head. Maybe I need counselling. Please, my dear, tell me."

"I see nothing wrong with you, Libby. You are the girl I love. 1 honestly think that all you need is thorough counselling coming from yourself and no one else. Ask yourself why you do things that end up hurting you, whether you are able to keep a promise and if you really love me. If your answer to that last question is yes, then you cannot hurt me. You would not like to hurt my feelings."

"I truly love you, Roger. Please let us have a new beginning. I have got only a few months before finishing my linguistics course and my advanced level school and I want to be with you when I am out of school. I really don't want to lose you."

"All said, my dear, I can assure you that my affection for you has not changed even a bit. It is true that I have friends as well but no one can take your place in my heart. However, remember that we cannot advance if every time we meet, we begin by resolving all the bad things that have happened. I have only one project to finish and my training will be over. When 1 come back, you will have been through with your school and that time we should start thinking about settling down together to start our own life. I don't want you to be unsure of our friendship. I want you to do your final exams well and that way I will be even happier."

We were silent for a while and looked at each other without blinking and it appeared like our minds and hearts were together once again. We embraced and kissed passionately. Suddenly I remembered Debra and a chill ran down my spine. I developed a sense of guilt, but then I said to myself: 'Libby hasn't been holy either'.

Libby looked at me intensely and then asked me, "But sweetheart, tell me for sure, do you have someone else in your life?" Her question made me feel as if she was reading my mind.

"Libby, like I have always said to you, it is next to impossible not to know someone else beside the one you love. The thing you need to remember always, whether I am with you or not is that no one else can occupy your place in my

heart."

"I am glad to hear that, sweetheart. You will find me a completely changed person."

"Just keep your word. That is all I can ask of you, my dear." We embraced again.

"I guess we can have some nyatna chotna" I suggested.

"That is a good idea."

"Today you will do the selection. Go to the meat rack and make your choice. I don't mind anything you choose; chicken, mutton, beef, game, anything. The choice is yours."

She stood up and walked to the rack near the charcoal burner. I looked at her as she walked away from me and I saw the same beautiful girl. Then I looked at her again, this time more intensely, and I saw Mary Magdalene and Delilah all in one person. I saw a girl whom I had intense love for, one I could love and trust one moment, then the next moment she was the re-incarnation of Delilah, this time wearing an afro. I felt torn apart. Do I disengage from her or hang on? I asked myself. I had no immediate answer. My love and sympathy for her were overwhelming.

Then I thought. Maybe bad influence was controlling her. Or maybe it was just a weakness which could be overcome with time, or perhaps deep-seated loneliness. I was not able to think of any simple explanation about her nymphomaniac behaviour and actions.

"What did you choose?" I asked as she returned to her seat.

"Just wait and see. I won't tell you until it is all ready," she joked. "How is your data programme?"

"It is a bit tight. I have lots of data to collect and put together and this means I will spend quite sometime travelling. I will spend some days at the central abattoir and then go down to Mombasa. I will then visit some small abattoir in the rural setting and collect whatever data I can. Finally, I will visit the Rift Valley region. I will also spend sometime in the park taking slides and if time allows, I will also visit some remote areas around Lake Turkana. But that is only

if time allows."

"When do you return to the U.S. and for how long?" she asked in a sorrowful voice.

"This will depend on how quickly I am able to finish and write up my research findings. Hopefully it won't take long. I like my project very much and I have very good research advisors. So that should not be a problem. Certainly I would love to come back soon and then we can have all the time together."

"That is nice, sweetheart. I will miss you a lot, but I will wait for you patiently, however long you take," she held my arm and we kissed again passionately.

"I have a surprise for you," I said and dipped my hand into my pocket.

"Is it a good or bad surprise?" she asked excitedly. "You guess."

"No, please tell me," she begged. "No, just guess. The surprise is all in my pocket." "No, sweetheart, I don't want to guess. I will get a heart attack if I guess wrong. Please tell me, honey."

"Okay, here you are," I passed a small pack containing a diamond ring, engraved with the name 'Libby', on the inside. She opened the pack and looked at the bluish diamond crystal. She looked at it again and then tried it on her little finger. It fitted perfectly. She removed it from her finger and looked at it all over again. Then she saw her name engraved on it. She jumped up from her chair and shouted, drawing the attention of everyone in the vicinity.

"My God, it's really lovely. It's so beautiful. I love it and I love you even more," she said and then bent over to me, holding me firmly around my neck, placing her cheek against my heavily bearded face.

"I will never leave you alone, sweetheart. This whole world is for me and you. I will forever be with you, whether in the air, on land or in the sea. I will love you forever wherever you will be."

We looked at one another and smiled heartily. Then I joked to her:"... all love, in the air, on land and in the sea?"

"Yes, sweetheart. Always."

"How about in heaven or in hell?"

"Come on sweetheart... everywhere, that is what I said," she said and closed her eyes. She leaned on my chest and I could hear her heart throbs.

* * *

After working through Saturday and Sunday, I finished my final work in Mombasa on Monday night. The next day I had all my data typed and bound into a small file. I felt very relaxed. Libby was going to join me the next day. It was hard to believe that six weeks were already over, yet we had only been together a few times during that period. We had planned to spend the last three days together before I flew out of Nairobi on Saturday afternoon for the States to go and complete my training programme.

I called Tiwi Villas in Diani and made a reservation for a cottage for two. We would stay there for two days and nights. It was the low tourist season and I thought Diani beach would be a lovely place to sunbathe on the white silver sand beaches.

I called Libby's aunt's house in Nairobi. Libby was not there. I was told that she would be in at any moment. I left a message for her to call me at the Oceanic Hotel. I returned to my room and sat on the bed proof-reading my data file. Shortly before 8.00 p.m. the telephone rang. I picked it and the operator put me through. It was Libby calling.

"How are you, sweetheart? I got your message and I decided to call you right away. Have you finished your project?" "Yes, my dear. It is all over and I am delighted." "Congratulations. I feel happy too."

"Thanks a lot. First tell me whether you have your ticket ready?"

"Yes. I have it with me. The plane leaves Nairobi at 10.00 a.m. and arrives at Moi International at 11.05 a.m. It is a Fokker Friendship and the flight number is KQ 037."

"That is good, I have made reservations here and I will see you then at the airport."

"Okay, sweetheart. I will see you then. And I miss you."

"I miss you too," I said and replaced the receiver.

I continued proof-reading my data, and when I finished, I got my pad out and sat on the desk. I had to enter into my diary all the significant events that I had encountered regarding my study project. My project sponsors needed a comprehensive report for their evaluation and future adjustments. I had entered every observation in summary and I had to put it in the long hand on the prescribed official forms.

'. . . transportation has been a handicap. The allowances given have been grossly inadequate. I have had to spend a lot of my own money to make it through, and re-imbursement should be considered.

'... bureaucracy has been a stumbling block. Passes to some areas should be considered well in advance. The sponsors should be in charge of the entire training, handling and finances. This will eliminate delays and unnecessary protocol, particularly in view of the fact that the research period is restricted and the element of time is critical.. /

I finished the report at midnight. My eyes were tired. I took a cup of black coffee and sank into my bed. The fan was on throughout, but the room was still hot. I covered myself with a net to keep away any mosquitoes and I fell asleep.

At 9.00 a.m. in the morning the telephone rang. I was still in bed. I stretched my hand and picked it. A beep sounded. Then a crisp voice came on the line.

"Hi Roger. This is Debra. How are you doing?"

"Pretty good, Debbie. And you?"

"Good. I received your fax letter. I am happy that you have finished your project on time. I went to Lake Tahoe last weekend with my parents and we had a wonderful time there. I notice a slight change in your travel itinerary. Instead of PSA, you are arriving by Delta Airlines which gets to Sacramento two hours ahead of schedule."

"That is correct. No other changes are anticipated."

"Never mind. Whatever the case I will not leave the house until it is one hour to your expected time of arrival. If there are any changes just call me at the house."

"Thank you very much, dear, for calling me. I long to see you. It seems to me like I have been away for a whole year from you."

"Will see you, Roger. I miss you," she said and hang up.

I lay back on the bed and momentarily felt depressed for no apparent reason. Then suddenly the phone rang and I picked it at once. It was Libby.

"Hello, sweetheart. I have just arrived at the airport. The plane is on time. Passengers are already going through the gates. I will see you in the next hour or so."

I took a quick shower and dressed up. Then I went to the dining room and took a light breakfast. After breakfast I hired an open tourer and drove slowly to Moi Airpot arriving there shortly before 11.00 o'clock. I parked the car and went to the arrival lounge. Then at exactly 11.00 a.m. a Fokker landed and an announcement was made. It was flight KQ 037. A while later, passengers started streaming into the lounge. There were no immigration checks and passengers were arriving and departing fairly fast. There was no queuing at all. Everything was moving swiftly.

Libby emerged from the security counter along with the other passengers. We spotted each other at once. Then I stood up and went to meet her. She came towards me beaming and we embraced and kissed. Then we walked to the car hand in hand. It was a great feeling being together once again. The day was sunny and bright and a cool breeze was blowing from the sea. The sky was all blue and the view of the ocean and the Kilindini harbour with its giant cranes and anchored ships was quite spectacular. We entered Makupa Causeway and drove straight to the Oceanic Hotel, where I paid my bills and checked out. I took my briefcase and safari bag and we proceeded to the Likoni Ferry. We found the ferry on the ramp and we boarded it. Then we crossed the channel and drove to Tiwi Villas arriving at midday. We checked in at the reception and we were shown our cottage, which was situated right above the cliff, directly overlooking the Indian Ocean. The cottage had a small kitchen, a small sitting room and one large bedroom, very neat and well furnished. There was a small Magic Chef freezer and a Kenwood cooker plus all the necessary kitchenware. It was indeed a small home away from home. The compound had beautiful coconut and palm trees and the lawns were very neatly cut.

After a while, Libby and I changed into swimming costumes. Then we went to the pool which was located just outside the main bar. We occupied the wooden chairs facing the ocean and ordered some cold drinks. The tide was low and the breaking of the waves on the coral reef a hundred metres away was a natural beauty in itself. There was a rainbow over the ocean in the distant north which meant the monsoon rains were on. One could feel the strong winds blowing from the sea, moderating with the high temperatures.

"When you look into the sea, do you wonder where all that water comes from?" I asked Libby.

"I always get scared and get this feeling. All the time I imagine what would happen if the sea broke loose and I wish I had wings. I never quite believe that water comprises three fourths of the earth's surface. It is simply incomprehensible to me. Your question reminds me of our visit to Eden Rock."

"What do you think you would find at the bottom of the Indian Ocean if all the water was emptied?"

"Perhaps there are some marine cities there. Again I don't like to imagine such things. All the ships, cars, trains and planes and the people that have sunk must be many. And you, what do you think when you look up into the sky on a clear night and then see all those stars in the heavens, some small and others large, some bright and others dim and some near and others far away?"

I laughed and looked at her. Her eyes were focussed on me. Then I smiled at her and said, "That is when I want to be near you. At times I feel like a strange force might pull me into one of the stars, and I imagine how lonely I could be, all by myself up there."

She smiled and held my hand, "I would rather come with you."

Her hands were very tender and I could feel the warmth in her palm. I held her waist and pulled her close to me. She appeared even more beautiful and voluptuous in her bikini. She was gorgeous. I stood up and lifted her by the arm. It was getting very hot outside, and we took our drinks and went back to the cottage. The air conditioner was on. The room therefore was cool. I showed her our travel arrangements and she was thrilled. We had so much to do in four days. We had to visit the Casino and a Chinese cultural show going on in the old town. Then on Friday morning we would join a tour group to the Tsavo National Park,

spend the night at the Ngulia Lodge and return to Nairobi by noon on Saturday.

My flight was already confirmed. Pan Am would leave Jomo Kenyatta International Airport at 16.00 hours via West Africa. I had to be at the airport by three in the afternoon at the latest. I was happy with the arrangements and I was even happier that I would be with Libby up to the last day.

Chapter Fourteen

The snow-capped Sierras were clearly visible below, stretching on a distinct line running from north to south. I knew we were at last crossing the Sierra Nevada Mountains. There were no clouds and one could clearly see automobiles on the highway below. Houses were also very distinct. All one needed was simply to look down through the plane's window. In another one hour we would be landing in Sacramento.

I looked at my watch and it was showing three o'clock Pacific time. The flight attendants were just beginning to serve the last round of refreshments. 1 asked for lemonade and then continued reading my copy of US News and World Report. My headphones remained tuned in to the channel playing country music throughout.

At 4.00 p.m. the plane touched down at the Sacramento metro airport. I had already cleared with the immigration at JFK International Airport, therefore I proceeded to the arrival lounge holding my briefcase in hand and my safari bag well strapped on my shoulder. It was a relief to be back.

When I reached the end of the lounge, I saw Debra clad in hot pants and a loose top. She was holding a can of Coke and she had not seen me yet. I walked straight to her at an angle and when I was a few feet away from her she turned and saw me.

"Oh dear!" she exclaimed. "Did you fall from above? Welcome. Very much on time, huh. Let me carry your bag," she offered, and removed my bag from my shoulder. It was a very good feeling to find her waiting for me at the airport. We went to her car in the parking lot and put my luggage on the back seat. Then we drove to Davis taking the northern inter-state highway 1-5 going north to Oregon. It was a shorter route from the metro

airport to Davis and barely twenty minutes later we arrived in Davis, and went to

Debra's apartment first.

"I have a few things for you, Debbie," I said and reached for my bag. I had some wooden carvings of wild animals and a whole lot of batiks portraying coastal life and ancient artefacts. I had found it was easier to convey a wider impression of art on batiks and I had plenty of them in my bag. Finally I had two packets of roasted coffee beans and two packets of fresh tea leaves obtained from a tea factory. When she opened them, the sweet aroma filled the room and she jumped up in excitement.

"I will take a packet of each to my mum. She will love it. It smells so good."

"I am happy you like it. I should have brought more with me."

"No, this is more than enough. It will take us a long time. All we need is to keep it in the deep freezer. And from there we will be taking a little at a time," she said, as she took the bottled coffee beans and tea to the freezer.

"I am sure you need a bath after all that travelling."

"Yes, I desperately need a cold shower."

"Okay, dear, come along. I will give you my robe and some towels," she said, and led me to the bedroom.

I took off my shirt and my trousers and wrapped myself in a towel. Then I made to go to the bathroom.

"Stop, my dear," she said, and started laughing pulling me back by the tail of the towel hanging from my flanks. "You have forgotten something."

"What have I forgotten, dear? I have a towel, slip-ons and I am sure you have enough shampoo in the bathroom."

"There is still something, which is very important. I can tell you don't have it," she said, and continued laughing at me very suggestively.

"You must tell me, Debbie," I insisted, and moved closer to her only to find that she was holding something in her hands behind her. I moved closer and she turned around. I could not

see what she was holding. Each time I tried to circumvent her she turned the other way. It became a sort of hide-and-seek. I stopped and looked at her. Then I smiled and she smiled back. I leaned on her and kissed her lips, but she still would not show me what she was holding. I held the nipples of her breasts and she became ticklish. Then she let go and held me tightly. I pushed her long hair aside and kissed her neck, which had already turned red. Then she held me by the neck and sank her tongue deep inside my mouth until I was almost breathless. I pulled off her loose blouse and ran my hands down her soft and fleshy body. I found she was wearing nothing beneath her loose blouse and our body contact was electrifying.

I moved my hands further down and held the zip of her hot pants. I pulled it down effortlessly and I could feel her round and full thighs giving in. Her hot pants fell to the carpet and I realised she had no pants on. Instead there was an acre of full, thick and soft hair. My towel fell down and before it reached the carpet, we were already on the bed clasped together like a railway joint singing the universal anthem: 'Oh, Oh, I missed you darling, I missed you darling/

An hour later the bed was soaked in sweat. We shifted to the twin bed, and lay there prostrate like people recovering from a theatre operation. When I regained my vitality, it was already dark. Debbie was still asleep. I switched on the light and tapped her stomach. She was unresponsive and heavily asleep. It was like a sleep induced by narcotics. I looked at her beautifully curved body whose beauty was enhanced by the pinkish bedside lamp and I felt another electric charge build up in me. I kissed her lips but she remained deep in sleep. She was totally unresponsive. Then feeling desperate, I switched off the bedside lamp and sank back into the bed.

* * *

When I woke up in the morning, I found myself alone in the bed. Debbie had woken up earlier. She had already bathed and was in the kitchen preparing breakfast. I took a towel and went to the

bathroom. The early summer sun was already hot at nine in the morning and a cold shower was what 1 needed most.

After taking a shower I put on her gown and joined her in the sitting room. 1 turned on the TV and sat to watch the early morning shows and news. She

brought breakfast which we ate together. After breakfast we drove to the American Arms. I opened my apartment and found everything intact. I looked at my summer schedule and found that I had no classes. My main classes were over and what remained was an analysis of my data. I removed my file containing the data from the briefcase. I showed it to Debra, and she looked at me in awe. There were pages of figures listed in long columns against months and years, with separate columns for cattle, sheep and goats.

"All this doesn't make sense. When did you compile it?" she asked.

"Well, never mind. This means a lot to me. Without it I don't think it would be worthwhile for me to be here. Already, so much is done but 1 am afraid of one thing."

"What is that? Maybe 1 can help."

"You know I am a very slow typist. Yet I have to feed all these figures into the computer. I need a minimum of about five thousand figures before I can start any analysis."

"I can help you type, are there any technicalities?"

"None at all. I will use the minitab programme, and all I need is simply to enter the data in the correct format. I must get it entered systematically."

"Yes, I understand. How long do you think it will take?"

"At my speed of typing I can give myself a minimum of two weeks. And if it becomes too monotonous, maybe three weeks. But I am confident I will get it done in good time. What arrangements have you made so far? I guess you also don't have any summer classes."

"That is right," she said. "I explored a few options and I reckoned we don't have much money. I thought we could take about one week and visit southern California. I have already

made arrangements with my mum. She will give us her camper for as long as we need it. It has a bed and a small kitchen. That is all we need. When we return we can then fly to Alaska. We will stay there for three days. The tour company has given us an option of staying on for another two days if we wish. That is when

the next group arrives. But that will be up to us to decide."

"That sounds a wonderful arrangement- Do you think we need any special arrangements or preparations?"

"None at all. 1 suppose after this, I can drive to Oakland, Then I will leave my car there and come back with my mum's camper. Then in the evening about six we can set off for southern California. It is usually cool and best to drive at night during summer. By alternating, we shall not get tired or sleepy along the way. I am sure we will be in Los Angeles tomorrow morning driving at moderate speed."

"Anything else, my dear?" 1 asked.

"That is just about it."

"Super. You go to Oakland, and in the meantime I will go to the bank and withdraw some money. I will also go to the campus briefly and present my data file to my professor. He can look at it while we are away, so that when we return, I can get down to work right away."

"That is good. I will see you then in about two hours." I walked her down to the parking lot, kissed her and she drove away.

I returned to the apartment and called my project director in his office. He was in and was happy about my return. He had received my greeting cards and was looking forward to my return, with the data.

I took my bicycle and my backpack and rode to his office. On the way I stopped at the Bank of America on third street and withdrew some money. At the campus I found Professor Rudolf waiting for me.

"Welcome back, Roger," he said and offered me a seat. "How was your overseas trip?" he asked with his deep voice.

"It was quite good. I didn't have time to travel a lot, but I did get all the data I went out looking for. I also took four slide films which I hoped will be useful during my final presentation."

"Good idea. Have you printed them yet?"

"No. I am going to leave them at the bookshop today."

"When do you want to start analysing your findings?"

"Today we are leaving for southern California for a week or so of sightseeing. We won't be back until probably mid next week at the earliest."

"How are you travelling south?"

"We have a camper."

"That is a lovely idea. Make good use of your time in the States. There are very many wonderful places to visit. Go to Disneyland, visit Yosemite Park, San Francisco and many other places, they are wonderful," he said and smiled. Then he continued, "I hope you won't forget to take your American girlfriend."

"No way," I said, and he laughed.

"Okay Roger. Call me whenever you are ready to start your project. Enjoy yourself and take care."

I left him with my data file and rode back to my apartment. I took one postcard from my bookrack and addressed it to Libby:

'Dear Libby,

I am in California. I had a good trip and I enjoyed every bit of it. I hope you are fine too. At this time of the year, temperatures are reaching ninety degrees. It can be extremely hot at times. I missed you very much when I left you at the airport. Very soon I will embark on my project and that is all that is left. When I finish the write-up, I will make a formal presentation. After that I will be at liberty to leave.

Prepare well for your finals. I want you to do well. Write soon and tell me how you are getting on.

Love, Roger.'

I affixed a stamp and walked to the post office booth down the street to post the card. As I walked, I imagined how lonesome one can be in a foreign land

without a friend. I imagined too how difficult it can become to make friends and more so, to have a girlfriend. Then I remembered a few guidelines from my travellers guide that had paid dividends:

'Always take it that every other person needs a friend too. Be friendly all the time. When someone annoys you, don't show it. Forget it and only show friendliness to the next person.

'Whenever you are not sure about anything, never hesitate to ask - always ask. Somebody will always have an answer. As soon as your reach a new town, find out all about sports clubs, the games available and so on.

'If you don't play any games, a very unlikely thing, at least you can swim alone. Find out where the movie theatres are and even where plays and shows are performed. Find out where discos are. You don't require to be two to enter a disco. And when you enter, don't just sit down. Dance to your good foot. Someone will join you, from the unknown. The language of music is universal. If you drink, never drink too much, never get intoxicated. If you do, you will never remember a genuine friend and you will remain in square one for a long time.'

This made me recall how I had met Debra at Mr. B's and how close we had become. I could not imagine how my life would be without her. A friend, a sweetheart, a companion and a playmate. She had become just about everything, never demanding, never pushy, very honest and faithful and always compromising and willing to share losses and gains. On top of that she was a beauty and had the looks. What else did I want?

I reached the post office booth and stood by it. I held the post card in my hand before slipping it down and then looked at it:

'Dear Libby...' I read the first line. '... I want you to do well. And write soon. Love, Roger.' I pushed it down the booth and turned around to walk back to my apartment. Suddenly my heart began to pound and I ran short of breath. I was not allergic to anything. I knew it was the

result of a lot of turmoil in my mind. I slowed my pace and I felt better, but my mind continued debating, about a subject whose theme was as elusive as the answer itself. Who is Libby to me? And who am I to her? I asked myself.

I had just posted a love card to her ten thousand miles away, while I was waiting for Debbie, so that we could drive together in a camper for a week-long romantic trip to southern California.

I had already assured Libby that I would never leave her. I had not committed myself to Debbie. Libby had broken our promise a number of times and Debbie had never annoyed or offended me, I thought to myself. Then I remembered that we had resolved to forget the past, and begin everything anew. But how could such a promise be up-held and verified? I was in a dilemma. Only one thing was clear: at the end of my training I wanted to go back home. Still that was not the answer to my dilemma. Maybe Debra would love to come with me if I suggested it. Maybe she would ask me, I thought. But I knew that a lot of considerations would have to be made in her case. There were extreme cultural differences and those could not be ignored. Then there were the social and the language aspects to be looked at. All the same I had reached a stage now whereby to disappoint Libby or Debra was equal to hurting my own feelings for a long time.

1 returned to my apartment feeling rather low. I turned on my radio to FM 102, the music station, and went to the kitchen to make myself a cheese sandwich. Then I returned to the sitting room and sat on the couch reading the Sacramento Bee. It was two o'clock and unbearably hot in the shade. I closed all the windows and turned the air conditioner on to maximum. Then I decided to have a nap on the couch.

My intended nap turned into a deep sleep, and when I opened my eyes it was already four o'clock. Debra had not returned yet. I walked to the bathroom and splashed my face with cold water. Then I returned to the couch and went on reading the Bee newspaper. At 5.00 p.m. Debra walked in, perspiring heavily.

"You must have been wondering what happened, I know," she said as she walked in.

"Yes, but I knew something must have held you up." "You are right, my dear. My mum and I took the camper to a garage for a check-up and we found that we needed to change a couple of things. We fitted all the tyres and tubes, the plugs, the oil fitter and the points as well. Then we had the van tuned up. It is now superb. What did you do for all those hours?"

"Nothing much. I went to the bank and later on went to see my programme

director. Afterwards I went to the post office. When I came home I ate a sandwich, then I read the newspaper, listened to the radio, lay on the couch to take a nap and finally without realising it I fell into a dee . . . e . . e . . . p sleep. I have just woken up."

"Good for you and then?"

"And then I heard the door open."

"And then?"

"And then I saw Debbie."

"And then?"

"And then I felt so good."

"So good ... so good," she mimicked me and we burst out laughing simultaneously, "... so good ... so good." Then we kissed.

"Anyhow, I guess we are in pretty good time," she said. "And since you have rested enough, you will drive out of here say for the first two or three hours so that I can also have a short rest. I have been moving up and down and you can imagine how hot it is outside. In fact I didn't even have time to visit the bank, but that is no problem. I have a mastercharge card. The car is in very good shape. I have a full tank. So at six we can set off according to our plan. In the meantime I can have a cold shower."

"That is fine. I don't think we need any sort of packing."

"No, we don't," she said and went to the bathroom.

At 6.00 p.m. we took one camera, one backpack containing a few summer slacks and we went down to the parking lot. We

entered the Ford camper and I sat at the wheel. We studied the road map for a while. Debbie had driven on the Californian highway since she was young, but I needed to study the map carefully before driving 6ff. When I finished reading the road map, I started the car and we drove off, taking the Covell boulevard. Then we drove on for about a mile before entering Interstate 1-80 east, headed

for Sacramento. It was a very busy five-lane highway running from west to east. I accelerated along the merging lane and soon got into the middle lanes, after attaining the speed of the traffic flow. I changed lanes again and entered the fast lane. We were then able to drive express to Sacramento before heading south.

Sacramento was a major intersection and the flyovers were numerous and marvelously designed. Some highways ran above the others, and it was confusing to a newcomer like me. The highways were, nevertheless, elaborately marked and all that was needed was extreme alertness for road signs. A slight mistake could easily lead to a trail of vehicles snarling into each other or grinding to a halt.

We changed the road and entered the south interstate highway 1-5. That was the highway that would eventually lead us to Los Angeles. One hour later we got out of Sacramento city and we were now driving south in the valley. The traffic was low and most of the time we found ourselves through large expanses of farmlands with not a single car ahead of us or even behind us. It was already getting dark. I put on the parking lights and we continued driving for another half-hour before we could really need the full lights. The days are longer than the nights in summer.

There were no settlements along the way and the drive could be monotonous and tiresome during the day.

Our first stop was in Fresno city. We stopped at a Texcal station and had the car checked. Then we refueled and drove on to a MacDonalds fast food restaurant to have dinner. We wanted the car to cool down also. We parked outside and entered the

restaurant, sat down and ordered some food. We were served with some coffee while we waited for the food.

I went to the car and came back with the road map. We looked at it once more and located where we were. We found we still had a long way to go, but we were in no hurry. We estimated that we would be in Los Angeles at about ten or eleven in the morning the next day, allowing for two or three rests along the way. At least we wanted to arrive there during day time.

At midnight we left Fresno and re-entered the 1-5. The traffic was very light. Debbie was a fast driver and within two hours we had covered one hundred and

fifty miles. Then she complained of fatigue. We did not want to strain ourselves at all and she pulled to the side near the next exit where we decided to have a rest. We locked the doors and pulled the curtains together leaving only enough space to let in fresh air. Then we jumped into the bed in the rear compartments to have a short sleep, remembering to leave our parking lights on.

* * *

When we reached Los Angeles, it was almost noon. It was hot and humid. We went and checked in at Tivolli motel, a small motel with a Chinese restaurant downstairs. More than anything else we needed to take a bath. We also needed a few hours bed rest, before taking a stroll in the city. After lunch we returned to our room and lay on the wide water bed. It was very refreshing after driving hundreds of miles mostly in the night. The eyes needed a rest if only to clear the redness in them.

At six thirty we woke up. The heat of the day had subsided a little, and it appeared like in the next one hour it was going to be cool enough to allow a leisurely walk in the streets. Meanwhile, we sat in our room watching Cable News Network.

Later we decided to go to the beach for a stroll in the cool breeze. The summer sun would not set until later when there would be a full moon. So we drove off and got to the beach when most beach goers had left. The ocean breeze was just great,

blowing strongly from the pacific into the sandy beaches which were still hot from the summer sun.

We walked hand in hand along the entire beach and finally settled on the elevated southern end. The sun was sinking and the reflection of its rays on the undulating sea provided a beautiful spectacle. The horizon was a glaring orange hue. Up in the eastern sky was the full moon all cloudy, ready to take over the night after the sun had gone down completely.

We sat on the mould of sand enjoying the humming breeze and the fluttering sounds coming from the breaking waves below us. I felt nostalgic when I remembered my walk on the beach in Mombasa with Libby. I imagined that perhaps part of the water just below us was the same water that we had been playing in at the Diani beach on the other side of the world. Then suddenly I

missed her company and I hated myself.

Debra was next to me and we held hands as we stared into the ocean waters below without uttering a word. Unlike Libby, Debra was cool and very self-confident. She rarely cracked jokes, but was forever ready to respond whenever she was tickled. She was very fast to notice whenever my moods fluctuated. And she always sought to pep me up.

She drew close to my face and I looked at her. Her deep blue eyes were wide open and she was trying to look into my eyes.

"My dear, do you feel sea-sick?" she asked jokingly, but the comment penetrated deep inside me.

"No, I am only looking at the waves and enjoying the cool breeze," I said and kissed her lips. She kissed me and we continued staring into the ocean which was now turning into a fearful dark vastness of still waters.

"You know what, Roger?" she asked and pushed me backwards, forcing me to lie on my back.

"Tell me," I said holding on to her shoulders.

"My mum really wants to meet you. She asked me to make a date before we go to Alaska."

"That is a good idea. What do you think about it?"

"I think it's a pretty good idea too. Maybe we can stop by when I go to return the camper."

"That would be a good opportunity. But how will you introduce me," I asked, and we both laughed.

"She knows a lot about you already," she said shyly. "Every time we are together in the house she asks me very many questions about you. I am unable to answer them but I am sure you will be able to answer them yourself. Precisely, I know she is very curious to know what we plan to do with ourselves, our lives. You know, she was very young when she got married to my dad and she has almost forgotten what happens. Maybe she has forgotten that things have changed a lot

since her days. You know she misses me a lot because I am the last born. My brother is overseas most of the year serving in the navy, and he rarely comes home. As you know, Gaetanne, my elder sister is married in the East Coast and visits rarely, probably during exceptional holidays like thanksgiving every other year or so. The telephone seems to have kept people apart. My brother calls from a ship in the Far East and sounds as if he is next door. The need to meet becomes less important. So you can see that being the only one close to home really makes my parents attached to me. I know she would like to spend everyday with me if she could.

"I will call her tomorrow and let her know that we will pass through there on our way north. We could spend a night and leave the following day."

"You go ahead and arrange it the best way you can. It's all fine with me. I would love to talk to her, especially more so if she loves wildlife as you have already told me."

"That is one subject you can talk about the whole night. She has hundreds of slides and a whole library of pictures covering almost any living animal and even re-constructions of extinct ones like dinosaurs and mammoths."

"That is very good if we share that interest," I said. Then she looked at me in the bright moonlight and whispered in my ear,",.. but of course I remain on top of your interests."

"Of course, dear, you know that very well," 1 said to her, and we embraced tenderly, as we lay with our backs on the sandy beach gazing up at the stars.

"Have you ever imagined how it would be like if we were to go and live in Africa?" I asked her deliberately, bringing in a delicate subject.

"I have thought about it many times ever since we met. Even right now 1 am contemplating that in my mind. One thing is clear. It would take me a very long time to adjust. Maybe 1 may never adjust and 1 tend to think life would be very miserable for me. You know I am a quiet person. I have difficulties making friends here and 1 think it would be really hard for me there. The other tf ang is what I would do there. You cannot expect me to be just a housewife at this age. I think 1 would be bored stiff. Even if I were to get a job it would mean I would not be with you most of the time, and again I know this would really be hard on me."

"And what do you think about children? One, two, three, four, ten?"

"What?" she yelled at me. "That is another area which I have thought about for a long time, even before I met you and I think 1 have a solid answer. You may never agree with me in your life, but somehow it is my firm stand. I do not intend to have any children."

"How come? What is your reasoning?" 1 asked curiously.

"I have never discussed that subject with anyone, but usually I make my biggest and most critical decisions alone. You are the first person to hear that. My reasoning is that there are already enough children in the world."

"Do you intend to adopt one or what do you have on your mind?"

"Not at all. 1 don't plan to adopt anyone. I reckon that if I have, or if I get enough resources, I will sponsor one or as many as I can, through anonymous funding. It is my firm belief that if we are able we should think about the many destitutes, orphans and the homeless and those starving. We have very many of those all over the world. In Africa we have millions, in Latin

America millions, in Asia, it is the same and even here in America we have many in need of help."

She looked at me in the moonlight and found me listening attentively. I had never heard her talk so seriously about a moving subject and in such fine details. I was impressed.

"You see, Roger, if at least one person out of a thousand made some little dedication towards these poor children, we can make a small but significant impact and it would go a long way."

"You never told me you intend to become a nun."

"I am not one, Roger and 1 don't intend to become one. I don't think you need to become a nun or a monk to do a good thing. Like I told you, that is something I have thought a lot about for a long time and that is the way I feel my life should be. It is the right course for me."

"What if your husband insists on having children?"

"Would you insist?" she cut in and smiled.

"Well our case is different," I said.

"In which way? You are right here with me and you do not need to consult anyone to answer me," I found myself cornered.

"Well, that is a really difficult subject. I have never thought about it. Not even imagined it. You see back home, there is that belief that a marriage is only complete when there are children in the family. Adoption is literally an alien thing. Very rare indeed."

"You see, Roger, that is where we differ. That is a completely different way of life. I have grown up and continue to live in a totally different world, a different society altogether."

"Suppose your husband was totally uncompromising. What would you do?" I asked.

"Surely we will have talked a lot before going to the extent of being married. You don't meet one day and marry the next. If I cannot come across one who understands and agrees to live like me, then too bad. And don't forget that you don't have to have a husband in order to exist. Maybe a husband needs a wife just as much. It's a matter of mutual understanding."

"So what do you think about our future? Just the two of us?" I was hesitant to ask that question but now I had to.

She looked at me in the dim moonlight, and I saw that she was looking at me with one closed eye. She smiled and then slowly said in a soft voice, "I have told you what I feel but you haven't told me what you think about it."

"What you say, Debbie, is just wonderful. The target is noble, but it requires a lot of sacrifice."

"That is the point. Once in a while you should be ready to sacrifice a little for nothing in return. I think there is a lot of satisfaction in that."

"Frankly, 1 have never considered the issue of children in a marriage. But at the same time, I have never ruled out anything. Maybe a time has never come to

think about it seriously. But deep in me, I have one strong feeling. You can enter into a pact with someone whom you love dearly, even without getting married and you can make yourself always available in case of need, but remain absolutely free to pursue your own goals. I know this does not happen back home, but at the same time I think a human being is basically the same anywhere. That is my very strong conviction. Whether you get married or not, you don't revenge on your earlier pacts. The key in this approach is that you never enter into more than one pact at a time. The next aspect is to be very loyal."

"Roger, I am very happy that you understand me. I cannot cut you from your cultural bonds, or from your own family and country. But surely many differences exist between our two systems. I feel what we need is a pact between us."

"What sort of a pact do you think would be ideal in our case? Do you think it would limit our freedom?" I asked.

"No, my dear. Our freedom would remain intact. What I envision is a deep love relationship where you will always be free to do whatever you wish. If you want to get married you are free to. If you want to remain free you are at liberty to do so. Nothing will bind us at all except our love. We won't even need to live in one house, in one city or even in the same state or

country. The thing is that wherever I am or wherever you are, we will be constantly in touch both soul and mind. If I am in a fix of some sort, be it depression, dilemma or real predicament you can bail me out and I can bail you out by whatever method you would consider reasonable. And again, if I am desperate I can call you or you can call me and together we can look for a solution. I know that sounds strange to you, but we are now in a world which is changing very fast. I have thought a lot about what I am proposing to you and I am certain that in the end, you will come to like my idea."

I could not come to terms with what I had heard. I could not believe it was Debbie talking. Was she testing me? I asked myself, but then I realised that Debbie was not that type. She was not the type to trick or test anybody. What answer was I going to give her? She seemed desperate to hear my answer.

"Debbie, tell me one thing."

"What is that?" she was quick to ask.

"Are you religious?"

"Why ask that one, Roger? I thought everybody is. It just depends on the degree of conviction and the method of worship. Personally I am constantly in touch with my creator and we are usually in harmony."

I laughed and then said, "Well, I don't mean to go into religion, but tell me how our love pact would work if I returned to my country and you remained here in the States. What would it be like, if I returned, got married and got children with thousands of miles separating us?"

She stroked my head and said softly but emphatically.

"Like I told you earlier, we don't need to be together physically. Only our hearts need to be. You know hearts don't need contact to be together."

"I understand you very well, Debbie," I said and felt very relieved. For the first time, I realised what she was talking about. I was certain she meant what she was saying, and she was not demanding in any way. Over the time, I had come to respect her

decisions. They were always well thought in advance and they were very clear. She never went back on her word.

Tell me another thing, Debbie. In your own opinion, how many pacts can one faithfully keep?"

"In my view, a good pact can only be between two persons. That is only one pact. If it breaks, you can enter into another one. The way I view it is that like a good marriage, a fruitful pact cannot work when more than two persons are involved. Like marriage you cannot abandon one pact and jump into another — the meaning would then be lost."

"When did you conceive that idea?" I asked her.

"Long before I met you. But I thought of putting it into practise after we became friends. I didn't want to tell you before."

"What makes you hate getting married?"

"Well, it is just my wish. I can tell you that it is difficult for me to live with something or concept that I don't like. That would be like putting myself in a jail knowingly. I cannot do that."

"One more thing, Debbie. Suppose I got married to someone else. How would you relate to her?"

"Absolutely no relationship. I wouldn't need any relationship with your wife. That would be up to you to relate with her in whatever way you wish. The same would apply to you in case I got married. That is why I like the idea." She seemed determined and fully decided about her stand.

We had become very intimate, and I could not imagine that a love pact would meet our needs. I could not visualise being hooked to her and yet not being with her. I needed her more than that, but at the same time I had to respect her decision. For the first time Libby did not feature anywhere in our proposed relationship. However, I was aware that Libby was very inquisitive, jealous and possesive. I could picture her in my mind, sitting behind a roseflower bed listening to our conversation.

Without thinking about it twice, I got hold of Debbie and pulled her over until she lay across my chest. Then I looked up and saw her smiling at me in the moonlight. She lowered her head and we kissed very emotionally.

"I like everything that you said today," I said to her.

Today we are entering into a lifetime pact. Whether we shall always be together or apart, our hearts shall remain together. My love for you will never change. I don't know if I shall ever get married, but as for now I cannot rule out anything. At present, what matters to me most is our continued happy relationship. Everything has been wonderful and I want us to continue that way. You can count on me for everything that I am able to offer you."

We kissed again very passionately and I heard her heavy breathing and the pounding inside her chest. Then I pushed her long hair away from my face and drew her arm even closer, until her full succulent breasts were the only cushion between us. I tilted her to the side and we swapped positions. I could no longer see the moon or even the stars. The Pacific Ocean also became quiet and 1 could

no longer hear the breaking of the waves or feel the cool breeze. But her sighs were loud, even deafening.

* * *

After visiting the San Diego zoo, we concluded our vacation. What remained was the long drive to the north. But we were in no hurry. Our plan was to get into Oakland on Saturday evening, spend the night at Debbie's home and then proceed to Davis the next day. Sunday was set aside for relaxation. On Monday we would fly to Anchorage for our five day comprehensive tour which was arranged by Giselle travels. Once more we opted to drive at night in order to escape the summer heat, and we agreed to alternate driving after every one hundred miles or whenever anyone felt tired.

We slept most of the afternoon inside the camper and at 9.00 p.m. we left San Diego. It was Debbie's turn on the wheel and I

was at the back of the camper. Debbie did not require any navigational aid and she asked me to let her drive in silence except for the music. The rear compartment of the camper was dimly lit so I could not read anything. I remained lying on the convertible bed most of the time, occasionally calling to ask her how much distance we had covered.

I remained fully awake all the time. I had not quite come to terms with our agreed future relationship. Yet I had committed myself to a love pact. And each time 1 thought about it Libby's image came to mind very vividly.

At that time, 1 could not afford to disappoint Debbie. She had become a part of my life and she meant a lot to me. I had to find a way of coming to terms with the new relationship which previously had no set guidelines. 1 viewed it as a situation where everything was laid down with no limit, and I had to set my own limits myself. I knew such a situation was very tempting.

However, I knew that I had to strike a compromise one way or the other. First and foremost, I had to be at peace with myself. That was the bottom line. Everything else had to start from there. I had to set my goals and stick to them. Secondly, 1 had to concentrate on my research project. Neither Libby nor Debra could step in between. After all, my project was as unpredictable as a dingo, but I had to keep my side of our promise. I also resolved that everything would depend on Libby once I got back home. She had the key to our relationship.

Finally I reckoned that Debra was a genuine person, but her principles were unshakable. I had to respect her for all that she was. This had to be a life long commitment of friendship. I was ready to honour it. I felt I had found an answer.

She pulled the car to the side of the road and stopped. Then she said aloud, "We have covered one hundred and fifty miles". Then she jumped out of the car and stretched herself.

"That was superb driving," I commended her and kissed her lips.

"1 know you must have dozed off a hundred times on that little bed/'

"You are right, sweetie, I have been criss-crossing between America and Africa all the time without getting tired/'I joked.

"I am glad you did not fall into the Atlantic ocean at any time," she said and jumped into the back of the camper.

"It's your turn to steer the wheel. I will doze off for a little while, and then I will be with you in the front seat," she said, and sank into the small bed. Then I started the car and entered the freeway.

"At any moment, my dear, you can wake me up if you need any navigational assistance," Debra said.

Chapter Fifteen

By the end of Fall, all my research work was over. My dissertation had been accepted and the ceremonious graduation was over. Everything had gone on well and right on schedule. U-Haul company had already shipped my heavy belongings. Whatever remained in my apartment was going to fit in my travelling bags. 1 was anxious and ready to go home.

After breakfast I sat on the couch idly. Then I looked at my watch and saw it was already after nine o'clock in the morning. I picked up the phone and called Cindy, my programme specialist in Washington D.C. First she congratulated me for a project well done and then enquired about my travel plans. I did not intend to stop over in any country and she promised to have my ticket and my final cheque ready in three days. She was very happy indeed. She then congratulated me once again and since we were not going to meet again before my departure, I

felt our goodbye was well done.

My mind was blank. I had almost one whole week with nothing specific to do. Debra had very many classes during that time and most of the time I was alone in my apartment listening to music, watching TV or simply lying down and reading any stuff that I could lay my hands on. I opened the small bedside drawer and pulled out Libby's last letter which I had received a week earlier. I had not bothered to reply it since I was almost leaving. It was the longest letter that she had ever written to me and she seemed desperately in need of my advice and assurance. I sat back on the chair and read it once again, meditatively:

'Sweetheart,

This is what I would consider one of the happiest days in my life. I say this because although I did not obtain sufficient marks to go to college I have been offered a

provisional job with Aero Pacific Airlines as a flight attendant. They have been recruiting regional flight attendants worldwide and Nairobi happened to be a regional base. I casually sent in an application and after a series of interviews I was one of the forty lucky ones out of a total of six hundred applicants. We had our final selection done at the Mount Safari Club, Lilian Towers. After selection we were treated to a cocktail at the same club. The interviews were gruelling and lengthy and I was elated when my name was finally called out. I cannot believe that I will be on the payroll this month. However, we have been told that we are not fully employed.

The hardest bit still remains. In four weeks the selection group of forty will travel to Miami in Florida to the Flight Academy for training. That will comprise both theory and actual operations. We have already been cautioned that any failures will be sent back on the next available flight. This is particularly worrying since they need only twenty flight attendants out of the forty who are going to Miami. We were told that even if all the forty of us pass, which I consider highly unlikely, the other twenty will not be hired. They will be treated as reserves at large.

Currently, I am working as a junior accounts clerk, but it is only temporary. I wouldn't remain here, even if it were permanent. It is a lousy job. At the end of the day I just find that I have been counting papers and I have done nothing in

accounts. The weekly pay is low and I spend more money on bus fare and going to work than I receive at the end of the day. I skip lunch most of the time, and eat as much as possible when I get home to keep me going the whole of the next day.

In your last letter, you indicated that you have finished your training. When are you coming? I wish you could be here. If, however, you are not about to come write to me urgently and tell me what you think about the whole thing. If you don't write soon I will go ahead and

take the Airways job. It seems quite a gamble but 1 will endeavour to do my best. 1 know it is for our own good. If 1 don't succeed, I will have succeeded in going to America on a free trip. But 1 do not expect to fail

I put the letter back in the envelope and pondered over the subject for a while. I could not see anything wrong with the job, but at the same time I did not know what it would entail. Maybe a lot of travelling. Maybe we shall have very little time together. I did not know anyone who was a stewardess. All I knew was that it was a high life career full of luxuries. I reckoned that there were two worlds in such a career. There was the life on the ground and there was another life once airborne. I could not see clearly what such a life held for our relationship, plans and dreams. I tried to think what it meant to me and to us. All I could see w 7 as darkness whenever I tried to peer into the depths of the whole affair. I had no solution. In the end I thought there was little for me to do if her mind was made up.

Still I had my own reservations, which for some reason were very deep-rooted. Unless Libby had changed her ways or unless she was going to change I was afraid we were not going to make it. She was used to high life and that was mostly what the job was ready to offer. I was skeptical about the chain of her associates, but again I realised that no one could be chained to another. The job was glamorous but could also be very enticing and very tempting. I knew jet-setters had a lot of money to spend. They were people who were exposed to many things, and wondered if Libby could withstand all the sophistication even after the initial training. I cared a lot for her and I knew the future could be at risk if anything was left to chance. However I felt this was not the time to get bothered. She had not taken the job yet. She had not undergone the training as yet and here I was. There were still twelve thousand miles separating us and maybe as many divergent views between us. The word love was the only key

word.

I left the apartment and rode my bicycle to the DHL Express, Mail office. I filled a small coupon and mailed a short letter to Libby:

'Hi,

Don't bother about my reply to your last letter in my possession regarding your possible change of job. It sounds a great idea, and I hope you have considered it well.

I am arriving in Nairobi on Tuesday night aboard Pan Am. I hope to see you at the airport. The plane gets there at 22.00 hours. Don't bother to pass the word around. I don't want to find an entire village waiting for me. Be good and take care.

Love, Roger.'

I was assured the message would be delivered within twenty-four hours. After that I went to the dean's office and signed off all the college property in my possession. Then 1 decided to go to the shopping mall for a light lunch. I bought a newspaper and after buying my lunch I sat outside. The day was sunny but a strong cold wind was blowing through the trees making it rather chilly. The flower gardens were covered with a bed of yellow leaves that had fallen from the trees and more were falling as the strong winds continued blowing through the tree branches leaving the branches bare in readiness for the winter which was around the corner.

I returned to my apartment in the afternoon and found Debra already there. She had finished her classes earlier than usual and she did not have anything else to do in the afternoon. We had the whole afternoon together.

Later in the evening of the same day, we were going to attend a grand farewell party for foreign students, which was organised by a group of veteran students living in Sacramento.

For the remaining hours, before going to the party, we decided to go for a leisurely drive in the countryside and a visit to Lake Berryessa, a man-made lake.

Our first stop was at the damming barrier, a concrete wall built across a creek and running as high as a ten-storeyed building. The wall span was almost one hundred metres across.

The construction gave the dam a scenic beauty. There was a hollow column of concrete built from the bottom of the dam and 1 realised it was meant to siphon out any excess water when the dam was full. It opened on the outside wall, and the water coming out at the bottom left the concrete tube with such great force that a powerful jet of mist and a sprawling rainbow streaked across the creek.

We parked the car at the side of the road and walked down the footpath leading to the bottom of the creek. The sound of the water hitting the rocks as it left the tunnel was deafening and frightening.

We sat down on a huge boulder facing the setting sun, admiring the ingenuity of the engineers who had designed the dam. It was a hallowing thought to imagine what would happen if suddenly the damming wall came crumbling under the weight of all that water. No doubt we would be washed away with such force that probably our first deposition would be in the ocean which was miles away. It was scaring to even think about it.

"Do you remember the first time we passed through here?" Debbie turned and asked me.

"No, I cannot remember seeing that column at the head of the dam."

"I thought you could. About one year and a half ago we drove along this road. We stopped briefly, but we never got out of the car. I did mention about a waterfall without any water falling. Maybe you don't pay enough attention to your teachers," she joked. "Or maybe ..." she said and closed one eye.

"I guess I couldn't think of a dam at that moment. You had occupied my whole mind."

"You must be kidding. We had barely started dating."

"That is right, but since our first date, I stopped seeing a lot of other things whenever we were together."

"And now?" she asked and smiled.

"Now I feel so much at ease when we are together that nothing will cross in front of us without my notice."

"You must be real happy to be going home, huh?" she said and looked at me with her seductive eyes.

I moved closer to her and held her bare shoulder very gently.

Then I said to her in a low voice filled with emotion as the thought that soon we would be parting was overwhelming: "Of late, Debbie, I have had sleepless nights, waking up in the middle of the night a number of times.This is very unusual and I am sure you must have noticed when we are sleeping together, that I have been turning and tossing very many times."

"That is right, sometimes I have been forced to punch you." "I don't know how it will be for me without you around. That is what I have been thinking hard about. I know I cannot change your mind, but I know to attempt to is to hurt myself. How I wish tilings were different."

"Roger, I do understand how you feel. I also feel depressed. Maybe you do not notice it. But I am sure that the promises we made while we were down South will remain unshaken. Mine will not be shaken until eternity," she said, and tears started rolling down her cheeks. A very rare thing with her.

"My word will remain as promised, darling, as long as I live," I said, and held her closer to myself. "As long as you live and as long as I live, you will always be in my heart. We have all the means of communication but as long as our hearts remain together then our wishes shall have been accomplished."

The night was setting in fast, and we were still far out in the wooded country side. We stood up and embraced. Then we kissed and started walking hand in hand up the footpath heading back to the car. Once more, the echoes of the water hitting the rocks at the bottom of the creek became audible. It was dark and we could barely see the surface of Lake Berryesa.

We entered the car and made a U-turn. We could not proceed. We had to get back and prepare for the farewell party in Sacramento. It was scheduled to start at 8.00 p.m. and there would be dancing from 9.00 p.m. I expected it to be a very emotional evening particularly for me and Debbie.

We left the party at 3.00 a.m. I drove all the way and Debbie sat silently next to me. Even when I tried to start a conversation she quickly brought it to an abrupt end.

At the party she had sat alone most of the time. She had not danced at all and she did not drink beer either. She had held a glass of wine in her hands throughout. Each time I asked her to have something, she said she was fine, and whenever I suggested we go home earlier, she told me to enjoy myself. She insisted she was okay and was not sleepy either, I knew something was bothering her and she did not want to talk about it

When we reached home, we sat on the couch and she fell on my lap with her eyes closed. I tried to talk to her but she would not talk. I held her close to myself and allowed her to regain her composure. I could tell that she was very disturbed. I could not tell exactly why.

Then slowly she got hold of my head and literally forced me to kiss her. She did not want to let go and we remained clasped together. Then she whispered in my ear: "Roger, I must drive to Oakland now". She was emphatic and I had learned never to antagonize her whenever she said something. I looked at my watch and saw to my amazement that it was going to four in the morning. I turned her head and looked at her face. She was covered with tears. I started feeling desolate after realising that I could not help the situation.

"Why do you want to go to Oakland at this hour?" I asked in a gentle soothing voice.

Then without any hesitation, she looked up at me and said, "I want to go there and stay for the next three days, without seeing anyone. I don't want to be here when you leave. That is why I must go now."

She stood up and I knew there was no way of stopping her once her mind was made up.

"Walk me to the car, please," she pleaded and held my arm firmly. I obliged and we walked to the parking lot.

The entire neighbourhood was fast asleep and the night was very still and calm. There was slight mist bearing fine rain droplets and it was eerily quiet.

Before she entered the car, we embraced and remained together for a moment. I looked at her face and saw her pupils wide open, looking back at me in the light of a distant street lamp. Then she patted my back and whispered again: "Roger, my dear darling, please excuse me, but I have to go home to Oakland. If I remain to see you go, I will break down and you must save me that torment by understanding me. I will send Hertz Rental to pick you and take you to the airport tomorrow night. All your bags are neatly packed. There is nothing to worry about. I will remain secluded in Oakland for one week, after which I will resume classes. So my love, goodbye. Be nice to me and to yourself and remember me. I will always remember you." We kissed again and she drove off.

I remained in the parking lot for a few minutes and watched the red tail lights disappear down the street. I became petrified for a moment and I could not move. For a moment, I could not comprehend what was happening. I felt confused and dizzy. I turned to all sides, but the blue Pontiac was not there. Debra was not there either. She was gone. I felt like I was in a dream, deserted.

I walked back into the apartment and looked around the room. There were only my bags which were placed in a solitary corner. The apartment looked exactly the same way it had when I first stepped in; a quiet, lonely, small apartment.

I spread myself across the bed and within no time I was fast asleep. I was weary and very depressed. Sleep was the only medicine available at that hour.

I was still in bed when, the telephone rang. I stretched my hand and picked the handset. Then a man's voice came on the line.

"This is Hertz Rental. Is that Mr. Roger at the Americana Arms Apartment?"

"That is right," I answered without asking who it was.

"Okay, we have been instructed to reserve a car for you beginning today at six in the evening for as long as you need it. Instructions have been given by Debra Schwatz. When do you need the car?"

I quickly glanced at my watch and found it was going to five. I didn't realize time had advanced so far.

"Probably I will need it just tonight. I guess 8.00 p. m. will be fine," I said.

"Jolly good. Someone will drive it to your apartment at the given address. Then when you finish using it you can leave it at any of our offices country wide. All charges have been taken care of by Debra."

Next 1 called Eastern Airlines to check on the flight and I was assured the flight was on time and would fly out of San Francisco at 02.00 hours.

It was a non-stop flight to JFK International in New York, which was going to be my point of exit. Finally, I called Pan Am and I was informed of some slight changes. I was not going via West Africa. Instead I was going to take a direct flight from JFK to Charles De Gaulle International in Paris. From there I was going to take Air France to Nairobi. Air France was not going to arrive in Nairobi until six the following morning. This was almost ten hours behind the scheduled Pan Am arrival, which was indicated on my ticket. It was the time I had given Libby. There was no time to advise her about the changes in my travel arrangements. It was too late in the night to call her. But I knew the Pan Am desk would advise her about the changes if she called them.

At seven o'clock in the evening I heard a knock on the door. When I opened, I found it was a man from Hertz Rental. He gave me the keys and showed me the car which was parked outside. Then he left in another waiting car.

I returned to the apartment and sat on the couch. I was very restless. I turned on my small transistor to my favourite station but it all sounded like a tin trunk re-bounding from a metal post. Every sound was irritating to my nerves. But there was no one to

talk to. I picked the phone and decided to call Debra. Then a strange feeling crossed my mind. I decided not to call her. She had said to me that she wanted to go into seclusion until I left, and I thought it was not good to call her. But again the urge to call her came back to me. I picked the phone and dialled the number which I knew was her personal number in her bedroom. I did not think twice about what she would feel. But there was no reply. The phone sounded engaged, with a characteristic tone. At once I realized that she had removed it from the hook. That was a sure way to avoid any calls or messages.

I set the alarm of my watch to buzz at 11.00 p.m., allowing myself two hours of driving up to San Francisco. Then I put my passport and my ticket in my coat pocket and lay back on the bed, staring blankly at the huge green flowered

curtain, slipping intermittently into and out of a light sleep.

At 11.30 p.m. I took my suitcase and my travelling bag to the car. Then I returned and took my briefcase. Finally, I switched off the lights in the apartment and as arranged earlier, I locked the apartment and took the keys to the manager's office. He was still there waiting for me. I gave him the keys and we shook hands. Then we bid each other farewell and I went to the parking lot. I entered the car and started the engine. I let the car warm up a little and then drove off, heading towards the freeway for my journey to San Francisco airport.

When 1 got to the airport, I parked the car and walked to the Hertz counter. I returned the car keys and signed the discharge forms. Then I moved on to the Eastern Airlines desk. I checked on my luggage and went to sit in the coffee shop. The plane was leaving on time, and I had another forty-five minutes before boarding time.

* * *

After customs clearance at Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, I loaded my suitcase and my bags onto a trolley and left the baggage hall. As I entered the arrivals area, I noticed Libby standing alone at the far end wearing a heavy woollen coat. It

was approaching eight in the morning and the wind blowing from the east was still very cold at that hour.

She spotted me emerging from the crowd gathered outside the small gate and she came scurrying towards me. We shook hands and kissed. Then we went to the taxi stand. She took the cart from me and assisted to push it to the taxi.

"Welcome back, sweetheart. I have been very anxious to see you. Last night I did not sleep. I waited here until the Pan Am plane arrived. Then I waited until the last passenger had left. When I failed to see you I panicked. I went to the counter and gave your name. That is when they told me that you were not on the plane and that you would be arriving today aboard Air France. I felt relieved and left for home. But I can tell you the night was long."

"Thanks, dear, for being that patient. It is nice to see you again. I have now come to stay."

I beckoned for a taxi, and a yellow one came over. I asked the driver to take us to my department's head office at the Community Hill so that I could report my arrival as well as find out about changes that may have taken place during my long absence.

We got to the office at quarter to nine. The department head was already in his office. After welcoming me he asked me to go and report at the meat cannery factory, in Athi River. That was going to be my initial station of work. Then he gave me two weeks leave in order to settle down, before resuming duty. There was a house allocated to me and I was delighted about that. I had no other business in Nairobi and I asked the taxi driver to take us to the meat cannery. I checked the house number allocated to me and I was thrilled that it was the same nice bungalow that I had been occupying before I left. When we arrived at the factory I went to the regional office, and after greeting the office workers, took the keys and went to the house. We off-loaded my luggage and the taxi left.

I called the transport office and asked if there was any car available. After a while the answer came. There was only a

Landrover. I asked the transport officer to send it to me along with one cleaner. I needed to have the house cleaned and polished.

I left the cleaner in the house and went to do some light shopping with Libby. There were no bulbs in the house and I needed a good number of them. We decided to drive to Kajiado, fifty kilometres away simply to pass time and to enjoy the drive through the Nyika Plains, which were perpetually filled with herds of zebras, gazelles and giraffes grazing alongside Maasai cattle.

"What do you think about the prospects of me being a flight attendant?" Libby was quick to ask. "You have been flying all this time and I am sure you have now seen them many times at work."

"It is true I have seen them at work, but I have never had an opportunity to talk to anyone regarding the job. Personally I think a job is a job. If you enjoy it, it pays well, and you are able to do the job, that is fine. By the way, you talked about regional flight attendants. What does that mean? I know Aero Pacific Lines is an American Company. So how will your terms be like? I also know there is a very strong union of flight attendants in the US, so how will you be affiliated to it? It must be a very complex arrangement."

"Initially we were told that we shall be based in Nairobi. Nairobi will be our operational base. We shall not operate out of Africa at any time in the beginning. We shall go as far as Senegal and back twice a week. Then from there the American crew will take over the plane back to the US. It will be a kind of shuttle flight. Aero Pacific Lines only flies to Dakar, Monrovia, Lagos and Nairobi in Africa. That is the reason why our route is only one and hence the name regional route. We were told they used to fly to Dar es Saalam and Johannesburg, but they no longer go to those places."

"And what will your terms of employment be like?" "Initially we are going to be hired on a contract of six months."

"That is a very short contract, isn't it?" "Very short indeed " "And what other benefits are there?"

"There will be a normal house allowance, a medical cover of about eighty per cent of cost. And that is just about it"

"That sounds quite different from what 1 would expect, or even what I know. It seems you are not covered by their union rules and it also seems the unions here have no say over you."

"I don't know much about the labour laws and even what the unions are about."

"And how about your salaries?"

"Full details have not been given but someone told me that the basic salary in our currency appears high but it is just a fraction of what the American stewardesses get."

"Why the difference, for the same kind of work?"

"Again I cannot answer that one. But it is true, the training is the same, the examinations are the same and the qualifications are the same. The job is exactly the same but the pay differs."

"Sounds like a kind of double standards, huh." "Maybe we need them, and they are not obliged to hire us or keep us. For the time being what I need is a job. The semantics of unions and routes and what have you, I don't understand."

"You are right, if you can get a little bit more pay, some training and some experience perhaps that could be a feather in

a small hat." ,

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"When are you expected to begirryour training?" "We are scheduled to leave this Sunday, in the afternoon. Then when we get to Miami, we shall undergo theory lessons and later on some practicals before we go into actual practice. We have been told that the training will be for all trainees recruited from all parts of the world: Africa, Europe and the Middle East."

"Do they have any restrictions say, regarding motherhood, marriage and such trivial things?"

"I am sure most of us said we are single and don't have any children. But I know a few who have children. They were not emphatic on that. But again it was clear to us that if you get a child your contract is simply terminated but I don't really know about that."

"Those terms are real hard. What do the rest of you think?"

"Generally all of us are excited. None of us seems to think about what may happen later. But again don't forget that we are not fully hired. The critical bit of the selection still remains. It is all a sort of crazy arrangement. Nothing seems to lead to the other. Each stage seems to be a dead end in itself. What I know for sure is that I love Roger. And I am sure he loves me too."

"Are there any options of the type of work you do once you are fully hired? Say in ticketing, in the office, and so forth. That is to say a section that does not require you to be flying all the time."

"That one I don't know. All I know is that we shall be trained specifically as flight attendants."

"Well, that is what I would call setting off for the unknown," I said, as I waved my right hand indicating that we wanted to turn to Kajiado Inn, after crossing the railway line to Magadi.

It was already lunch time and we ordered some food. Meanwhile, I ordered a cold Tusker beer and the first glass tasted good. It was a long time since I had a Tusker beer. Libby chose to have a warm Export. I called for a second round and changed to warm beer. I found Tusker even tastier when warm.

I tried to figure out in my mind what it would be like; I being the man of the house, while Libby became the jet-setter. It was hard to imagine how life would be. At the same time I could not see any valid reason to dissuade her from doing the job which she seemed to like. Deep inside me I had very strong reservations about the whole affair. But again I had no grounds to raise any objections.

"What do your parents think about it?"

"They think it is a wonderful opportunity. They have encouraged me to take it"

"Well, personally I foresee only one thing. I don't know whether it is for the better or for the worse."

"What is that?" she asked curtly.

"There will be the flying requirements on one hand, and there will be the house and me on the other. These two will be pulling you in different directions. Do you think you will endure the forces? And don't forget these are not light forces."

She looked at me as if seeking some assistance to answer the question. Then she said, "I guess all things are achieved by trying, by enduring and I also think most of all by persevering."

"I quite agree with you, Libby, but don't forget that you cannot keep trying all the time. You cannot endure the impossible always and you cannot persevere forever. I know some people can keep trying one thing for a life time, but I wouldn't consider that to be life, You might as well forget it and start a new life."

She seemed quite determined to try her new job and I did not consider it sensible to discourage her. But again I felt I knew quite well what such travels could lead to. It was a big gamble in a strong love affair, but I still conceded to it. I could see blurred shadows lying in wait, ahead,beyond the perceptible, and I felt I needed special eye glasses to enable me see clearly what lay ahead of us. I finally found myself conceding to every proposal that was laid in front of me.

"And how is your family?"

"They are fine. I told them that you were coming in at this time. They knew I was coming to the airport to meet you." ""Andhowisjoelene?"

"I haven't seen her for a long time. She eloped with a married man, and asked for a transfer to Western Kenya. Since that time, I have not seen her. But I hear she is working somewhere near Lake Victoria. I really don't know precisely where."

"You mentioned in your letter that you are a chief accountant somewhere in town," I teased her.

"Come off it, sweetheart," she screamed, and pushed me away at the same time bursting into a prolonged laughter. "You cannot call me that. A chief accountant? Maybe the chief accountant of wastepaper baskets. I am designated as a junior accounts clerk, but I can tell you that the guys there, my bosses, have the audacity to tell me to prepare tea for them. It is sickening. I spend literally all day running up and down on some plebeian errands until the day is over. Then on Fridays I hear a so-called section head say to me trenchantly, 'there is too much work this week, so you can come over the weekend for some overtime if you want some extra pay 7 . But when I leave on Fridays that is usually the end of my week. However, I find the job preferable to just sitting at home doing nothing."

"You are quite right. Idleness is the worst tiling I have ever experienced. It tires both the body and the mind. I guess you also age faster."

After lunch we drove to the main shopping arcade and bought all the necessary provisions. We then left Kajiado and headed back home, driving at a moderate speed, stopping once in a while to watch ostriches doing their mating dances or some male gazelles locking horns and fighting over territorial borders.

The savannah grass was barely two feet off the ground and we could stretch our eyes for miles and miles up to where the distant horizon appeared bluish in colour.

At 6.30 p.m. we arrived back home. The house had been cleaned and polished and the flowerbeds all around the house neatly trimmed. I gave the gardener and the cleaner a hundred shillings each in appreciation and they left us to re-arrange the furniture, after fixing the electric bulbs in all the rooms. The house became

lively once more.

I sat on the sofa and I felt fully at home after a long time. Meanwhile, Libby went to the kitchen and prepared two mugs of black coffee, then she joined me in the sitting room. We sat

there for a while watching a documentary on TV. After watching the ten o'clock news we retired to the bedroom.

"Do you realize how little time you have between now and Sunday?" I asked.

"I know but I have just about everything ready."

"You have your passport, health certificate and your visa?"

"Yes, all those are ready. We will be given our first allowance when we arrive in Miami and therefore I don't intend to carry a lot of clothing or things like that."

"Remember it is winter and very cold at this time. If you have some warm clothing it would be a good idea to carry a few. You may not have time to go to the stores right away when you get there. And your allowance may also not be adequate to do everything you want. I have about one hundred and fifty dollars which I did not declare and I suppose that can keep you going for the first few days. Also I have about one hundred French francs and you can change that when you get to New York.

"That is just wonderful, sweetheart. That is a lot of money. It will take me a long way. And when are you resuming work?"

"In ten days' time. I have what they call overseas leave during which time I will try and get settled. Tomorrow I plan to go and see my family upcountry. They knew I was coming around this time. I don't think they know I am already here. I intend to stay there for a couple of days and then come back."

"When do you plan to return?"

"I want to be with you from Friday until Sunday when you leave and if I could help it I wouldn't want to go at this time. Since you have got everything ready, I don't think there can be any problem. I will be away for only two days. You will keep one set of keys, and I will keep the other one. Then on Friday you can wait

for me here. I will come back in the late afternoon, and thereafter we can go out for a change before you leave. Can we call it a farewell dinner?"

* * *

On Sunday afternoon I drove Libby to the airport and we got there slightly late. All passengers and the entire group of the new recruits had already gone to the transit lounge. Libby panicked. I carried her suitcase and we went to the check-in counter. We found an attendant who was very kind and helpful. She understood the reason for our delay at once and she directed Libby to move at once to the security and customs check. I was left behind weighing and checking-in her suitcase. Libby was in a state of panic and confusion. And when I looked up she was gone. I looked around me and saw a group of well-wishers and the recruits' relatives staring at me as I continued explaining to the ground hostess the cause of our delay. I found her exceptionally gentle, kind and understanding. Finally she looked at Libby's ticket and smiled at me.

"Is Libby your sister?" she asked.

"No," I said and smiled back at her.

"Your wife?"

"No. She is my fiancee."

Then she laughed and commented: "Air travels is like that. It can be hectic at times. I saw you didn't even kiss her goodbye."

"I wished I had. But when I looked up she was gone."

She smiled again and looked at her watch. Then she looked at me and said, "They haven't left yet. There is another half-hour to go. Would you like to see her?"

"Sure. That would be great. I would like to kiss her and say goodbye."

"Come with me."

I followed her and we went up the stairs to the duty-free area where we found the passengers and the group of recruits seated in the departure lounge. Libby

saw me and came almost running all the way.

"You didn't want to say goodbye to me before leaving," I teased her. "Or is it out of sight out of mind?" We all laughed.

"I didn't know what was happening until I found myself in here. I thought I was going to be left."

Rose, the ground hostess smiled and said, "At times things happen so fast here. But don't worry, Libby, you will get used to it. It was worse for me when I started flying."

"Thanks, Rose, for encouraging me," Libby said. "I will try hard."

We embraced and kissed goodbye. After that I felt relieved.

"Work hard, dear, and do the best you can. That will be my pleasure." We kissed for the last time and I walked away with Rose.

I expressed my appreciation to her and then left. I climbed up to the waving base and stood directly facing the Aero Pacific Jumbo right below the waving base. There was an Aeroflot plane parked next to it and both of them would leave at about the same time. The waving base was crowded and it was unusually hot that afternoon.

Aero Pacific passengers started boarding using the gangway and the new recruits were the last group to board. I recognized Libby in her skyblue suit and she spotted me spontaneously. She smiled and waved vigorously. Finally she entered the plane.

Some minutes later, a tractor backed the plane away from the boarding area and the plane taxied to the runaway. A few minutes later, the giant jumbo was airborne, climbing fast and gently turning to the right to begin its initial flight of West Africa.

I left the waving base and went down to the Kwaheri Bar. I bought a bottle of Tusker and sat alone at a corner, scanning through the pages of a Readers Digest. I had picked up a very old copy of the magazine from my book rack and it kept me busy as I drank my beer.

An article titled, 'Life Without Her', caught my attention. Instantly I placed my glass of beer on the table and diverted my whole attention to the article. It dwelt in depth on a young man who nearly lost his wife in a car accident, and during the short intervening period before she recovered from the ICU, he had come to realize that she was the leaven in the bread of the house.

Everything was in shambles during her absence; there had been no order in his house, not even in his mind during her absence.

I tossed the magazine away and continued to have my drink. I saw no relevance in the article, but at first I had felt hollow inside when I saw the heading. I then felt I needed Libby. But now she was gone and gone for a long time.

After my second beer, 1 left the airport and went home. The house looked very empty and lifeless. I put on a video cassette 'The Battle of the Midway 7 , and sat there watching the film, until night crept in. I was bored and I did not want to go anywhere. I took another musical cassette and pushed it into the video. A while later, I stood up feeling very restless and I went to my bedroom. I opened my suitcase and removed a picture of Libby and one of Debbie. I went back to the sofa. I looked at the pictures and realized neither of them was anywhere near. They were just still pictures.

I realized that Libby must have been flying over the Congo Basin at that time. I then said to myself aloud: 'after the wedding I don't know what will happen'.

Chapter Sixteen

After my short leave I resumed work at the meat cannery. A month and a half later I received a copy of the new official posting order. I read through it a number of times and I felt very disappointed after receiving the new order. I could not remain in the office that morning.

When 1 reached my house I prepared a cup of coffee and sat quietly in my study. My new terms were contained in two pages of a letter. I started marking all the areas that did not satisfy me:

(i) I had to remain in the same station as before. The monotonous job was going to remain unchanged.

(ii) There was no promotion foreseeable.

(iii) There was no salary increase.

(iv) There was no allowance for working long hours.

(v) Seniority mattered more than advanced training.

(vi).,. The letter was very demoralising. I was meant to work under a less qualified person, who was not happy about my return. He was very hostile to me. I sought a change of station several times, but my applications were always rebuffed without any explanation. The cannery was a delicate and sensitive place to work in and soon my nerves were getting tense. News about the cannery often made banner headlines in the newspapers. It was a centre of political interest, and soon I could not bear the nerve racking assignment. I tendered my resignation and left before getting my final benefits.

Within the first week after leaving, I joined a private company and soon after I felt that was the place where I should have been in the first place. There was no monotony of work and

my working day was always full. There was no single minute for idleness.

I shifted from my house and went to live in the western suburb of Nairobi. At first the new environment appeared strange. It was a cosmopolitan neighbourhood and it was next to impossible to interact with the neighbours. There was no gym or sports club anywhere near and soon I became used to the solitary life.

After the second month in Miami, Libby sent me the first lengthy letter and some copies of her appraisal reports to let me know about her progress. I was delighted to receive her letter, and some photographs taken during her training sessions.

'Dear sweetheart,

It has not been easy to sit back and write you a full letter to tell you how I am fairing. The schedule since our arrival has been very tight. At six in the morning we are up. We have classes in the morning and practicals in the afternoon. Then in the evening we get further lessons. That is how my days have been. The exams are not very bad but the grading system is what we all fear. There is no pass mark as such. There is what they call a shifting curve, and this means if

most people get everything right, that determines the pass mark. I am happy, however, because I have not failed in anything. A few of my friends have already been sent back home and each time someone is sent home I get scared.

Our flying practicals have been in the continental USA and the farthest I have gone to is Los Angeles. I have so far received a few commendations and I am very happy indeed. I am confident I will make it.

Tell me about yourself when you write back. You mentioned in your postcard that you had already left your old job. Why? How is your new job. You told me not to worry and I will do exactly that. I would be happy if you tell me more about the whole thing. When I called

you last time, a lady answered the phone. Again what is happening? I can only trust and hope that no one is interfering with our plans. I hope, once again that what you told me in your letter is all there is to it; 'Concentrate on your studies and all will be fine whatever the results'. That was re-assuring and I am doing just that.

From this place I have no way of calling home. 1 have written to them but no one has written back to me. If you chance to see Julie pass my regards and ask her to write soon. The training programme will be over very soon and I look forward to coming home very much. I Find this place very lonely when there is nothing seriously going on, so I spend most of my free time reading my service handbook. I am hardly ever free though.

Be true and loving as always .. . and I love you very much.

Ever in my mind, Libby.' 1 admired her pictures taken in her uniform as she looked very beautiful indeed. I put the pictures aside and read through the letter again. There was more in the message than was instantly apparent. I took a chair and went to sit in the sun at the back of the house. I had many questions ringing repeatedly in my mind.

'What was our marriage going to be like? Was it sustainable? Could we sustain it when one of us was globe-trotting and the other was left alone?'

The mere thought of it made me feel weak and my promises to Libby made me feel even weaker. I was not ready to abandon her, or break the promises. But I could foresee some real difficulties arising from our separate lives. We had

always talked about raising children, but we had never thought seriously what that would mean when we were going to be apart most of the time. I could not bear the notion of entrusting our children to someone else. It was incomprehensible to me. Yet I knew for certain that Libby was very much in love with her new job. It

seemed to matter more to her than anything else, and 1 could not imagine myself forcing her to go against her wishes.

How true and loyal she would live to be was another question. But again I was well aware that loyalty could not be weighed on a scale. I had to take it as a gamble, and an expensive gamble at that. I did not want the thought of it occupying my mind. I had more important things relating to our proposed marriage to ponder over. In my mind I had many questions and not a single answer.

I went back to the house, and carried a small coffee table and some writing material. Then I set about replying her letter.

'Darling Libby,

It is Saturday afternoon and there is the usual December climate beautiful and cloudless. I am relaxing under an avocado tree, reading papers and thinking about you and the days to come. The days immediately ahead look exceedingly bright, but those a little ahead seem to assume all sorts of shades and colours.

I have just been reading your letter and 1 feel excited and in high spirits. I am very glad indeed to hear that you are doing well. Please keep it up. That is what we promised each other when you were leaving for Miami. It makes me very proud of you. I have had the chance to meet your family and they are all fine.

I have more or less got used to living alone and sometimes I get the feeling that you will never come back. It is only a bad feeling so don't take it seriously.

You mentioned a lady picking up the telephone. That was a colleague in my new office. My promise to you can never be broken. I cannot let anyone come in between us. Always rest assured about that. You also wrote about our wedding and you hinted that you have seen a nice wedding dress. If you can afford it, buy it. Our preparations cannot be stopped. However, don't forget that your first priority is your training.

At times when I am alone in the house, I wonder or rather I ask myself how life will be when we are so far apart That gives me a bad feeling. But I always dismiss the thought from my mind. I always think that you cannot plan what will actually happen after a marriage, and 1 take it that things will fall into place. Again that notion nags me and I prefer not to think about it. We have been together long enough and we have endured a lot together and somehow I feel things will be alright. Of course I know you have your own thoughts and feelings about the whole affair. But should we live on thoughts, feelings and imaginations? We have always talked about getting children, but have we ever thought what that means? You have also said many times that life is very short. But then it has always been like that. It cannot have changed all of a sudden for sure. Just do your classes well for the time being and we will see how other things fit in.

Roger/

When I finished writing I read the letter all over again and I decided not to post it. I felt it was not the proper letter when she was about to sit for her final test. I left the letter on the writing pad and opted to send her just a greetings card. All I needed to let her know was that I was fine, that I still loved her very much and also to wish her the best in her final tests.

* * *

After weeks of serious thinking and meditation, I came to the conclusion that after all, getting married was not an incarceration. It was not a debatable subject, and no clinics existed for such consultations. Any that I knew of only dealt with celebrated and solemnized cases. Our's was yet to begin. It was only a proposal garlanded with very beautiful promises. I resolved that there was no going back. I had nothing in

particular to fear. I did not even see the reason why the subject should occupy my mind so much.

Life had to go on. And now it was only a matter of days before Libby came back. The training was over and they were expected back any time.

As I sat at my office desk, my secretary walked in and drew my attention. She was holding a piece of paper in her hand.

"Roger, this fax message is yours," she said and handed it to me. I looked at it briefly and found it was Libby telefaxing from Miami. The message was brief and to the point: 'To Roger:

Hi. I am excited my dear sweetie. Everything is over and my average pass is a distinction. We arrive tomorrow night at 01.00 hours. I shall be very delighted to see you at the airport. I have missed you so much and I really long for your kiss. Please be there. I will collapse if 1 don't see your face.

Ever loving, Libby.' After reading the fax message, 1 felt thrilled and my lnood to work disappeared. I could not sit in the office any more. I could not wait for the next day to dawn. I excused myself and left the office a bit early. Then I took two days off-duty. I needed some time with her after she arrived.

I drove to Westlands shopping centre. I thought about what present I should buy her. I knew she loved flowers very much and I stopped at the florists' shop. I looked around and found a very good collection. Then I ordered a fresh bouquet of carnations, which I would collect the next day on my way to the airport.

After dinner at the Minar Restaurant, I drove back to town and on to the Bellevue drive-in cinema to watch a film. I sat alone in the car and I was envious each time I saw a couple drive past me going towards their stand. Somehow I thought that could as well be my last drive-in cinema to attend alone.

After the movie I drove home and reached there almost at one in the night. It was cold and quiet inside the house. I prepared a cup of hot chocolate and then went to bed where I found the bedsheets equally cold. I put on the heater and adjusted it to medium scale. Soon my bedroom gained some heat and shortly I fell asleep.

When I got up the next day it was already ten o'clock. I went to the newspaper stand and bought two dailies. Then I got back to bed and lay there reading the papers. I had nothing planned for the day, and it had been also a long time since I had spent a whole day indoors. After reading the papers, I turned on the KTN channel to watch the world news report. The crumbling of the communist walls in Eastern Europe dominated the world news.

At 10.00 p.m. I locked the house. I had already picked the flowers from the Sarit Centre Florist Shop during the day. I picked up my bouquet of flowers which was well wrapped in aluminium foil and placed it on the back seat of my car. It

was a combination of red and white carnations and lillies interspersed with a few daisies. They were tied together with a pink ribbon before finally being wrapped in the aluminium foil at the edges.

After putting the flowers in the car, I drove along Waiyaki Way and turned left towards the city centre. I joined Uhuru Highway and drove on to Mombasa road, before finally entering the airport road .The traffic on the airport road was very heavy due to the many flights leaving around midnight. There was a light fog all the way from town and the drive to the airport took an unusually long time.

At about midnight I got to the airport and luckily found an empty parking near the arrivals terminal. I bought a two hour pass and then proceeded to the arrival hall. First I went to the notice-board and found that the Aero Pacific flight was on schedule. I was happy to realise that I did not have to wait for long. I walked to the newspaper stand and bought a copy of the Tanzanian Daily News. I ordered a cup of coffee and sat in the coffee shop reading my paper.

Never before had I seen so many children and adults gathered at the arrival hall merrily moving up and down the hallway, while they filled the entire coffee shop and the pub enjoying their drinks. Upon enquiring what the fiesta was all about, I learned that the multitude comprised relatives of the flight attendants in Libby's group who were returning from their successful training. I realised that I was in the same category. But my mission was more than that. I was meeting my fiancee. I was happy thinking about it but I was not particularly yearning for the unknown.

At 01.00 hours the overhead notice-board flickered and I looked up. Then I saw that the notice had changed. Aero Pacific plane had arrived. After the announcement, there followed a surge of the waiting crowd towards the gate. I remained behind enjoying their visible excitement, each of them trying to find a vantage position to peep right into the baggage hall. I knew it was going to be another hour before the Jumbo 747 emptied all the passengers, and then immigration and the customs checks.

Finally, Libby appeared at the exit gate pushing a handcart. I hurriedly walked to her and pushed the cart aside. We embraced and kissed over and over again without letting go. It was an ecstatic moment.

I helped her push the cart and we proceeded towards the parking lot, where I had

parked the car.

"I couldn't wait to see you, sweetheart," she said gripping my arm against her's.

"I have missed you a lot, darling," I assured her as I opened the door of the car.

I took the bouquet of flowers and placed them in her arms. She could not believe her eyes at first. "Are they mine? Oh dear, 1 love you so much my dear." She exclaimed and fell on my chest kissing me wildly. "Oh how I missed you. Three months seemed like three years."

"I am very happy that you passed your exams. That was the greatest thing you could give me - your success."

"Thanks a lot for the beautiful flowers."

"Was your family meeting you?"

"Yes, my parents and my sister were supposed to come. I don't know what happened."

"I will tell you what. While I load your suitcase into the car, you walk back there to the hall and make a search in the whole area. There are so many people there and chances are that none of them saw you."

"You are right, sweetheart. I will be right back."

I loaded the suitcase into the boot and then locked the car. Then I lit a cigarette and stood at the rail perimeter of the car pack.

A quarter of an hour later I saw Libby coming with a small crowd surrounding her. Her entire family and some friends were all there to meet her. They had not seen her pass the exit gate and they remained at the eastern end of the hall while Libby left through the western gate. I greeted them and then Libby called me aside.

"Don't feel bad, sweetheart, but I think it is just fair that I go home tonight with my parents. I know they have missed me a lot too, and I have missed them a lot myself. I will spend the night there with them and tomorrow you can come and pick me up. How is that?"

"A pretty good idea. We have room for three in the car. See who should come along with us. I will drive you down and then I can come back to Nairobi and have at least some little sleep. Then tomorrow afternoon I will come for you."

"I am sorry, dear, that I must leave you tonight."

"No need to worry, dear. That is just the best idea for tonight. Parents are parents you know."

I looked at my watch and found that it was already 3.00 a.m. We got into the car and drove along the Mombasa road. There was virtually no traffic at that hour and I was able to maintain a reasonable speed.

I did not alight at her home. After removing her suitcase, we kissed goodnight and 1 drove back to Nairobi, arriving home at

4.30 a.m. tired and very sleepy. I locked the car in the garage and went straight to bed.

* * *

When the phone rang in the sitting room I thought I was dreaming. I uncovered my head and opened my eyes. Then I sluggishly walked to the sitting room and picked up the phone. It was Libby on the line.

"Sweetheart, what is happening? Are you still in bed?" "Oh my, what time is it?" I asked and then looked at the wall clock.

"It's already three o'clock," she yelled.

"I cannot believe it," I said in a slurred voice.

"I know you must be tired," she said ruefully.

"Are you still at home?" I asked.

"Yes, I have been waiting for you."

"Okay sweetheart, I will see you then."

I replaced the telephone and went to the bathroom. I took a cold shower and after

dressing up I entered the car and drove down. Twenty minutes later I reached her home and found her sitting with her friends in the front yard chatting and laughing. I stopped the car at the gate and she came over to me.

"Come in for lunch," she pleaded.

"No, thank you. I know there are very many of your friends in there and I won't be comfortable with people I don't know."

"I understand, Roger. So let me tell them that I am leaving and then we can leave. Allow me only fifteen minutes," she begged, and ran back to the house.

She disappeared into the main house and a while later came back carrying her suitcase and a shoulder bag. Then she waved her friends goodbye and we drove off.

"I barely slept last night. So many of my friends came around and we sat chatting until almost day break."

"1 can imagine the excitement."

"And I am sure you haven't eaten yet," she commented.

"You are right. When you called I was still in bed. I guess we can buy some barbecued chicken and take it home with us. That is how I have been surviving when you were away. I never cooked in the house."

"Poor you, no wonder you look thin."

We stopped at the Chipolata Cafe on Moi Avenue and bought some chicken and French fries. Then we took some ketchup and drove straight home. It was such a good feeling sitting together at the dining table after such a long separation.

After lunch we carried some chairs and went to sit in the sun at the backyard where it was cool and the breeze from the trees was very refreshing. She removed an IOK ring from her handbag and fixed it on my finger. It was a perfect fit. We kissed and moved closer holding hands.

"I like the ring. How did you estimate my exact size?" I asked with a smile.

"Easy, because you are mine. I know by heart the size of everything that you wear. I have some slacks, shirts and shoes for you and I can bet they will fit you perfectly."

"That is great my dear. You mean you have brought me so many things?"

"I have brought you more of my love," she said and kissed my lips gently.

"When do you start flying?"

"You won't believe it, but this is the only weekend we are free. I am in the first group and we shall be alternating. On Thursday we leave for Monrovia. From there another crew will take over the plane and take it across the Atlantic to the US. Then two days later we take over the flight from the US and bring it over to Nairobi. That will be the operation schedule: Nairobi Lagos-Monrova-NewYork and back. That is what they are calling the regional route."

"That sounds like you will have plenty of free time both here in Nairobi and when you are in Monrovia," I commented.

"Yes and no. When we are here we shall also occasionally have to work in the office."

"That appears reasonable to me. But I am afraid I will have to get used to staying alone most of the time."

"This month I will travel a lot, but after four weeks I will have about ten days off-duty. During that time I will get a companion ticket and we can travel together up to Dakar, Senegal. By that time our crew will be changing over in Dakar."

"What is a companion ticket?" I asked.

"Each one of us is entitled to a limited number of free tickets. All that we shall require is money for our own expenses. I know it is expensive but we can save for the trip."

"I suppose I might as well start saving now. I understand Dakar is a very expensive city. I have a friend working with Pan African News Agency in Dakar and probably we can take that opportunity to pay him a visit."

"Sure, we can. Four days will be a lot of time. We can visit many places in Senegal," she said.

"That sounds great. There is the famous Goree Island, the old slave supermarket which I would love to visit. I have only learnt a lot about it in the history books and I would like to see the place."

* * *

After flying for six months Libby had changed and was completely a different person, a person totally different from the d£ar Libby that I knew and I was used to There was virtually no communication between us. Her lifestyle had changed as well. When she was not on flight duties, she was a local tourist or a local tour guide. I detested the idea of foreign tourists picking her from the house to go sightseeing in the parks and on the beaches, coming home late in the night. Initially, I did not object to group tours, but I was gradually getting fed up, answering her phone calls in the middle of the night, telling me that she would be arriving home late etc.

When she was driving her friends I could not sleep until she came home. She knew nothing about car repairs, except changing a wheel and 1 was always wary in case she suffered a stalled engine or something in the night. But each time she arrived late she had a very good excuse. Staying at home for a full day became foreign to her.

My role became like that of a chauffeur. Picking her from the airport when she returned from a flight or taking her to the airport whenever she was leaving. Our quarrels became more frequent and intense and for once I started getting worried about our relationship. In spite of the quarrels and abuses, our love became even more intense. It became routine to fight at one moment and the next moment we were in bed making love and laughing it out.

Two months before, while touring Goree Island in Senegal we had vowed never to quarrel or fight again. And we had decided to bring our wedding day nearer, from June to January.

Now all final preparations were under way, and almost complete and nothing could be postponed. We had talked to our vicar and had already completed the required interviews, during which time all the aspects of a married life were discussed at length. When asked about children we answered that we had

discussed it, although we had not and it was not on our minds. It was not a priority in our lives. When asked whether our separation due to our careers would interfere with our marriage we said that we were already used to that kind of life. There were no second thoughts between us.

One week before our wedding we flew out to Frankfurt. We needed to do our final shopping. We bought our rings and exchanged some gifts. Then on the eve of our departure from Frankfurt we returned early to her hotel room at the Intercontinental Hotel in Frankfurt Main. For the first time during that trip I felt a heavy load pressing on my mind. I had a very dull feeling and a sense of uncertainty. Nothing seemed real to me although I could see that Libby was very excited.

I opened the small fridge in the hotel room and took a can of beer. Then I stood at the edge of the bed leaning against the window sill. From the tenth floor, I could see the tramcars moving way down below, and people clad in warm heavy clothing moving up and down the side walks. It was very cold outside and hail-laden winds were blowing. The warmth inside the room was sleep-inducing. I picked another can of beer, and then turned on the television. I turned to Libby and found that she was looking hard at me.

"What are you thinking about?" I asked.

"1 am counting the resolutions which I will make after the wedding."

"They must be many, probably that is the reason why your mood has been changing all day."

"You are right, sweetheart. And how many resolutions do you think you will make on your part?" she asked and broke into a short laughter.

"I guess none at all. All I will strive to do is perhaps rededicate myself to you. What are your resolutions?"

"I am confused. I really don't know. I can't think of one now that you have asked me. Please tell me what you would like of me. Then I will tell you what I would like of you."

1 looked at her closely and found her lips almost quivering and her eyes blinking faster than usual.

"Firstly, all I will ask of you is unabridged loyalty, love and faithfulness. If you can give me that I will never ask for more."

"Sweetheart, I will promise you that and anything else I consider good in life if only you promise me love."

"My love for you darling is endless. Just remember what I told you once: loving someone means dying for that person. That is how deep my love for you is. Don't forget that our promises are not for the wedding day only. They are forever. So if you promise now, you better know you are making a big commitment."

"I promise you all that, my dear sweetheart. I really do."

We kissed and moved closer together. Another accord had been sealed. This time in a far away land, where not a single tree had leaves and none of the flower beds was in bloom. There was snow all over, and hail continued in a blizzard.

We kissed again passionately and fell backwards across the bed. It was time to sleep. We needed early sleep in order to wake up in time for the train to Frankfurt International Airport, to catch 10.00 o'clock Aero Pacific flight to Nairobi.

* * *

On the wedding day, my bestman and I were the first to enter the Cathedral. It looked larger than usual. As we entered, I could see hundreds of well-wishers gathered outside waiting eagerly for the ceremonial hour. I avoided any eye to eye contact and we proceeded straight to the altar.

Instructions were that when the congregation started entering the Cathedral, we should not look back. We had to stand at attention, our eyes fixed to the altar. When the congregation got seated, it was dead quiet for a moment, except for soft low piped music coming from all corners of the cathedral.

Then I heard footsteps advancing towards me from behind. I was tempted to look back, but I did not. Then the piped music came to a sudden stop. Somebody was standing beside me on the left. I could see through the corner of my eye that it was Libby, but she was so concealed in a heavy facial net that 1 wasn't really sure that she was the one. The wedding ceremony had began. There was no

turning back. And the questions that followed were brief but piercing.

'Is this Libby, the girl you want to marry?

Will you continue to love her the way you love her now?

Will you love her in times of abundance and in times of scarcity?

Will you love her as much when she grows old?

Will you tolerate her when she acts like a child?

Will you remain faithful to her? Will you ... ?

The questions were very many. There was no room for argument, explanations or any questions. And to all the questions, the answer was either I do or I will. It was like a military marching exercise.

Finally the preacher solemnly declared us man and wife. Then he proceeded and washed his hands off the whole affair in a very simple phrase: What God has put together let no man put asunder.

Choir after choir sung for us and I felt closer to the holy spirit than ever before. Then I looked at Libby and our eyes met. We both smiled and kissed on the lips. A prayer followed and then we started marching out in a beautiful formation led by the preacher, while the piped music provided the melody.

As we entered the bridal car I turned to Libby. We embraced emotionally and then I whispered to her: "May the words spoken by the preacher be our guiding spirit", then I looked at her again. She had tears in her eyes. Then she regained her composure and we kissed again. Then we proceeded to the reception where we were showered with a lot of uncooked rice and confetti as we entered the hall.

At the end of the reception there was a car-load of presents and flowers marking the day. We then proceeded to a grand wedding dinner and dance at the Milimani Hotel. Everything was candle lit and it was a lovely evening.

At midnight, my new bride Libby and I officially opened the dance and all well-wishers jumped to the floor whistling and ululating. The celebrations were

scheduled to continue until Sunday morning.

It was time to start our honeymoon, so the bridal escorts drove us home and returned to the celebrations. We were now on our own. We did not require any further guidance. Our honeymoon was on and so was our married life. We removed

our wedding clothes and sank to the bed we were used to, but this time as man and wife, with a strong determination to conquer anything and every temptation that could arise in the future.

A deep sleep creeped in between us and in no time we were snoring like mountain climbers returning from conquering some big heights.

When we woke up the next day it was going to four in the afternoon. It was another beautiful Sunday. We replaced the phone on the hook and calls started coming in one after another bearing only words of congratulations. We accepted them with many thanks, but deep in us we were grieving gallantly. Libby was supposed to be flying to Frankfurt that night, and then on to Bombay, India, for a month-long tour of duty flying between Europe and Asia. I had to drop her at the airport at 10.00 p.m. that same night.

I did not know what to do during the time I would be alone. 1 did not want to ask her for any suggestions because I realised that she was deeply hurt by having to leave that night. I hoped we would both cope with it.

While she was dressing up, 1 called Kanamai Cottages at the coast and they confirmed availability of a cottage. Then I decided I was going to spend some time there meditating.

At 10.00 p.m., I drove Libby to the airport and escorted her to the aircrew's office, carrying her small travelling bag in one arm and her large suitcase in the other. I refused to enter the office. I stopped outside the door, from where I could hear the roaring of the jet engines coming from the parked Aero Pacific Jumbo parked outside.

I looked at her in the dim light and I could see streaks of tears rolling down her cheeks. I felt deserted and all of a sudden my heart began pacing very fast. I felt unusually strong. It was like some invisible person was lurking, ready to take my wife away. I looked around but there was no one, not even a moving shadow.

We embraced and kissed goodbye. I did not want to stay at the airport for another minute. The sound of the jet engines was getting to my nerves. I entered the car and returned home where I found myself all alone once more. The house was eerily quiet. The sitting room was littered with unwrapped presents, flowers and cards of congratulations. There was literally no room to move around in the sitting room. I weaved my way slowly into the bedroom and threw myself onto the bed. It suddenly looked too big for me to sleep in.

Chapter Seventeen

At the end of six weeks Libby returned from her assignment in Bombay, India. Except for an occasional phone call we were out of touch completely. I had long ceased to miss her and when she came back I expected no change. She came for a month-long vacation after which she was to go to Tel Aviv base for another five weeks. The thought of it depressed me and 1 started questioning the purpose of our marriage. The more I thought about it the more depressed I became. My moods started getting erratic.

My daily routine did not change. Every morning 1 would go to the office and sometimes I would go home for lunch if Libby was in. Many times she was away picnicking with her friends, more or less as she was used to when she was overseas. Boulevard Hotel became my lunch time venue. 1 would carry my newspapers to browse through during the lunch break and after work I would go home feeling tired and unsure of myself. If I didn't find her at home, I would cook two eggs, take a cup of tea and drive off to Sagret Equatorial Hotel for a cold beer. That became the order of the day every week. On Wednesday, we would go to the Carnivore restaurant for dinner and every Friday we attended a disco somewhere. She was obsessed with rap music and dancing. Soon 1 got fed up when I complained to her and she got visibly annoyed and easily irritable. That episode became the end of my complaints and I never complained again.

At the end of four weeks she extended her leave by two weeks in order to give me enough time to apply for a short leave so that I could accompany her to Tel Aviv for about three days. I anxiously looked forward to a trip to Israel, but my ecstasy of being with Libby had vanished. The atmosphere in the house had become very tense. At times when I was alone I wished that

no wedding had taken place. I really felt pegged down but I could not mention it to anyone, and each time I turned to her she was often not in the mood to discuss

anything. Having fun was her main preoccupation.

International phone calls swelled. Sometimes I would receive very late international calls and no names would be given. Again I complained but I was rebuffed: "friends are friends," Libby had said. But a wife is more than a friend I thought; and kept this to myself.

For one week I was not able to sleep. During the last days of her leave, international calls coming in increased. When I was asleep she would take the phone to the sitting room to save me the noise. Conversations were suspiciously lengthy, but by now I had been conditioned not to be inquisitive. However, my curiosity swelled to dangerous levels and each time the telephone rang in the middle of the night, my sleep disappeared completely, until many hours later. I was almost reduced to a stranger inside my own house. For two days we were not on talking terms. I contemplated shifting to the second bedroom but again I decided against the idea. I preferred to reconcile when she was in the mood to talk. Time did not appear to help. Our relationship became worse and I decided to leave everything to sort itself out. I was not prepared for any sort of psychological war which she seemed well equipped for.

A week before we left fpt Tel Aviv she came home shortly before lunch with two plane tickets issued by El Al airlines. Mine was a return ticket, but hers was one way. Then she drove to town and obtained our visas to Israel. My leave had been approved already. When she came back from town, she told me there was a group of friends visiting Nairobi and she wanted to accompany them to the Maasai Mara game reserve for two days. They were meeting the expenses. I asked if I was invited and the answer was that the tour company would then require more money for any additional person. Again I could not help to wonder whether I was another person or Roger, her beloved husband? I had the money but I lost interest and I felt

unwelcome. I thought about it briefly and then issued my ultimatum.

"I don't think I would hate to go to the Maasai Mara, but I would love it more if I went with you, just the two of us, or if I was cordially invited. I don't think it is fair when you go accompanying your friends leaving me behind however liberal and free we are. I have thought about all what we promised each other, that you and I are always to think of each other first and foremost. I think with all due love and respect you should not

go"

"How can you or I be at the forefront when most of the times we are thousands of miles apart? she asked sarcastically.

"At that time, my dear, our hearts ought to be together, but this time it is different," I said very calmly.

"Today is Tuesday. We have made all the arrangements, and I think I should go," she insisted. "And I will go."

Those words reverberated deep into my mind. I did not want any arguments. She looked at me without blinking and started crying but I knew those tears were not genuine. Her pride was hurt and she did not want to give in. Then she turned around and went to the bathroom.

In the meantime, I went to the telephone relay and unplugged one set of lead cables. I hooked them to my military Zenith Recorder and turned it on, to the recording mode. I set it to record for four hours any calls coming or going out of the house. I was fed up and I wanted to know who else she was confiding in. I knew in her anger Libby was likely to call the whole world.

A while later she came out of the bathroom with her eyes red scarlet. Then I called her by her name: "Libby, I think you should not go. And I see no need to expound on it any further."

She looked at me as I walked out of the house but she did not utter a single word.

I took the car and drove off but I did not tell her where I was going. I took Valley Road and then got to Ngong Road and

drove straight to the Shade Hotel. I walked into the main bar and sat at the counter. Then I ordered a cold beer. I needed some silence and a moment of deep thought. I asked the barman for some roast meat and I sat drinking until four o'clock in the afternoon. At five-thirty I drove back home slowly and arrived at 6.00 p.m.

Libby was not at home and the house looked deserted. The bed was as ruffled as it had been in the morning when I woke up and her favourite handbag was not on

the hanger. I sat down on the sofa and took a Readers Digest magazine.

I flipped through the pages but found nothing to interest me. I opened the cupboard and took a bottle of vodka. I filled a glass and placed it on the table. Then! went to the bedroom and took my Zenith Recorder. I removed the tape and rewound. Then I started playing it back. For the first ten minutes or so there was nothing recorded. I estimated that to be die time since leaving the house up to the time I entered Ngong Road. Then suddenly, Libby's voice appeared very clearly:

'. -. 1 am very sorry Le Roy, but 1 won't be able to come with you to the Maasai Mara.'

'Why Libby?' a male voice with a slight French accent asks.

'My husband insists that 1 should not go. He says he should also have been invited. But of course I wouldn't agree to that. He might kill me if he suspects anything is afoot between us.'

'Do you think he is suspicious?'

T cannot tell, but he was in a bad mood today. He told me not to go and left the house fifteen minutes ago without saying a word.'

'So what do we do? The three of us are here in the hotel, Jackquelene, Francois and myself.'

Then there is dead silence for a minute or so during which time only the noise of the traffic outside is audible. Then Libby's voice came in:

' I am going to see you in your room at the Hilton Hotel, and then we can work out what to do . . . but, I think we should

avoid meeting or seeing one another when we are in Nairobi. I know Roger can be nasty if you blackmail him, or if he gets any idea that we are seeing each other. We would rather meet only when we are out of the country, which anyway is the case most of the time. Take it from me that Roger would not stand me in the house if he got the slightest indication of what is going on. And to tell you the truth, of late I feel very guilty after seeing you.

'There is something else I also think we should talk about. He is coming with me to Tel Aviv for three days and in the second week we can still go to Rio, but I am afraid that could as well be the last time for me to see you. I am sorry but I have got to try and save my marriage. I will see you in twenty minutes/

There was no more conversation on the tape. Only the traffic noise. I drank my first glass of vodka quickly and filled it again. The conversation on the tape did not impress me, and I did not want to dwell on it for a second. It was clear that Libby was not willing to change soon. I listened to the tape again and I became very depressed. I removed the whole tape from the recorder and threw it in the garbage incinerator. Then I set it on fire and returned to my seat. I had to safeguard my sanity more than my pride. Libby was still my wife, and spying on her was the worst thing I could do to hurt my pride.

I drank a second glass of vodka, and continued drinking one glass after another, until my eyes started rolling. After listening to the evening news summary, I locked the main door and removed the keys from the union lock. It was midnight and Libby was not home yet. So I went to bed as I was used to — alone, but this time very unhappy, and my trust totally shattered.

I recovered from the effects of the vodka at 2.00 a.m., feeling very thirsty and dehydrated. I walked to the kitchen and drank a glass of orange juice. Then I went back to bed but I could not sleep for the next one hour. Libby had not shown up yet and I had no idea where she was or whatcould have happened to her. The mere thought of it was very disturbing and I kept waking

up. She had not taken her car and wherever she went she must have driven in another car. Then I reckoned that she was an adult and I stopped worrying anymore. Shortly after that I fell into a deep sleep.

In the middle of my sleep, the telephone rang and I felt like a fire engine was passing by. I raised my head and picked it up, Libby was on the line talking with a shaken voice. She did not even say hello.

"I am afraid of coming home/' she said.

"Where are you?" I asked.

She hesitated to answer and then said: "We did not go to the Maasai Mara. I decided not to. So instead we chose to go to Lake Naivasha, and we had a car

breakdown. There was no telephone anywhere and I was unable to call you. Please tell me if you will beat me if I come home?" she pleaded.

Her questions and even her voice were irritating. 1 was happy to hear that she was fine, but 1 did not want to hear her voice anymore. I felt sick of her.

"Even if you come home and we started fighting, we will have barely one hour before daybreak. You know that I don't possess a gun to shoot you when you come. So the choice is yours, whether you come or you don't," I said and hang up. Then I went back to sleep.

At 5.30 a.m. I heard the noise of a car outside. Then shortly after, I heard the main door of our house open and then close. I turned my head and looked up. It was Libby looking cold and shaken.

"I have come," she said looking hard at me to see my reaction.

"You better sleep if you want to," I said and covered my head with the bedcover. I did not wish to say anything at that hour of the night. I fell back to sleep.

As a result of the many interruptions of my sleep during the night, I woke up late. Libby was already up. She had cleaned the house and breakfast was ready on the table. But I had no

appetite at all. I took a glass of milk and sat right across the table reading the morning papers. There was a ghostly silence in the house and we did not look at each other.

"I called El Al and confirmed the flight. The plane leaves JKA at eleven tomorrow night. Its a Jumbo 747 enroute from Johannesburg."

I looked at her for the first time that morning and wondered if really she was the dear wife I married less than a year ago. A deep chasm had already set itself between us, and I was not sure what could be used to seal the cleft. And if anything was available for that purpose.

My interest of visiting Tel Aviv vanished and so did all the fire of accompanying Libby to Israel. But I felt I should still go with her. My trust in her was critically fragmented.

"What do we need to carry?" I asked, if only to break the silence.

"I will pack a few clothes for you," she replied. "I do not think you require anything else. I have checked your papers and they are all valid."

* * *

The El AI plane was scheduled to leave at 23.00 hours, but it did not leave until 03.00 hours. The plane did not even arrive until after midnight. The security check was extra-ordinary and very time consuming. The questions asked were very many.

Finally we boarded the plane at two thirty and left Nairobi at exactly three in the morning. The plane was full and we got seats away from each other along different aisles. That was a short flight and I did not sleep all the way. I kept thinking about Libby and myself. I was very restless and I kept questioning the purpose of my going on the trip. There was no happiness inside me. My mind was full of questions, suspicions and doubts. It was a horrible experience.

When we arrived at Ben Gurion airport we found a ground hostess waiting for us. She gave Libby her timetable of flight

duties and then left. From the airport we took a taxi to the Carlton Hotel in Tel Aviv. That was the hotel where her fellow crew members were staying. We checked in and after taking a shower we went for breakfast.

The sun was up in the clear sky and it was very bright and hot outside. We occupied a small table overlooking the Mediterranean sea from where we could see fishermen preparing their boats and nets on the beach.

After breakfast, we decided to take a walk. Libby was scheduled to fly out to Paris that night and she needed some sleep in the afternoon. At the reception desk we took a map of the city and studied it for a while. We chose to take a walk to Jaffer to see some of the ancient Biblical ruins.

We took a walk along the entire beach-front until we reached the narrow streets of Jaffer. Then we took the main street and just followed it up to the excavated sites, where we found some displays and inscriptions made on some excavated items, and other ancient artefacts. Most of the writing was in Hebrew and we had to keep asking for interpretations.

At midday, we detoured to a small open hotel at the top of a cliff overlooking the sea and sat at a table in the open. It was very spacious and the sea view and the cool breeze were a very welcome break after walking up and down the hilly winding paths in the sultry heat.

We ordered cold drinks and grilled meat, which we saw being roasted on charcoal ovens. We were served with mutton and plenty of vegetables and spices. But even after eating, the tension between us remained high. I felt quite helpless and 1 removed my sun-glasses to draw Libby's attention.

"My dear, don't you think it is really bad when we are so far away and there is no ease between us?"

"I thought so. But you treat me like a toddler. You seem to think I cannot take care of myself, while I think I am mature enough to know what I want. You very well know that most of the time we are not together. We are usually far apart. You

cannot expect me to know everything you are doing all the time and I think the same case applies to me."

"That is true, Libby, but your work is different. When you are at work it is different. And I think when you are at home it is also different. What do you think I feel when you just walk away, or spend all day away when you know very well I am at home yearning to be with you?"

"But sometimes when I am there, you don't even come home for lunch. Sometimes you go away the whole night."

"So you want to imply it is all a game of tit for tat and an eye for an eye?" I asked, looking direct into her eyes, without blinking.

"I didn't say that, but it seems like it. Furthermore, there are no children in the house you could say 1 am neglecting."

"My dear, I am just talking about the two of us," 1 said with a lot of emotion in my voice, on recalling the tape conversation.

"I know, but is there any point for one to live like he is in a civil jail? I just don't know. For the time being my job seems to take most of my time and energy," she

replied without any attempt to explain anything.

"I have no quarrel about your job for the time being and 1 quite agree with you. But don't you think that when you are old we will still need each other whereas your job will not require your services?"

"That will be then and 1 cannot tell about the future."

"Well, my dear, 1 can see some differences have deeply crept between us, and I really don't know what we need to do. I must tell you now that I am not very happy with strange persons calling from all over the world, asking for you in the middle of the night and when I try to take any message the phone is hung up on me. Do you know how painful it is, my dear libby? And don't forget, that is not all that I have tolerated all along."

She looked at me, and she did not seem to like my comment Then she burst out, "Now if someone calls the house and I am not there, how can I know who it was or the purpose of the call?

Do you expect me to answer that?" she asked, rather sharply, something that I could not stand in the Holy Land.

"There is no contest, dear. It is very clear that something is awfully wrong and progressing along the wrong path."

"I don't know how you see it. And I also don't think I can change your perception," she said without any elaboration.

She was not ready to budge and I was not ready to push her any further. My mind was irreversibly made up. I paid twenty shekels for our food and drinks and then we took a taxi back to the Carlton Hotel.

We did not speak another word along the way.

When we reached the hotel, she went straight to bed and I sat in the bar taking some whisky at the counter overlooking the blue Mediterranean sea water, asking myself silently why I had to travel all the way for a belated honeymoon.

At 8.00 p.m. she walked down and called me to the lobby. Then she said, "I am leaving for Paris now, and as you know 1 will not be back until tomorrow night.

I hope you will find something to keep you busy. Just remember to sign for anything you take here at the hotel. It will make my account easy when I am finally checking out."

We kissed goodbye but it was a very cold kiss. I was not even sure who I was kissing.

I returned to the counter, and after one more shot of whisky I went up to the hotel room and asked for room service. Shortly an attendant came and I ordered six packs of Schlitz beer. I opened one can and drank it fairly fast. Then I opened a second one and held it in my hand. I was unable to finish it. I emptied the beer into the sink and threw the can into the waste bin. All of a sudden I did not want the smell of beer. I turned on the hot water faucet and cleansed the sink. Then I sat on the bed.

I turned on the TV and put off the sound. Every programme was in Hebrew. I could not follow anything and I felt frustrated. I spread myself on the bed and stared at the ceiling, feeling like a prisoner. The room was dead quiet. Libby was gone, and even

when she had been around she was hostile* The TV was on, but I could not understand the jpr6gr3hi?ne:^There : was beer, but I could not bring myself to swallow it. My chest muscles were very tense and I could hear my own hearbeats.

I opened the window and looked outside. It was all darkness except for the distant luminous beacons planted in the sea far away below. I returned to the bed and sat down. I could not think any more on my own. Then I said to myself, 'This is not the married life that I asked for'. 1 decided once and for all to leave for home on the next available flight. I resolved in my heart that there was no purpose of the marriage. It had to be terminated. That was my final conclusion. There was no need for any further discussion. I resolved not to consult anyone. It had to be an affair between me and Libby, and I could foresee no direction for the marriage. I could not play the multiple rule of a husband, lover, butler, chauffeur and private eye all at the same time. That was the end of it.

I stood up and felt a wave of relaxation run down my head to the tip of my toes. Then I opened Libby's suitcase and took some writing material. There was no room to make any changes in my mind, it was all made up. I would write a

farewell note and give it to her personally when she came back from France. I needed no reply.

"Libby: This note is not the result of a snap decision. It is the culmination of long days and long nights of deep thought and meditation. It marks the end of the many talks we have had over the years and also signifies the conclusion of an assignment which was begun by just the two of us. We got married hoping to become closer. But this goal appears to be a distant target moving further and further away. Very many people seem to have crept in between us, and you seem to like it that way. I am not ready for that and I am convinced that you are not ready to change. I respect your freedom, but I honour my freedom of mind even more. I cannot live with my mind

bogged yp witl* ^u^Sp^g^d ^ngertainties. And I know it|s#^eglttjf fmymfvtln beffig either.

I dopft w^t testnak£ any suggestions'to you about what you n^i ip donBvrt t'can say tlearly and deeply from my heaLrCthat"it is best for you to look for another man, if you so wish. One who is more flexible than I am. And probably one who doesn't know you well. Maybe someone who doesn't love too much. I got no doubt in my mind that 1 have loved you well and deeply from my heart, and long enough to say conclusively once and for all that I am simply unable to live this kind of life. This is my painful decision.

1 know the pain of my decision will come to an end after sometime but it can never be changed, and I hope you will accept everything now rather than later.

I am aware that we are bound together by law, as man and wife. But whether that law exists or not, this is the end of whatever exists between us. My love for you is gone and I see nothing else worthwhile between us.

Once again, I am not advising you on what to do. But you will find it better and easier to file a petition for dissolution of our marriage. If you don't I will. Advance any imaginable reasons you can think of. The thing is that I am not worried how you achieve it. I have no more interest in the matter. Expect no contest from me, and no more of my time in the whole affair.

So my love, all I can tell you now is* good luck and God bless you. I can never forget you. And I need not try — you can call it love, hate or anything. But I will remain, forever as solid as a rock, in my belief that true love is immortal.

Roger.' Postscript: Please do not reply.









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When Roger meets Libby for the first time, his heart goes out for her. He falls in love despite warnings from Libby's cousin Joelene that he is playing with fire.

Blinded by his love for Libby, Roger overlooks her major weakness even when he meets women of better character than Libby.

Roger goes to the United States of America to study for two years, while Libby gets a job as a flight attendant with Aero Pacific Airlines. Then they get married and Roger gets to know the real Libby.

Desperate and very miserable, Roger decides to end his painful relationship with Libby. Has waiting for her for all those years been worth it ?

Ayub Ndii the author is a professionally trained veterinary surgeon and epidermiologist. He is currently working with Minet ICDC Mombasa. Ndii is also the author of *A Brief Assignment.*

SPEAR BOOKS