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EBB and FLOW

A Collection of Short Stories

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Preface

This is a collection of ten short stories, each set in a different international location. In some the setting informs the story, in others it is an incidental background. I have written varied accounts of living and dying, which comment on the human condition; the ‘ebb and flow’ of life.

The first story, ‘Ebb and Flow’, from which the collection takes its title, is about green turtles coming back generation after generation to lay their eggs on the same beach, and tells of some of the hazards they face in propagation and survival. This brief account mirrors the precarious nature of human life and the threats that each individual may face in seeking fulfilment and the continuation of their species.

Other stories deal with reaching for goals and the losses that may be incurred in seeking their attainment. ‘The Black Ghost’ has the protagonist placing himself in a position where he pays an extreme penalty whilst pursuing his dream; in ‘Cottesloe Beach’ that penalty is exacted by another, as revenge. Many narratives speak of loss: the loss of a child, a loved one, an animal companion, reason, dignity and life itself.

‘The Simple Life’ gently mocks those who delude themselves into thinking that a return to the simplicity and lack of materialism of a former age would be an idyllic experience, even if it were possible. ‘Disneyland’ tells of someone who is unwillingly dragged in to helping another gain freedom and happiness, but whose own pleasure in life is spoiled by excessive personal indulgence. ‘Snoras’ illustrates the consequences of unbearable stress in the commercial world. ‘Hansie’ describes the cost of freedom.

As the settings have been varied, by evoking the essence of different places, the tone has also been altered by the introduction of mystery, drama, happiness, sadness, tension, humour, and even a little pathos into the text; hopefully bringing light and shade to the pictures painted. I have also made a conscious effort to try to write openings that would hook the readers and make them want to read on.

These tales are set in Malaysia, Lithuania, England, Morocco, Australia, Singapore, Namibia, Thailand, Brunei and America. Having been fortunate enough to have travelled to these places, I have spent time in re-immersing myself in the locations, with the help of photographs, maps and guidebooks, rather as a ‘method’ actor submerges him or herself in a character. Several of my characters are based on individuals or composites of different people I have met in these countries, and this has enabled me to ‘hear’ dialogue as it would have been spoken by that person. Hopefully these advantages have helped me to write both convincingly and entertainingly.

As the stories evolved, various changes took place during the drafting process. ‘Ebb and Flow’ was originally written in the past tense, but as I pictured the scene of the turtle coming up at night to visit the moonlit beach, this was altered to the present tense, to describe it as I was seeing it. This seemed to give the work more immediacy, and I hoped it would engage the reader more readily.

In ‘Fast Food World’, having almost completed writing it in the first person, I realised that this would not work, given the ending, unless I resorted to introducing a journal, tape recorder or other contrived device, and also altering the conclusion. I went through the whole piece, changing the viewpoint to that of the omniscient observer. This enabled me to write it using a single voice.

I also found that I felt passionate about the changes that are being made to many places in the name of progress. Singapore was an obvious example. Much of the charm that I

loved when first visiting that state has been swept away, as the city fathers were slow to recognise that buildings which date from the time of state's colonial heritage were worth preserving against the encroaching high-rise tide. This is another example of the 'ebb and flow' of opinion, as small pockets are belatedly being conserved as tourist attractions. My own emotions crept into the narrative when I was describing the renovations at Raffles Hotel.

Although 'A Day at the Seaside' (an account of a childhood trip to an English seaside resort) may not be the obvious choice in a collection of stories set in exotic locations, hopefully it has served as a contrast. I also felt that it should be included because the 'flow' of excitement when going somewhere new and special is felt by children worldwide, and the 'ebb' of the cautionary aspect of this story applies to all parents (especially those who are also motorists).

In 'Cottesloe Beach', the narrative was originally going begin in Britain and move to Australia when the characters emigrated. The plot was to involve an affair and an elopement, but as I began to write, this all changed. The action began and ended in Australia and took a more sinister turn than I had anticipated, as the characters evolved and pursued their own destinies.

Throughout the writing I have sought to find authentic names for my characters. Where I was unsure of the local spelling variations for a name, such as the Moroccan variant of Joseph (which is Youssef), some helpful websites, listed in my bibliography, gave forenames and their meanings from all over the world. I was also able to find useful information online, about the lives and breeding habits of the poisonous snakes of Borneo (in particular the king cobra) which was used in 'The Black Ghost'. The pseudo-Latin name for this mythical orchid was an invention, coined from the Malay words for 'ghost' and 'black'.

Most of the narratives, with the exception of the ones previously mentioned, have not changed substantially since their first drafting, but each one has had details of punctuation,

grammar and spelling, as well as word choice and order, altered. This involved up to twenty drafts of some individual pieces.

If this collection were to be turned into a published book I should like to expand it with further stories, perhaps concentrating on more European settings, and also to illustrate it with original photographs.

Ebb and Flow

‘Most men ebb and flow in wretchedness between the fear of death and the hardship of life; they are unwilling to live and yet they do not know how to die.’

Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucium*.

She moves effortlessly through her pellucid aqueous world. The full moon which casts gently-moving shadows of palm fronds onto the blue-white sandy beach also penetrates to where she glides. A spotlight effect through the calm water causes pale moonbeams to glance off her carapace. Behind her in an underwater cliff is a cave of skeletons where her kind go to die, but she is concerned with life, not death. She reaches the edge of the sea where little waves nibble the beach and eases herself from the water. Instantly all her lithe grace is gone. Using her flippers, first fore then rear, she laboriously hauls her bulk up the slope towards the line of dried seaweed and driftwood that mark the high water's limits. A distinctive trail follows her where flippers, belly and tail have gouged the sand. Her progress is slow and she pauses frequently to gather her strength for the task ahead. Satisfied that she has found a spot out of reach of the tide, she pauses to rest for a few moments, then with renewed energy, starts to dig. Flippers send showers of sand in all directions. Its dryness resists her efforts and constant trickles slide back in the hole, but she is determined. She gets down a damper, firmer layer and makes more progress. The cavity under the roots of a nippah palm steadily grows until she is finally satisfied. She nestles in the deep hollow.

She appears to be resting after her labours, but an acute observer might notice that her tail is slightly lifted. Her eyes are closed; her body motionless, seemingly sleeping. Without

warning a stream of eggs begins to emerge from under her tail. Like soft glutinous ping-pong balls, they shine in the moonlight, white and gleaming. She groans and sighs in her labour, repeating the process until, over the next two hours, over a hundred eggs are laid. She gathers her strength for her final task. Sand has to be carefully scraped over the eggs until they are hidden. After turning to check that none of them is visible, she starts on her laborious trek back towards the sea. The return journey is easier as the beach slopes gently down, but progress is still slow, as by now she is weary and longs to be weightless in the welcoming water. Finally the green turtle slips gratefully into the waves and is gone. This was her beach. She was hatched here. Over the past two weeks she has climbed its sloping sand four times and laid four separate clutches, but now she will not return for at least seven years when another pregnancy will compel her to seek out the same spot to deposit more eggs.

Turtle eggs fetch a good price in the markets. Although the trade is banned, unscrupulous dealers steal and sell them, and unprincipled individuals buy them, but not from this island; Pulau Kajang. Here a man walks the beach in the metallic moonlight, watching for turtles to lay. He waits until the eggs are buried, then gently unearths them, collecting them in a bucket. Timing is crucial. He dare not delay or the precious young will begin to develop; then die. He takes them to a safe place where he digs a hole in the sand and reinters them, but he also surrounds their burial place with a defence of fine wire netting to deter predators. Monitor lizards, crabs, and rats all enjoy turtle eggs, but here they are thwarted by the wire. These eggs will all hatch into female turtles, as the hole he has dug is not deep and the sex of the hatchlings is determined by temperature. Tomorrow he may dig deeper and the young of that clutch will be male. He waits. Each night in the nursery, the sand erupts inside one or more of the cages as the hatchlings scabble their way towards the light and freedom. The man tenderly collects these and places them in a plastic pail of sea water. He carries them to the beach where he gently tips the vessel at the water's edge and the matchbox-sized babies

scrabble and scramble towards the sea. Some go the wrong way and he guides them back to the waves. He stands barefoot in the shallows and feels the tickle of their feet as they run over his. Perhaps only one percent of these infants will survive to return and lay their own eggs here in about fifteen years. When they enter the water, dangers face them. Gulls, sharks and dolphins are all on the lookout for a meal of turtle.

The man walks home along the beach, and as he does so his lone footprints cross turtle trails, like giant wheel tracks, leading up and back, from the sea to the disturbed sand above the high water mark. The tide has turned and more slick sand is exposed. On the silky wetness his bare feet avoid the dismembered carcass of a dead baby turtle, surrounded by metallic myriads of buzzing flies. For now the man needs to sleep, but tomorrow night the cycle will begin again.

The mother is now well out in the ocean, glad to be weightless in the warm tropical waters; content to have accomplished what she set out to do. No one knows where she goes after she leaves the island but, God willing, she will return.

Snoras

I sensed, rather than heard him come up behind me as I waited for the lift. The hotel carpets were thick and he trod lightly. I half turned as he drew alongside, and he made some comment about how slow these elevators were. He must have guessed I was English. He spoke to me in that language, but there was a hint of an accent. I couldn't place it. Somewhere in Eastern Europe I would have guessed, although not necessarily from here in Lithuania. I turned towards the window where the rooftops of Vilnius were punctuated by scattered church towers. On one horizon a cluster of emerald green onion domes looked alien and exotic. Down below us the River Neris, tamed by high concrete banks, surged along sullenly like liquid gunmetal, as though resenting its constraints. From a clearing in a wooded area in the distance a hot air balloon slowly rose, whilst another, already half inflated, waited its turn to take to the steely skies.

A clanking groan announced the arrival of the lift, and my companion stood aside to let me enter. I studied his reflection in the mirrored wall. He was a very short man, less than five foot small. Clean-shaven, of indeterminate age, maybe forty-odd but he could have been older, thick dark hair, eyes that blazed like Ceylon sapphires in a pale face, a neat suit, crisp white shirt, and a discreet dark tie: he would have been the archetypal businessman had it not been for his diminutive size. Vertically challenged I think they call it, although as political correctness seems to have its own fashions, that description may no longer be acceptable. At least I knew 'dwarf' was out. We arrived in the lobby, and he went to wait in one of the seats,

whilst I went to ask the concierge about how to find the local places of interest. I had most of a day to explore before my conference began.

A marketing conference had brought me here; somewhat reluctantly it had to be said. My boss had gone down with a bad bout of shingles the night before he was due to leave for Lithuania. He'd called me at home,

'Sorry about this, Jenny, I know it's short notice, but you'll have to be on that Vilnius flight tomorrow. I'll sort a car to collect you at 5.00 a.m. Pick up the tickets at the airport and I'll fax you the paperwork. Hope you didn't have anything planned for the next two nights, but someone's got to be there. 'Night.'

He hung up before I could reply.

It was already late and I still had to pack, but how could I refuse such a charmingly phrased invitation. I unclenched my fists and forced myself to breathe slowly in and out whilst counting to thirty. Ten wouldn't cut it this time. My plans for the next two nights had only included chardonnay, shampoo, conditioner and a manicure, but I wasn't going to tell my boss that. Let him think he was thwarting some exciting excursion or romantic assignation.

I groaned at the thought of the early start, and began to throw some clothes into a small overnight bag. Changing my mind, I found a larger case and transferred my belongings. After all it was for two nights, so the least the company could do was to pay for the privilege of carrying an item of check-in baggage if, as I feared, the carrier would be Ryanair.

It seemed as though the alarm clock rang seconds after my head and pillow collided. The company driver who picked me up told me I would be on a Czech Air flight. Not the dreaded Ryanair then, so I would be entitled to a free baggage allowance. I felt slightly resentful. I'd really wanted the firm to pay for having cheated me out of my cosy evenings at home.

Vilnius airport was unremarkable, although the adverts for Snoras Bank made me smile. I imagined a cacophony of cashiers dozing at their posts, their snores reverberating round the building, whilst queues of frustrated customers tried to wake them to get their cash. Later I looked up 'snoras' online and found it's the Lithuanian name of a mystical midget-like creature that accumulates wealth. It's also Swedish for 'steal'. Perhaps my first thoughts weren't too far out. Cashiers all pretending to be snoring so they don't have to hand out cash to the clients, then pocketing the money. Sounds very plausible from what little I know of banks.

The short car ride from the airport took me through grey residential streets with an inordinate number of red traffic lights. My hotel was disappointingly modern; a glass-and-concrete upended box set on a rise above the river, it looked just the place to hold a boring conference, which of course, was why I was there.

'Don't Wobble on a Ladder. Take the Teeter out of Topiary with TopTrim Trimmers,' our blurb says.

Extending hedge trimmers may not be everyone's idea of a sexy product, but if Eastern Europe is going to fall in love with the concept of ladderless hedge cutting, we want it to be via TopTrim products, not those of some rival company. I was certainly going to have to make my presentation more convincing than our promo slogan. I had never given a sales presentation and was seriously nervous.

The concierge suggested I might like to visit the KGB museum, or perhaps the cathedral and the Upper Castle, all within reasonable walking distance. He gave me a tourist map and I set off down the hill, past the pretty St Raphael church and across the Zaliasis Bridge over the Neris. The rain had reluctantly stopped. Although the sun was beginning to fire intermittent rays through holes in the clouds, the March wind cutting through my jacket and whipping my hair into my eyes felt like a mild form of torture. Knowing the displays

featuring real torture in the KGB museum would hold little appeal for me, I walked towards the cathedral instead. Rounding a corner I thought I saw the little man from the lift behind me, but when I turned back to look, either he was gone or I had been mistaken. The cathedral was before me. Its separate, soaring bell tower had a sturdy round base, topped with octagonal additions of diminishing sizes, adorned with windows which reflected the pale sunshine; a surreal, elongated wedding cake. The parchment-painted cathedral was gravely classical, with formal uncluttered lines. I entered.

The interior felt surprisingly warm after the biting wind outside. I opted not to light a taper, then felt mean, as the blaze of the candles on the huge wooden stand, lit by more generous visitors than myself, was the only source of heat. I wandered round examining the various chapels then, before exiting, quenched my conscience with a donation placed in an offertory box the size of a small car (having come to the conclusion that whoever chose it must have had great need, great optimism, or both).

The sun was wholeheartedly out now and I was momentarily blinded as I stepped outside the building. A shadowy shape seemed to disappear behind an advertisement kiosk, but again I couldn't be sure whether it was the man from the hotel. It could have been a child or a woman; all I had was the impression of a small dark figure.

The walk to the castle was pleasant. Daffodils performed Wordsworthian nods and dances on the green area along the footpath and even the river below to my left seemed more animated. I looked forward to the panoramic views the concierge had assured me were to be had from the Gedminas Tower of the Upper Castle. This could be reached by a fifteen-minute climb up a long steep staircase or by funicular. Steep stairs or funicular? Tough choice. I proffered the necessary litas to the man in the ticket office and took my place in the funicular. No one else was waiting. The operator was just about to release the mechanism that would send my car upwards and the one at the top reciprocally downwards, when there was a shout

behind me, and the little man from the hotel ran towards the funicular, flung some litas at the ticket collector, and joined me in the small cabin.

‘Good morning,’ he said, stating the blindingly obvious.

‘Good morning.’

Not much else to reply really. It was. The sun had driven the greyness away. The buds on the birch clad hillside were bursting into acid green leaf and everything sparkled with spring freshness. I wondered why he had been in such a hurry to join me. Did he know I’d seen him following me earlier? He seemed taller than I remembered and his eyes a cloudier blue. We ascended the rest of the way in silence and I was relieved when he headed upwards towards the tower where the museum was situated. I walked straight ahead to a viewpoint where Vilnius lay spread out below. The hot air balloons had gone, but I could see the onion-shaped emerald domes and the red rooftops of the Old Town. Immediately below was a mediaeval street which curved out of sight behind a tall church. Standing motionless half hidden by an ornate lamp standard was a tiny dark-suited figure. I wondered how he had got down there so quickly, and why he had come all the way up here only to go back down straight away. I moved away from the parapet and climbed the path to the tower. To my amazement, not one but two very small dark-suited men exited the huge wooden door as I approached. They were talking animatedly in a foreign language, heads close, and didn’t seem to see me. I passed them and entered the tower museum, climbing the spiral staircase to look at the armour, weaponry and models of previous castles, set out in glass cases. There was also a modern metal sculpture of a dog, which seemed out of place. I was about to take a photograph of this when the curator stepped forward from a niche in the thick stonewall. I had earlier seen a well-built uniformed female talking to some visitors on the second floor, and assumed she was the curator, but this was a very small male in a dark suit. He had very blue eyes.

‘Not to photo please,’ he said in English, wagging his finger at me. I turned and fled.

Everything felt surreal; nightmarish. He seemed to be everywhere. I ran towards the funicular. A cabin was waiting and I entered. It descended immediately. As soon as it reached the bottom, the door opened and I hurried away, through the Lower Castle archway and on to the street. Looking back, I saw a small dark figure leaning in the shadows, apparently lighting a cigarette. He seemed to be staring after me. I ran all the way back to the hotel through streets full of little blue-eyed men in dark suits and flung myself breathlessly in one of the big squishy leather armchairs in the lobby. A voice from the concierge’s desk asked me whether I had enjoyed my sightseeing. I looked up at the tiny man in the concierge’s uniform. It was the man I had been seeing all day. His name badge read ‘Snoras’.

I’m writing this at home as part of my therapy. They use words like ‘stress’, ‘trauma’ and ‘closure’. It’s been six months. I’m still taking the medication but feel much better and hope to return to work soon. My boss has been very understanding and blames himself for putting me under too much pressure. He tells me that TopTrim has not succeeded, so far, in capturing the Eastern European market.

A Day at the Seaside

It all started the night before. The telly was droning away in the corner, ignored by the whole family as usual and the news had almost finished, its horror stories of conflict, criminality and corruption supposedly lightened by the ‘and finally’ bit at the end. That night this was about a woman who had found her engagement ring after losing it thirty years previously on a beach. Someone wanting to make a sandpit had bought a bag of sand at a builder’s yard and the ring had popped out, ultimately to be reunited with its owner. Good news for the woman and possibly the sandpit builder if there was a reward, but not enough to counteract the dismal stories that had preceded it. It did, however, catch the attention of the three younger members of our family who immediately homed in on the word ‘beach’.

‘D-a-a-a-ad,’ we whined, ‘can we go to the seaside tomorrow? D-a-a-a-ad, ple-e-ease. You said we could go one Saturday in the holidays. Can we go tomorrow? Ple-e-ease. Ple-e-ease.’

I don’t know why we thought wheedling would be more successful than a direct request, but it worked, perhaps because Dad wanted to go anyway. Mum immediately started to make preparations and we were shooed off to bed because we would have to make an early start. Mum slipped out to the corner shop to buy more bread, fillings for the sandwiches, and two big bottles of pop; Tizer and cream soda, our favourites. Dad went out to the garage and rooted out the beach ball, a cricket bat and tennis ball, the buckets and spades, a kite, an old blanket, deck chairs for him and Mum, and a gaudily striped windbreak.

‘You’d better put the macs in too,’ said Mum, sceptical of the weatherman’s promise of a sunny day. She was busying herself making mounds of sandwiches: egg, meat paste, bloater paste, cheese; whilst from the oven the tempting aroma of fruit cake filled the kitchen and wafted up the stairs to where we lay, too excited to sleep.

‘I bet the car breaks down again tomorrow,’ said my sister, who had inherited her optimism from our mother.

‘Bet it doesn’t too,’ said my brother, ‘and even if it does I’m going to walk.’

‘It’s too far, stupid. Shut up and go to sleep,’ I ordered, pulling rank as the eldest, and after a bit more bickering we were quiet, thinking about what we’d do on the beach the next day. I was going to build the biggest sandcastle ever. It would have battlements, towers and a moat, and I had enough pocket money to buy paper flags from the beach shop to put on the top. People would stop and say, ‘Did that boy build that amazing castle all by himself?’ and I would stand by, modestly acknowledging the deserved acclaim. The applause of the crowd turned into Dad clapping his hands to rouse us.

‘Come on you lot, don’t you want to go to the seaside?’

We jumped up and dressed. It was a misty morning, but the sun could be seen, still low in the sky, a dusky orange ball caught in the aerials on the roofs of the houses across the road. Dad backed the car out of the garage and we jumped in, each clutching a rolled up towel containing our swim things. Mum got the food and the pop from the pantry, and made a big flask of tea. She managed to squeeze the picnic basket into the boot amongst the equipment Dad had packed the previous night. I wondered why she always brought enough to feed everyone on the beach. No one would even want the sandwiches because Dad always bought us fish and chips, candy floss and licky-drippy soft seaside ice cream. We always ate the cake though, in the car on the way home.

Hardly out of the driveway the ‘are we nearly there yet’s’ started, and shortly after that my brother needed a pee. Dad stopped the car, grumbling about people who should have gone before they left home. With the exception of Mum, we all took turns behind a convenient roadside bush, even Dad, who justified his joining in by telling us that the Duke of Wellington always advised his troops never to neglect any opportunity to sit down or to spend a penny. I bet the Duke and his troops didn’t have traffic roaring past, inches away, on a busy highway when they relieved themselves. We piled back in and resumed our journey. We played car cricket and I-spy, then fell to low-level bickering as the interminable journey dragged on. Mum tried to keep the peace and Dad ignored us, shutting out the noise by dreaming of his team winning the cup. We could tell, because he always had a certain little smile on his face when he was thinking about his heroes.

Then it happened. The long serpent of cars lured by the promise of the shimmering, beckoning sea slowed; halted.

‘What’s happening Dad? Why’ve we stopped?’ It was as though we thought Dad was omniscient; could see straight through the line of cars on the hill ahead, winding round the next bend and all the way to where the car at the snake’s head lay crushed beneath a lorry. We never heard exactly what had happened. Perhaps the cause was speeding, or a moment’s inattention. A cacophony of screeching brakes and merged metal. A pause as the mangled steel settled and the shattered glass lay silent. A family heading for the sea destroyed. Lives changed forever.

Back in the queue we knew nothing of this. The car got hotter as the sun beat down on the roof. We opened all the windows, but it was still like being in a tin can heated up on a searing stove of road. We thought we might melt. At last, when the temperature was becoming unbearable and Dad was actually considering letting us out of the car to sit on the roadside, sirens wailed and police, fire and ambulance vehicles nee-naw-nee-naw-ed past. We

had to stay put. After another long wait the traffic started to move, although very slowly, and the line of cars crept up the hill and round the bend. We passed the site of the accident. There wasn't much to see. There were no bodies and no blood. A bit disappointing I thought. The car and the lorry had been towed away. A diamond glitter of glass was scattered at the roadside with part of a bumper and a few bits of unidentifiable metal. To one side, as though waiting to be reclaimed by its small owner, was a blue teddy bear, clean and unscathed by the accident.

We carried on to the seaside. Dad bought the fish and chips. Mum complained because she had made all those sandwiches that no one was eating. We swam in the grey sea and Mum and Dad paddled; Dad with his trouser legs rolled right up, showing the hairiness of his white veiny legs, Mum on the very edge, jumping back and giving little squeals each time the bigger waves threatened to wet the hem of her frock. The tide came and went and I built my sandcastle. It wasn't as big and splendid as the one in my dreams, but I bought the flags and stuck them in the top anyway. Dad said it was a really good effort and that meant more to me than a load of strangers applauding. We had ice cream and candy floss. The day flew. Soon Mum was stripping the skin from our legs by rubbing them clean with the sandy towels, and we were dressed and driven homeward, munching huge hunks of fruitcake.

I'm a grown man now with a wife and children of my own. Like my Dad I dream of my team winning the cup. Our family loves the sea. Most weekends in summer we drive to the coast and I buy the kids fish and chips and ice creams. The journeys are usually quieter than when I was a child. My kids watch DVDs in the back of the car, play hand-held games or listen to their MP3 players. In my head I sometimes replay the childhood memory of that special day at the seaside so long ago, and if ever I'm tempted to daydream as I drive, or to floor the accelerator to speed up the long journey to the beach, I remember a blue teddy bear.

The Simple Life

Look closely at the banks of earth along the roadside to the north of Agadir and you can see they are not just earth, but contain bricks, stones, glass shards, timbers and plaster, for they are all that is left of the earthquake-devastated Old Town. Listen with your spirit and you can here the cries of more than twelve thousand ghosts; the inhabitants who perished in an instant in 1960, when their world shook and bludgeoned them to death with falling masonry.

The tourist-stuffed Land Cruiser wound past the scarred landscape, its passengers neither knowing nor caring about the city's past. It scorned the rubble and the new port with its sardine boats, trawlers and container ships; skirted the massive French-owned cement works, and paid no attention to the fish packing factories. Eventually it left the industrial area behind and gained the stunning coastal road with its Atlantic-nibbled coves. Azure waters lapped sun warmed sands. In one bay windsurfers swooped and flew the rollers, and in the occasional village, expressionless donkeys laden with herbs or hay plodded beside the roads, urged on by impatient farmers eager to get to field or market. Herds of alien-eyed goats were chivvied along by small children who should by rights have been in school, but whose truancy was condoned by parents who could see no point in education when there was work to be done at home.

In the air-conditioned cool of the vehicle, Naima the guide had introduced herself and the driver, Youssef. The tourists, an elderly couple and a mother with three children, had also begun to make sporadic conversation. They were all English, but had little in common other than the fact they were all on a day trip from Agadir to the Atlas Mountains.

After hugging the coast for several kilometres, they turned right at a sign for the market town of Aourir. Here they had to slow down to twine through the busy main street. Pedestrians, cyclists, riders of mopeds and motorcycles, cars, carts, vans, lorries and donkeys fought for space on the narrow thoroughfare. Vehicles parked at random to disgorge their goods into the small shops. One open-topped vehicle had meat, probably beef or lamb as it wasn't yet the season for goat, tossed on a torn tarpaulin inside. The driver waved the clouds of flies away in a desultory manner, but they continually returned to settle on the bloody carcasses. Another man, the owner of a roadside stall, staggered under the weight of a load of bananas; the individual bananas were small, but the bunches were huge and heavy. Outside one of several workshops a man was tinkering with a dismembered motorbike, oblivious of the crowds who had to sidestep to avoid the engine parts laid out on an oily rug. Men in djellabas, mostly of an earthy brown hue, wandered along looking like mediaeval monks, whilst the women who wore mostly pastel shades, resembled bunches of sweet peas as they chatted in little groups. Over the whole scene was a patina of reddish dust which penetrated the crannies of the Land Cruiser and dried the tongues of the passengers.

On finally extricating itself from the town, the vehicle twined steadily upwards as the zigzag road stitched itself to increasingly steep hillsides. After crowning a particularly rugged brow, the view below was a startling contrast to the bareness of the mountains. Green date palms flourished along a valley soothed by a gently-flowing river. An oasis. Multiple stalls selling identical 'fossils'. A hostel. Toilets. A café. A flat rock by the river jutted out towards the water, where people took turns to have their photographs taken to show the folks back home that they had really been here. This part of the 'sixties hippy trail had been named 'Paradise Valley' by Jimi Hendrix, no less, and many flower people had drifted through this utopian scene in clouds of mind-altering smoke, finding peace, love, and themselves.

Further on, the valley narrowed to a high-walled defile within which the road continued to climb. The pebbles of the dry stream bed sprouted oleander bushes; vivid pinks and glossy greens looking artificial in their arid surroundings, as though someone had decided that a little decoration was in order, so had carefully spaced them out at intervals along the way. Soon the road burst out into sunshine and a different terrain, an undulating high plateau.

The Land Cruiser left the tarmac and jolted along rocky trails. The passengers clung to the handles and tried not to hit the ceiling and each other as they negotiated the bumps. Great clumps of lavender lined the route. Scarlet poppies clashed with the red earth. No signs of habitation, but on a corner, under a scrubby olive tree, a scrawny dog scratched then resettled in the dusty shade. Further on, a couple of discarded sardine tins graced the bank, and a tattered plastic bag clung to a thorn bush. Civilization must be about to impinge.

A few more kilometres of this boneshaking proved more than enough adventure for the travellers. The elderly couple, Phil and Joan, looked tense and a little pale. Each nursed a bruised head where skull had met roof. The children, Andrew, Saul and Charlotte had screeched non-stop as they bounced around, blaming each other when they collided. Their mother, Harriet smiled indulgently and avoided eye contact with everyone. Naima and Youssef remained impassive, staring through the windscreen where the wipers had made clean arcs in the dirt.

They halted. To their left a cluster of isolated stone buildings huddled in dusty silence in the shimmering heat. A Berber village. Naima led the way up a passageway between high stone walls. A small wooden door in the wall was opened and they were ushered in to the cool of the interior. A Berber meal was included in the price of the trip, but first they were shown round part of the house. Up a flight of stone stairs to a rooftop. From here they could look down into a large open chamber where the goats would be stabled at night. It was dark and fetid and Charlotte held her nose, complaining loudly.

‘Mummy, how can people live with smelly goats actually inside their houses?’

Harriet looked vague and ignored her. Andrew and Saul lay on their bellies and peered into the darkness. Phil and Joan exchanged glances, each aware of the other’s impulse to tip the boys over the edge into the stinking straw far below.

The other side of the roof looked down into the riad or guest house. This was a pleasant contrast to the stabling arrangements. A courtyard with a gently flowing fountain was planted with orange trees. Brightly painted doors led to the guest rooms set around this cool space. The scent of the blossoms wafted upwards and ripe fruit hung tantalisingly just out of reach. The boys’ demands for oranges became shrill and everyone feigned deafness. The master of the house came out, just in time, to invite them to the dining room for some food. Shoes were left at the door. The host retired to the kitchen to prepare the meal. There were brightly coloured woven rugs on the floor. Phil, who had visited the museum in Agadir, pronounced knowledgably upon the pattern.

‘Berber rugs are designed to tell the story of the location of the weaver. An enclosed border means they are from a town or city; a crenellated border indicates a fortified place; borderless means they come from a settlement somewhere in open countryside. This rug has been made in a country location; possibly this village.’

Everyone applauded and Phil sat down looking flustered by the attention. Joan flushed, embarrassed on his behalf. The seating was set around the perimeter of the room and was low, as were the tables. Naima explained that their host was not only the head of this household and the village, but of the whole area. An important man.

This important man came in bearing a tray of glasses and a large ornate metal teapot. He poured each guest some sweet mint tea, raising the pot high, so the green liquid streamed in a thin skein and splashed in the glass below. The children pulled faces behind his back, but drank up. Most of the adults found it too sweet, but drank politely and accepted refills. The

man came back with a mixture of flat and leavened bread on earthenware plates, and dips of peanut sauce, argan oil and honey in bowls. Everyone was silent as they munched. A little boy peered shyly round the doorway, watching the foreigners eat. A woman called from the depths of the house and he scampered off.

The important man was known to his friends as Amaynu (meaning ‘innovator’) but as Berber names were frowned upon by the Moroccan government, the tour company which brought him his guests knew him by his Arabic name; Ahmad. Amaynu loved meeting these people from so many countries and enjoyed concealing the fact that he spoke fluent English, French, German and Arabic and a little Spanish, as well as his native Berber tongue. He had lived in America for eight years, and had found it lucrative but lonely. Now he was home again.

Joan was telling Harriet how lovely it must be to live the simple life with none of the pressures of the twenty-first century.

‘This house and village are like stepping back in time. Like those films of Robin Hood or Shakespeare or someone like that.’ Overhearing this, their host smiled. He turned to eavesdrop on the children.

‘This oil stuff is yuk!’

‘The honey’s all drippy.’

‘I don’t like peanuts. Why isn’t there jam?’

‘Why isn’t there any proper bread?’

‘This is boring. Are we going soon? I want to go swimming.’

He smiled inwardly as Phil and Joan whispered what they would like to do to these brats. His children were still young, but they would be brought up to behave properly and show respect for their parents and others. He quietly cleared the glasses and plates, stood to one side while the guests reclaimed their shoes then indicated where the toilet was. The party

commented audibly on its cleanliness. They hadn't expected proper loo roll, soap and a clean towel. Refreshed, they made their way back down to Youssef and the waiting Land Cruiser. They still had a waterfall known as the Cascades and a hotel with a swimming pool to visit before they returned to Agadir. As they left, Joan could be heard asking Naima whether there would be any souvenir shops, and Harriet looked worried, as she had just realised she had forgotten to bring swimwear for the children.

Amaynu stood in the arched gateway, hand lifted in farewell. He winced as the revving of the departing engine shattered the peace of the village. The sound gradually receded. Turning back through the outer courtyard he climbed the steps to the rooftop. There he removed a tarpaulin and some old rugs from an object in the corner, revealing it to be a satellite dish. Descending he re-entered the house, and as he passed his bedroom door briefly wondered whether to change into his Armani jeans and a polo shirt, but decided against it. The loose-fitting white kaftan was cooler and more comfortable. He stretched out on the sofa in his private living room and switched on the plasma TV. Picking his mobile phone from the coffee table, he entered a reminder to call his stockbroker later that afternoon. He took a can of coke from the mini fridge in the corner, popped it and took a long cool swig. Setting it back down on the table he gave a deep sigh of satisfaction. Then, speaking half aloud, he said,

'No, nothing beats the simple life.'

Cottesloe Beach

He thought she was drop-dead gorgeous. Slim, brunette, wiry, petite, quick in her movements, he was reminded of a small bird, a splendid fairy wren perhaps, in her blue and turquoise dress. She held her head on one side as she listened to something her companion said, then laughter came, wholeheartedly; infectiously, and he ached to laugh with her, even though he had heard nothing of the joke that had inspired her. Unaware that his mouth had fallen open, Brian stared at her until his mate brought him back to reality.

‘Talk about tongue hanging out. You look like a beached barramundi.’

As he spoke, Jack, a self-appointed expert on women, gave his moonstruck friend Brian a friendly dig in the ribs.

‘She’s not bad,’ he said, following Brian’s gaze, ‘but not a patch on that blonde next to her, in the corner.’

The blonde in question caught Jack’s eye and looked away quickly, pretending to examine a glass of rosé. A slight natural blush went unnoticed beneath the blusher and golden tan. The dark girl said something and the pair giggled and looked across at the boys’ table.

‘Strewth, I think we’re in there. Come on.’

Jack walked over. ‘Can we buy you a drink, ladies? I’m Jack, and this is Brian. What are you drinking?’

‘Trust Jack to play the big man,’ thought Brian. He was skint and hadn’t wanted to come out at all, but Jack had persuaded him. On the other hand, if he hadn’t come he wouldn’t have seen her. The moment he did, it was as though everyone and everything else

was in monochrome and she alone was in glorious technicolor. That was what he thought then, and he was to remember the moment over the next few years and wonder whether he had been drunk (surely not on two pints of Toohey's, even then?) or whether there had been some magic in the smoke-laden air that had turned his head. He couldn't remember much about the rest of the evening. He and Jenny had left the bar together at closing time, and he had walked her home. The other two had gone their separate ways.

Brian was from Claremont and Jenny from nearby Mosman Park. They wondered why they had never met before. That part of Western Australia is the proverbial 'small world'. They bought a poky apartment on the outskirts of Fremantle, near the docks, and moved in together. They both hated it, but it was all they could afford, and the main thing was that they had each other. They both wanted kids. None appeared. There were tests but the doctors could find no reason.

'It's no one's fault. Just one of those things,' they were told. 'If you stop worrying about it, it may happen. Try to relax.'

That famous oxymoronic cliché. They tried. It didn't happen.

They saved for a bigger apartment. Brian had found one advertised in the *Fremantle Herald* and had first viewed it alone, before putting a deposit down without telling Jenny. It was in Cottesloe Beach, where he worked. They'd taken a day off, with Jenny thinking they were just going for a picnic and a swim. They deserved some time off. Life had been busy in the three years since they'd got together; Brian driving daily from Freo to work in the bar and Jenny working as an assistant in a pharmacy.

The drive to Cottesloe Beach in their old Holden Premier convertible was enjoyable. The sun shone, the hood was down and they had the day to themselves. On arrival, Brian avoided the car parks on the Esplanade and found a space on a residential street parallel to the beach. He pointed to apartment No 4b and proudly explained that this was to be their new

home. Jenny was stunned. She didn't know how he could have done all this without her knowing. Their place in Freo was cramped and very gloomy, but this was much more light and spacious. It was on the ground floor of a small modern block on Gadson Street, only 100 yards from the long sandy beach. Perhaps the move would relax them enough to make the coveted parenthood possible.

'Nothing but the Drive-Thru Bottle Shop between us and the Indian Ocean,' said Brian. 'I can walk along the Esplanade to work, so no need to take the car. We'll save a bit. When I came to view, a neighbour at No. 6 told me they're looking for staff at the IGA supermarket round the corner on Eric Street, so maybe you could apply.' He looked happier than he had in ages Jenny thought, giving him a hug.

They settled in to their new life, loving the quieter area away from the busy dock road and relishing the more easy-going atmosphere. Things were almost perfect. Jenny made friends at the supermarket and Brian seemed to have a huge crowd of drinking cronies at the pub, including his old mate Jack; although to be fair, Jack tended to stick to soft drinks these days. The guys would call at the bottle shop to stock up on the way home and continue drinking on the veranda until the early hours, when the neighbours would yell at them to shut up and let them get some sleep. At first Jenny would join them, but the conversation was blokey and she felt left out. She preferred meeting a couple of the girls from the IGA after work and going to one of their homes to share a bottle of wine and some girlie chat. But first one, then the other got pregnant and their evenings were taken up with feeds, nappies or getting the little ankle-biters to sleep. Jenny was lonely. Brian never mentioned babies, he seemed to prefer booze. They bickered.

Sometimes she would go to the beach to swim alone. It was better that way, as Brian always became sulky when they went together. He only liked doing things he was good at, and despite being brought up in Western Australia he was a poor swimmer; not over-fond of

the water, especially as there were sometimes shark alerts around here. He generally stayed on dry land to avoid being shown up by Jenny's easy, powerful crawl.

Things continued to deteriorate between them. She was aware that she was nagging Brian about his drinking, but she was frustrated that they had no life together. He would drink until he was virtually comatose, and then fall into a chair or on the sofa to sleep in his clothes. It was amazing he had kept his job. She had to do something to change things. Talking hadn't worked.

One night she persuaded the cronies to leave early, or at least early for them. It was still after midnight. Brian was drunk, but was in an affable mood and still just about able to walk.

'Let's go on the beach,' she said, 'it's almost a full moon tonight.' Brian, surprisingly, agreed. They made their way past the bottle shop and down to the shore. Everywhere was deserted at that hour. The sea looked glassy in the moonlight and there was a strip of wet sand, a gleaming silver ribbon, where the tide had just begun to turn. Someone had left an inflated airbed and some broken beer bottles, king browns, in the grass at the top of the beach. She knew what she had to do. Leaving Brian swaying, she dragged the airbed down to the water line, returning for Brian after carefully slipping a shard of the broken glass into a tissue in her shorts pocket.

'Come on Bri, lie down here with me and look at the moon.' He mumbled agreement and they lay together for the first time in many months, looking at the enormous sky. She snuggled up to him and stroked him gently. Soon Brian began snoring like a badly serviced tractor and she knew he wouldn't stir for hours. She eased his bulk into the middle of the inflatable and, grunting with the effort, managed to drag it in to the shallows, then deeper and deeper until she was swimming, pushing the airbed ahead of her. She swam well out into the ocean, along the shining path of the moon. When she was satisfied she had gone far enough,

she reached into her pocket and found the piece of glass. The broken edge was scalpel-sharp. First she took Brian's hand and made a swift incision along the back. Blood spurted but in his drunken state his only reaction was to snatch his hand away and mutter a little. She then punctured the airbed below the water line so a stream of bubbles rose to the calm surface of the sea. Jenny swam; shutting her ears to the now wide-awake Brian's startled yells as he floundered. Soon she was yards away, cleaving the water with her strong steady crawl. The cries stopped. Heading back to the beach she felt more tired than she had ever been. She hadn't realised how far out she had swum; certainly too far for Brian to make it back to shore, and with a bit of luck some shark might be attracted by the blood in the water.

Back at the apartment she changed out of her wet clothes and slipped into bed. She needed to rest. Jack had done well leaving the airbed and broken glass. Idly she wondered whether they would have children.

Fast Food World

'Inhale deeply. Make me a part of you,' says the scented breath of Singapore to arriving travellers, from the moment they step outside Changi airport, especially if they have come from the keener, thinner climate of northern Europe. The warmth and humidity combine to feel solid; an entity to be swum through, rather than an atmosphere to be carelessly breathed. The skin is caressed and the senses ensnared by the heady fragrance. Outside the airport building an unending line of taxis inches forward, orchestrated by controllers with whistles who guide each vehicle to its allotted place. Passengers with their baggage shuffle from behind the barriers to the numbered positions where the taxis stop. Bougainvilleas tumble over concrete walls, turning them into Niagaras of life and colour; whilst above them lethargic palm fronds hardly stir in the tropical torpor. On her first arrival Rose had breathed in, as this island state had instructed, and the bargain had been made. Singapore had moved from her lungs to her heart and remained there, calling her if she stayed away too long, enticing her back with night-time dreams and daytime nostalgia.

Now she was arriving again, and the excitement of her first few arrivals was turning into the pleasant anticipation of greeting an old friend. It felt like coming home. The taxi had taken the East Coast Highway route to the city and the steady 'ping, ping' which indicated it was exceeding the speed limit was strangely comforting; a sign that it would reach its destination faster than she could have hoped. Having negotiated the traffic near the airport, her driver began to make conversation. He was Chinese, and Rose had noticed from his licence badge, half obscured by rosary beads, a crucifix and a small plastic vase of artificial

flowers, that his name was Samuel Ng. She had been daydreaming, but jerked awake when he spoke.

‘Is this your first visit to Singapore madam?’

‘No, I have been here many times. I used to live in Brunei.’

‘Ah, Brunei. Very quiet place. Singapore much better. Many things to do and plenty shopping. Where you live now?’

‘England,’ she replied.

‘Where in England? I have cousin in Northampton. You know Northampton?’

‘Not very well. I come from the north of England. Chester. It’s near Liverpool and Manchester.’

‘Manchester United. Very good team. Liverpool also, but not so good I think.’

She agreed that they were both good teams, but admitted that she wasn’t really a football fan, and they fell silent again. Although it was only 6.30pm on an August evening, it was almost dark and just a few muted rosy remains of the sunset’s afterglow lingered low in the western sky. The last noisy mynah birds were bickering about roosts for the night. Rose would be glad to get to her hotel to freshen up after her long journey. She was staying at the Holiday Inn, Park View. Four star, but not the most expensive or luxurious hotel in Singapore. It suited her. She liked being near the centre of the city rather than in one of the hyper-luxury high-rise places near the harbour, or in the Shangri-La or the Goodwood Park in one of the greener areas a little out of town.

In former times when Rose had been in Singapore with Frank, she would have jumped at the chance to stay at Raffles. Then they could only afford the occasional Singapore Sling in the old Long Bar and even that was too expensive after the whole place was upgraded. She remembered it when the paintwork was less than immaculate, the grass in the courtyards was brown and balding, the electric wiring hung in random loops along the outside of the building

and the fading elegance made it easy to imagine the likes of Somerset Maugham or Rudyard Kipling closeted in their suites, writing during the day, slipping down to the Tiffin Room for afternoon tea, then going on to the Long Bar at sunset to down Singapore Slings and gin and tonics to aid the muse. These luminaries would then have dressed for dinner and dined in the Palm Court, where suspended cages of canaries sought to outdo the orchestra in accompanying the meal with their melodies. After a nightcap or two, they would have made their way, perhaps unsteadily, to their suites, where slowly turning ceiling fans wafted a gentle coolness into the sweltering night air.

Now that Rose could have afforded to stay there it had lost its charm. The refurbishment in the 1980's had increased the number of suites and facilities, but had turned Raffles into a plastic, corporate caricature of itself. Sure, the paintwork was pristine, the courtyards displayed immaculate green turf, the service was faultless and the food perfection, but the ghosts of those early guests had been exorcised by the modernising spirit that swept through the building in its quest for five stars and a bland international identity. Mammon had triumphed once more over the mood and magic of history. Frank would have been saddened.

Rose checked in at the Park View and was escorted to her room, knowing that when daylight came she would be able to see across to the green fringes of the gardens of the Istana; the presidential palace. A major road lay immediately below, but even in semi-darkness the view was hypnotic. Tides of traffic ebbed and flowed. Flatbed trucks zoomed up and down with workers, human cargo, clinging on in the back. Swarms of taxis; blue, yellow, white, black, shuttled past in both directions. Motorbikes and mopeds, which would have sounded like angry hornets had it not been for the efficient double (or was it triple?) glazing, weaved in and out of the traffic. Rose watched for a while before the tiredness hit her. After a quick phone call and a refreshing shower she crashed out for an early night.

She awoke late, thinking there was greyness outside, but found she had been deceived by the lined curtains and tinted glass of the windows. The sun was shining and it was a beautiful morning. Breakfast was coffee and a little yoghurt. She couldn't manage any more these days. Even that was an effort.

Later, leaving by the hotel's back entrance she walked down Cuppage Plaza and turning right at the end, found herself ambling along Orchard Road. When she had first come here with Frank, everyone seemed to walk at a leisurely pace. They would laugh together as he teased her about how quickly she adopted the 'Asian stroll', but now there seemed to be no difference between the U.K. and Singapore. People hurried along in a purposeful way, making no allowance for the heat and humidity.

She wandered round Tang's department store, browsed in Lucky Plaza and explored the supermarket in the basement of the Centrepoint building. Growing very tired, she began to retrace her steps. The place she was aiming for, Fast Food World, was just behind her hotel. Part pavement café, part restaurant, it had been a favourite with her and Frank in the old days.

Because they had moved around so much during their married life, it had been hard to make real friends. They had never had children. She had socialised with Frank's colleagues and their wives, and there had been connections and companions, but never close friends. It hadn't mattered, because all she and Frank had needed was one another. That worked until she became the one and there was no other.

Mei Lin at Fast Food World was almost a friend. Rose had known her for over twenty years. At first Rose hadn't realised that Mei Lin's husband owned this and several other businesses; hadn't known she was married. On later visits, the husband, Kai Boon had been there, sitting at a side table, struggling to swallow anything, even clear soup. The last time Frank and Rose had been there Mei Lin had become a widow. Now Rose was there alone.

She chose a table and sat down. Mei Lin brought a menu. They had talked briefly on the phone the previous night and she had reluctantly agreed. A hotel room was too impersonal. Normally Rose would have sat at a table outside, overlooking the street. Today she sat in the corner, just inside the restaurant. The two staff members were sitting outside under the awning, preparing the onions and garlic for the evening meals. It was a sweltering mid-afternoon. The tourists had eaten lunch and the locals hadn't begun to think of dinner. The street was deserted. Rose was the only customer. Mei Lin brought her the beer she had ordered; Tsing Tao in an iced tankard.

Rose positioned her chair in the corner, tucked well into the angle of the walls, and pulled the table towards her. Taking a plastic container of tablets from her pocket, she opened it and took a handful with a gulp of her drink. They made her gag, but she managed to swallow them down with more of the cold lager. She adjusted her wig to make sure of having some dignity. It wouldn't do for it to slide off in public. Mei Lin caught her eye then looked away. Rose knew she didn't really approve, but understood. The wig secured to her satisfaction, Rose hitched up the waist of her linen trousers. Since her diagnosis her flesh had shrivelled and shrunk and now all her clothes hung slackly on her stick-insect frame. She realised she should have worn a belt, but it was pointless worrying about it.

The comforting figure of Mei Lin sat outside under the shade of the awning, her back to the restaurant, fingers busy with her abacus, doing her accounts. They were complicated and would take time, as well as all her concentration. Inside, leaning back in her corner, Rose took another mouthful of beer and swallowed the rest of the tablets. She closed her eyes and settled herself. The lager in her glass grew warm.

Hansie

The road ran straight, like a wire pulled taut along the broad valley floor between the ancient Naukluft Mountains and the shifting auburn dunes. Way beyond these dunes lay the Skeleton Coast, where mysterious mists shroud the beaches and the carcasses of wrecked ships are preserved; their ribs reaching up from the sand in mute protest at their fate. Some of these are now well inland, as the creeping claws of sand grasp land back from the ocean, leaving these dead hulks increasingly isolated from their natural watery habitat. It is a place for colonies of fur seals and flamingos, for rare desert elephants and sparse prickly plants: an inhospitable, hauntingly beautiful grave for the many who have been shipwrecked; who died waiting for rescue, or perished trying to cross the parched and featureless dunes to seek assistance and all-important fresh water.

The Joyful Jackal Safari minibus sped along on the good surface, heading for Sossusvlei, an enormous clay pan whose name in Nama, the local language, means ‘gathering of water’. During the past days the Mercedes vehicle had bumped along stony trails where loose gravel spat at the windscreen like hailstones and whoever was riding in the front passenger seat had to sit with the flat of their hand against the glass, so the resonance of the flying pebbles was dulled and the screen hopefully kept intact. Sand had crept in through hidden gaps in the window seals, and the passengers had to constantly clear ears, noses and mouths of a gritty layer of the stuff. Hair became stiff and dull under the onslaught, and a shower was the first thing the travellers sought after putting up the tents for the night. Even when, as at some camps, there was only cold water, and campers had to carry a torch or

stumble in the darkness to the ablution block, it was still the most wonderful thing to feel the patina of dust being washed from the body, and freshness replacing the baked-on sweat of the day.

There were still over two hours before sunset. Pieter, the tour leader and driver had pulled in to the side of the road and got out to make a call on his mobile phone. He came back smiling.

‘There are ten of you and, as you know, you were due to fly over the Skeleton Coast tomorrow. There’s only one plane at Sossusvlei and other groups will be at the airstrip ahead of us, so I have just spoken to my friend Willem, who says he will fly five of you tonight in his own Cessna to make sure you all get to go. Who wants to fly today? His farm is just up the road.’

Ten hands went up, but after a bit of discussion five agreed to wait for the official flight the next day. It was only a few minutes drive to the farm. A hand-painted sign on the farm’s fence announced that refreshments could be bought and that there was a mini zoo.

‘I don’t know about zoo’ said Pieter, ‘the last time I was here Willem only had a lion and a baby cheetah. He’s been saying the lion’s just two years old for as long as I can remember, so it must be fully grown now. He’s afraid it will be confiscated if the authorities hear about it.’

Sure enough, round the back of the sprawling bungalow were two huge wire enclosures. They were planted with shady trees and well-watered grass. In one was a young cheetah, curled up on a low branch, and in the other was a full-grown lion, sleeping in a corner. The visitors clustered round, cameras clicking, thrilled to have only a chicken-wire fence between them and these magnificent beasts. Two of the women in the group wandered round the corner to get a better view of the sleeping lion. He opened both eyes and without preamble launched himself at the chicken wire. The women screamed and jumped back.

Fortunately the wire was stronger than it looked. The lion sank back down looking disappointed. The husband of one of the women came to see what the fuss was about.

‘I’ve been telling her I brought her all the way to Africa to get her eaten by a lion, and blow me, if it had happened then I would have missed it.’ He laughed as he spoke, but his eyes looked disappointed.

Willem was worried. The wire had held this time, but he knew that was partly by good luck. It would be hard to build an enclosure guaranteed to contain 500 lbs. of launched lion. Families visited here sometimes and he wouldn’t forgive himself if a child got hurt. He had found Hansie, an orphaned cub, and nursed him to health, getting up in the night to feed him bottles of vitamin-laced milk. He had grown into a fine lion. Willem would take him out most days in the back of his truck, releasing the tailboard and letting him run free when he reached an unpopulated place. He had never failed to return from his long joyous runs, rolling over kitten-like to let Willem tickle his belly when they were reunited. Now it seemed the time he dreaded had come. Hansie must be returned to the wild. He would take these folks on their flight to the Skeleton Coast then come home and think how he would do it.

The little airstrip was across the road from the farm. The five chosen fliers followed Willem to where the Cessna 206 was standing on a small piece of gravelly, grass-punctured tarmac. They hauled themselves up on a strut to climb in, seated themselves and fastened the seatbelts. The remaining five and Pieter stood, a little forlornly, waving as the small plane taxied then took off. They shrank to become little ants which disappeared as the plane headed towards the coast. It flew over the clay pan, leaving a crescent of mountains behind, then passed over a flat area marked by dry stream beds and mysterious green and red circles; lichens that thrive in the arid conditions. It turned again, passing over Dune 45, the most famous of the mighty red monsters, then sped away across miles of rippled dunes, their contours given relief by the sinking sun, like magnified patterns on an endless beach when the

tide has receded. The coast was hazy, the spray of the Atlantic breakers mixing with the impulsive mists that appear and melt away with playful insouciance, causing havoc to shipping and snatching men's lives. They saw the evidence of this in the many scattered wrecks. They swooped low over the colony of fur seals huddled so close that no sand showed between their packed bodies then passed over the pointillistic pink area where hundreds of flamingos congregate. These rose in a fluttering cloud as the plane passed over, then settled back to searching for supper on the wet sands. The plane turned again and flew back towards the farm as the sun began to paint the dunes alizarin crimson; the pressed-juice red that is the most ephemeral colour of the artist's palette. The shadows had almost filled the valley by the time they landed. Pieter, and the others who had remained behind, were waiting to greet them. They all said their thanks and goodbyes and drove off in the gathering dusk.

Willem sighed as he secured the Cessna and turned for the farm. Whilst he had been flying he hadn't had to think about Hansie, but now there was no escape. He opened the gate in the fencing and the lion bounded over with a nuzzling greeting. Willem let down the tailgate on the jeep and Hansie leaped in, looking a little puzzled to be going out just as it was getting dark. They drove down a little-used trail that ran for fifty miles into the mountains, mostly parallel to the new track. It diverged towards the end, then petered out where the ruins of an abandoned farm shone silver in the moonlight. It was a lonely place; the home of jackals and Cape foxes. Willem knew lions came here, but he hadn't driven up this track since the old farmer had died. He had never brought Hansie, fearing that he wouldn't return to the truck if he let him run free here; the call of his own kind would be too strong. Now it was time. He released the pin holding the tailgate and Hansie jumped down. He sniffed the air, ran a little way past the ruins, half turned as if to return to Willem, then changing his mind, started to lope off, his great muscular body catching the moonlight as he moved. Two jackals slunk sulkily into the shadows as they heard this interloper approach. Willem walked wearily to the

truck without looking back, and started the engine. He half expected Hansie to appear, running behind him on the moonlit trail, but there was no sign. He drove the fifty miles badly, crashing the gears and pretending to himself that the sea mist had crept inland. His vision was certainly blurred.

In the valley, just over the hillside from where Willem had freed Hansie, was the silent campsite where, in their orderly row of green tents, the tourists slept. They dreamed of red dusty roads or of flying over endless dunes. If any of them had been awake that night they might have heard the silence carved open for a moment by a single mighty roar.

The Lost Boy

Bangkok. The Grand Palace and Wat Phra Kaew tour. International sweat mingling as tourists, pleased to enter the open-sided temple's shade, form a slowly writhing snake to gaze up at the Emerald Buddha. He gazes back at them impassively, meditatively. With derision or a benison? Who can tell? The green visage gives nothing away. Outside, the humid heat reflects from old stone and sunlight dazzles as it bounces back from the jewelled figures supporting the golden stupa.

Bryn and Megan laugh as little Gareth manages to scramble onto the plinth of a great statue and place his diminutive shoe against the massive carved slipper of a guardian demon. They lift him down and wander into the garden where the grass is burned brown and great egg jars, each planted with a manicured, corkscrew-trunked topiary tree, offer no shade. They wonder when the air-conditioned coach will arrive to take them to their next destination. They turn to speak to Gareth, but he has toddled off. The crowds seem denser. They don't worry at first. He must be behind an egg jar. Perhaps he has gone back to look at the monkey-like figures round the stupa or to climb back on the plinth. They can't find him. No sign of a dark-haired toddler, or rather, every toddler here has dark hair, and none of them is Gareth. The crowd dwindles.

The day has cooled at last, darkness has fallen with tropical haste, and Bryn and Megan have spent hours at the police station with an interpreter and friendly smiling officials who reassure them that everything will be done to find the child. He is not found. They stay on in Thailand, following tenuous leads, but eventually have to return to Wales. The news

slips from the headlines and public consciousness. So many children disappear each year that the world cannot be expected to remain focused on each personal tragedy. They pick up the threads of their lives and try to carry on. They blame themselves. They have no more babies, but keep Gareth's bedroom with its cot, his favourite animal mobile and soft toys, as a sort of shrine. Every now and then a rumour sends them flying back to Thailand, but it is always false. Sometimes Gareth is sighted in Singapore, Malaysia or Hong Kong. It is never him. The calls become fewer. The not-knowing is corrosive. The years age the couple, but not as much as their loss.

A young man sits at the feet of an older one. His name is Phassakorn, which means 'the sun', for he brings sunshine to his elderly parents. He is carving elephants; meticulously fashioning the hard wood with sure strokes until the image emerges from inside, and all the parts that were not elephant lie as shavings on the yellow earth. A mango tree shades them from the fierce heat. Their village is surrounded by padi fields. Inside the house, behind them, the young man's mother is preparing the evening vegetables and noodles. They will eat well tonight. The tourists at the night market in Chiang Mai like these carvings. There is something different about them; a freshness.

The father and son gather up their goods in bundles, place them in a trailer hitched to the son's bicycle and begin the long ride to the market. One day they hope to afford a tuk-tuk. The lamplight of the stall flickers and catches the white bone tusks and smooth glossy outlines of the elephants. The tourists exclaim over the skill of the carver and hand over their baht, pleased to have haggled the sellers down. They enjoy their bargain. The sellers hide their delight. These tourists have paid well above the going rate.

The father and son return to the village and eat their supper. The family go to bed. The father and mother sleep dreamlessly; the sleep of those with a good life and a clear conscience. What should disturb their sleep? They have a home, a business and a son to care

for them in their old age. The son stirs, as his strange recurring dream troubles him. He is in a green place like nothing he has known. Its cool freshness is enfolding him and he feels an overwhelming sense of sadness. He sighs as he turns over and the dream fades.

In a bedroom, in a green Welsh valley, sunlight shines through a cot, casting barred shadows on the wall. A soft breeze, almost like a sigh, stirs the animals of a mobile.

The Black Ghost

For anyone who grew up with matching jungle patterned curtains and duvet cover, or who fantasised about the animals in the film *Jungle Book*, the real jungle would come as a real disappointment. Exotic flowers and vines do not adorn every tree. Monkeys are not leaping from branch to branch wherever you turn. Lions, tigers, elephants, bears, snakes and hyenas do not meet for cosy conversations each morning, before dispersing amicably to munch ants whilst singing jolly songs. In short, in a real jungle, and I'm talking here about Borneo, there certainly is richness and diversity of plant and animal life, but much of that life is covert; has to be sought out. That can bring danger.

Just such a seeker was Dr. Anthony Williams, usually known as Ant. Ant was an orchid collector who worked at a prestigious botanical garden in England. At home, most of his small garden was taken up by a huge glasshouse, which the neighbours complained was a monstrosity. It shouldn't have been allowed. Why couldn't he be content with a normal back garden; lawn bifurcated by concrete path, herbaceous borders to the side and small veg. patch at the bottom. Possibly a potting shed. That was a real garden. A plot stuffed with a massive greenhouse full of foreign flowers was not. Mutter, grumble.

Ant wasn't exactly impervious to the criticism; he tried to explain that it was his hobby as well as his job. What he couldn't explain was that orchids were not only both of these, they were his whole life. He lived and breathed orchids. He dreamed and read about orchids. All normal activities like eating, dressing, sleeping were simply distractions to be endured until he could return his full attention to his passion. He and his longsuffering wife,

Fiona, were childless; their personal attempts at propagation bearing no fruit. Fiona indulged, rather than shared his floral passion. She also understood the neighbours' concerns, but if it kept Ant happy then they would just have to put up with it.

It had all stemmed (Ant tended to think in botanical terms) from a school visit to Kew Gardens when he was about fifteen. Most of the other boys had been bored (after all, what's the point of a garden if you can't play football) but Ant had seen the orchids and been smitten. Something inside him was drawn to these flowers with their variety, amazing colours, shapes and sizes and he knew they were his future. He studied hard, chose Edinburgh University because of its botanical gardens, and emerged virtually unscathed by the excesses of student life, with a First (which he had expected) and a young wife, Fiona, (who had been something of a surprise). Marriage had not been in his plans, but Fiona was determined. He was a pale sandy mouse-like man with small blue eyes which made him look as though he peered anxiously at the world. He was amazed that a strong beautiful woman could find him attractive. Her strength carried the day. They were wed. She, of course, carried a bouquet of orchids at the wedding.

He worked briefly at a zoo, where orchids were grown in the gardens and some of the animal houses, along with the palms and trailing vines that were supposed to bring verisimilitude to the various habitats. His thesis, 'A Comparative Study of the Propagation of *phalaenopsis dendrobium* in Simian and Pachydermal Environments' was well received, and led to his being offered his present job at the prestigious botanical gardens. This meant foreign travel.

Ant was well pleased to be able to wander the world collecting and exchanging specimens, attending conferences and meeting other aficionados. He climbed the Himalayan foothills, kayaked the upper reaches of the Amazon, trekked in Thailand and even rushed back to England excitedly when a rare bloom was discovered on a slag heap in St Helens.

Fiona dutifully fed, watered, ventilated and when necessary, re-potted his plants at home, becoming more than a little disillusioned with her role.

One of the world's rarest orchids is the *phalaenopsis hantuhitamia*. The black ghost. There were often rumours that this strange, elusive flower had been sighted, but it had only once been photographed, deep in the Borneo jungle. It was said to appear, bloom for ten days, then the whole plant to disappear without trace. Usually by the time the experts had trekked to the remote location where it had been reported it was too late. Ant was determined to see one.

When an email whisper reached him (it was too tenuous to be called a rumour) that the third cousin of a friend of a family he had met in Brunei had told them he had actually seen this orchid flowering in the jungle the previous week, Ant was on the next plane. When he met the family, they agreed they had heard this, but they had also been told the man had been consuming a great deal of tuak, the local rice wine, at the time. However, the nephew of a neighbour's aunt knew where the man lived, so he could ask for himself. He did. The man lived in the longhouse at the far end of the Labi road. No time for dithering. Ant hired a Mitsubishi Pajero, bought some hot roti and bottled water from a roadside stall to sustain him, and headed away from the coast, up towards Labi and into the unknown.

Much of the road was surfaced as far as the village and he made good time. Labi was a fair sized community with clustered houses (some of them on stilts) neatly tended patches of maize and yams, surrounded by coconut palms, papaya, and mango trees, a prayer house and a school. The children were going home when he drove through, and he marvelled at how clean and tidy they all looked at the end of their day. The boys' shirts and the girls' headscarves were still crisp and white. How did they manage it in the dust and humid heat? Most English kids look scruffy and dishevelled by the time they arrive at school, let alone when they get back home.

He drove on, passing a swampy lake, a picnic shelter with overflowing litter bins and a wooden walkway jutting out into the water. The place was deserted. Soon the few signs of human interference with nature vanished, along with the tarmac surface of the road. He was driving on red dirt and sheets of sandstone, with a view across miles of jungle to his right and a steep hill to his left. It was hard to wrestle the wheel as the tyres sought purchase on the smooth sandy surface. The trail plunged suddenly downwards and he was surrounded by virgin jungle. It seemed dark after the open landscape and he realised he would have to drive fast to reach the longhouse at the end of the track by nightfall. He put his foot down, jolting over the bumps and hammering the Pajero's suspension.

It was dusk when he arrived. Word had travelled before him and he was expected. It was only a seven door longhouse, quite a shorthouse by longhouse standards, although because it was inhabited by seven large families it meant over fifty people slept under one roof. He was ushered up the notched log that served as a ladder to the elevated building and was invited in to the inner veranda. He knew that casual visitors were normally only allowed access to the outer area, so he was honoured and felt even more so when he found that he was to sleep inside a room with one of the seven families. The Tuah Rumah, or chief, came to greet him, and he was also introduced to the man he had been waiting to meet, Jinak, the one who had found the orchid. Jinak looked him in the eye.

'Tuan, I know there are those who say I imagine this flower after drinking tuak, but those people lie. I know what I saw, and will lead you to the place in the morning.'

Ant would have liked to have set off there and then in the darkness, but knew this was impossible. Instead he tried to contain his impatience and to enjoy his stay with these hospitable people. The children clustered around him, marvelling at his light hair, blue eyes and freckles, some stroking his pale skin. The adults broke out the tuak, served from a large kettle. They plied Ant with the fiery liquid, shouting 'Drink! Drink!' whenever the cup was

passed to him. He drank and began to enjoy himself. Fish, which had been caught in the river that day, was cooked over an open fire, in bamboo tubes and served on banana leaves. It was accompanied by small parcels of rice wrapped in woven bamboo leaves. The entertainment began. A small man who described himself as 'the second best ngajat dancer in the country' started to present his ancient dance. He carried a carved shield and a spear, had tall feathers in his headdress and a feathered waistcoat and cloak. He slowly gyrated as he depicted first the hunter, then the prey. His arms were outstretched and he crouched and rose, as he followed the steps that his ancestors had trodden for generations. Much of his chest, back, arms and legs were heavily tattooed. When he lifted his head, even the sensitive skin of his throat bore the black ritual markings. He swayed to the hypnotic beat of a set of gamelan gongs and no one spoke or moved until he finished. He then invited Ant to join him, and the mood lightened. Ant stumbled round, flapped his arms, and almost fell over as he tried to copy the graceful movements. Everyone laughed and applauded as the tuak was passed round again. And again. Then many more times.

In the morning Ant woke early with a dry mouth, an aching head and a bursting bladder. He crept from the room, climbed down the notched log and headed for a private bit of jungle in which to relieve himself. Where the sun struck through the leaves to the forest floor the earth steamed and he added his small measure to the rising vapour all around. As he walked back to the longhouse he spotted a narrow trail leading off to the left. It was marked by a pole, decorated with knotted grasses and red and white strips of cloth. Beyond it was another, then a third, and after that he could see a strange structure like a giant bird table, complete with bamboo-thatched roof. He approached it curiously. He recognised it as a spirit house. On its platform and below on the ground were offerings to the spirits: bread, rambutans, bananas, mangoes, ears of corn, parcels of rice and in pride of place, two cans of Carlsberg lager.

‘Now there’s someone making a real sacrifice,’ Ant thought, laughing aloud. He looked round hastily to make sure no one could have heard and been offended, but only an unseen bird called in the dense greenery. Creeping back down the trail, he wondered whether he too should have left something to placate the spirits.

Back at the longhouse Jinak was waiting to guide him to the orchid. First he used his parang to cut down a sapling for Ant to use as a walking pole. Ant was offended, thinking that Jinak saw him as an old man.

‘The cheek of it,’ he thought, ‘I’m only thirty-nine.’

That was before he saw the trail. Their route was through marshy jungle and the only path was made from single logs laid end to end, raised above the morass. The logs were slippery and Ant was glad of the pole to help him balance. More than once his foot slid and he had to extricate it from the foul mud. Jinak ran nimbly ahead and had to keep coming back to help him. They reached a small river where the bridge was a fallen tree at a steep angle. Jinak ran across, but Ant straddled it and inched over, hoping that if he did fall, no crocodiles would be lurking on the bank.

They had been walking for about three hours when there was a strange sound. The jungle is always noisy. Cicadas tuned to a multitude of pitches vie for volume. Birds call. Frogs croak. Watercourses trickle down to find the rivers that criss-cross the terrain. Gibbons in the distance make their song-like echoing cries. Unseen animals occasionally barge through the undergrowth. Sometimes whole trees crash down without warning. This sound was none of these. It was Jinak’s mobile phone playing ‘You’ll Never Walk Alone’.

Jinak took the call. He spoke urgently in Iban for a few minutes then turned to Ant.

‘So sorry tuan, that was my wife. My young son is sick and has been taken to hospital in Bandar Seri Begawan. I must return now to be with him.’

‘But...’

‘Don’t worry tuan. You can still reach orchid. There is only one trail here and you cannot miss way. It is now only about half-hour walk to place where orchid grow. When, to left of path you see large rock shaped like frog, you will find flower growing just beyond on fallen tree stump. Good luck.’

Before Ant could reply he was gone, running along the log path without looking back. Ant paused. He could give up now and retrace his steps to the longhouse or he could press on alone and follow Jinak’s instructions. The black orchid called to him. The journey so far had been hard work, but not technically difficult and he saw no reason why he shouldn’t continue. The terrain was more open now; boggy grassland with shrubs and the occasional blackened tree stump. There must have been a recent fire to have cleared this large area. In some places pitcher plants grew, and he had to force the botanist in him to press on without stopping to identify the different varieties of these insectivorous marvels. Occasional reddish rocks poked through the herbage, but none of them looked remotely like a frog. He wondered whether he would recognise the spot when he found it. One man’s frog could be another’s deer, mouse, monkey or crouching lion.

He almost missed the frog rock. He had expected it to be an impressive monolith, but it was less than a metre high. It was such a good representation that it could have been a carving. A perfect crouched frog with bulbous eyes; it could never have been mistaken for anything else. His heart felt uncomfortably active in his chest as he approached. His mouth was dry. Stinging sweat rolled into his eyes. Soon he would be one of the select few orchidologists to have beheld the black ghost. What if he were too late and the ghost had already vaporised, leaving no trace. He held his breath.

Behind the rock was a blackened tree stump, and there, like a mass of black velvet butterflies, grew the elusive orchid he had come so far to find. Ant laid his camera bag on the ground and stretched out his hand. He felt an irresistible compulsion to reach out and gently

touch the petals. As he did so there was a sudden movement and he turned to see two yellow eyes level with his as the king cobra reared up. Of all the snakes in all the world Ant had disturbed the only one that builds and guards a nest for its young. The grassy pile by the tree stump contained about fifty eggs.

The cobra struck his throat so quickly that there was no time to move. Almost instantly he could feel the deadly neurotoxins spreading through his body, shutting down each function in an inexorable wave. His last thought was one of regret that he had failed to take his photo of the orchid. By the time he was found it would be gone.

Ant was buried in Borneo. By the time his body had been recovered, nature had almost reclaimed it. The cause of death appeared to be a snake bite. A brood of young and deadly king cobras was seen nearby. Of the orchid there was no trace. Jinak attended the funeral in Bandar Seri Begawan. His son had recovered and he blamed himself for letting Ant continue alone. He never found another black ghost orchid.

Back in England Fiona mourned, but not too deeply, although she tried to look suitably distraught at the memorial service. Marriage to Ant had been disappointing. They had had very little time together. He had always been away on expeditions whilst she was left at home to care for his stupid orchids. She called the prestigious botanical garden and they eagerly came to take Ant's collection into their own care. The huge glasshouse was, to the delight of the neighbours, dismantled and sold. Fiona remodelled the back garden. When she was done, it had a lawn bifurcated by a concrete path, large vegetable patches each side, and a small potting shed at the end. When visitors remarked on the lack of flowers, she smiled to herself, but declined to explain.

Disneyland

Virginia was fat. Even back home in Texas, the state which prides itself on its every aspect being bigger than anywhere else in America, Virginia had exceeded everyone's expectations as she had piled on pound after pound. It had started with a muffin top and 'does my ass look big in this?' and had rapidly become a rout. A whole bakery of fleshy rolls had followed, building up on every portion of her anatomy, until she had reached her present (some would say magnificent) proportions. Her face was still recognizable as a visage, but puffy flesh had blurred the features into a doughy mass, until the small glittering eyes had to pry their way through fold after fold of flab to make their sharp observations on a world she increasingly feigned to despise. Her acid comments were spoken through a small, delicately formed mouth, whose lips were the only part of her not to have ballooned as the rest of her body increased.

Virginia was not only fat, but she was also unhappy. She did not want to be here. She most emphatically wished she were somewhere, anywhere, else. Breakfast at the Howard Johnson Lodge, across the road from Disneyland, had been a most unsatisfactory affair. Hiram, her husband had roused her at what she considered to be an unchristian hour because Sadie was desperate to get to the theme park as soon as it opened, and what Sadie wanted Sadie got. Hiram usually helped Sadie in the mornings. She had to be washed, dressed, her hair combed and fixed, and her small form lifted into her wheelchair before her day could begin, and here in Anaheim, away from any other carers, all this fell to Hiram.

The breakfast itself had been okay when they finally got there, and Virginia was seated in front of her third heaped plate of bacon, eggs (sunny side up), beans, sausage, pancakes with maple syrup, biscuits, hash browns and French toast, when the waiter came over to talk to them. He looked pale and was sweating profusely.

‘I feel real nauseous,’ he complained, ‘spent the night in the john throwing up and shi...’ He broke off at this point, seeing Virginia push her piled plate away. She rose and waddled out of the diner looking furious, leaving Hiram to wipe Sadie’s eggy face and sticky hands and follow, pushing the wheelchair. How dare this waiter ruin her breakfast when she had only had her first courses and three mugs of coffee and hadn’t even started on the doughnuts, waffles and muffins?

Hiram and Sadie soon caught up with Virginia. They all crossed the street together and entered the theme park gates. She still had a face like a mountain storm, purple with exertion and anger, eyes glittering fiercely, her tiny mouth a small animal sheltering from the streams of sweat beneath the overhang of the button nose, this feature itself almost engulfed by the encroaching bulge of cheeks. They walked in silence, Hiram knowing that any remark on his part would redirect Virginia’s wrath in his direction. She stamped along, flesh quivering with every step, and they reached the queue for the ‘It’s a Small World’ attraction.

Even though it was only an hour since the park had opened, the line for the ride snaked to and fro in a long zigzag round the barriers, but the wheelchair granted them priority and they headed to the front of the waiting crowd. Some people looked as though they were about to protest, but seeing the small hunched figure they bit back any comments and moved aside to let them pass. Virginia knew she was too large for the boats that took the passengers through the gentle ride, past the dioramas of moving figures from all parts of the globe. The repetition of the chorus of the silly theme song irritated her intensely. ‘It’s a small world after all. / It’s a small world after all. / It’s a small world after all. / It’s a small, small world.’ She

waited, glowering, in the shade of the awning that sheltered the queuers from the Californian sun, as Hiram gently lifted Sadie, placed her on the boat's wooden seat and followed her into the gaily painted vessel. Virginia remained guarding the wheelchair; trying to ignore the stares and sneers of people who muttered to one another about her size. Some of the comments were audibly uncomplimentary, but she was used to blocking out these, and worse.

Hiram and Sadie's boat reappeared at the tunnel exit and Virginia pushed the wheelchair forwards to meet them. Hiram disembarked first, then lifted Sadie across, making sure she was comfortable in her chair's cushions. The sun was beating down by now and they decided to find some refreshments before heading for their main objective of the day. The restaurant was packed and Virginia sat at a table with Sadie's chair at her side whilst Hiram queued up for burgers and drinks for the three of them. Sadie wanted a cola and he and Virginia were having beer. He had ordered eight burgers, one each for him and Sadie, and the rest for Virginia. When he came to pay he found they wouldn't let him purchase two beers in case he was buying one for a minor, so Virginia was forced to heave herself across to the checkout so the cashier could inspect her to assess whether she was over twenty-one. She was less than delighted at having to get up and walk the length of the restaurant when she had only just succeeded in lowering her bulk onto three chairs. She had, like the majority of Americans, never been overseas, but she had a vague idea that in Europe they wouldn't have been so picky about who was receiving the drink as long as it was paid for. Hiram fetched her a second beer, then she visited the restroom. The disabled one was a tight fit, but just about accommodated her girth.

It was time to find the ride they had come for. For months Sadie had been talking about it, ever since she had seen a video clip online. She had beseeched, cajoled, begged, pleaded, wheedled and whined, with tears and tantrums, until they had promised to bring her to Disneyland. The deal, for which Virginia was truly thankful, was that this was to be a one-

off. Once accomplished, they would never have to return. Sadie had promised she would be happy for the rest of her life; that she would never ask them for anything again, if they would bring her just the once. So here they were, heading for the Twilight Zone and its Tower of Terror.

The sun had gone in and the odd fat drop of rain plopped on them as they made their way along the walled pathway. Palms and ferns grew in profusion on both sides, and mist swirled around them. It was hard to tell whether it was Disney-generated fog or simply the result of the intense humidity amongst the luxuriant foliage. The forbidding spectre labelled 'Hollywood Tower Hotel' rose through the vapour ahead of them and once more the wheelchair proved to be a magic passport to the front of the queue. The huge wooden doors swung open, and they were beckoned in by a gaunt, eau-de-nil-faced butler.

'Welcome to the Tower of Terror,' he intoned sepulchrally, his features deadpan.

They waited in a gothic ante-room, dusty and festooned by cobwebs, and were shown a video about how the 'hotel' had been struck by lightning, sending it into the 'twilight zone'. They were then ushered into what was described as a freight elevator. The wheelchair was left abandoned at the entrance and Hiram carried Sadie. The elevator was designed for more than a dozen seated adults, but on this occasion the numbers were severely limited by Virginia moulding her soft mass into the space normally occupied by at least three people. The passengers were strapped in, an extension belt being brought to accommodate Virginia. The elevator rose and the doors opened when it reached the top. At that moment their seating became a carriage, spinning sideways across a dark space. It turned again and hurtled towards a blank wall. Just as it was about to crash, the wall disappeared like an up-an-over door, and the passengers were hurtling towards the gap, dizzily high above the park. They could see rides laid out below them like a map, with antlike visitors scurrying about. At the last minute when a fall seemed inevitable, they were turned away and the carriage became an elevator

once more, but not a sedate one, stopping at every floor. This was freefalling out of control down a giant shaft. Most people were screaming; clutching at one another, eyes wide and mouths agape, stomachs left behind at the top. One voice was raised above all the rest: Sadie laughing. This was what she had come for. All her life she had been sedate, constrained, shielded from excitement. She had known when she saw the film of the Tower of Terror, that this was something she wanted to do before she died. No matter how much fuss she had to make to achieve her aim, she had been determined to make them bring her here. It had all been worthwhile. She had just had the best experience of her life. An ecstatic, wonderful, exhilarating adventure.

Virginia felt sick. Back outside she panted in the humid air that gave no relief to her sweating body. The folds and creases of her flesh were chafed and raw. She had hated every moment of the day. Her three breakfasts were fighting with the beers and burgers and the whole lot was threatening to explode through her dainty lips in a foul-smelling bilious stream. At that moment it stopped threatening. It erupted. All down the front of her best frock and across the pathway. She glared at Sadie, now seated contentedly in her wheelchair, with a beatific smile on her face, and turned on Hiram.

‘This is all your stupid fault,’ she spat. ‘Why can’t you just learn to say no to your goddam mother?’

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