

## Sample chapter

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## On the Gold Coast

After an uncomfortable drive across the savannah Peter and Sylvia reached Bolgatanga, the first bigger town in northern Ghana. The taxi driver deposited them in front of the Black Star Hotel, where they intended to spend the night. The rooms had air-conditioning.

“Except that nothing works,” said the boy at the reception, “the air cooler doesn’t work, there is no electricity.” But when they entered the room they were pleased to find the air-conditioner making a lively noise. The boy had been wrong. Perhaps he wanted to tell them that the toilet didn’t work, for when Peter pulled the chain, the water rose over the sides of the pan and flooded the bathroom as well as part of the room.

Being hungry and thirsty, they immediately went to the hotel’s restaurant. It was airless and stifling hot. Ventilators under the ceiling were motionless. The menu was three pages long. Some dishes had wonderfully seductive names. But when they finally chose what sounded most promising, the waiter told them that all they had was chicken with rice.

“Right,” they said. “And two orange juices.”

The waiter sighed and twisted his eyes towards the ceiling. “All we have is beer, sir, only beer,” he said in the manner of someone who was tired of stupid questions.

“No soft drinks?” they expressed surprise. “Lemonade, coca cola, mineral water?”

“Tap water,” the waiter replied.

Peter ordered beer, Sylvia decided to try tap water.

“But it should be cold,” she said.

The waiter, who was already leaving, turned and came back to the table. “How can it be cold when we have no electricity, we’ve had none for two weeks, the refrigerator doesn’t work. Water is warm, the beer is warm, and the sun is warm.”

The rice was sticky, overcooked and stale. The chicken leg did not seem to have any leg. The warm beer had

a metallic, poisonous taste which made Peter nauseous. The water was best of all. Whether it was really boiled, as the waiter assured them, was another question.

It soon became obvious that they couldn’t believe anybody. The boy at the reception said that there were no buses anywhere because they had all broken down. There were no spare parts. But the waiter told them that the bus for Tamale left every morning at seven. A guest at the next table interrupted to say that this was a lie. The bus left at five, not at seven. But he would strongly advise them to be there at four; because there were too many passengers and not enough buses, they had stopped issuing reservations. Now only those with sharp elbows manage to get aboard.

The boy at the reception was right. There were no buses.

They set off to see the town. After a few steps they got the feeling that they had fallen through a time warp into some kind of parallel world. Bolgatanga gave the impression that its rightful inhabitants had left in great panic, and that normal life came to a standstill at that very moment. They could see the signs of their abrupt departure everywhere: in half-finished houses which, without any windows and doors, resembled large red-brick skeletons under the tropical sky; in neglected plots of land, which weather-beaten boards described as “supermarket”, “bank”, “school”; and in the doors of dusty shops, which were hanging half-broken off their posts.

The people who lived in the middle of this desolation gave the impression that they merely camped there; that they were Huns on the streets of the town vacated by the Romans. No houses were being built. No road was being repaired. No wall was being given a fresh coat of paint. They could see no one replacing broken window panes. Everything was closed. Nothing was for sale. Stalls stood deserted in the shade of the trees along dusty streets. Inside the shops they could see darkly gaping shelves, empty. Here and there they came upon a woman selling paltry mangoes, half-ripe oranges and blackened bananas. The few vehicles they saw cruising the streets were all ancient bangers.

They walked to the nearest bush-taxi station to check out what was on offer. In Ghana the bush taxi is called tro-tro or mammy wagon. The vehicles resting in front of a petrol station gave the impression that they had been brought there from some other world. Each of them did have four wheels and four tyres (so

smooth that one could almost see one's reflection in them), and each also had a steering wheel and a cabin, proudly marked Austin, Chevrolet or Bedford. But the contraptions attached to the cabins reminded one of a deliberate sabotage by an evil-minded apprentice: haphazardly nailed-together timber frames, covered with punctured awning, under which were arranged low, free-standing wooden benches. Some vehicles were enormous, five-ton trucks, others were small, rickety, leaning dangerously to one side. One, at the edge of the station, had collapsed altogether.

But strangest of all was that nothing was moving: even here, where one would expect a crowd, the world had come to a standstill. In the quarter of an hour that Peter and Sylvia spent examining these most unusual means of transport not a single vehicle either left or arrived, and only one was surrounded by a small group of people who gave the impression that they were setting off on a journey.

Then, already near the exit to the street, they came upon an unusual scene. Sitting on a dusty backpack was a young European girl, lost in some kind of neurotic self-absorption, nervously playing with the curls of her unwashed and uncombed brown hair. Had they passed without saying anything, she probably wouldn't have noticed them, but the moment she heard Sylvia's "Hi" she looked up as if seeing a ghost.

"Oh," she exclaimed in a tone which was a mixture of relief and astonishment, "oh! I'm sooooo glad to see you!" No sooner had she said this than she was up on her feet, reaching for their hands. "Do forgive me, but I haven't seen white faces for more than two weeks." She very nearly gave them a hug.

"Irene," she introduced herself. "From Switzerland. But now for more than six months travelling in Africa. And for more than a *week* waiting for transport to Kumasi!"

Peter and Sylvia said they were hoping to go the same way, although it seemed they would die before transport became available, not of some tropical disease but of thirst. There doesn't seem to be anything except warm beer.

"I know a place where they might have something," Irene immediately tried to be helpful. "State hotel. Catering Guest House. But it's a little out of town."

They hired a pattering, clattering taxi which took them through the town onto a dusty road leading north, past a neighbourhood of concrete blocks which

gave the impression that no one had lived in them for a long time, except rats and dogs. It took them along a narrow road winding its way through neglected fields, and deposited them in front of the state hotel building, which was not only new and finished, but also freshly painted. "In this hotel they have everything," said Irene, who had obviously been there before.

She led the way to the reception, where they found not a soul. It was hard to escape the feeling that the hotel did not have a single guest, and that the staff, if there were any, were employed for no other reason than to maintain the place for the possible arrival of some high-placed state functionary. They carried on and found themselves in an open concrete courtyard with rows of wooden chairs, in front of which, fixed to a metal frame, stood a large cinema screen. The young porter, who was fiddling with an ancient-looking projector, told them that a film would be shown at eight in the evening. After that they would remove the chairs to make room for dancing. On a covered stage in another corner of the courtyard they noticed three young men preparing speakers, microphones and amplifiers. The hotel had its own generator, there was electricity, no doubt a refrigerator as well. The young porter asked if they wanted to take a look at the discotheque.

"First we're going to have a drink," said Irene.

They learned that they could have beer, but only in the bar which would open at nine in the evening. It was six o'clock. As for water, it was available in the restaurant which would open at seven. Before then they could have a look at the discotheque.

Okay, they said. Obviously the boy wanted to show them something of which he was especially proud. As soon as he opened the nearest door and led them down a flight of stairs into a cellar Peter felt as if they had tumbled down those stairs out of Africa and into a world a million miles away from the dreary reality they had left outside. Spread out before them was a huge cavern with a circular dance floor, with tables and leather chairs in discreet corners, with romantic lighting and wall decorations. High above the dance floor perched a glass cabin which could be reached by a spiral staircase. "That box up there is mine," the porter said proudly. "I'm a disc jockey."

He invited them to follow him up the spiral staircase. And there, in his box, he had the latest state-of-the-art sound system, the best available anywhere in the

world at that time. He inserted a CD and pressed a button. The cavern began to vibrate in the rhythm of wild rock'n'roll. He pressed another button. Red, blue and yellow snowflakes began to flicker over the walls and the dance floor. Peter tried to imagine a crowd of perspiring black bodies engaged in frenzied movement, young couples in discreet corners, the "romanticism" of entertainment which is the same the world over.

Suddenly a young woman appeared on the dance floor. In the middle of criss-crossing multicoloured light beams she started to dance to the rhythm of the music, jerkily, harmoniously, but also, in an unsettling way, convulsively, with her limbs resembling the arms of an octopus, flailing about in search of a grip: as though she were trying to pull herself out of herself, escape herself, leave herself on the dance floor, a flaccid body with no life in it, while her soul would sour high above the world, looking down on it as on a painful past. It took Peter and Sylvia a while to realise that the woman on the dance floor was Irene, who had sneaked down the staircase behind their backs. "Please don't go," the singer's voice rose above drums and guitars, "please don't go."

Irene, whose aggressive desire for immediate friendship filled them with incomprehensible anguish, was dancing as though with each of her movements she were fighting for life. The violent jerks of her slender, almost boyish body were turning more and more into an erotic plea for an understanding hand that would pull her out of quicksand before it swallowed her altogether. Her brown, creased and in parts ragged long skirt swept round her ankles now this way, now that way, but always in the opposite way than her hair, which, dishevelled and stuck together, circled around her head like the nimbus of a holy woman who had fallen into Lucifer's trap. Just before the music ended she collapsed and remained motionless on the floor.

They ran down the staircase and bent over her. She opened her eyes and looked first at Peter and then at Sylvia. "I'm sorry," she whispered in a weak voice. "I haven't eaten anything for four days."

They helped her to her feet, and leaning on Peter's shoulder she managed to get up the flight of stairs, across the courtyard into the reception, and from there into the restaurant, where she collapsed on a chair at the first table. The young porter brought her backpack. It was only twenty to seven, but the porter whispered something to the waiter, who said they could order.

All they had was rice with beef stew. "Oh, please, please," said Irene and, trembling from exhaustion, rested her head on her arms, which she had crossed on the table.

Cold water? Yes, but unfortunately only in the bar, which opens at nine. Beer? The same. The only drink available was warm water. Peter and Sylvia left most of the food on their plates. The beef was unchewable. But Irene ate everything, including the beef pieces, which she didn't chew but simply swallowed. In the end she picked up the plate with both hands and licked it clean.

"Would you like another portion?" Peter asked. "Yes I would," she replied without the slightest embarrassment. The second portion disappeared in the same way as the first, only faster, and this time too, openly as a child, she cleaned the plate with her tongue. "Oh," she sighed when she finished, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

Peter paid and they said good bye. They didn't want to wait until nine, they were too tired. Outside it was already dark, but not a light to be seen anywhere. The young porter said the hotel phone was out of order, so he could not call a taxi, and it was unlikely that one would come past before nine. Fortunately Sylvia had a torch in her bag, so they set off along the winding road through the fields, hoping to make it back to the Black Star Hotel. Somewhere halfway Irene fell behind and vomited both portions of beef stew into the ditch. When they finally reached the hotel and paused in front of the entrance to say goodbye, she said, "I'm so grateful to you. Shall we have one more drink?"

They went into the restaurant and approached the bar. "Beer," Peter said. The women didn't feel like arguing either, so they ordered the only thing they were sure to have. But the waiter leaned back as if announcing something he was particularly proud of. "Not at all," he said. "Beer is available only at lunch time."

"Well, what do you have, for God's sake?" Peter asked. "We're thirsty." The waiter waved at the shelves behind him. "Whiskey, rum." They also had lights all of a sudden. Because it's Saturday, the waiter explained. That's why the ventilators don't work. If they work, there is no light, and vice versa.

They moved to a table in the corner and ordered three whiskies. Peter was worried that Irene's empty stomach wouldn't take kindly to an assault by straight

liquor. It was unlikely it had recovered sufficiently after all that convulsive vomiting. But she downed the whiskey in one go and humbly asked if she could have another. Peter passed her wish on to the waiter. She didn't down the second drink, but rolled the glass with her fingers as if looking for the right words for some sort of confession. She was overtaken by Sylvia, who asked her in which hotel she was staying. "That's what I wanted to tell you," Irene responded gratefully. "For some time now I've been sleeping rough. I've run out of money. Would I be going too far if I asked you to let me wash in your room?"

Peter looked at Sylvia, who without the slightest hesitation said yes, of course, no problem at all, why not do it right now. "And you can pay," she said to him before taking Irene to the room. Peter ordered another whiskey and tried to think calmly about what was happening. Everything was moving a little too fast. Only four hours had passed since they met her at the bush taxi station, and yet he felt as though they had spent together five days. Irene's presence had filled the bleak desolation of the place, and of their journey through Africa, with something that was, although unspoken, pregnant with a foreboding of something dark, even dangerous. He shuddered at the thought that they knew next to nothing about her. He settled the bill and picked up the backpack she had left on the chair; it wouldn't have been safe to leave it there. He hoisted it onto his back and with a heavy step, strangely excited, climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The bathroom door was slightly ajar; he could hear the sounds of running water and vigorous splashing. Sylvia was making the bed, smoothing out the sheet, tucking it under the mattress. "Good," she said, "you haven't forgotten the backpack." There followed a heated exchange. We know nothing about her, Peter kept repeating, nothing at all. Let her shower and go.

"Listen," Sylvia said. "She is tired and unhappy. Something happened to her. Something terrible, I would say. But I have no intention of prying into it, and neither will you. It's obvious that she would like to forget something. Let her sleep here, the bed is big enough for three, we can't throw her out on the street."

It's not a question of throwing her out on the street, Peter said. According to her that's where she was before they, by the will of God-knows-what peculiar fate, ran into her, and if they hadn't spoken to her she wouldn't have seen them, and would still have been where she

was. And where she will be when she dresses and leaves their room, so that they can go to bed, tired as they both are.

We may be tired, admitted Sylvia, but she is tired a hundred times more. Has Africa really turned him into a complete paranoiac; what could possibly happen to them if they allowed her to spend the night? And if he doesn't want this, they can hire a room for her, there must be no shortage of vacant ones, but they are not sending her out into the night, and that's that.

The argument was cut short by Irene, who came from the bathroom. Her washed hair was straight, smooth and shiny. She looked completely different. She had wrapped herself in Peter's towel. "What a relief," she sighed. "Like being born into a new life." Then she noticed her backpack, and another wave of joy swept over her. There was nothing fake about it; it was genuine, almost childlike in its sincerity. She opened the backpack and rummaged inside it. "Everything's dirty," she said plaintively, "I have nothing to wear."

Peter felt an urge to get away from this, so he went to the bathroom to take a shower. Under the jets of water, still warm from the heat of the day, he tried to figure out the nature of his feelings. Was it anger, or was it excitement? Their journey, which had started to lose its purpose, and their lives, on which the desolation of Africa had started to inflict aching wounds, had suddenly been disrupted by a third person, who brought with her something new and yet familiar, something long missing; the feeling that the only source of life's energy is the relationship with the Other, and that the commonest source of pain is also the only way to salvation.

As soon as he closed the tap and reached for the towel, he found himself in complete darkness. They were left without electricity. He dried himself, wrapped the towel round his waist and felt his way out of the bathroom. First he ran against the wardrobe, then against the door which was ajar, and only then did he manage to move along the wall as far as the small table which he knew was standing opposite the bed. There was a flash of lightning, and in the split second of trembling light he saw that Sylvia and Irene were already asleep; Sylvia on the left side of the bed, Irene in the middle, with the right side waiting for him.

To avoid running into another piece of furniture, he waited for another flash of lightning. As soon as it came he moved to the bed and carefully, so as not

to wake them, stretched out on the side they had allocated to him. By agreement? But they were both asleep; what a ridiculous thought! He tried to fall asleep as soon as possible.

Then, suddenly, the noisy air-conditioning unit shuddered to a stop. In the silence that filled the room he could hear the breathing of the two women. Lightning was joined by thunder, and a tremendous storm was unleashed on the town. The wind pushed its way through the gaps in the window, and because it felt cool, Peter went to open it. He could see amazing configurations of lightning, dancing over the plain all the way to the horizon. The first drops of rain hit the tin roof of the hotel with the weight of dead pigeons. The sound increased to torrential hissing. Thunder moved about like a drunken giant wearing metal clogs.

When he returned to the bed he heard Irene say, "I'm so afraid. Can you give me a hug?" In a flash of lightning he saw her lying on her back, propped up on her elbows, staring out of the window. He also saw that the towel into which she was wrapped had come undone and that she was lying there completely naked. The thunder was so violent that Sylvia couldn't have been asleep, but she pretended not to be aware of what was happening. Peter decided to do the same. But already after the next crash of thunder Irene shuddered and repeated, "I'm so afraid. Please, please give me a hug."

She started to sob. There was nothing false about it, the crying was subdued, and deeply shocking. It was Sylvia who first surrendered to the immeasurable sadness that filled her gasping sobs. She placed her arm round Irene's waist and gently pulled her towards her. "Everything will be fine," she said in a comforting tone, like a mother to a child. Irene turned towards her and placed her right arm round her shoulders. "Both," she said. "You must both hug me."

There was a silence in which a long, trembling bolt of lightning lit up two embraced women and a man who was lying next to them not knowing what to do. If the woman in the middle had not been naked, and if this nakedness hadn't seemed calculated rather than accidental, he probably wouldn't have hesitated for quite so long. But for Peter the whole situation was something completely new, and he was fast losing ground, falling into a black emptiness in which he could sense nothing that would stop him before he broke the barrier between normalcy and madness,

and found himself where most of what he still managed to control in his life would remain no more than memory.

Then he heard Sylvia's voice. "Why are you so cold?" she said with more than a hint of reproach. "Why are you so," she looked for the right word, "ungenerous?"

Fine, Peter thought. If my wife sees generosity as my readiness to embrace a naked woman lying between us, then I will do so, and let her take the responsibility for everything that may follow. He turned around and placed his right arm first round Irene's waist, and then, encountering there Sylvia's arm, moved it a little lower onto her hips.

He could feel how she twisted her body slightly to snuggle up to him, pressing her buttocks against his legs. With his arm dislodged, he moved it up to place it round her shoulders, but as he did so, before completing the movement, she raised her right arm just enough for his to end up on her chest. Before he could pull it away, she placed her right hand on the back of his and pressed it against herself in such a way that his palm came to rest on her left breast.

"Now it's okay," she said. "Now the storm can last forever."

Her breasts were small, but the nipples were not: swollen, erect and full they seem to be screaming for rough caressing, for gentle kneading, for an approval of the arousal with which they responded to the touch of someone else's skin. Outside, the storm weakened, thunder withdrew across the plain, and the rain settled down to a monotonous murmur. Peter could feel Irene's fingers on his, and his on her breast, while with his elbow he could feel Sylvia's arm, with which she was holding Irene round the waist, and which, a few inches higher from where Irene's buttocks had snuggled tightly against him, was touching the skin on his belly, now also bare, for his towel, too, had come undone and left him skin to skin with a stranger his wife was holding as tightly as if she wanted to protect her. From him, or from barely controllable desires that had welled up inside her?

"You are so good to me," whispered Irene in the dark. "I want to repay you. Both of you. I'm yours, if you want me."

Silence. Thunder still rumbled somewhere in the distance, but the flashes of lightning were too far away now to light up the bed on which they lay in the expectation of a resolution, astonished at the barely

believable difference between day and night, at the speed with which the world had turned upside down, at the gap between desires and judgement that kept reminding them that such a thing cannot be the fruit of an impulse, but of clear decision for which they would need at least two months, if not three.

"I like you both very much," continued Irene, and gently squeezed the back of Peter's hand which was feeling the burning roughness of her swollen nipple.

After a while it was Sylvia who spoke first.

"Thank you," she said. "It would be difficult to imagine a nicer present. But you're ours already. If we wanted more of you we might end up losing you, which wouldn't make any of us very happy. Besides, we might lose each other, which wouldn't make you happy either. Right?"

A good twenty minutes must have passed before Irene replied in a whisper, "Right." Soon after that, safe in their embrace, she fell asleep. The storm finally faded away: the last rumble of thunder in the distance, the last flash of lightning, the last push of the wind, the last trickle of rain. Silence. Once again stifling heat began to return to the room. In less than half an hour they were all bathing in sweat. This was another, quite welcome reason for loosening their three-way embrace and moving away from each other in the hope they might yet catch some sleep.

The next morning there was no sign of the torrential downpour; the thirsty soil had absorbed every drop of moisture. They hired a taxi and drove off towards Kumasi. Irene was glad she wouldn't have to hang around any longer, waiting for a truck going south. She had spent eleven days in Bolgatanga, and although during that time some vehicles did set off towards the south of the country, neither seemed reliable enough for her to entrust it with her new, fresh, recently regained freedom. They didn't want to pry into what exactly she wanted to say with these words; they were hoping that sooner or later she herself would feel the desire to explain them.

The road was deteriorating at an alarming rate. Little potholes were becoming large potholes, and it wasn't long before the driver had to resort to a dangerous slalom in his attempt to avoid them. But he was so clumsy, or tired, that he often drove right into those he most tried to avoid.

At four in the afternoon a large truck came towards them. The driver saw it too late; he twisted the steer-

ing wheel to the right so suddenly that they left the road and ended up in a wide brambly ditch. If the brambles hadn't brought the car to a halt, they probably wouldn't have stopped at all; the driver appeared to be so confused that he never even thought of applying the brakes. The ditch was too deep for the car to get back onto the road on its own; the driver said they would have to wait for someone to help them. He didn't seem too perturbed. They climbed out of the car and stretched their limbs.

Irene set off across an empty field, towards the late afternoon sun, which was breaking through rainclouds and painting the landscape with melancholy light. She walked slowly, with her head lowered, her hands numbly swinging. After about two hundred yards she stopped. For a while she stood there as if not knowing what to do. Then she sank to a crouching position, buried her face in her hands and began to shudder. Peter and Sylvia looked at each other. After the previous night, this was the first time that they didn't immediately avert their eyes. Even so the look did not last more than two seconds. But it was enough; they followed Irene across the field. Crouching next to her, one on each side, they put their arms round her shoulders.

"Can you see the door in the horizon?" she asked, wiping tears off her cheeks with the back of her hand. "There," she pointed across the desolate plain without any trees or villages, "there should be a door there. But I can't see any. Some people can. Through that door they can enter a parallel world, in which everything is turned on its head. In that world injustice is done to those who in this world do injustice to others. I used to wish that I would find that door and pass through it. But I no longer do. Now I know that it's easier to suffer than to cause suffering to others."

While behind them a passing truck, using a metal rope, tried to pull their car out of the ditch, Irene talked as if she, too, had to pull herself out of a hole into which she had driven her life; she talked fast, as if afraid she would run out of time. She was running away from her husband, a French rascal, with whom she had lived in Niamey, the capital of Niger. They had met while she was holidaying on the French Riviera. She liked him because he was witty, daring, adventurous, everything that in those days she longed for. And when he said that he wouldn't mind spending a few years in Africa, she went along with him. But his business ventures failed, and he began to sell

her to other businessmen and to local bigshots. He taped the encounters in hotel rooms with a hidden video camera, and then sold the tapes to those whose lives, marriages and careers could be ruined by them. And all the while he was promising that this wouldn't last very long. All they needed was enough money to return to Europe, open a shop with African carvings, and start leading a normal life. First a year passed, then one more, then another, and still there wasn't enough money. In the meantime he had taken to beating her. All her doubts, self-disgust and desperate pleas drove him to a murderous frenzy which he could drown only in alcohol.

One day she had paused on the bridge across the River Niger, a swampy, lazy body of water so wide one can hardly see from one side to the other. She stood there watching the women who were standing up to their knees in water, washing clothes. She felt a sudden urge to get soaped, washed, wrung, dried and ironed like one of the shirts in the hands of those laundry women. She wanted to be like new, without a trace of old stains. She looked across the river where everything seemed dead and yellowed. On the other side, the savannah ran as far as Volta, Mali, Senegal. She stared into that hollow emptiness and at the end of it imagined a door through which she could leave this world, in which, she felt, there was nowhere to

run. In the end she convinced herself that such a door existed, and that she couldn't see it because it was too far. One day she threw some clothes into her backpack and set off towards the horizon. But the invisible door kept moving away, it refused to wait for her.

"Forgive me," she whispered. "In your company I experienced the first true goodness in more than five years. That's why I offered myself to you. I believed that love in the embrace of goodness would cleanse me. Now I see that I, too, simply wanted to use you. I'm sorry."

They drove on. The car had a battered door, scratched mud-guards, and a broken front light. The driver wasn't happy. The night had announced itself, but was approaching slowly. And then, suddenly, everything changed! Rising on both sides of the road were the magnificent, incredibly high walls of the Ashanti jungle. Savannah, the aching yellow emptiness, had finally vanished. Here there were again unstoppable growth, opulent greenery and warm moisture. Twilight was turning to darkness. And when it got dark, the horizon moved closer, and with it the invisible door, through which now even Peter and Sylvia would have liked to enter the parallel world. Or at least return to the Black Star Hotel, to the midnight embrace, in which the soul of their fellow wanderer could have cleansed itself.