VINTAGE

WHAT AM I DOING HERE?

BRUCE CHATWIN

Contents

About the Book

Bruce Chatwin was, in his life as in his art, forever in search of the extraordinary, the exotic and the unexpected.

In this collection of profiles, essays and travel stories, Chatwin takes us to Benin, where he is arrested as a mercenary during a coup; to Boston to meet an LSD guru who believes he is Christ; to India with Indira Gandhi; and to Nepal where he reminds us that ‘Man’s real home is not a house, but the Road, and that life itself is a journey to be walked on foot’.

About the Author

Bruce Chatwin was born in Sheffield in 1940. After attending Marlborough School he began work as a porter at Sotheby's. Eight years later, having become one of Sotheby's youngest directors, he abandoned his job to pursue his passion for world travel. Between 1972 and 1975 he worked for the *Sunday Times*, before announcing his next departure in a telegram: 'Gone to Patagonia for six months.' This trip inspired the first of Chatwin's books, *In Patagonia*, which won the Hawthornden Prize and the E.M. Forster award and launched his writing career. Two of his books have been made into feature films: *The Viceroy of Ouidah* (retitled *Cobra Verde*), directed by Werner Herzog, and Andrew Grieve's *On The Black Hill.* On publication *The Songlines* went straight to No. 1 in the *Sunday Times* bestseller list and stayed in the top ten for nine months. His novel, *Utz*, was shortlisted for the 1988 Booker Prize. He died in January 1989.

ALSO BY BRUCE CHATWIN

In Patagonia

The Viceroy of Ouidah

On the Black Hill

The Songlines

Utz

Photographs and Notebooks

with Paul Theroux

Patagonia Revisited

‘His last book, a “personal selection” of essays, portraits, meditations, travel writing and other unclassifiable Chatwinian forms of prose, was put together during his final, terrible year of wasting away . . . one of its chief delights is that it contains so many of its author’s best anecdotes, his choicest performances’

Salman Rushdie, *Observer*

‘It is a personal collection of travel pieces, profiles, stories and essays, and as one reads it one cannot forget it was compiled by a uniquely gifted writer in the face of death, urgently pinning down experiences important to him. All that might suggest a scrapbook, but as a legendary traveller and observer of people Chatwin had more to put into his than most’

Mail on Sunday

‘Each of his books, in its distinctness from the others, mirrored his evident fear of being categorised by critics or publishers, and this sense of wanting to surprise went hand in hand with the power to create a collusion with the individual reader, as though you and he alone knew where the work’s real thrust lay’

Jonathan Keates, *The Independent*

‘Bruce Chatwin’s posthumously published volume of articles and stories is both a marvellous introduction to his work and a memorial to a great writer . . . It is a remarkable collection, and a fitting postscript to a distinguished career’

Today

‘All the writing in this volume demonstrates Bruce Chatwin’s loathing of the humdrum, the dreary, the predictable. What attracted him was the unusual, the weird and wonderful. Wherever he was, he would respond to odd news items he read, like the day he was in Benares and read that a wolf-

child had been found near Sultanpur. Most people would think how interesting and turn the page but not Chatwin. He caught a train at once and within twenty four hours was travelling on by rickshaw to where the boy was. The journalist in him (strongly present) knew a good story when it heard one'

Margaret Forster, *The Guardian*

'Bruce Chatwin's originality as a writer is that he uses accepted means, sharpened and pared down admittedly, to express unlikely material. If there was a barrier or inhibition, he just crashed it as he would in life; the resources of language had to take the strain he put on them without distortion. That is Tolstoy's formula, and almost every great writer's. It is like the best letter-writing only more artful, and as with the best letter writers there was a competence, almost a smoothness about Bruce'

Peter Levi, *The Spectator*

'When I read *The Songlines* I felt that his most engrossing character was himself, and that the unknown land which most fascinated him remained, as it had been since childhood, his own imagination. That is true in this book too. There are a dozen autobiographical articles about his father, about undergoing tests in hospital and his feelings about death, about his visit to the location where Herzog was filming *The Viceroy of Ouidah.* Pieces like these show us that human existence – at least as Chatwin sees it – is gloriously open-ended, unpredictable and exotic. The more he assures us that he is telling the truth, the more wonders we can expect'

Kenneth McLeish, *The Sunday Times*

What Am I Doing Here

Bruce Chatwin

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

WRITTEN FOR FRIENDS AND FAMILY

ASSUNTA

A Story

WHAT AM I doing here? I am flat on my back in a National Health Service hospital hoping, praying, that the rigors and fevers which have racked me for three months *will* turn out to be malaria – although, after many blood tests, they have not found a single parasite. I have been on quinine tablets for thirteen hours – and my temperature does seem to be sliding down. I feel my ears. They are cold. I feel the tip of my nose. It is cold. I feel my forehead. It is cool. I feel inside my groin. Not too bad. The excitement is enough to send my temperature soaring.

In comes one of the people I most adore on the ward, Assunta, the cleaning lady and tea-maker.

She comes from Palermo and has married an Englishman. She works here, not so much for money, as for love. I rejoice at the sight of Assunta because she fills the room with Southern warmth.

She has come with a mop to swab the floor.

‘Oh, my God!’ she says. ‘The snake!. . . My daughter, she go to the police about the snake.’

‘What snake?’

‘Puppet.’

‘Puppet?’

‘No. No. Poppet.’

‘Assunta, what *are* you talking about?’

She takes a deep breath and speaks in grim and halting sentences:

‘Mister Bruce . . . I have this next-door neighbour . . . She is an evil woman . . . My kids, they play in the garden and she scream, “Your kids make too much noise. Take them in the house”. . . She not believe in God or nothing . . . She have two abortions . . . All she love is animals . . . She have dog . . . She have cat . . . She have rabbits . . . and she have Poppet . . .’

‘The snake?’

‘So she knock on my door and she say, “Have you seen Poppet? She got out of her cage . . .” “No, I no see . . . Look for Poppet yourself . . .” I *shut* the windows . . . I lock the door . . . I say the kids, you no go in the garden until she find Poppet . . . She not find Poppet . . . Anywhere!. . . Then I must go my garden shed to get something . . . Comes this terrible noise, “*Sssss*!. . . *Ghrr*! *Sssss*!” I slam the door . . . I shout, “Your Poppet is in my shed!” She come over . . . She open the door . . . And this snake jump out . . . And go round and round her body five, six times . . . And lick all over her face . . .’

‘How big is this snake?’

‘BIG!’ says Assunta. ‘Big as this room . . .’

She waves the mop-handle diagonally across the room. The snake must be a python or a boa constrictor over twenty feet long.

‘And the head!’ she says. Her hands gesture to something the size of a small honeydew melon. ‘And horrible red eyes!

‘So she say, “Can I bring Poppet through the house?. . .” “No,” I say. “You go over the wall.”’

‘You should have gone to the police long ago.’

‘And the little kids playing in the street!. . . English people is mad . . . Now she knock on my door. She say, “My Poppet, she have a baby”. . . She pay £17 for artificial insemination . . . Disgusting!. . . My daughter, she go to the police.’

1988

ASSUNTA 2

A Story

IT MAY BE malaria. The temperature *has* gone down. Young doctors smile and ask how I feel. Now it's my turn to be sceptical: 'You tell *me* how I feel.' I pestered them to put me on quinine but they were reluctant. If it *is* malaria, I know where I got it. Last spring, having recovered from a very rare Chinese fungus of the bone-marrow, I went to Ghana where a film-director friend was making a film based on one of my books.

There were no hotel beds in Accra because the city was host to a Pan-African Ladies' Congress. The film crew had moved to the North. My friend regretted there might be no one reliable to meet me. We called the British Council representative who volunteered to find something. I once spent a night in Accra, in the bus-park.

Outside the airport building there were *two* reception committees, not one: the boys of Ghana Film Industries, the girls of the British Council. They waved bits of white cardboard: 'Mr Chatwin . . . Mr Chatwin . . .' We drove off in the British Council's white station-wagon. The boys followed in their tumbledown cars. We came to the hotel, which I think was called Liberty Hall. I was really too tired to take in the name, and I left at five in the morning. I gave the boys and girls beer and lemonade, and they shyly answered questions. I heard a loud and angry commotion at the reception desk. A lady was shouting, in French, 'Madame, est-ce que je peux vous aider?'

There were many hungry ladies in the dining-room. They were the delegation from Guinea and they only spoke French. I assumed the role of head waiter and my English-speaking assistant took notes on a pad.

I announced the menu: steak, kid, guinea-fowl, chicken, fish. The ladies were very particular. One wanted her steak ‘not too cooked’. One wanted chicken with *akassas* and a chile sauce ‘not too strong’. The waiter went to the kitchen and the ladies clapped. Here was life again!

I had not noticed that my face was covered with mosquito bites.

I flew to the North in a chartered plane. I felt the film was going to *look* spectacular but was not much to do with my book. The star did not look like a Brazilian slave trader as much as a bad-tempered European woman. I mistimed one of my anti-malarials and forgot about it.

A week after coming back to England I took another prophylactic and had a seizure: shivers followed by a temperature. It was not serious. I thought nothing of it.

A week later I took another pill and this time had a shaking fit and raging fever. I had recovered by the morning. The doctors and I agreed it was probably a reaction to the pill.

The young doctors were reluctant to put me on quinine without a go-ahead from the Professor. He is one of the most brilliant clinical physicians in this country – which leads the world. In the Far East he has made advances in the study of cerebral malaria. He dazzles me with his mind and his wisdom.

He comes into the room with a stethoscope round his neck:

‘How are you?’

‘Look at the temperature chart.’

He looks at the chart, he looks up and grins:

‘I’m always mistrustful of patients who diagnose their own diseases. I suspect they may have healing powers, or self-healing powers, of which we know nothing.’

He goes. I lie back on the pillow and shut my eyes. The Professor has made me happier than he can imagine.

He is a world authority on snake-bites.

In comes Assunta with the morning tea.

‘Like a cup-a-tea, Bruce?’

‘I’d love a cup of tea, Assunta.’

She brings the tea and we settle in for our daily morning talk.

‘You know, Assunta, it may be malaria after all.’

‘These doctors,’ she sighs. ‘They not always know . . . Sometimes you know and they not know . . . I have terrible time with my last child . . .’

‘When was that, Assunta?’

‘My little girl is fourteen.’

She is going to tell me another story.

‘My husband and i . . . we have three children . . . so I take the pill . . . and I get fat . . . I get so fat people say: “Assunta you’re pregnant”. . . I say, “I can’t be pregnant . . . I take the pill . . . I have my periods . . . Regular . . .” But I feel something inside . . . It is not a baby . . . It not move . . . I have three babies and they move . . . So my husband, he take me to hospital . . . They make more scan . . . And one day doctor and nurses come . . . My husband come . . . He white like a sheet . . . The doctor hold my hand . . . He say, “Be calm, Assunta. Be calm . . .” I *NOT* calm! “Assunta,” he say. “You really want this baby?” “Yes, now I want baby . . .” Now really I worry . . . “What the matter?” “Be calm, Assunta,” he say. “Be calm . . . Assunta, the baby in your body have no arms and no legs. You not want child like that . . .”

‘I go up and down . . . I go up . . . I go down . . . I no breathe . . . The nurse she have needle and I sleep . . . So I wake in morning and I am drunk . . . “Where am I?” I say the

nurse . . . “Assunta, you still in hospital . . .” And the nurse . . . she put in front of me piece paper . . . “Please sign”. . . I am so drunk I sign . . . O my God I sign away baby . . . O Mary forgive me! But no . . . I stay in hospital three months . . . The baby not move . . . Every week . . . Scan . . . Scan . . . Scan . . . Back . . . front . . . side . . . Always same: “Assunta, your baby, it have no arms and no legs . . .” So comes time for baby to be born. The doctors say me, “Assunta, you want injection?. . . You not want to see baby?. . .” “*NO!*” I shout. “I want see baby . . . *MY* baby! I see my baby!. . . With my eyes!. . .’ So the baby come . . . And I look . . . And I see the little hand . . . My baby is normal! Normal . . .’

I am crying. I find it hard to cry, but I am crying.

‘I look at doctor and I say, “You, you, you . . . you . . . you fuckin’ bastard! You tell me my baby have no arms and no legs . . .” The doctor . . . he go away . . . I am happy . . . Happy, Bruce . . . So happy!. . . I hold my child . . . I thank the Virgin . . . I crying . . . So comes next morning . . . the nurses all around . . . I still crying . . . “Please, please tell doctor forgive what I say him . . .” The nurses say, “No, Assunta. You are right . . . All hospital know you right . . .” “But tell doctor forgive me!” I still crying . . . So comes the morning . . . The doctor, he knock my door . . . He bring *BIG* bouquet of flowers . . . I never saw flowers like . . . BIG, BIG coronations!. . . And big box chocolates and little clothes for my baby. He take my hand . . . He smile . . . “Assunta, you right to call me fucking bastard!”

1988

YOUR FATHER'S EYES ARE BLUE AGAIN

MY MOTHER HAS come back from her cataract operation. For years she has felt hemmed in by the murk. The colours amaze her.

'Your father's eyes are blue again.'

My father has the most beautiful blue eyes I have ever seen in a man. I do not say this because he is my father. They are mariner's eyes, level and steady. On the Malta convoys they scanned the surface of the sea for mines, or the horizon for an enemy warship. They are the eyes of a man who has never known the meaning of dishonesty. They have never tempted him to anything mean or shoddy.

My mother's eyes are brown and lively, with suggestions of Southern ancestry.

When my mother, Margharita, was in hospital he found a photograph I had feared was lost. He had it taken at Hove in 1940 before going to sea. The photo shows the clear blue eyes, that can only be blue, gazing squarely at the camera from under the patent leather peak of his naval officer's cap. My mother kept it by her bedside. I would kiss it before going to bed. My first memory of him is on my third birthday, the 13th of May 1943. He took us bicycling near Flamborough Head, the grey Yorkshire headland that Rimbaud may have seen from a brig and put into his prose-poem *Promontoire.*

He rigged up an improvised saddle for me on his crossbar, with stirrups of purple electric wire. I pointed to a squashed brown thing on the road.

'What's that, daddy?'

'I don't know.'

He did not want me to see something dead.

‘Well, it looks to me like a piece of hedgehog.’

My father was not looking in the box of old photos for the one of himself, but for one of his father’s yacht, the *Aireymouse.* In the Twenties and Thirties my grandfather, a Birmingham lawyer, owned a vessel of legendary beauty. She was a teak, clipper-bowed ketch built at Fowey in Cornwall in 1898; she had once been rigged as a cutter. An aireymouse is a bat and, under her bowsprit, there was the figurehead of a bat with outstretched wings. The bat had disappeared by my father’s day. *Aireymouse* had brown sails dyed with cutch-bark, a brass ship’s bell, and a gold line from stem to stern.

My grandfather died in 1933, and *Aireymouse* had to be sold. She needed expensive repairs to her stanchions. Neither my father nor his brothers and sister could afford them. They sold her for £200. For my father alone it was the loss of a lover.

He had other boats – the *Nocteluca*, the *Dozmaree*, the *Nereid*, the *Sunquest* – but he shared them with others, and none matched the boat of his dreams.

I do not think he could bring himself to find out what had happened to *Aireymouse.* He heard rumours. In Guernsey a car had driven over the pier and landed on her deck – without doing too much damage. Or she was a rotting house-boat in the mud of a West Country creek. Or an incendiary bomb had hit her in the War. He came to accept that she was gone, but never quite believed it. On our sailing holidays we all believed that one golden evening, off Ushant or in the Race of Alderney, two sails would appear on the horizon and the ethereal craft would heave into view. My father would raise his binoculars and say the words he yearned to say: ‘It’s *Aireymouse.*’

He became resigned. My parents no longer went to sea. They bought a camping van and travelled all over Europe.

My father kept a sailor's log-book of their journeys, and read road-maps as if they were charts.

He had also dreamed of making one trade-wind passage to the West Indies. He never found the time to get away. Too many people depended on his legal advice. He would come home exhausted in the evenings after grappling with the problems of National Health Service hospitals. After his retirement, he had an arthritic hip and I feared he would go into decline. Once the operation had been performed, he was young again.

Four years ago my brother took him on the trade-wind passage. The boat was a modern yacht to be delivered to Antigua. But the owners had made her top-heavy with expensive junk. In a following sea, she did a fifty-degree roll and they had to turn back to the Cape Verde Islands. My father looked younger than ever after his adventure, but it was a disappointment.

Three days before Margharita went to hospital, he found himself talking on the phone to a man who said: 'I've been looking for you for a long time.' Was Charles Chatwin related to the pre-war owners of *Aireymouse*?

'I am,' said my father. 'She was our boat.'

'I've bought her,' the man said.

The man had found her up the River Dart. He fell in love with her and bought her. He took her to a yard in Totnes. The deck was gone. Many of the oak timbers were gone. But the teak hull was in perfect condition.

'I'm going to reconstruct her,' the man said. Could he count on Charles's help?

Charles will be eighty this year.

Let us pray he will sail on *Aireymouse.*

1988

2

STRANGE ENCOUNTERS

A COUP

A Story

THE COUP BEGAN at seven on Sunday morning. It was a grey and windless dawn and the grey Atlantic rollers broke in long even lines along the beach. The palms above the tidemark shivered in a current of cooler air that blew in off the breakers. Out at sea – beyond the surf – there were several black fishing canoes. Buzzards were circling above the market, swooping now and then to snatch up scraps of offal. The butchers were working, even on a Sunday.

We were in a taxi when the coup began, on our way to another country. We had passed the Hôtel de la Plage, passed the Sûreté Nationale, and then we drove under a limply-flapping banner which said, in red letters, that Marxist-Leninism was the one and only guide. In front of the Presidential Palace was a road-block. A soldier waved us to a halt, and then waved us on.

‘Pourriture!’ said my friend Domingo, and grinned.

Domingo was a young, honey-coloured mulatto with a flat and friendly face, a curly moustache and a set of dazzling teeth. He was the direct descendant of Francisco Felix de Souza, a Brazilian slave-dealer about whom I was writing a book.

Domingo had two wives. The first wife was old and the skin hung in loose folds off her back. The second wife was hardly more than a child. We were on our way to Togo, to watch a football game, and to visit his great-uncle who knew a lot of old stories about the slaver.

The taxi was jammed with football fans. On my right sat a very black old man wrapped in green and orange cotton. His teeth were also orange from chewing cola nuts, and from time to time he spat.

Outside the Presidential Palace hung an outsize poster of the Head of State, and two much smaller posters of Lenin and Kim Il Sung. Beyond the road-block, we took a right fork, on through the old European section where there were bungalows and balks of bougainvillaea by the gates. Along the sides of the tarmac, market-women walked in single file with basins and baskets balanced on their heads.

‘What’s that?’ I asked. There was some kind of commotion, up ahead, towards the airport.

‘Accident!’ Domingo shrugged.

The women were screaming, and scattering their yams and pineapples, and rushing for the shelter of the gardens. A white Peugeot shot down the middle of the road, swerving right and left to miss the women, and then, we heard the crack of gunfire.

‘C’est la guerre!’ our driver shouted, and spun the taxi round.

‘I knew it.’ Domingo grabbed my arm. ‘I knew it.’

The sun was up by the time we got to downtown Cotonou. In the taxi-park the crowd had panicked and overturned a brazier. A stack of crates had caught fire. A policeman blew his whistle and bawled for water. Above the rooftops, there was a column of black smoke, rising.

‘They’re burning the Palace,’ said Domingo. ‘Quick! Run!’

We ran, bumped into other running figures, and ran on. A man shouted, ‘Mercenary!’ and lunged for my shoulder. I ducked and we dodged down a sidestreet. A boy in a red shirt beckoned me into a bar. It was dark inside. People were clustered round a radio. Then the bartender screamed (wildly, in African) at me. And suddenly I was out again on the dusty red street, shielding my head with my arms, pushed and pummelled against the corrugated building by

four hard, acridly-sweating men until the gendarmes came to fetch me in a jeep.

‘For your own proper protection,’ their officer said, as the handcuffs snapped around my wrists.

The last I saw of Domingo he was standing in the street, crying, as the jeep drove off, and he vanished in a clash of coloured cottons.

In the barracks guardroom a skinny boy, stripped to a pair of purple underpants, sat hunched against the wall. His hands and feet were bound with rope, and he had the greyish look Africans get when they are truly frightened. A gecko hung motionless on the whitewash. Outside the door there was a papaya with a tall scaly trunk and yellowing fruit. A mud-wall ran along the far side of the compound. Beyond the wall the noise of gunfire continued, and the high-pitched wailing of women.

A corporal came in and searched me. He was small, wiry, angular, and his cheekbones shone. He took my watch, wallet, passport and notebook.

‘Mercenary!’ he said, pointing to the patch-pocket on the leg of my khaki trousers. His gums were spongy and his breath was foul.

‘No,’ I said, submissively. ‘I’m a tourist.’

‘Mercenary!’ he shrieked, and slapped my face – not hard, but hard enough to hurt.

He held up my fountain-pen. ‘What?’

‘A pen,’ I said.

‘What for?’

‘To write with.’

‘A gun?’

‘Not a gun.’

‘Yes, a gun!’

I sat on a bench, staring at the skinny boy who continued to stare at his toes. The corporal sat cross-legged in the doorway with his sub-machine-gun trained on me. Outside

in the yard, two sergeants were distributing rifles, and a truck was loading with troops. The troops sat down with the barrels sticking up from their crotches. The colonel came out of his office and took the salute. The truck lurched off, and he walked over, lumpily, towards the guardroom.

The corporal snapped to attention, and pointed to me. ‘Mercenary, Comrade Colonel!’

‘From today,’ said the colonel, ‘there are no more comrades in our country.’

‘Yes, Comrade Colonel,’ the man nodded; but checked himself and added, ‘Yes, my Colonel.’

The colonel waved him aside and surveyed me gloomily. He wore an exquisitely-pressed pair of paratrooper fatigues, a red star on his cap, and another red star in his lapel. A roll of fat stood out around the back of his neck, his thick lips drooped at the corners. He looked, I thought, so like a sad hippopotamus. I told myself I mustn’t think he looks like a sad hippopotamus. Whatever happens, he mustn’t think I think he looks like a sad hippopotamus.

‘Ah, monsieur!’ he said, in a quiet dispirited voice. ‘What are you doing in this poor country of ours?’

‘I came here as a tourist.’

‘You are English?’

‘Yes.’

‘But you speak an excellent French.’

‘Passable,’ I said.

‘With a Parisian accent I should have said.’

‘I have lived in Paris.’

‘I, also, have visited Paris. A wonderful city!’

‘The most wonderful city.’

‘But you have mistimed your visit to Benin.’

‘Yes,’ I faltered. ‘I seem to have run into trouble.’

‘You have been here before?’

‘Once,’ I said. ‘Five years ago.’

‘When Benin was Dahomey.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I used to think Benin was in Nigeria.’

‘Benin is in Nigeria and now we have it here.’

‘I think I understand.’

‘Calm yourself, monsieur.’ His fingers reached to unlock my handcuffs. ‘We are having another little change of politics. Nothing more! In these situations one must keep calm. You understand? Calm!’

Some boys had come through the barracks’ gate and were creeping forward to peer at the prisoner. The colonel appeared in the doorway, and they scampered off.

‘Come,’ he said. ‘You will be safer if you stay with me. Come, let us listen to the Head of State.’

We walked across the parade-ground to his office where he sat me in a chair and reached for a portable radio. Above his desk hung a photo of the Head of State, in a Fidel Castro cap. His cheeks were a basketwork of scarifications.

‘The Head of State’, said the colonel, ‘is always speaking over the radio. We call it the *journal parlé.* It is a crime in this country *not* to listen to the *journal parlé.*’

He turned the knob. The military music came in crackling bursts.

> Citizens of Benin . . . the hour is grave. At seven hours this morning, an unidentified DC-8 jet aircraft landed at our International Airport of Cotonou, carrying a crapulous crowd of mercenaries . . . black and white . . . financed by the lackeys of international imperialism . . . A vile plot to destroy our democratic and operational regime.

The colonel laid his jowls on his hands and sighed, ‘The Sombas! The Sombas!’

The Sombas came from the far north-west of the country. They filed their teeth to points and once, not so long ago, were cannibals.

‘. . . launched a vicious attack on our Presidential Palace . . .’

I glanced up again at the wall. The Head of State was a Somba – and the colonel was a Fon.

‘. . . the population is requested to arm itself with stones and knives to kill this crapulous . . .’

‘A recorded message,’ said the colonel, and turned the volume down. ‘It was recorded yesterday.’

‘You mean . . .’

‘Calm yourself, monsieur. You do not understand. In this country one understands nothing.’

Certainly, as the morning wore on, the colonel understood less and less. He did not, for example, understand why, on the nine o’clock communiqué, the mercenaries had landed in a DC-8 jet, while at ten the plane had changed to a DC-7 turboprop. Around eleven the music cut off again and the Head of State announced a victory for the Government Forces. The enemy, he said, were retreating *en catastrophe* for the marshes of Ouidah.

‘There has been a mistake,’ said the colonel, looking very shaken. ‘Excuse me, monsieur. I must leave you.’

He hesitated on the threshold and then stepped out into the sunlight. The hawks made swift spiralling shadows on the ground. I helped myself to a drink from his water-flask. The shooting sounded further off now, and the town was quieter. Ten minutes later, the corporal marched into the office. I put my hands above my head, and he escorted me back to the guardroom.

It was very hot. The skinny boy had been taken away, and on the bench at the back sat a Frenchman.

Outside, tied to the papaya, a springer spaniel was panting and straining at its leash. A pair of soldiers squatted on their hams and tried to dismantle the Frenchman’s shotgun. A third soldier, rummaging in his game-bag, was laying out a few brace of partridge and a guinea-fowl.

‘Will you please give that dog some water?’ the Frenchman asked.

‘Eh?’ The corporal bared his gums.

‘The dog,’ he pointed. ‘Water!’

‘No.’

‘What’s going on?’ I asked.

‘The monkeys are wrecking my gun and killing my dog.’

‘Out there, I mean.’

‘Coup monté.’

‘Which means?’

‘You hire a plane-load of mercenaries to shoot up the town. See who your friends are and who are your enemies. Shoot the enemies. Simple!’

‘Clever.’

‘Very.’

‘And us?’

‘They might need a corpse or two. As proof!’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘I was joking.’

‘Thanks all the same.’

The Frenchman was a water-engineer. He worked up-country, on Artesian wells, and had come down to the capital on leave. He was a short, muscular man, tending to paunch, with cropped grey hair and a web of white laugh-lines over his leathery cheeks. He had dressed himself *en mercenaire*, in fake python-skin camouflage, to shoot a few game-birds in the forest on the outskirts of town.

‘What do you think of my costume?’ he asked.

‘Suitable,’ I said.

‘Thank you.’

The sun was vertical. The colour of the parade-ground had bleached to a pinkish orange, and the soldiers strutted back and forth in their own pools of shade. Along the wall the vultures flexed their wings.

‘Waiting,’ joked the Frenchman.

‘Thank you.’

‘Don’t mention it.’

Our view of the morning’s entertainment was restricted by the width of the doorframe. We were, however, able to witness a group of soldiers treating their ex-colonel in a

most shabby fashion. We wondered how he could still be alive as they dragged him out and bundled him into the back of a jeep. The corporal had taken the colonel's radio, and was cradling it on his knee. The Head of State was baying for blood – '*Mort aux mercenaires soit qu'ils sont noirs ou blancs*. . .' The urchins, too, were back in force, jumping up and down, drawing their fingers across their throats, and chanting in unison, '*Mort aux mercenaires!*. . . *Mort aux mercenaires!*. . .'

Around noon, the jeep came back. A lithe young woman jumped out and started screeching orders at an infantry platoon. She was wearing a mud-stained battledress. A nest of plaits curled, like snakes, from under her beret.

'So,' said my companion. 'The new colonel.'

'An Amazon colonel,' I said.

'I always said it,' he said. 'Never trust a teenage Amazon colonel.'

He passed me a cigarette. There were two in the packet and I took one of them.

'Thanks,' I said. 'I don't smoke.'

He lit mine, and then his, and blew a smoke-ring at the rafters. The gecko on the wall hadn't budged.

'My name's Jacques,' he said.

I told him my own name and he said, 'I don't like the look of this.'

'Nor I,' I said.

'No,' he said. 'There are no rules in this country.'

Nor were there any rules, none that one could think of, when the corporal came back from conferring with the Amazon and ordered us, also, to strip to our underpants. I hesitated. I was unsure whether I was wearing underpants. But a barrel in the small of my back convinced me, underpants or no, that my trousers would have to come down – only to find that I did, after all, have on a pair of pink and white boxer shorts from Brooks Brothers.

Jacques was wearing green string pants. We must have looked a pretty couple – my back welted all over with mosquito bites, he with his paunch flopping over the elastic – as the corporal marched us out, barefoot over the burning ground, and stood us, hands up, against the wall which the vultures had fouled with their ash-white, ammonia-smelling droppings.

'*Merde!*' said Jacques. 'Now what?'

What indeed? I was not frightened. I was tired and hot. My arms ached, my knees sagged, my tongue felt like leather, and my temples throbbed. But this was not frightening. It was too like a B-movie to be frightening. I began to count the flecks of millet-chaff embedded in the mud-plaster wall . . .

I remembered the morning, five years earlier, my first morning in Dahomey, under the tall trees in Parakou. I'd had a rough night, coming down from the desert in the back of a crowded truck, and at breakfast-time, at the café-routier, I'd asked the waiter what there was to see in town.

'Patrice.'

'Patrice?'

'That's me,' he grinned. 'And, monsieur, there are hundreds of other beautiful young girls and boys who walk, all the time, up and down the streets of Parakou.'

I remembered, too, the girl who sold pineapples at Dassa-Zoumbé station. It had been a stifling day, the train slow and the country burnt. I had been reading Gide's *Nourritures terrestres* and, as we drew into Dassa, had come to the line '*Ô cafés – où notre démence s'est continuée très avant dans la nuit*. . .' No, I thought, this will never do, and looked out of the carriage window. A basket of pineapples had halted outside. The girl underneath the basket smiled and, when I gave her the Gide, gasped, lobbed all six pineapples into the carriage, and ran off to show her friends – who in turn came skipping down the tracks, clamouring, 'A book, please? A