

The
CLOTHS *of*
HEAVEN

Sue Eckstein



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He Wishes for the Cloths of Heaven

W. B. Yeats

Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.

Brighton, October 24th 1990

POST CARD

THE ADDRESS TO BE WRITTEN ON THIS SIDE



As promised, a post card.

I'd forgotten what an

English autumn could

be like - crisp and clear -

the sort of weather I used

to dream about in Bakinabe.

I've started making plans -

but I'm rather out of practice.

There's a good chance Guido

Ansaloni will take me on as a pupil in the Spring -

Rome seems a good place to be as any.

I think of you often. Look after yourself. R x

Daniel Macdonald
FCO Tiokunola
C/O Ring Charles St
London SW1A 2AH

BAKINABE, WEST AFRICA, 1989

When Isabel Redmond walked out onto the veranda she could not help noticing that her husband's hands were firmly cupped round a pair of rather splendid black breasts.

"Thought you might like a cold drink, Patrick," she said with a cheery sigh, placing a tray with two glasses of lemonade on the only clear corner of a low wooden table.

"Ah Izzy, you're a marvel," said Patrick rather distractedly, as he carefully fastened the buttons of his companion's blouse, deftly giving one large, erect nipple a valedictory tweak as he tucked it in. "We'd just finished. Thirsty work, eh, Isatou?"

Isatou re-tied her headscarf and smiled her thanks as Isabel passed her a glass. Patrick, meanwhile, dismantled his tripod and put his cameras away with rather less enthusiasm and dexterity than he had demonstrated only moments earlier.

"Same time next week? Marvellous!" he said, ushering Isatou into the house and out of the front door.

Isabel picked up the empty glasses and put them down on the tray. She heard Patrick walk back along the corridor and into the shower room. She heard the rusty squeak as he turned on the shower, and the familiar sharp intake of breath as the cold water hit the top of his balding head. She looked out over the dusty road, the hedges of flaming bougainvillea, the corrugated iron roofs and sighed again, this time slightly less cheerfully. Patrick. What was she to do with him? What could she do? As hobbies went, it was perhaps a little out of the

ordinary but as a deviancy it was really quite mild.

It could be a lot worse. Decades in Africa had had a far more bizarre effect on many of the expatriates they had encountered over the years. What about Stanley Shea, that surveyor in Kaduna? The one Eleanor Cameron had known. Years ago now. It was one thing to shoot yourself in the head when your house-boy finally tired of your advances, but quite another to miss so badly that you spent the rest of your life in a nursing home in Worthing. And Thomas Kayne, that judge who had served in the colonial service and was now living out his retirement following a clan of Fulani herdsmen and their cattle as they roamed the Sahel. Rumour had it you could trace his journey by the pale-skinned, green-eyed children that peppered his route. And just what Father Seamus was doing up in Brikaba was anyone's guess.

Isabel looked down at the mess of papers and magazines on the table. Dusty back copies of *West Africa* and *Private Eye*, sheets of yellow paper covered in lines of poetry and crossings out. Recipes. Reminders. Letters. Bills. She shuffled them into ungainly piles. There should at least be a bit of order around the place.

Isabel had married Patrick when they were both still at Oxford and now, forty-one years, six children and two continents later, she could not imagine what life would be like without him. It would be strangely empty and devoid of any real meaning, despite her children, her teaching and her many other interests; none of them, admittedly, as exotic as Patrick's.

If Patrick ever thought about these things, which Isabel suspected he rarely did, he would have expressed very similar sentiments. Isabel was, quite literally, his

better half, though he would have worked hard to think up a more erudite way of putting it. Every evening, except when one of their children was over from England or someone dropped in, they would walk, arm in arm, to six o'clock Mass at St Gabriel's and then stroll on to their favourite beachside bar. There they would sit beside each other in companionable silence, watching the sun go down, each with a cold beer and a well-worn novel or book of poetry. From time to time they would read out snippets that each thought the other would appreciate. Occasionally, Patrick would look around, smile wickedly, pull out a short blunt pencil from his top pocket and open his small black notebook.

Patrick went nowhere without this notebook, in which he would jot down snatches of overheard conversation and anything else that he thought might come in useful. There had been a bit of a commotion the previous month when one of his poems, 'Cocktails at Eight, Fenella', had appeared in the *London Review of Books*. It had just been bad timing that old Alec, the High Commissioner, had been on home leave when it came out, bad luck that his hosts had subscribed to it, and unfortunate that his wife, Fenella, in an uncharacteristically literary mood, had read it. Patrick and Isabel's relationship with the High Commission and the other British expatriates, at best tenuous, was now somewhat strained.

Isabel picked some dead flowers off the bougainvillea and crunched up the brown petals. She held her hand over the veranda wall and watched as the dried fragments spun and eddied to the ground. It was so hot and so dry. You could taste the dust in your throat and feel it in your eyes. Isabel, who was not one to complain or to wish

herself anywhere other than where she was, found herself longing for the rains. The roads would be a mess. Shoes – unworn for a couple of days – would be covered in a light dusting of mould, and you would drip with sweat all day and night. But the earth would yield the most marvellous treasures, and when the rain clouds cleared the sky would be an azure so deep that you thought you would weep with the beauty of it.

"Izzy, my love," said Patrick, coming onto the veranda, brandishing an airmail envelope in one hand and his reading glasses in the other, and dressed only in a towel, a pair of flip-flops and the canvas hat he was rarely seen without, "have you read this letter from Joe?" His large white stomach flopped comfortably over the towel.

"No. I was about to and then I got sidetracked. What does he have to say for himself?" Joe was their youngest child and only son. He had graduated in philosophy from Edinburgh University and, after a brief foray into journalism, had distressed both his parents by joining a merchant bank. As if that were not bad enough, he seemed to be doing remarkably well and appeared to have little interest in Africa except where it affected the commodities market.

"The bugger's fine," said Patrick affectionately, scanning the letter. "Moving in with Lucy, it seems."

"I hope she knows what she's letting herself in for," said Isabel who, while she adored her only son, disapproved of his cavalier attitude towards his girlfriends and life in general. "She seems far too good for him. I hope she doesn't let him walk all over her." Isabel felt herself to be partially to blame for what she saw as Joe's

shortcomings. A much longed-for son and brother, tall, blond and beautiful, he had spent his youth at a Catholic boys' boarding school inconveniently set in the middle of several hundred acres of Yorkshire dale. When he left, he was like a lion released back into the wild. Girls were the zebras he had always known were out there (he had five sisters, after all) but had rarely had the chance to pounce upon. Isabel had failed to find the equivalent of a tranquilliser dart with which to curb his enthusiasm and Patrick had not been much help, openly enjoying Joe's tales of conquest.

"Seems Lucy's cousin is out here. At the High Commission," continued Patrick. "Some kind of second secretary. Poor sod."

"That must be Daniel Maddison," said Isabel. "He's that slim, dark-haired chap who arrived a couple of months ago. Only about twenty-five or so. I bumped into him in the supermarket – quite literally – and we got talking – a few weeks ago now. I remember telling you at the time. He seemed very pleasant, if a little disappointed."

"Why? Not enough cheddar cheese and Branston pickle for him?"

"Quite the opposite, I think. He seemed amazed that there was so much imported stuff available. I think he imagined he was being posted into the bush or something."

"Probably read too much Graham Greene. It does that to you. Still, if he can read at all it singles him out from the rest of the diplomatic crowd," said Patrick contemptuously.

"And I saw him again in town last week," said Isabel,

frowning as she recalled the occasion. "I don't think he saw me. He was standing outside one of those Lebanese cloth shops, staring in at the piles of batik print. He looked a bit odd, actually."

"What do you mean, odd?" asked Patrick.

"I don't know. Sort of distracted. Confused. That sort of thing. He looked as though he was about to go in, and then suddenly he turned away and walked off."

"Probably overpowered by the vulgarity of the colours," said Patrick dismissively. "Not quite the right thing for those High Commission cocktail parties, are they?"

"Oh, Patrick, don't be such a beast. I think we should invite him round. Especially if he's Lucy's cousin. You never know, she may survive life with our angelic son for more than the usual six months. And anyway, he seems interesting."

"Why? Because he has a thing about garish material and a passing interest in Africa?"

"You're just jealous, Patrick, in case you have a rival for the position of resident iconoclast. I'm going to drop him a note and suggest he joins us for a drink. So there. Now go on, you old goat. Get dressed. Mass starts in twenty minutes."

Isabel took the letter with one hand and Patrick's glasses with the other and then hesitated. Dropping them onto the table, she stepped forward and wrapped her arms around him. His arms enveloped her and, as they did so, his towel dropped to the floor. He buried his face in her hair and nuzzled her ear. She felt the hairs on the back of her neck bristle.

"What about eight o'clock Mass instead?" they said

together, laughing as they walked hand in hand into their bedroom, the damp towel trailing behind them.



Daniel Maddison had offered to join the High Commissioner on his visit to Juntaur. He needed an excuse to get off the High Commission compound. Maybe a trip down the coast would clear his head.

The journey had started inauspiciously with old Alec snapping at the driver – something to do with the angle of the Union Jack on the bonnet – and then going into a sulky decline in the back of the Range Rover. He had responded to Daniel’s enthusiastic commentary first with irritable grunts and then with a moody silence. Two hours into the journey and old Alec’s temper was showing no sign of improving.

The road skirted the fish-smoking huts and the smell of barbecued fish caught the back of Daniel’s throat. Every now and then, groups of small children would run out of their compounds, shouting *Toubab! Toubab!*, laughing, and trying to touch the side of the car as it sped by. Daniel gazed out of the window, smiling to himself. Where else could you spend a working day driving down palm-fringed dirt roads, with the sea shimmering behind the dunes, past wizened old men sitting on wooden benches in doorways watching the world go by and groups of women carrying water pots on their heads, their hips swaying in ways which made it difficult for him to swallow. Go on. Where else? Where else, for that matter, would you get fish called *bonga*?

Daniel felt himself relax. The unease he had been experiencing over the past few weeks seemed to be diminishing. But if he shut his eyes for a moment he could still see her face. Pale and still, her fair hair falling

over her eyes as she bent over the rolls of cloth.

Daniel glanced sideways at the High Commissioner and noticed that he had tired of staring at the back of the driver's head and was now immersed in a thick novel with a scarlet and gold-embossed cover. Well at least he was spared the ordeal of having to make conversation with Alec, who appeared to regard him as only slightly less strange than the people he insisted on calling "the natives" whenever he felt it was safe to do so. Daniel shuddered as he recalled the last conversation they had had while waiting for a visiting dignitary at the airport:

"Got a girlfriend back home then?"

"I'm sorry?"

"A girlfriend. You know. Two legs, a pair of t—"

"Yes – I know what you—"

"Good-looking chap like you. Must have them queuing up."

"Well ..."

"What about Hélène?"

"Hélène who?"

"Smets. Hélène Smets."

"She's married."

Daniel could still see the look that Alec had given him – a combination of undisguised incredulity and amusement.

The driver turned sharply off the main road and drove into the village chief's compound, the little Union Jack flapping through clouds of yellow dust. Old Alec snapped his book shut. The muffled sound of children calling out grew louder and louder. Hands waved, inches from their faces; grimy fingers tapped on the glass and doors. They stepped from the car. The heat and

uninsulated shrieks of laughter hit them. Daniel stood back and watched as Alec gasped and clutched the bonnet and tried, without success, to find his handkerchief in one of the many pockets of his tropical-weight beige suit. Alec and Daniel were engulfed by a group of men in long blue or white robes, all reaching for their hands and greeting them. They were led to a wooden bench outside a building so new it seemed as though the bricks could be lifted from their soft bed of cement. Alec looked, to Daniel, as though he was gearing up for an afternoon in the dentist's chair. The village chief thanked them, in a mixture of broken English and Bakawa, for the generous gift, the fruits of which they were obviously sitting in front of. A pair of scissors was handed to Alec. He cut the yellow ribbon. A huge cheer went up.

Daniel noticed that the High Commissioner was wiping his hands on the back of his jacket, probably hoping no one would see. If he would just relax, keep his hair on. What little there was left of it. It wouldn't have taken much for him to just cut the piece of ribbon with a smile, declare the community centre open with a bit of good grace and a couple of words of encouragement, would it? Why couldn't he just try to enjoy it? Listen to the drums? Look at the women beginning to dance?

First one woman then two, then ten, twenty, shuffled in thin plastic flip-flops to the sandy space in front of the building. Several had sleeping babies tied tightly to their backs. The infants' heads wobbled and shook as they slept. The women danced wildly to the drum beats. The whole space was a mass of movement and colour as they clapped and turned.

Old Alec was squinting at his watch, wiping rivulets

of sweat from his eyes. The sun was directly overhead now. He should have worn a hat, thought Daniel. *Alec Moss, who died of sunstroke just three years before he was due to retire from the Foreign Office, will be remembered for his uncanny ability to absent himself, in spirit, if not in person, from any situation in which he did not feel comfortable. Rarely seen without a large gin and tonic in one hand and a pretty girl in the other, Alec Moss will be much missed by his wife Fenella, Isatou in the visa office, Mariatou at the supermarket, Fatou at the British Council library, Yassin at the ...*

All around Daniel, the men were chewing kola nuts. His neighbours spat great gobs of red saliva onto the ground and laughed. A group of men were crouched over a charcoal stove, brewing up *ataaya*. They emptied cones of white sugar into boiling green tea then poured the frothing brown liquid into small glasses. They tipped the tea from glass to glass, holding the glasses far apart. The waterfall of tea glinted in the sun.

Daniel's eyes wandered over to where a young woman was feeding her baby. Her eyes were like chocolate wells. They stared back impassively. The baby, saturated with milk, flopped off the nipple, mouth open, eyes shut. Its tiny black toes curled and uncurled. The breast shone with milk and saliva.

There was a huff of irritation at his ear. Old Alec was stamping and rolling his eyes like some kind of demented horse. A demented sweaty horse with a cocktail party to go to. The driver, who had ambled over, drawn by the smell of food it now appeared certain he was not going to get, muttered something in Bakawa. The village chief laughed and slapped him on the back in sympathy.

Daniel, reluctant to leave without eating the meal that had been so carefully prepared in their honour, shook hands with as many villagers as he could, then opened the car door. It was like an oven in there. Alec was already sitting in the back seat, fiddling with the buttons of his jacket. Daniel got in next to him. The driver turned the key in the ignition, jabbed on the air conditioning, and screeched away in a cloud of dust and disappointment.