

ONE

THE MORTICIAN WAS APOLOGETIC. It was hard for him to keep the room refrigerated due to all the power cuts, he said. Life would be better when they could afford a generator. But it was unusual for them to keep a body for so long. One more day and they'd have had to bury him. He'd already been paunched.

I looked and knew right away it was him....I just knew.

The mortician asked me in bullshit English: 'Why did he come here to live in Hell when he could've stayed in England - Paradise, uh?'

The next morning, I drank a glass of sticky red tea in the courtyard of my hotel and went out for a stroll through the city. I didn't hang about in my room. The cockroaches were so big, I wondered if I had delirium tremens. In my delicate state, the crack and release of their oyster-sized innards nearly made me puke up my own.

I walked away from the railway line towards the river. The streets had no names. They were just tracks with pits filled with garbage amongst which goats and dogs rummaged, lined with high, cracked mud walls at the base of which, every few yards, was a recess for a toilet bucket for each house, its presence revealed by a noisy swarm of flies, or with single-storey, flat-topped, tin buildings with wooden, roofed-in verandas, all painted blue or green, battered by dust.

Under the shade of the verandas were men in grubby white *jelabias*, some lying about on strung, wooden-framed beds, others squatting, sitting, lounging against posts: all staring. One or two treadled old Singer sewing machines. A man, without once taking his eyes off me, was chucking stones at the dogs. I felt I'd arrived from Mars. Obviously people saw this in me. It was eleven o'clock and the piss-scented air shivered about me in the heat, fierce as the oven in a crematorium. My shirt stuck to my body like a used condom.

I regretted getting myself arseholed after the mortuary. A hang-over in a hundred and thirty degrees is no joke at the best of times, and my arms were still aching and swollen from the cholera and yellow-fever jabs. I came to the greasy facade of an open-air flea-pit. Billboards advertised the current features: a Hindi romance and 'Apocalypse Now'. I walked past beggars, like perambulating old scarecrows, staring wide-eyed little kids whose thin, sweat-soaked rags stuck to their skinny frames like shreds of snotty tissue; shrouded women sitting in the dust by mounds of beans and seeds for sale, and men squatting like dogs in dried up ditches and washing themselves afterwards with water poured onto their left hands from old sherry bottles. It seemed the convention that anybody adopting the shitting and pissing position immediately became invisible. Suddenly, at last, I turned a corner and saw a white man. I breathed a sigh of relief.

He was standing alone under the awning of a little shop with his back resting against the serving hatch, drinking a Pepsi Cola. He was tall and rangy and slightly stooped as if from months of back-packing. His hair was very long, like an old-time hippy's. I pegged him as a stray tourist well off the beaten track, although there was no rucksack in sight. As I drew nearer, he glanced intently at me and then immediately appeared to lose all interest in me although he made no attempt to look away, still keeping his gaze casually in place in my direction, but seeming to look right through me as though I were no more than a small, approaching cloud of dust.

I went picking my way among the potholes, trying to keep my eyes on him but afraid of falling in. The street was so bad, it looked as though it'd been used for tank manoeuvres. As I came up to him, instead of clocking me directly, he gave the impression of keeping his eyes peeled up the street, in the direction from which I'd come. It was just like I hadn't been there. It gave me a spooky feeling, and I passed by him without any sign of acknowledgement between us, not so much as a smile, a nod, or a look that said who-the-fuck-are-you? I turned the corner and found I was tense as a high sea and slightly shaky. I walked on and turned another corner. Eerie firelight flared in the cave-like depths of an open-front shop where boys scooped trays of bread from an oven with thin wooden paddles. I hurried on, through the squawking, wriggling markets until I lost myself in a maze of narrow alleys crammed with all kinds of merchants and artisans.

In the afternoon of the following day I found an empty beer-garden overlooking the waterfront

between a place called 'The Blue Nile Club' and a Shell filling station. I sat down at a table under the shade of a *neme*. The first letter of the garage sign was missing. The four that remained, it seemed to me, added up to a generous enough description of this place. I opened my shoulder bag and took out a translation of the pathologist's report which I'd just collected from the semi-comatose clerk at the coroner's office. 'Simon Bishop,' it read, 'large quantities of water in the lungs, large quantities of alcohol in the bloodstream. Cause of death: drowning'.

'Simon Bishop'. I again spoke aloud that unfamiliar name that now in my mind labelled like a parcel the remains of David Lawton, so thoroughly worked over by the Nile and all the creatures that lived in it that, finally disgorged among the bushes, worked on some more by maggots and flies as he lay there drying out in the sun, the flesh on his body where it merged with the exposed sinew and bone took on the appearance of weirdly beautiful, honeycombed underwater polyps, all pearlised, like coral.

Surprisingly, the lady-killer face had, in fact, remained relatively intact, even the lips, nose and ears, whereas soft, pendulous parts elsewhere had gone, leaving only an empty flap of skin, and a nub, like a portion of chicken gible. His once renowned piercing green eyes though had about as much life in them now as a pair of squashed processed peas.

Stapled to the back of the report was a second page of what seemed forensic, scientific notes, in Arabic, but with a note at the bottom which said 'pto for translation and explanation'. Over, it read: 'When the body of Mr Bishop was recovered it was noted there was foaming from the mouth and nose which is characteristic of drowning. There was no damage to the skull, and after he died his head was lifted clear of the river and sheltered from the sun by overhanging branches, but the body was covered in holes, tears, and bite marks from being attacked by the perch, electric eel, and other flesh-eating fish that live in the Nile. Because of the several days' exposure to the water the layers of skin had begun to separate, and this made it difficult to take fingerprints directly from the body, since the outer layers of skin separated like a glove. The forensic scientist, Mr Abdu Malik, had to cut the skin around the wrist and remove the "glove" of skin; then this "glove" was slipped over Mr Malik's own gloved hand, and the prints you see here were taken as if the skin belonged to Mr Bishop's living fingers.

'The presence of a significant number of diatoms in the lung and kidney tissue of the body after it was recovered from the river indicates that the body was alive when it entered the water. Diatoms are absorbed by breathing, not by passive diffusion. Few diatoms in the body tissue would have suggested that the body was already dead when it entered the water, which was not the case with the body in question.'

I gazed for some moments at the patterns of loops, arches, whorls; the details of broken ridges and bifurcations, the health lines and marriage lines, the lifelines of David's unique hand and fingerprints, as though they lay before me like a map which, if only I could work out how to read, would tell me the answers to the mysteries: how he'd felt and what had happened to him in the year leading up to his death; and I wondered why, if the coroner who'd organised the post-mortem thought there might be some doubts raised later about the identity of the body, he'd not insisted on casts or X-rays of the teeth and mouth, rather than fingerprints, for nearly everyone has their records with a dentist, far fewer have been profiled by the police, and I'd have been very surprised if David had got form. So, why was he being treated like a criminal? It seemed to me that with this textbookish report and/or its translation in neat, almost copybook handwriting, the coroner, pathologist, forensic scientist, office boy, or whoever-the-fuck, wanted to appear as being a lot smarter than he really was.

I put the report away and looked at the river. The rains were not yet due and the water was low, exposing a huge lozenge of flesh-coloured sand on the other side. The mortician had told me that in the previous year they had hardly any rain at all. A young boy, slim and coal black in brown *jelabia*, was washing a huge frying pan in the river. He rinsed it several times and then laid it down, half way up the bank, gleaming. He slipped his *jelabia* over his head like a girl removing her dress, stepped out of his shorts and went leaping back down the bank to the river, neat black dumplings leaping and trembling with an innocent joy all of their own. I watched him splash about for a bit. The water was so blue, as though a big brush loaded with water-colour had just been rinsed in it, and the boy was mixing it all in as he splashed and swam.

Someone else was watching the river. It was the white man, the *khawadja*, who'd given me the cold shoulder in the street the day before. He was standing below the beer garden, on the headland, above the river bank.

A wind was getting up, raising the dust. The boy in the river got out, smoothed his hands over his head, his chest, his shoulders, brushing off some of the droplets of water that clung to his hair and skin, put on his clothes, and picked up his frying pan. He brushed away some of the particles of dust with his fingers and gave it a quick polish with the hem of his *jelabia*. He examined his face in it for a moment and then scrambled off up the bank and raced away to the city, balancing the frying pan on his head. The *khawadja* was facing into the wind which blew quite strongly now and the air over the river was white with dust. He hooded his eyes against it.

Gone was the stoop. He looked tall and straight, big boned and strong. His hands hung loosely at his sides like a pair of paddles. In that harsh landscape he seemed to tower like a giant. The clothes he had on looked very dirty and hung on him loosely, like a pair of pyjamas, a sensible fit in that terrible heat. Suddenly I saw clearly his hand clench and jaw tighten. I followed his gaze. A man was pushing out a small canoe from the sandbank on the opposite side of the river. The white man strode swiftly across the waterfront and hid behind a broken wall that jutted up like the stumps of teeth left behind in a smashed-in mouth. He was now crouching directly below me in the shadow of the trees near a hollow in which men had tossed their empty beer cans. The boat had left the sandbank which resembled a partially submerged belly stretching half way across the river. It was rough going. The dust-laden wind whipped up the surface of the water, rapidly turning it yellow.

When the canoe reached our side of the river the man pulled it into some bushes and then scrambled up the bank. He had something wrapped in a red plastic bag or cover under his arm. The wind tugged at the plastic, exposing an inch or two of what looked like a black box, and the man tried to pull the cover over it again. The *khawadja* stepped out from behind the piece of wall and confronted the man, a chubby young Arab in flared butter-cutters and trainers, as he climbed onto the headland. The Arab gave a startled grin, raised his free hand in a little salute and then tried to nip off as casually as he could. But the *khawadja* strode swiftly to him and said something in Arabic in a high, sharp voice. The Arab shrugged and shook his head. Then, an extraordinary thing happened. The *khawadja* suddenly grabbed the bundle from the man, glanced quickly inside it without exposing the contents, and then, with both hands, shoved it back to the man, his movements charged with fierce energy and contempt. As the Arab grabbed it back, hugging it to his chest, the *khawadja*, without passion or anger, but with great deliberation and force, swung back his arm and slapped and backhanded the man's face three times with his enormous hand. Then, without another word he strode quickly away from the waterfront, past the HELL sign towards the city, his yellow hair blowing out before him like a petrol flame. Gingerly, the Arab touched his stinging cheeks and then hurried off with his bundle, disappearing among the bushes along the waterfront.

By the time I'd scrambled down through the trees from the beer-garden there was no sign of either of them. For a while I stood on the headland and tried to gaze across the water to the other side. The dust rose off the river like a pall of smoke, went up my nose, down my throat and into my eyes. I could just make out a green band of trees beyond the sand-bank and a cluster of mud houses nestling there among them.

(Extracts continue on next page)

TWO

(THIS IS THE BEGINNING OF CHAPTER TWO)

PINCHED AND FRAIL LITTLE FATHER GIOVANNI from Florence who'd lived for thirty years in Africa reassured me it would not be necessary for the remains of our earthly carcasses to be gathered up to reconstitute our resurrected bodies:

'The resurrection of your friend Simon, it not be resuscitation job only. Is like Christ. Is not like raising of Lazarus. That poor man Lazarus, he had to die again all over.' He studied his face in the noses of his black leather shoes, so highly polished he could've shaved himself in them. A tiny lizard slid over his toes and on to the sandy earth covering Lawton's coffin. The little priest bent down to peer at his toecap which was now slightly dulled. He fished out of his cassock a clean brown handkerchief and restored the shoe to its former immaculate glory.

There were no flowers. None were available. Father Giovanni went on: 'A flower, it grow from its seed. But it not look like the seed. And if you crush that seed it not stop the miracle of the beautiful flower that one day grow from it.' He ground his tiny fist into his palm and then laid his open hand before me as if to show a seed about to burst doggedly forth into a plant. He laid his hand gently on my arm. 'Is not good for us to attach lot of importance to our physical life here on earth. Here we can only crawl, blindly, like caterpillar. If caterpillar living in this soil had consciousness, he no like to leave it, discard his body and die, just as human beings, we no like. This because the caterpillar he not know there is other new world after he die where he can enjoy nice flower and sweet honey. He cling to what he know....and he suffer more.'

'So we must have faith, eh, Father?'

'The caterpillar. I doubt he have faith. But that not stop him get there in the end, no?'

As if on cue, a gorgeous coral pink butterfly hovered obligingly like a sudden blossoming flower over the grave. The little priest turned to me and chuckled dryly. We prayed silently, and I took extra care not to kneel on any caterpillars.

Other graves around the tiny, weatherboard church were simply marked with drunk-looking, unscribed wooden crosses. This made it a little easier for the moment not to blurt out 'Simon's' real name. There were a few tufts of grass struggling to survive amid the dirt and dust. Father Giovanni opened his missal and recited a prayer. His hands resembled carved little chunks of Gorgonzola cheese:

'In the midst of life we are in death
Earth to earth and dust to dust
Calmly now the words we say
Leaving him to sleep in trust
Till the Resurrection Day
Father in thy gracious keeping
Leave we now thy servant sleeping.'

The Arab with three vertical tribal scars running down each side of his face sat hunched like a boxer in his corner, his white turban or *imma* unwound and draped loosely like a towel around his neck and shoulders, pulling at a topless Long Life lager can and rinsing its contents around his mouth before spitting it back into the river. He murmured something to the young man sitting next to him who took the makeshift cup, leaned over the side and plunged it once more into the billowing wake. This time the man with the scars drank deeply. He got it refilled, leaned forward and offered it to me. I hesitated, although I was very thirsty. 'Go on take it,' he urged. 'I'm sure you are thirsty, and the water from the Blue Nile is quite pure, you won't die!' He giggled then,

white teeth peeping goofily, and with his beaming round face he made me think of a cross between Ken Dodd and Tony Hancock got up for some Oriental play.

I took the dripping can and drank. The water was cool and clean tasting. 'The water is good. Thank you.'

'Are you a teacher?' I was grateful for the man's perfect English though not for the question. But it gave me an idea.

'Yes,' I lied.

'This is a sad time for you, and for us too. Would you like me to take you to the house?'

'I'd be obliged.'

The ferryman steered the launch with longboat attached to it around the sandbelly and nosed it gently over to some steps cut into the earth of the main bank, the powerful throb of the diesel engine throttling down to a merry chug. The women all sat together in a separate part at the front of the canopied launch around the wheelhouse, looking like a box of very expensive, hand-made, hand-wrapped chocolates in their brightly-coloured cotton or silk *tobe* cocoons. When the ferryman cut the engine the silence was stirred by the chuckle of the water off the prow. We waited for the women's compartment to empty and then stepped up into the wooden longboat, which had boards running up to the bows. The steps in the mud bank were steep and rough, and my tubby companion, who of all things was wearing stack-heeled leather cowboy boots below his *jelabia*, might well have stumbled and fell as we left the makeshift catamaran if he hadn't been holding my hand; but once on terra firma, he strode on with a bold, happy, buccaneering gait. Before we left the Nile he pointed towards a large old villa with peeling shutters that brooded thirty yards or so west along the riverbank. 'That's my house,' he said.

Still holding my hand, my guide, whose name was Muhammad Awad, led me away from the river and the mud houses and shady orchards of orange and lemon trees with pretty little monkeys playing in them, through a grove of dry and dusty *acacia* and out into the open desert. Bright yellow-green birds flashed about like feathered darts among the *acacia*, goats nuzzled a fuzz of tan grass, and danced on their hind legs under the trees to nip at lower leaves. A camel, in sleepy composure, chewed upper branches, while its owner dozed in a circle of shade below. The trail ran downhill to a dried-up *wadi*, half hidden under a mass of candelabrum with leaves like cabbages and bladders big as footballs. We skirted the poisonous-looking plants and climbed up a gentle slope until we came to an estate of tin-roofed bungalows with dried up lawns on which grazed sheep and goats. A hot wind hummed about us, raising dust. The houses were set about ten yards apart and some of them were surrounded by high brick walls above which gently rioted red or purple *jahannamiya*.

'This is the teachers' estate for Nahud School....built by you English in the days of your great empire....'

I glanced west towards the school, some quarter mile away across the desert: an arcaded quadrangle glimpsed through the single-storey, zinc-roofed boarding houses scattered around it. A circular water tower on stilts, painted in black and white chequered squares like a chess board or crossword puzzle and, huddled next door in a wire cage like an exhibit at a freak show was something that resembled the serpentine works of a huge, prehistoric refrigerator and a bus engine, trussed together to mate and combine hideously and unhappily into god knows what. 'What the fuck is that?', I wanted to ask but right now didn't seem appropriate. If I'd been in London I could've dismissed it as some poxy modern art installation. As big an eyesore was the school bell tower that loomed over the desert like a machine gun post in a concentration camp. I peeled my eyes, but couldn't make out any barbed wire. Near at hand, a group of small black boys were kicking an old, wounded football about in front of the houses. The football spun toward us. Muhammad booted it back to the boys.

'Some of your pupils?'

Muhammad chuckled. ‘Oh no, no, - just some of the squatters’ kids. I doubt if any of those little southern rascals has ever been anywhere near a classroom – except to nip in and steal the pencils and rubbers!’

Two light-skinned Arab boys came by to play football with the Negro boys.

Muhammad stopped at the tin door of a walled garden. He went inside and came out with a key so huge, it was like something from an ancient book of hours. He brandished the key as though it were a symbol. ‘The key to Heartbreak Hotel,’ he said cryptically, and gave another of his little giggles. We continued on our way until we came to a house, all by itself, at the end of the estate, right on the edge of the open desert.

The place had gone to the dogs. It looked like a decrepit old summerhouse, half-hidden among *nemes* that hemmed it in like something from a medieval woodcut or Edvard Munch painting. All the woodwork badly needed repainting and the sand-spattered mosquito netting that completely enclosed the veranda as though it were a chicken coop hung off its frame in places like a torn lace curtain. Elsewhere the mosquito mesh looked so fine that, with the sun glinting and casting shadows, it resembled the dirty glass windows of a greenhouse. There was no wall or fence and sheep and goats nosed about in the dust outside as though they remembered it’d once been a lawn. A camel cropped at one of the *nemes* whose upper branches had been allowed to spread and droop over the house like a weeping willow. Outside the veranda was a rubbish pit, some lumps of ruined masonry, a few scrawny bushes and, a few yards east of the house, a dead tree. The furniture on the crumbling veranda consisted of a small formica table, a lopsided strung, wooden framed bed or *angareb*, and some chairs made of plastic string wound on threadbare steel frames. Because of the key, I’d half-expected the house to look haunted or enchanted, like something from some old legend or fairy tale. The atmosphere was sultry, storm-brewing, yet, due in part to the tatty furniture, languorous and no more exotic than the becalmed boredom of seaside holidays spent at the seedy Southend guest houses I remembered from my childhood.

The late afternoon sunlight cast long shadows of branches, mosquito-wire posts, and leaf silhouettes diagonally across the wall of the veranda and on the tiled floor. I gazed at the small, wire-meshed windows, the busy, fiery *jahannamiya* flowers creeping up on their vines from the tubs on the veranda towards the sills, and there was a sense of tropical stagnation, desolation, a thwarted luxuriance or grandeur. I got a feeling that inside something serenely gloomy and a little strange had been going on, that I’d stumbled on a mystery, an Arcadia of excess, of decadence and sickness, such was the atmosphere of foreboding that hugged the house and gradually dispelled the desert torpor.

Above the door to the veranda was a faded painted sign showing two hearts, both cracked, like eggs. Red yolks ran out of them and intertwined, forming itself into a twisting, curling Arabic script with a translation in English beneath that read: ‘Heartbreak Hotel.’ I stared at the sign. The heart-shaped eggs made me think of torn or smashed theatrical masks. I turned to my companion who was rewinding his *imma* around his head for about the third time since we left the ferry.

‘Charlie, you must excuse me, I have to go and say my prayers. Perhaps you will do me the honour of eating with me later – say in about an hour, when you finish here? My house is the one I pointed out to you by the river, remember?’, Muhammad whispered as though himself affected by the sombre loneliness of the place.

I pushed open the door to the veranda and a black cat scrambled up the mosquito wire and into a hole in the hardboard ceiling. The floor of the veranda, the *angareb*, the table and chairs, were covered in thick dust blown in from the open desert. I unlocked the front door and pushed it open....

FRAGMENTS OF ENTRIES FROM DAVID LAWTON’S UNDATED JOURNALS:

The following are a selection of cropped extracts from David Lawton’s undated journals, the pages numbered as they appear in the novel, ‘Red over Blue’:

(Page numbers 319-20: Sadie, risking both their lives, pays another secret night visit to David at Heartbreak Hotel)

BEFORE I MET SADIE all my life I'd been denied physical and spiritual contact with my true life. As an actor I'd played other men's lives as though they were a suit of clothes for me to wear until filming was over and then to take off and throw away. And then I met Sadie and now I know I'm breaking through into my own true life. Sadie has enabled me to make physical contact and touch the fabric of real life. Yes, she has enabled me to at last start living my life! Sadie is my destiny. Together we will take possession of our lives, make something strong and beautiful of our lives.

THE KORAN left open on my table. In the gloomy daylight the holy book displays its fierce script like glass jags atop an orchard wall. I snap it shut before the words leap out and attack me. The book is closed now like the folded wings of a moth.

It was such a sticky night, and the breeze was like a fever-breath pressing against our brows, offering no relief from the heat. We didn't speak, for in the open desert on a warm night, with or without a breeze, the softest whisper can carry for hundreds of yards, even over a mile, for there is nothing to obstruct it. Anyway, we understood each other better in silence

I plucked two of the *jahannamiiya* flowers from the tubs on the veranda and gave them to her. We went indoors, closed the louvered door. She fixed the red blooms in her breast cleft, and in the darkness of her hair where they smouldered like the flames in black wine. She settled herself on the bed and would not let me light a candle tonight. I lay with her in my hot little room.

I gazed for a long time into the calm deep brown of her iris. I wanted to live inside her, inside the ocean calm of her eyes. I touched my lips to her brow. I sensed all her curves and planes like the earth viewed from outer space. I wanted to get closer to her. I felt like someone threading together a rosary of clues, hunting for a place they have heard about from a half-remembered song, that exists somewhere in a book, found, by chance, in a charity shop. Old yellowed paperbacks smell musty, dusty, nice, but the smell of sweat and incense that lingers in a girl's clothes, the hair, the breath, the scalp, the skin of a girl smell even better than a book, better than all the treasured libraries of the world. We were walking hand-in-hand along the edge of what I hoped must become the mingling of our ripening wishes. Gradually she became enveloped in a soft grave radiance beyond which the night lay spilled all around us like warm sticky liquid from a spoon. She was looking at me as though we were eternal.

Suddenly she said: '*Habibi*, you are my sweetheart, and if you leave me you'll spend the rest of your life coming back to me.'

(Pages 404-408: a section from David's account of his five day return journey down the White Nile from the equatorial south of Sudan to the north after his secret mission):

AN HOUR LATER I was standing with some other passengers in the stern. The Nile began to break up again into a series of narrow channels with many bends, which were difficult for the steamer to negotiate. The El Genaina, nearly as wide as the mouth of the channel the pilot steered us into, lurched like a drunk around a bend, hitting first one spongy bank and then the other with a big muffled thump, causing birds to catapult from the waving reeds like a great swarm of insects, and then shuddered to a halt. We were stuck in the throat of the river. The steamer's four propellers raced desperately to free us from the banks, at times lifting us right out of the water, tearing away great chunks of earth with grass and reeds. The river bulged like a serpent that has swallowed a pig; the river's surface convulsed to lift far out over the banks, and through the forests of grasses and reeds, but still we didn't budge an inch.

Other channels, choked with lilies, hyacinths, and reeds, split off into a cross-roads on either side. These lonely banks just here are a paradise for birds and flowers: plovers, swifts, carmine bee-eaters, fish eagles, herons, kingfishers and storks skimmed above the river or perched along the banks, feeding on the abundant dragonflies and fish. Giant orchids, mauve and pink, with blood-wet-open mouths like the peeled-back, empurpled lips of vulvas bloom along the banks. Some crocodiles, disturbed by the agitated river, left the water and scrambled back onto the banks, disappearing among the grass and reeds. The papyrus stretched in rippling monotony from horizon to horizon, with only one or two thin, twisted trees marking the banks of the maze of channels. An unpleasant-looking bird, a marabout, standing five feet tall, with a long thick bill and the ugly bare head and neck of a vulture, eyed us maliciously from the bank. He stood absolutely still, and then, never once breaking his ironic gaze, turned his head from side to side, as if slowly shaking it at us, to tell us we were doomed. A ghastly-looking, large, naked, sausage-shaped pouch in front of his neck began to tremble and shake. The dense walls of vegetation pressed about us, closing in on the steamer. Suddenly the bird beat huge whirring wings and took off over the river, its wings whistling like knives. Just then, the vegetation parted and some men emerged from the reeds. They stood calmly and quietly, watching the propellers churn up the water, and the mud from the bank.

The swamp men were entirely naked. They were much shorter, more compact and chunkier than the Dinka – voluptuous even; their muscular, shapely bodies smooth-skinned and hairless, lightly tanned with ash, probably as protection against insects and mosquitoes. They stood there solemn and solicitous, every now and then murmuring to one another, and raising an arm to gesture lightly towards the labouring river and the steamer's exposed propellers; to shrug helplessly or glance up at us, their faces wearing sympathetic, chivalrous expressions. Two of the men, who looked quite old because of their lined, scorched faces wore longbows slung over their shoulders, a bunch of arrows held lightly in their left hands. The third man, who was a boy aged between fifteen and eighteen and unarmed, squatted some yards along the bank from the others to watch, his pale, greenish-brown body dwarfed by the background of papyrus reeds and grasses, and splashed by glints of sun.

He was exceptionally beautiful. His large, wide-apart eyes below a noble forehead and above high cheekbones were warm and lively and intelligent; his long neck rising proudly from between broad strong shoulders that framed breasts like shields his torso tapering down to a rippling belly, a trim slim waist, prominent hip-bones, and shapely, well-rounded buttocks and thighs. His scrotum, full and firm as an apple, bulged below his large, limp, reptile-smooth cock, the foreskin of which, - tender, docile, intact, - hung in tight, faintly marked little folds or knurls, as if ready at any moment to glide right back to reveal the thick, rampant head of the life root. He was the loveliest creature I have ever seen apart from Sadie. He was not tall and, with his perfect body, and the mischievous little spirit that every now and then teased and danced in his eyes, it seemed to me that if Sadie had been a boy, this is how she would have looked. Perhaps here in this lost, enchanted water-garden on the edge of time, gods mingle and play with water sprites, beasts and men.

None of the men had a trace of pubic hair, neither on or around the scrotum, nor at the mons veneris. One of the Arab passengers, from where we were all gathered on the platform at the stern of the steamer threw down a bag of *tumbac* – the tobacco men in the north stuff under their lower lips. The boy, smiling, agile as a young lion, leapt to catch it. He opened the bag, sniffed the contents and, to our amusement and surprise began to eat it. He chewed his way through a small bite, all the while, it seemed, attempting to smile politely for us, while at the same time darting incredulous, eyes-rolled-to-heaven glances at his companions. At last, still clowning, he gave a great gulp as though he'd just swallowed it, grinned delightedly, showing perfect teeth, then turned discreetly aside to spit it out into his hand and wink at his companions. Everyone watching from the steamer was enchanted with the young man's little charade, especially when he tossed the rest of the bag to his companions who promptly stuck it under their lower lips in the proper

way. Then the lovely young fellow stepped forward to a tree to take down half a dozen or so cobs of corn that were hanging behind it on a huge bundle from a branch. He tossed them up to the passengers. As he did so, he looked straight at me. My heart leapt. He smiled softly, shyly, seriously, reservedly, almost gravely, this time not exposing his teeth, his lips slightly parting then gently touching in a tender line, as if brushing each other tentatively in a kiss, then he turned and ran swiftly away through the long grasses, graceful as a deer. Looking after him from the steamer, I managed to glimpse him one last time, slipping softly through the papyrus, before he disappeared into the wild of the swamp forever from my life. The sight of the lovely sweeping 'V' of his back, the muscled, hollowed valley of his spine, the ripple and play of the muscles of his body as he moved and breathed and ran – the smooth halves of his bottom trembling to firm and snug together along the tender smile of his crack: an innocent echo of his other smile, whose sweetness filled my mind as if still embroidered on the grasses, the river water and the air – made me homesick for Sadie. When he broke our glance and turned away, it was as if a cord, invisible but almost tangible through the sudden twisting pain, had been cut between us. I'd been bewitched by this darling boy from the swamp: I loved him.

It was as if the boy, because he was beautiful, because he was perfect, because he was small, *was* Sadie. But it was more than that. Under the strange enchantment that had taken gentle hold of me in this remote place, all kinds of notions began to fill my mind: weird and wonderful pictures and fancies that defied rational explanation, that disturbed me, yet exhilarated me; that made the pores of my skin all over my body open wide like mouths and tingle like lips that have been kissed, or ached to be kissed. My skin stung like it had when Sadie stood over me in the bath at Heartbreak Hotel, pulled down her briefs to piss through her fingers, drizzled me in her warm salt cascade. Other times she'd blindfolded me (since she'd insisted on not letting me see her infibulation), so that she didn't need to use her fingers, and her waters had overwhelmed me in a glorious baptismal shower.

I felt that if I'd known the swamp boy's language, or if he'd known Arabic, I would have wanted to call out to him, to call him back, to ask him to come with me on the steamer north to Sadie, so she could delight in him as I had delighted in him, and he delight in her as I had delighted in her. I wanted to give him to Sadie and to give Sadie to him. I wanted to rejoice in the sight of their perfect bodies making perfect love; for the boy from the mud to enfold my Sadie in his smooth strong arms; for their bodies to fit like a tongue in a mouth. More than this, I wanted to be Sadie, as naked as I'd seen the swamp boy, abandoning herself to the tender-passionate caresses of this boy. It was as if it were *me as Sadie* he were holding in his arms in my head. Yes, I wanted to *be* Sadie, to be her eyes while she knelt before him to worship the lolling, insolent loveliness of his manhood, to be her hands as she cupped and weighed the glorious forbidden fruit beneath; to be her lips when her drooling mouth was planted with that fabulously big, heavenly boy-thing: to feel the miracle of the life-root throb firm and expand and grow long and glistening and thick and strong, until it needed a deeper, wider, kind of mouth to take it, and the seed that would spurt from it: to be, above all, the wings that would open, spasm, and beat deep inside her womb.

But the swamp boy did not belong to me any more than Sadie belonged to me. They were free and would never meet. Their bodies would never find each other, never fit together like a tongue in its mouth. They belonged to different, distant areas of this vast jig-saw puzzle that is Sudan. Only the gleaming thread of the Nile linked them together, and only then on the huge map in my head, not in theirs. Neither would ever leave their different worlds nor want to leave them, for neither knew of any world outside their own.

This desire to be Sadie, loving, and being made love to by the swamp boy persisted and grew long after the banks sundered and crumbled under the relentless thrust of the propellers which, having stirred up to a stink the ooze, fish mucus, algae, mud and slime, suddenly pushed us on as through a mucus membrane, like an ark emerging from the uterus at its birth, shivering the arched spine of the Nile....

(Pages 432-445: Sadie follows David down to the Nile where, at last, after months of repression and restraint, they give way to their emotions in the mud. These pages are the beginning of the ‘Mud Scene’).

LAST NIGHT I went for a walk by the river. There was no moon and the stars were hazed by dust. By the time I reached the woods, my clothes were soaked through with sweat. The woods and orchards run all along this stretch of the river. All along the Nile, swarms of insects hummed like bagpipes, so thick, it seemed no air was left to breathe. Fruit bats or flying foxes hung upside down from the lower branches like covens of pretty, black-cloaked witches. I followed a narrow path beside the woods that overlooked the river until I reached a bend. Around the bend, the woods stretched down to the river where there was a beach or sandbank, and, just beyond it, a mud pool. On the other side of the river, there were no lights, only the desert. Beyond, the city, with its minarets resembling twists of barley sugar like something from an Arabian Nights fairy story, seemed very far away.

I went down onto the beach, and stood at the edge of the mud pool. Beyond the pool, the Nile was shallow and seemed still as a pond or lagoon. I seemed alone in this remote place. I remembered the river during the rains, when the waters humped and heaved and slid between the banks as though in a peristalsis, a thick, blood-flecked, brown length of viscera endlessly churning as if through a sphincter. But it was now, before the rains, a rich savoury stink came off the river. Patches of slow-moving waters had a slick look, as though oil had leaked from a barge or steamer. A few stars shone through the dust and shimmered on the oil in brilliant blue flowers of fire. I slipped off my *macoobs*, rolled up my trousers and stepped into the pool. The cool mud yielded. It bubbled with secrets and melting fingers oozed up to my knees. I lifted my foot and the mud gurgled and sucked. By the time I reached the water, the mud bulged over my knees. Whenever I pulled out my foot to take a step, there was a noise like a big smacking kiss. The river bottom was sandy, firmer than the sluggish circle of mud. While the midges danced on the river, chuckling eddies washed my feet and legs and knees like spring water blown through stones and sand. Fish glided by and touched me with their soft perverted kisses. There was a big smacking kiss behind me. When I twisted my trunk to turn, Sadie put her hand on my arm and her finger to her lips.

She had hoisted her *tobe* and dress to her mid-thighs and was standing up to her knees in the mud. She did not leave the mud and I stepped back in. In the darkness, I could hardly make out her features but her eyes were hard and bright as black steel, and when I brought my face close to hers, I could see there was no tenderness in her face at all. Her expression was not warm or eager, but intense, urgent, even cruel. It was as if she'd come not to make love but to make murder or war. A shiver ran down my spine, but it was not all fear. The time to resist the searing, gigantic temptations was over and we both knew what had to be done.

She threw off the whispering silk cocoon of her *tobe*. It billowed around her shoulders and floated to the mud, strangely, like discarded wings. Like opposite poles of magnets her mouth crashed into mine and, locked in each other's arms we keeled over into the mud. She sucked and bit at my lips; then her tongue became a serpent's, plunging, darting, flickering, writhing in my mouth. Then she wrestled me over and straddled my chest, forcing me back into the mud. Panting, she gazed down at me, her face wild and dark, as though taking shape out of the mud. She used her strong compact body to pin me by the shoulders, arms and trunk. Now fierce and tender she whispered:

'Mush kussni. Kullumakan atani, laakin mush kussni. Fahimta?' – Not my cunt. Everywhere else, but not my cunt. Understand?

That was all she said. She brought her face close to mine and her eyes glowed with a fierce tenderness and trust and regret. 'I'm so sorry, *habibi*', she said, 'but if you break my infibulation then you know my life would be ruined.' Disappointed, I swallowed hard, nodded, then when she tried to kiss me I was angry, and with a great heave I threw her off. I crawled over the mud to

where she lay recovering her breath. She was spreadeagled like a giant frog, her head haloed in a cloud of flies. She sat up, and I tugged down to her waist the long zip at the back of her dress. Her *tobe* lay about us like a membrane covering the mud. Her breasts tumbled out of her dress. Immediately they were set upon by a swarm of flies, sipping at her trickling sweat as though it were honey. She lay back in the mud, scooped her breasts in her hands and offered them up to me. I lay across her belly, cursed and brushed away the flies, began to cover her with kisses. It was as if my lips had been burnt, and only the huge amnions of watermelons that were her breasts could cool and soothe them with the balm of their flesh.

Her nipple expanded until it filled my mouth. Like a greedy baby I wanted to cram more and more of her into her mouth. Unable to do so I pillowed my face on her breast, imagining my head encircled by the giant bruise of her gloriole.

She reached for me. All these long months we'd been creatures of each other's minds, isolated from each other in our separate skulls by mountains of blood. We had imagined each other, and now, in order to give flesh to those images, we had to feel each other, devour each other.

But it was not permitted for we two poor creatures to simultaneously devour each other. So one of us had to give in. I pushed her face away and rolled her over in the mud. She lay on her belly supporting herself by her hands which sank slowly into the mud. I knelt beside her to gaze into her face. She was bearded with flies. For a moment she let them share her feast. Then she brushed them off and looked up: her eyes were unfocused and soft; juice, slime, saliva, still bubbled and drooled about her lips, as though she'd been feasting on oysters or snails. I rubbed it all into her face, her lips, her neck, her throat, her hair. All the while the flies were crawling, drinking, feeding.

Her unexpected submissiveness made me angry. Her inaccessibility intensified my anger. I was like a squirrel trying to break into an impossible nut. She took me again in her mouth, between her breasts, in her armpit, her hand, in the bend of her knee. We even tried an ear, which tickled her and made her chuckle. Neither of us knew what to do. The situation demanded something special, a simple ritual gesture that would make her mine forever, that would bind us to the end of time. We just didn't know what to do, either of us. My rage grew monstrous. I thumped her and pulled her hair. She gasped, but lay there on her belly in the mud and took it.

What I could touch and taste and see and smell only aroused in me a longing for that which I could not touch or taste or see or smell. Close up, all I could make out were her eyelids, with the lashes touching the curves of her cheeks, her temple, painted with mud and glistening with sweat and flies; her ear, the jet-gush of her hair where it flowed down her back, and her mouth, gaping, as though her whole body were wracked with pain. That I could feel no pleasure either seemed no reason not to go on. On the contrary, it was as if, no matter what the cost in suffering and pain, we needed to open up the pores all over our bodies to let out the cry that was in our blood, as though we needed to sweat blood, and then let that sweat mingle and our cries. Only by going on could we let out the cry and find release from the separate prisons of our skins.

Less and less surprised at my own brutality I gathered up her hair and stretched it above her head so that it streamed out into the mud above her as though she'd been drowned. I licked and sucked her throat. I no longer wanted to see her face, for, strangely, it seemed to me that, given that it is beautiful, the face is the least desirable feature of a beautiful woman, as are the hands, normally the most responsive and eloquent parts of the human body. What I so desperately sought was located elsewhere on her body, where or what I did not know.

Feverishly, but with the cool precision of a safe-cracker running out of time I ran my eyes, my fingers, my nose, my tongue, my lips, down her exposed neck and back, lingering for some while in the hairs that curled in the nape. Even this limited area was too vast for my eyes to take in, for, as my movements became more frenzied and urgent, in close-up, Sadie's mud-striped skin became the striped hide of a zebra, the patchwork of a giraffe, then black skin, then white, the body of the swamp boy, and then once again her own. But when I got up and stood up I couldn't see her at all: she had merged with the mud.

As I explored the long deep ravine of her back, she shivered with pleasure, my anger subsided, and I grew calm. After a while, it no longer occurred to me that what I was looking for was simply that which was forbidden, any more than that which would give her pleasure.

But I did not want to simply remain calm. I wanted whatever it was no-one else could ever see or ever want. I was searching for a mark on a map. I wanted to find and drink from the deep wishing well of her being. I wanted to go where no one would ever want to go. Except me alone. I was a pirate determined to find the place where was hidden something that for me alone would, when I dug it up, have the wondrous glitter of buried treasure.

Given that she was perfect, given that she was lovely, I wanted to find somewhere that was imperfect, that was unlovely. I wanted somewhere ugly. I wanted to sanctify that ugly place with a kiss.

These thoughts did not come to me at the time in words, or even in thoughts at all but more as fever beats in the blood. It is only now that I can find the words, although even then, at times, the words did come: from time to time, in the throes of searching passion, I amazed myself with my lucidity, detachment, and precision.

What I wanted could have been something as inconsequential as a tiny scar on her body (perhaps from the self-inflicted knife wound on her breast), or a mole on her back. It was as if the essence of this woman would be revealed to me by accident, by not seeking her at the places I expected her to be – at her entrances and exits.

When I found the spot over her kidney in the small of her back, it seemed to me I had arrived home. The realization that her silk smooth skin was somewhere imperfect made her as special in my eyes as the notion that from time to time she needed to shit. It was as if no other woman in the whole world had ever had a spot or needed to shit. At the same time, the obvious truth that many people in the world have eruptions or some other blemish on their skins, and that all human beings and animals need to shit, only enhanced her value in my eyes. Such was the logic of my madness, passion, adulation, lust and love.

I found it as a small bump under my fingers. I thought it must be a mole. Even if I'd wanted to ask her I did not know the Arabic for mole. Probably if it was other – something not permanent – she would not know it was there. Sadie seemed quite content to lie there in the mud. Her anger too, whatever its cause, was either lulled or gone.

Kneeling beside her prone body in the mud, I brought my face close to where my fingertips told me the object of my curiosity and desire was. But it was too dark to see anything smaller than the muscles that, streaked with mud, oiled with sweat, rippled like the surface of the river all along her spine. It seemed to me that the spot, unlike a mole, felt hard and crusty like the protective shell of an insect, and so, in the end, I squeezed it between my fingertips and sucked. Sadie's blood and pus flowed into my mouth.

For a moment I was happy, but then it was not enough. Suddenly in a mad frenzy I ran my hands all over the exposed parts of her body, rolling her over and over in the mud, and pulling up her dress to get to the smooth cool flesh of her buttocks and thighs. With a deep sigh, I laid my cheek to rest against her buttocks which lay there nestled together like some gorgeous black fruitage. The flies buzzed, crawled along the sweaty skimp of cotton lodged in her crack, probed with their mouthparts, tickled my face with their feet and wings. Now, at this moment, I longed to see her face. It would no longer have been a distraction to see her face – on the contrary, it would have countered what I now saw as the soulless anonymity of her body. I recalled how much tenderness and passion her features could express, violence, ecstasy, cruelty, slow poison. But I did not want to have to move to see her face. I wanted to enjoy the sight and feel of the firm alps of meat of her buttocks at the same time as seeing her face.

While I kissed and licked and sucked at her buttocks, stroked and licked the unbearably soft inside of her thighs with the flame that was my tongue, all the while running my hand up and down the dimpled backs of her knees, I tried to satisfy my desire to experience a kind of pornography of her face. While all my senses wallowed in her mud-streaked, fly-blown flesh,

feverishly my mind rifled through a score of images of Sadie, a barrage of close-ups of her face, in all her moods and miens: fragments of scenes which now flooded into my mind from long ago, from the first time in this life ever I saw her.

I remembered the first time on the ferry. It was on this river. The look on her face. It had been warm and welcoming, kind and smiling. It was as though she knew me, and wanted to show me she was happy to see me return. Then, only a few days later, before we had even spoken, she ignored me, looked right through me, as if she didn't want to know me, or as if she was afraid to know me. The look on her face. It had been solemn, remote, arrogant, almost contemptuous, cruel. Then again, later, another time, when she got off the ferry, she'd stopped on the river bank to fix her sandal. The bold look she'd shot me then! It was as though I held in my hands now a glazed still of that scene.

As I ransacked my memory for Sadie, searching for fresh images of her that I may have forgotten, while trying in vain to hold onto the scraps that I already had, my hands, my lips, my face, my tongue, my whole body became frantic in its efforts to contain her body. It was as if there was some absolutely ideal juxtaposition of memory and touch, taste and smell that would send me hurtling to the release of my orgasm without need of the forbidden entrance, suction, and friction. Everything in me was surging to her. Everything in me was going wild to know and grasp everything in her. I had to know her. I had to possess her. I had to fuse with her. I had to become her.

Inspired by the memories, the feelings of tenderness I had for Sadie now were exquisite and overwhelming; and yet, without the memories, there would have been no room for the tenderness, although, paradoxically, I could never have felt such violent feelings for a stranger.

With my mind exhausted and bursting with images of Sadie, my senses reeling, I longed to find relief again from the smooth-skinned monotony of the surface of her body. I had to find a way in. My tongue slithered between the sweat-streaked, mud-stained mounds of her buttocks. Sadie helped me a little by lifting and splaying her buttocks. The tip of my tongue probed against the band of cotton, contrived to prise under it. The taste of spiced sweet cotton and then something like sour black olives or seaweed. It was as though I'd discovered the dark delights of some secret, forbidden delicatessen, full of tastes and smells both delicate and violent.

Drunk as I was on this gamey feast, the images swarmed in my mind: Sadie's smile on our first encounter on the ferry crossing the Blue Nile, Sadie looking sombre, sullen, next time on the ferry; Sadie taking my hand in the pharmacy – the look in her eyes, the intimate caress of her voice, the touch of her fingertips in my palm, the swell of her mons venus: Sadie pouring me tea with a stranger's shit under her fingernails after she'd cleaned my bag when I'd rested it on the river bank whilst waiting for the ferry (this didn't actually happen: she'd washed her hands immediately we'd got to her home), the tear in her *tobe*, the rise and fall of her breasts, a glimpse of her nipple, the way her dress rode up her thighs when she played the model: the dazzling glimpse of twin hemispheres of flesh divided by a flimsy strip of cotton; Sadie dilating her eyes, darting out her tongue, wriggling the tip in sensual delight; Sadie cracking gum in my face, sneering as she discards the gum, grinds it into the dust with her heel, top lip flaring in contempt; Sadie baring her breast, snorting tea into my lap; Sadie inciting me to scratch her breasts till they bled, wanting to share in the sufferings of Christ; Sadie dancing naked at Heartbreak Hotel, wanton and abandoned, presenting me with tea made from her own waters, her piss. Sadie's desiccated shit sprinkled on my food – the very idea of it! Yet it was the earliest pictures of her that now excited me the most: before we'd spoken – especially the one of her squatting with her back to me on the river bank, bending, to adjust the strap of her sandal. I now tried to hold it steady in my mind like a film still held in a trembling hand. Although I believed I had not felt anything profane at the time, I did now, because, I realised, I'd been able to see, for the first time, not just the pulse at her ankle (more sensed than see), the plump shape and light-creamy colour of her sun-and-wind-cracked heel, but the contour of her backside – in that position it flared out from her waist, spread and took up the slack of her dress and *tobe* – and then, when she turned her

head, her face (with its sultry, slightly outraged look) at the same time; and it was as if I'd gone up to her and started doing with her then, with her friend as a witness watching, what in reality I was only doing with her now, on the same river bank, after all this time, with her as a full participant and accomplice – something so shockingly beautiful, and utterly filthy and forbidden.

After a while, Sadie pulled herself to her knees, reached behind her, and eased the underband of her knickers out from where my tongue had embedded it right up her crack. Thinking she'd had enough, I started to get up, but she pushed me back into the mud. Then, slowly, carefully, she backed herself astride me.

I was lying on my back in the mud, my head between her thick bronzed knees, as though she'd just given birth to me. Sadie was resting on all fours in the mud. She was still naked to the waist, but covered now below, for she'd unrucked and straightened her dress automatically when she got up. Now she reached around and began slowly to lift her dress. When I tried to help her, she took both my hands in hers and pinned them firmly to the mud with her knees to tell me I must not use them. Then, at first, she did nothing. She just squatted there over my face, her dress drawn right up now over her haunches to her waist. She was perfectly still, huge, monumental. I became more and more aware then of her inner physical self: the spongy thudding of her heart, murmurs of valves adjusting the flow of her blood, the expanse and collapse of her respiration, the squishing of glands sloshing around water and other liquids, the twisting and gurgling of her intestines. But then all these sensations became muffled by a cottony overcast. It was as if Sadie filled the whole universe....the moon was an egg cell wandering and rotating slowly inside her body....

I sensed we were about to do something awesome, incredible, magnificent, obscene, forbidden....I knew that whatever it was Sadie was going to do would be her way of acknowledging my existence on this earth, her way of telling me that my existence had inestimable value in her eyes, her way of telling me that I truly mattered, that she loved me....the sounds of the inner workings of Sadie's body....she was like a jazz musician playing with me....emotionally jamming....a mother singing a cradle song or lullaby to me, the baby in her womb....I expected to hear my name whispered now, not just from her lips but from everywhere inside of her....and all these sounds amounted to more than a lullaby....it made me think it was possible for us to extemporise together a philosophical meditation that allowed us to reach God and hear Him making music on the xylophone of the stars....

Light began to emanate from the mud. The mud lay about us like a thick crust under pressure from an internal fire. The light was volcanic. It was reminiscent of the light that comes from the substance of which meteors are made. Below the crust the stinking mud bubbled and breathed. Everything about us was in a state of fusion. We were the same colour. We were moulded from the mud. The mud glued our bodies together. Together we formed a matrix of blood and mud. I wanted to cleave to Sadie, to hold onto her calves, her knees, her thighs, her buttocks: to press my face against and hug every part of her. It seemed to me there was something tragic in our position and juxtaposition. We were like two incomplete figures sculpted by Rodin from the same block of stone or clay, when it is impossible to tell if the figures have just been formed, or are melting back down into the block from where they came, and from which they can never rise above, however strongly it made them. We were two interlocked figures slithering together down the Gates of Hell.

I began covering everywhere I could reach with kisses – her heels, her ankles, the backs of her thighs....I began kissing the face of her right buttock, all the while working my way over to where it curved towards the cleft or crack like a beach to the edge of the river or sea. Flagrantly, shamelessly, joyfully immodest, Sadie began to shake her buttocks in my face like a stripper. The large halves of her rump were cleaved by the flimsy underband of her briefs, like the interlocking basins of a globe in which one half fits the next at the seam of the equator, but which were held together now only by the Band Aid of her briefs. Her skin, streaked with mud and sweat and flies, was bathed in a glow from the mud which was like live coals. She was kneeling upright in the

mud now, her head thrown back, her back arched like a salmon, her hair cascading down to the small of her back. She turned her head and her hair lifted and poured like the leaves of a tree, or the tail of a mare; her hair rippled like black topsoil turned back from the blade of a plough. I heard her ribs thudding like a horse cantering on a beach that suddenly bursts into full gallop. The round, steep hills of her buttocks – massive, close to my face – blurred, vibrating as if in the throes of an earth tremor. They filled my field of vision as an anthropomorphized hillscape, to the horizon as far as my eye could see, like a study by Man Ray. It was a comfort to have her like this, so close to my face, with the heady reek of the mud mingling with her own dark musk, the oozing primitive gurgling, belching, of this fecund lagoon, this magma which made the primal soup from which life itself had emerged. She reached behind her and, with two fingers of her left hand, contrived to pull aside the strip of cotton wedged up her crack, to reveal shadowy dark parts suggesting the rotten flesh in the cleft of a peach, until, suddenly, there it was, really close up, the deep wishing-well of her, the most secret, shameful part of her, the lips puckered up like a kiss, and the strange, reptile-like skin around it, while, still concealed, was the most precious prize of all – the sealed slit mouth of her womb.

But in the dim fire-glow of the mud, this dark, splintered star she'd chosen to offer seemed beautiful and strange. It was like viewing, in extreme stark closeup, something grotesque and wonderful discovered on the bed of some monstrous ocean on the planet Venus, Neptune, Pluto, Europa, or Mars. She used the fingers of both hands to pull her buttocks wider apart so I could see then it was the centre of a purple flower in bloom, large as an abused, gaping mouth. I worshipped at this bitter place as though it were a shrine, which indeed it was, as much as the other place she had forbidden was a shrine: the Shrine of a Our Lady of Lust and Sorrows.

Around the fluted opening of the mouth – tufted with hairs silken soft, fine as the down on her nape – a ring of sphincter muscle moved all the time, like a pulse, opening and closing the lips like a gill. There was a faint, hot stink of fish from the cotton gusset that bulged as if over a sanitary pad below, and I imagined, suddenly, this second hidden mouth opening, the river pouring out through a thicket of wiry curls or a soft sweet damp delta of black moss, bearing with it starfish, spiralled foams, froth and blood – the fermented fruit of her womb. I imagined it opening like a dam. I could smell sea water, oysters, mussels, mudflats, squid: the belly of the sea. I loved discovering the heady odours of the sea in her. I became aware of the ocean in her. I could feel the pull of her lunar tides.

She was so shameless, so miraculously filthy and rude, pulling herself open like a child putting its fingers in its cheeks, pulling its mouth open to cock-a-snook. At what? As I watched, I almost expected to see a tongue come poking out at me - or a big pink bubble of gum – that would be so saucily like her! Suddenly, the sphincter began to palpitate violently, the valve of flesh - the lips – with deep puckering contractions, spasmed: Sadie released her buttocks and, with a deep sigh, sank forward onto all fours, wave upon wave of convulsions passing through her whole body, which jerked about above me like a compass needle.

When her orgasm had subsided, still on all fours, she stretched forward a little to crane her head around to look at me. From this unusual angle in the soft, volcanic glow from the mud she looked lovely and strange, the angel face juxtaposed with the sheer profanity of that shameful, secret mouth she was still revealing to me: slack, dilated, pleading, the colour of a bruise, the skin in the parted cleft above it moist-gleaming, like the underneath of a slug with its trail of slime. The look in her eyes – still droopy with desire – was soft and unfocused, the features of her face sagging and lopsided as if in a state of helpless dissolution – drowsy with tenderness, relief, and love – when all control is lost. She only murmured one word – *'Shukran'*, then, *'Atani'* – Again.

This time she pulled her briefs down to where her buttocks rested in light creases on the tops of her thighs, so her vulva was still just covered. She pulled and stretched herself right open with her hands as if desperate to expose to me her insides, to draw me into them, and revealed to me once more the source of our happiness – this incredible, by now astonishingly large, purple bloom, with its reptile under-speckle, in all its shocking beauty. Such a strange wild place she'd revealed

to me in this night of lust: an underworld of taste and scent that made my ears buzz and my head spin. I was enchanted by her complete lack of modesty, touched by her tenderness and trust. She released her buttocks to settle again on all fours, and it closed tight to a bud, then, this time without her hands bloomed again, closed, and bloomed again, and again, and again: she came: gentler, gentler, gentler, until through my frail nerves I could just feel her deep languors ripple like the Nile sighing through its reeds....

I realised the musky nectar of this moist flower could become a delicious deadly drug I might never again be able to live without. Such a drowsy, bitter-sweetness, humid as the interior of a greenhouse hibiscus, moist as the drowning-pool in the womb of a water lily. I wanted to devour and be devoured by this living prodigy, this black flower which had bloomed this night in the licentiousness of love. But how was this quiet absorption, as though I were a painter contemplating an object in a landscape, a mystic gazing into a candle flame, possible at a time of wild, ecstatic, delight like this, when I'd just discovered this wonderland – the gorgeous arsey-versey world of Sadie?

It occurred to me suddenly, that she was, at any moment, about to shit. This premonition, or notion filled me with a feeling that is hard to describe and was hard to bear. It filled me with an unspeakable love and an unspeakable tenderness. I already knew that there'd never be another time for us like this. This was our time. In this night our souls would be found and lost. I knew that in order to have her, in order to know her, I would have to lose my salvation and my soul, and she would too. Slowly, so as not to alarm her, I drew up my arms and hands and hugged her buttock to my face. Against my face she felt as big as Africa. I dipped my tongue into her as though into a crack in the earth. The salty, fruity, tang. She tasted of home, my real home. Other strong, radiant impressions rushed into my soul, tears welled up in my eyes, and my heart began to sweetly ache for I realised that Sadie herself – her body – was my motherland. The face of the earth glistened with sweat. The mud ran in streaks down the smooth curved face of the earth as if thinned with rain or tears.

The urge to cry out her name, to cry out how much I loved her, how much I adored her, how much I worshipped her was so overwhelming it gave me pain to resist. In order to stop myself I grabbed at the hem of her dress and stuffed it in my mouth. Her poor threadbare dress. It was her work dress. It stank of toil and sweat, of water cuts, of fetching and carrying; of her sour sweet body. Bits of mud flaked off in my mouth. I imagined the mud melting on my tongue in scrolls like chocolate.

I hugged at her buttocks again, nuzzled and lapped at the now sunk plughole until it budded again and I prised it gently open with the tip of my tongue. As I explored the corolla and calyx of this glittering flower, and pictured the long stalk of her rectum and the yards of gut springing up to her mouth through a forbidden forest inside her of other blossoming organs, or meat flowers, I detected new tastes below the dominant one of musk-melon: garlic, potted meat or liver pate, honey, the tang of yeast extract and lemon, persimmon, figs, and jam. They were all mingled in the sweat and other sweet-and-sour honeys and vinegars this whirlpool of flesh was all the while secreting like an eager, famished mouth that, like the rest of our sweat-slicked bodies, was crawling with the tickling mouths feet and wings of flies. In this drowsy, trickly, oozy stream my flesh imbibed I seemed to taste an unquenched unsmotherable heat, a sullen ferocity and dignity of long-ago beaten Arab tribes. I felt very small and very big. The small part of me was seeking the kind of intimacy with her body, with Sadie's suffocating, swarming flesh, that only an unborn child can have. I wanted to be cocooned by her body, to be smothered by the mass and heat of it, to be connected to it, to be plunged completely into it and be wrapped in the warm soft bloody membranes, blubber and tissue. I wanted her to give birth to me, to be my mother. Spiritually, I felt our thoughts, memories, fantasies of each other already formed an umbilical cord and placenta that connected our inner lives which had swollen up over the months in secret like dangerous, forbidden, monstrous and beautiful, fetuses or fruits.

Since I could not enter her, could not cover myself with her insides, I longed for her now to do what it seemed she promised or threatened: to bring something from inside her out to cover me. The big part of me, while scornful of these infantile, regressive yearnings – as though I were a small boy wanting to stick his head up his mother’s skirt – yearned for something no less regressive, and much more destructive. I wanted to take the song bird to pieces to find out what made her sing.

Like Thomas who needed to plunge his fingers into Christ’s wounds to reassure himself that He was real, I needed to plunge my fingers into Sadie, to break her skin, to violate the smooth, perfect surface of her body. I wanted to open her up, make her bleed.

I wanted to reach deep into her body and pluck out some wonderful organ that had been there all the time I’d known her but which I’d never seen, to hold in my hands to examine in the dull fire-glow from the mud. I would plunge my whole fist into her chest and pull out her heart, to enfold it in the cage of my hands like a warm, captive bird. I would feel it beat against the bars of my fingers like the wings of the bird. I would squeeze the bars of my fingers together so hard that, as the solid slick of meat slid through each gap between my fingers, I’d see my own lines and prints indented on her flesh as if in wax like a seal: thus there’d be no doubt that what I held in my clenched fist was the very heart of Sadie and she was mine.

I wanted to tear off her head and eat out its contents; to unzip her belly, take out her entrails and hold them squirming, steaming, stinking, against my cheek. I wanted to rummage inside her as if in a deep dark pantry for jars marked ‘Sadie mince’, ‘Sadie sauce’, ‘Sadie dripping’, ‘Sadie jelly’, ‘Sadie syrup’, ‘Sadie jam’; to open those jars and, like a child, smear my lips, my face, my whole body with their contents. I wanted to lay down beside her as if by a brook, let my fingers dabble in the very stuff of her blood...to lose myself in this vast forest of meat with its rare fluids and stinking scarlet treasures; to unravel her ropes of moonstone, opal, amethyst, and bind myself in them.

The more, in my mind, I played the butcher or surgeon and reduced Sadie to each of the various blood-soaked internal organs of her body, turning her inside-out as it were, the more intense my feelings grew, until a nuclear fire swept through my veins and boiled up my blood. Unless she craned her neck around I could not see her face; and so we existed in this dimly lit, squelching mud world full of lust and grief, where faces were extinguished like lanterns and only bodies mattered, - our bodies, absent bodies, but most of all her body. However, once or twice, when she stretched her body to bunch and rub me between the deep cleft of her overhanging breasts which she squashed against me, I brought light to this dark joyless world by reviving the earlier pornography of her face. Some of these images were so strong, so full of warmth and joy and life, it was like a sudden blaze of sun beating down on the dismembered parts of her body which, otherwise in my mind, seemed detached, eerily beautiful, like body parts reassembled for an art installation after being recovered from a human slaughter house or concentration camp. But all the while I was now aware of a growing sense of evil and of sin; and this awareness only drove me further on, for it was in the realm of sin and evil I felt now our truest, bravest, selves could be located: concrete, naked and strong, perfectly formed and focused, with bloodied wings. The realm of good was a sterile limbo where the object was simply not to feel or do anything ‘wrong’, to suppress or kill our deepest, strongest, most passionate instincts and desires: to make of us saints or automatons.

Sadie interrupted my reverie with a fantasy of her own. She raised her head to glance back over her shoulder at me, her eyes slitted and glittering:

‘Tell me about the girl in the mask,’ she whispered her voice hoarse with passion, ‘would you prefer to be doing this with her. Was she more beautiful than me?’.....

(Pages 455-460: Nearly a week has passed since the Mud Scene and Sadie has disappeared:

desperate, David plucks up courage and goes to the pharmacy where she works but is told by another assistant that Sadie has not turned up. Desolate, he returns to Heartbreak Hotel where he is met by intruders):

I left the waterfront and wandered back to the city. All the shops and teahouses had just shut up for the afternoon siesta or *noom*. Hour after hour I trudged the streets with nowhere to go. Hot and cold waves of restlessness and nausea drove me on. Not once could I rest. The afternoon became shrill and terrible.

I could not take in any of the sights or sounds or smells of the drowsing city. I write now about a sheet of newspaper I saw blowing about in the dust. But in truth I don't recall any newspaper, or whether a wind blew along the empty streets. I saw no one on the arcaded verandas, and yet all the time I felt I was being watched. The sun scorched me to the corium of my skin. I tried to occupy my mind with happy thoughts of Sadie, with remembrances of love. But there is no torment like the remembered moments of happiness, when it seems the time of happiness has gone, perhaps like a season that will never return.

I recall now that there *was* a wind. When I came to the river and trees again it was dark. The wind blew along the river, leaving on its surface depressions like footprints. The footprints glowed and were tugged by the water. Her voice came murmuring from the river, afflicted with strange subterranean melodies. I said aloud to myself: 'she is dead. She is under the water now. Eels are writhing in and out of all her orifices, feasting on her insides.'

I remembered Sadie told me once that while she was undergoing the miracle of puberty she'd craved her own image in her mirror. She said the mirror was a river or lake whose soothing waters healed. If only she could gaze long enough she would pass through the mirror as easily as passing through the broken skin of water. She didn't merely flirt with herself, talk to herself, practise kisses on herself, chat herself up. She was fixated....she wanted to drown in her own image. Perhaps she'd discovered the mirror as a means of self-replication, and she gazed at herself until there were two selves facing each other, neither of which were the real Sadie. Unlike the beautiful youth Narcissus though who fell in love with his own reflection in a pool and pined away and became a flower because he couldn't reach what he thought was not himself, but another person, Sadie fell madly in love with the beatific vision which gazed back at her and which she knew was herself....by means of the mirror she could not only see herself but replicate herself, make love to herself, and make a monument to herself, to her own beauty. Her mother was always scolding her for spending too long in the mirror. 'Sometimes I think I must have given birth to twins,' she'd say. When she was alone, Sadie caressed her own breasts and buttocks in the mirror, and inserted her fingers in the only place left. Afterwards she'd enjoy the heady reek and taste of her fingers. It drove her wild. It was as if she'd dipped them in some strange, forbidden nectar, she said. But what she wanted, I believe she tried to explain to me, was to be able to stand back from herself, yet, at the same time, to dive into herself, lose herself in herself, and find herself in herself.

Sadie's nightly bath in the mirror became a ritual that lasted for years. It was a kind of religious ceremony. Like me she was driven by forces she could not control or understand or resist. Perhaps this journal satisfies the same impulses in me that Sadie had when she entered the voluptuous world of her mirror. I am watched by the feverish words I write as though I were gazing at my own reflection entwined with Sadie's in a looking glass. I am both the watcher in the words and the watched....I imagine a beautiful blindfolded girl, the image of Sadie, reaching out to her from the watery depths of the mirror, pleading for help....children's games: blind man's buff....ring-a-ring-a-roses....Sadie's blinded soul is trapped somewhere in currents of multiple mirrors....hyacinths and water lilies tangled in her streaming hair; I recall her yearning, bitter-sweet smile, my darling Ophelia of the mirror.

The girl in the Blue Nile pharmacy was surprised when I went back at dusk. I had to, I was afraid to go to Sadie's home. I felt so exposed, so scared and guilty, like a Don Giovanni who's

just come to his senses after a visit to the village church while on a drunken revelry, where he'd stolen a statue of the Virgin, and wandered about the streets laughing outrageously whilst he danced with the statue, held it against his body, making obscene movements, and caressing the breasts and buttocks.

'*Aleela Sadie Ali mafish, kooloo kooloo,*' – Today Sadie Ali is not here at all, she said emphatically, as if I'd not understood her the first time. 'She's gone to Khartoum to visit a sick relative,' she added, less harassed, and suddenly more helpful this time. My desire for Sadie must have been noticeable; it accompanied me everywhere like a shadow. I had known of course she wouldn't be back. I realised then I just wanted to be in a place where she'd been. I wanted to brush my fingertips along the top of the little wooden till, to touch some of the coloured glass jars that glowed on the shelves which she had touched, but in the end I did nothing and, having purchased some malaria prophylactics, went back to the unlit road that leads to the river. I needed to get home now. At least at Heartbreak Hotel I'd be in a place littered with her scraps, - holy relics of one sort or another, even if some of them were practically invisible: odd strands of hair which I'd retrieved from the bed and around the room after her visits, dust and dirt from under her nails and between her toes, skin flakes, tiny envelopes of under-arm and pubic hair she'd saved me and which I'd pressed between the pages of this journal along with her nail clippings, cut locks of hair, *jahannamiya* flowers she'd worn in her breast-cleft, her buttocks-cleft, in her armpit, and in her hair and which were stained with her body-moistures; but, best of all, and more precious than star dust, the jar containing her powdered body wastes. Also a medicine bottle of her piss, a water glass with a smudge of dark red lipstick on its rim, and the piece of shroud which I've considered mounting and framing under museum glass as a body painting by Sadie in blood. All these sad and eerie objects were parts of Sadie I could keep forever. Some people like to collect matchbooks, sprigs of heather, or lucky coins. I wished the whole of Heartbreak Hotel could be cluttered with her personal belongings – an empty dish or cup, a handkerchief, a hair tie, an item of dirty laundry with its vaguely anguishing scents, a sandal, a sock. To have such items she had worn or used always around me would help calm and comfort me and, like a lucky penny, provide a kind of hedge against being washed under by this enormous wave of anxiety I am riding – my constant sense of imminent loss and disaster.

Along the road to the river the blinding headlights of cars came full at me: I plunged stumbling into a well of darkness as they passed until I reached the *souk*. Flames leapt from the baker's shop ovens when the boys opened their doors to scoop up the loaves with their long-handled paddles.

There was no one else on the ferry. It was like a ghost ship. I had not seen this pilot before. He did not greet me when I got on, or say goodnight when I got off on the other side of the river. When I made my way from the Nile quite alone through the groves of trees and across the bit of open desert to my house, I had already forgotten his face. Perhaps for too long my mind had been teeming with impressions and thoughts and just couldn't take any more in. All day long my head had felt like a gigantic egg about to crack in the sun. God knows what kind of prehistoric monster it would hatch out into the world if it ever did.

As I approached Heartbreak Hotel, a few dogs barked. Sheila was not there wagging her tail to greet me. There was no welcoming mew from the cats on the veranda either. The electricity was off again and all the houses on the estate were in darkness. I unlocked the front door and went in. I was thirsty, and carried on through to the kitchen to get some water from the *zirr*. When I got there I shone my torch on the back door. I've never used this door and it is always kept bolted from inside. The door was closed, but the bolt was bent, and some of the screws had jumped out of the brackets. I picked out one of them in my torch beam on the floor. Someone had got into the house.

I started to go to my room to check my things. I heard footsteps coming along the back veranda to the kitchen. Whoever it was made no attempt to conceal their presence. I switched off my torch and waited. A man's voice I didn't recognise called softly – 'Mr Simon?', and then they were all in the kitchen, big men, crowding in without torches. I couldn't see their faces, but did not switch

on my torch again for fear it would provoke them. One of them, who appeared slightly smaller than the others, spoke:

‘Mr Simon, you will come with us please,’ he said in perfect English.

‘Who are you? Are you the police?’

‘No questions please. Just come with us.’ There was no menace in his voice. It was soft, and friendly, almost as if he were talking to a lover. It was as though he knew I wouldn’t resist. He didn’t touch me, once raise his voice or otherwise get tough. He had the calm respectful manner of one in authority who is used to getting exactly what he wants. For some reason all I could think of was Sadie’s breasts. Her nipples swam before my eyes as though I were about to swoon. I was on the point of murmuring to the men that I was ready now to become a Muslim. But just then, I heard Elizabeth’s rooster crow from their little outhouse.

‘What’s the matter with you, Mr Simon? Are you ill?’

I was shaking badly. Perhaps he thought I had malaria. I knew I was going to be taken away to be dealt with in some way. The realisation made me feel curiously relieved now, as if I’d known I’d had it coming to me all along, and now at last we were going to get it over with.

I was led out into the desert at the back of the house. Under the starlight I peered at the faces of the men to see if I could recognise any one I knew, perhaps Sadie’s neighbours or relatives. When I saw that they were all southerners I tried to run.

They grabbed me and bundled me into a big Toyota saloon. The soft-spoken man sat in the front and drove. We sped off across the desert, past Karima to the road. The saloon turned left, over the Chinese Bridge towards Khartoum. One of the men who sat either side of me in the back gave me a pair of dark glasses and indicated I should put them on. They were wrap-around glasses with thick side-wings. To anyone seeing me they would have looked like sun glasses or night glasses, but the lenses were in fact painted black so that while I had them on I was totally blind.

No one spoke to me during the journey and the men in the Toyota did not speak to one another either. I felt it was useless for me to speak, and so I kept silent. I didn’t feel like speaking. I had nothing much to say. All I could think of was Sadie’s bared breasts, their fullness, their softness, their shapeliness, with their big areolas like sad eyes tenderly, pleadingly, hopelessly, staring at me. It was as if the men in the car were making me think of Sadie’s naked, vulnerable breasts to suit some sinister purpose of their own. It was a kind of torture.

Only once the mild-mannered driver with a voice like a caress said: ‘If we are stopped at a police or army check, we are all friends going for a meal in Khartoum,’ then ‘...you are our guest,’ he added courteously, without irony. We weren’t stopped, and the car sped on, I presumed all the way to Khartoum.

Once we got to the big city, I felt the saloon twist slowly, smoothly, through unfamiliar back streets, heard goats bleat, dogs bark, donkeys bray, the noise of other traffic, with their gently honking horns. But I was moving through nothingness, uprooted and suspended, blind and disorientated, through a dark void in the unknown, unearthly, terrible, far from Sadie, far from anyone or anything I’d ever experienced or known or loved, as though I were nothing more than an object being taken somewhere to be trashed.

When we arrived at our destination, I was not allowed to remove the glasses. When I tried my hand was caught and held firmly. The men led me by the hand into what I took to be a large hotel for the journey up in the lift was quite long. Finally, I was taken into a room and allowed to remove the glasses.....