



Nobody believes in love at first sight. Norman didn't until he read about 'Joy, The Gold Panning Missionary' in an African magazine and set out to find her. But it isn't easy to find love in east Africa in the early eighties. This is a region with a heavy colonial hangover: Obote's government teeters on the brink of collapse, petty crime and corruption are rife in the streets and Norman, the impressionable young Englishman, makes slow progress towards the woman he intends to marry. A decade on and many thousands of miles from Africa, Norman is trying to shape a new life. Joy has walked out, leaving him to their damp tumbledown farmhouse in a rural corner of northern France. He is a desperate, broken man. Alone, he sifts the wreckage of his marriage from the wreckage of this ramshackle farm and tries to plot a way out, some sort of future. It's only when Norman decides to go back to Africa - not for love this time, but to settle old scores - that he finally sees what he must do, however dark and terrifying an act that is. In his own unique prose, Dexter Petley carefully laces Norman's African and French stories together to create a delicate portrait of an Englishman abroad, a brutal depiction of the corruption that colonialism breeds and, above all, a brilliant, bittersweet love story.

Extract:

Lira was wet, dark and packed with soldiers and people in transit. I climbed off the truck as night fell and followed the men into the New World Bar & Restaurant. I found the backless chair at the filthy table, sticky from sweet tea sloshed by drunkards.

-Hey you, *mzungu!* the waiter shouted. What is it you are wanting here? Kahawa? Coe-fee?

I got my hot water in a plastic mug, toothflats on the rim, greasy water they'd boiled the bones with. The waiter dosed it with one scoop of Tanzanian coffee from a tin. The powder floated and refused to penetrate the film. At the next table a woman flopped her left tit into a kid's face and her free hand gripped a cow bone, brown teeth pulling at the elastic gristle. The bone became a spoon which she plunged into a red plastic bowl and it came up endraped by intestines and rice. The din, smoke, stench and wet and the crawling flies were cranking up the nausea delayed from the journey. A cigarette only parched my mouth. The coffee fell into my turning stomach in lumps. Then three UNLA soldiers appeared in the doorway. Torn fatigues, one in a buttonless Police raincoat, another with no tunic buttons or laces, the tongues on his boots flapping like panting dogs. They went round demanding cigarettes. Dog boots made his way to the woman and her baby and the man beside me lurched sideways and poked me on the arm.

-Hey *mzungu*. Good evening sir. Yes, do you know this man, Father Grumble? Aiyee, he is, this true, a great man of Uganda pipple. Is TRUE. YES. A *mzungu* from God! He titch me to this way enjoy the sport fighting.

He raised his fists and shadow boxed, grotesquely balanced on his chair. Dog Boots began to rise, so I did too and tried making the door.

-YOU, sit! Dog Boots shouted. I will titch him now his manners.

I was out and walking straight over the road and into the Lango Hoteli. The bar was full of prostitutes and more drunks. Some of the drunkest were fellow travellers off the Soroti truck. I paid for a room. There was no key and the room was occupied till I wanted to sleep. The manager said to give him my rucksack but I said no and stood back outside, looking up and down the street. More fellow passengers huddled in groups among the hundreds of travellers stretched along both sides. The hundreds you could sense were there in the dark under cardboard shelters. All waiting for the one miracle truck to take them home for Easter. They'd come from Kampala, Jinja, Kenya, Tanzania, squatting there for days because they couldn't afford the price of a ride which doubled from one day to the next.

The Lango had no food, just *waragi*. Moonshine in the dark. I walked from one cafe to the next and they all had boiled bones and guts or just the empty water. I tried the open shops, the bars, the street vendors, the open doorways, any smoking oil lamp on the ground beside a square of filthy rag in case there might be three onions, a warty tomato or even a *matoke* branch. I was hungry as Dog Boots now. There were no streetlamps in these towns so I had to home in on any flame or ember. From hunger to exhaustion, then nauseated from the stench of piss and rotting skins. I was sweating in the cold damp air, eyes stinging from charcoal smoke. I gave up and cursed myself. I should've anticipated the Lira famine and stocked up in Soroti. I should've guessed how bad the ride'd be. I knew how bad it would be, but couldn't've carried on without this absurd optimism that I'd arrive at Lira with a healthy appetite and walk into big bowl of steaming rice and beans.

The train'd terminated at Soroti. Sixty of us on the back of a tipper truck carried on in the searing heat, shuddering along 74 miles of corrugated dirt, jaws smashing together on my back teeth. Then a torrential downpour under swirling black skies flooded the truck and turned the dust to mud. The few bananas in my jacket pocket were mashed to a pulp by the goats I'd been jammed against. I had some groundnuts wrapped in a twist of Bank of Barudi scrip showing the Jinja Sanitary Stores account charges for September 1971. The nuts rolled and scattered on the truck bed and were squabbled over by chickens with their legs tied to their wings. During the downpours the men squatted quite still like ducks and stared at their feet. The women held small shields ripped from cardboard boxes over their heads, eyes closed, sitting feet crossed. I just bowed my head like a horse and the rain ran down my neck.

I went to bed hungry. That night in the Lango the men argued in the corridor over the division of women and the price of oblivion, but I slept well and woke early because the barman'd told me, secretly, that a truck was leaving for Gulu at after 1 o'clock, which meant 6 a.m.

-After one o'clock, he'd said, you ask for Mr Mbitu. You say him: Samuel is your friend.

At six a.m. I re-packed my damp clothes, broken shaving mirror, dented soap. A tube of shaving cream split over two shirts and cacked up my notebook. The hotel doors were still bolted and barred from the night before. A soldier, one of Dog Boot's drunken *mshenzi*, was slumped on a Langi stool by the door, rifle between his knees. I rattled the bar. The soldier coughed and rubbed his eyes in the slanting sunlight and blew snot onto the floor with his fingers.

-It is lock-it, he said, sleepwalking over to the large double doors and aiming a kick. Very lock-it, yes?

-Where is the manager? I said.

The soldier changed from sleepy drunk to gaurd dog with a gun. I'd talked with a soldier like him once, asked him why he was a soldier, sick, drunk, no pay, no food, no commanding officer, waking up with the pox and a hangover every morning. Turned out of barracks to chase bandits who'd kill him soon. He'd said he was lured into the army. He'd been a gatekeeper at an Italian mission and these Veronese priests had taught him to be a car mechanic. He was lured away by a uniform and a gun, rations, women, rewards for the picking if he vowed he'd kill his mother when ordered. He took the vow, then he was immersed in a barrel of water for several nights. This proved he was a soldier. That was the only training he had.

The mirror behind the bar was miraculously undamaged. The soldier looked in it, ran his fingers under his ears and across his lonely yellow eyes.

-Eeh, he said, waving a backhand at the door. The manager is sick.

-How do I get out then?

This soldier was special security, sent North to infiltrate hotels and report on suspicious guests with much goods. He extracted things and sold them. At the bars he guzzled as much *enguli* as he could before passing out. Now he'd woke with his stomach burning among the Iteso who he hated because they were Obote's mad dogs and he was Acholi. They said it was the Iteso who'd blown Chief of Staff Ojok up in his helicopter, so he had to keep an eye on them. If he just stopped to wake himself then wonder why I was there he might get his pips.

He examined the door and unslid the bolts, butting it with his shoulder. The wooden bar along the bottom began to crack so he kicked it clear and pushed hard

enough to create a gap between the two doors. We saw bright sunrise on the mud outside, and an iron padlock swinging like a church bell on a heavy chain slung frame to frame.

-Oh my God, he said. He tried to wedge the gap wider with the wooden bar. We are prisoners in this sick man's hotel. Who did this?

He stepped back two paces and picked up his rifle. He put the muzzle against the padlock, stepped back another two, one more, one forward. Final measurements, then back again. He closed his eyes and I dived for cover in the corner and put my hands over my ears. Nothing. Instead of firing, his right hand snatched off the rifle and landed on his head. His bladder was bursting too the way he squirmed. He felt for his cap. It was rolled and stuffed under the shoulder tab and he relaxed. I knew what that was about. When he was, say, Private Thomas stationed near Kampala, he was sent with a dozen infantrymen into Nyamana village to open fire on sleeping villagers suspected of feeding NRA guerillas, but he lost his cap in the nightmare. In the morning when the survivors dared come out of hiding and returned to the village, one of them found the cap and handed it to the Police as evidence. The name Thomas was printed inside the cap. Private Thomas knew it was a very bad thing to lose his cap. He read the story in the English version of the opposition Democratic Party weekly, *Munansi* because the literate soldiers always read it after operations. He claimed his cap at the Police Station and said he'd lost it weeks ago. His Captain bollocked him but was impressed by his lies so they sent him for intelligence training with the North Koreans. Now he was one of the thumb-printers even though he still looked like a stupid private. He thinks it's because of him they smashed up the *Munansi* offices and arrested all the editors. So now, everytime he aimed the rifle he made sure his cap was tabbed down.

I was ducked behind the bar now and there were two rapid bursts. The door was splintered good and the mud was cratored. There were feet flying down the road and voices everywhere and shells cucking on the concrete floor. The smell was sharp and bitter and the padlock still held. He'd fuckin missed. There was something in his eyes these days, some disease the Iteso'd caught off the Karamajong and he was angry and itching and butted the padlock twice with the rifle. The chain

slid free and he kicked the door out, floundering in the mud. Several soldiers were running towards him with rocket launchers.

-S'okay s'okay, he shouted and waved his hand like there were flies. He pissed like a horse against the wall as I poked my face outside.

-Come, Thomas said. Get out. It is open.

-Thankyou, I said, walking out and trying to get as far away as I could before he let go of his cock and picked up that rifle again.

-Hey *mzungu*, he said. You give me one stick.

I should've done that without being asked so I threw him a crushed packet of Sportsman with 3 sticks left. As he moved to catch it his rifle slid sideways and he pissed on it.