stopping he pulled the cap off the plastic bottle, put it to his lips and tipped back sharply. The water thumped against the neck and into his mouth but he stopped drinking at once, as he had no idea where to find water and did not know how many houses he would pass along the way. He had chlorine pills in his pack but they were supposed to taste foul. Still, he preferred them to amoebic dysentery, and he thought back on his last encounter with the disease at Maradi. Four dehydrating weeks of weakness, endless bottles of Fanta and rehydration salts had left him stretched out on the bed too weak to lift up his legs or even think.

Through the memories came the sound of shuffled laterite and the creak of old springs. Tiffen turned around to see a young man on a bicycle approaching over a road not yet distorted by shivering heat waves. From the rack hung several guinea hens, layered over each other's feet so that from the side it was difficult to see the spinning bicycle spokes. The rider had tied down their wings but the curious birds stuck their heads out over the passing dust. By the time he came abreast with Tiffen he had slowed the bicycle to walking pace, and greeted him.

"N' faanda! A dempo te?"

"Laafia. Opano te?"

"Laafia, laafia." The man's expression had hardly changed but Tiffen realised he had offended him and basic Gourma manners by asking about the guinea hens first instead of his household. A pained embarrassment stopped Tiffen from correcting himself and he just looked at him in silence, not knowing what to say. The rider held his gaze on Tiffen a little longer, then looked ahead and continued along the road, until the creak of the seat springs grew too faint to hear and his form was swallowed up in the distance. The presence of the vast and silent country returned to settle about Tiffen as he watched him go.

After a few minutes hunger overcame remorse and he reached into the satchel that hung at his side. Without bothering to sit down he opened the tin of sardines and began to eat on the move, taking care to save every drop of oil. It was a game, a distraction to take his mind off the long horizon-capped road and a distance that showed no sign of ending. Still holding the tin in one hand he took out what remained of the dates he had bought as far back as Niamey and began to eat them very slowly, sucking out and enjoying the sugar. With the last one he wiped the tin clean and left it on a roadside stone, knowing that someone would take it by nightfall to use as a peanut scoop in the market.

It amazed Tiffen how the Gourmas were able to make use of what they had, and he thought of the butcher he had watched in the Diapaga marketplace the day before in spite of his hunger. The tin-roofed shop stood at the edge of the market near one of the dumps and under a large shade tree. Open at the front to keep cool throughout the afternoon the inside was nonetheless hot under dark, soot smeared walls. In the morning before his customers arrived, the butcher and his apprentice would kill and cut up a goat or sheep. Even though the

heat ruined fresh meat quickly he was able to sell everything by the afternoon. The lesser parts of the intestine and feet were thrown onto the rubbish heap to be eaten by vultures and dogs. The dogs were the worst, and Tiffen feared them at all times. He remembered one night at Diapaga in particular, when two street packs had fought over scraps outside his window, terrifying him with thoughts of rabies. . . By day they had left, but not their memory. He remembered that any rabid dog caught in town was chased by an instant mob, beaten to death with heavy sticks and its head cooked and eaten, as the Gourmas believed it gave immunity from rabies. To Tiffen, the lynching and supper seemed symbolic, almost as if in coming together over the dead dog the angers of the crowd were quelled and their hostilities disappated.

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2b

Tiffen drew aside the curtains he had kept closed throughout the past several weeks and peered into the courtyard again. Nothing. The dust had settled over itself, undisturbed by the breeze and patterned by leaf-dappled sunlight. He closed off the world outside and thought back upon the life and people Gordon had been a part of. . .

He came out to Niger in 1944 with his wife Lena, and worked out of many of the mission stations between Zinder and Niamey as a bush preacher. Now he was based just outside Maradi in Soura. Once or twice a week he disappeared into the bush somewhere to preach with a group of local evangelists, into the deep countryside with its silences, but still managed to visit frequently enough at the main compound. He knew what went on. He saw, lived amoungst and touched the strains--the tensions that blossomed into petty hatreds and infighting between a few, blighting the whole community. Face it, thought Tiffen. What do you expect when people are just plain different, when the world at home a world away expects some form of perfection and those at hand scruitinise them too?

One of the families on the Maradi compound set up the chicken coop to provide eggs, a few roast chickens, and an example to passers by. It now swelled with dozens of rabbits, several chickens and a family of ducks. As the smell and disease had arisen amoungst the overcrowded animals so too the bitterness between those who wanted to keep the coop, and those who wanted to move it somewhere else--or close it down altogether. Nobody spoke openly about their differences, and the sullen rancour that had built up over weeks between personalities found its voice over the fate of a henhouse. What did the Africans think about this dispute, where birds became more precious than people? They glimpsed at them for a moment then left, wondering at what they had seen.

Tiffen knew the feud had touched him too. During the afternoon breaks over summer the world came to a stop as people left work to eat lunch and sprawl out away from the sun, the dusty heat and sometimes each other. Everything became quiet. Inside the garage, surrounded by forty years of accumulated tools and junk he would lean over the cleared woodworking bench to peer through the filthy window pane that

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divided his world from the bright one outside. When the sound and feel of woodshavings leaping out of the plane and onto his hands became intolerable, he would remember his hunger and yearn to see something living. The compound buildings outside had been freshly painted white and pretty and their glare hurt him as he emerged to walk across the dust in silence, huddled, eyes barely open, crossing the bright desert between the houses with their boarded up shutters. Nothing moved or spoke under the sun-spun weight that froze the compound, but Tiffen thought less about that. He feared what would happen if he tried to become involved and mop things up.

And now Gordon is dead, he thought. Why?

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3a

Look how my feet eat up the miles, thought Tiffen, and see how this road falls away. I'll get there way before tonight.

The morning was still and the air mild around him. The room and the people he had met or avoided in Diapaga seemed very distant. Stretching his arms away from him he closed his eyes and turned about slowly, feeling his toes cool off and the air in his nose.

He looked at his shadow and his thoughts returned. What is the point of making this walk? You are only a flea on the surface of the African bush. Look up at the sky and see.

Tiffen did so. The distant column of thin smoke from the bush fire rose straight and unbended into a huge sky and vanished.

You flea.

His shadow continued to follow him as he tucked the satchel under his arm and ran along the road into the distance.

**********

3b

Why? Why did it have to happen? He did not need to be down that well, that stinking pit in the earth, that. . . sweat-pore of the universe. It barely supplied water to this land. So they had to deepen it because the refugees needed the water. He could have sent someone else down. Why anyone at all? That was not like him.

Why am I doing this?

The curtains were drawn. Tiffen sat in the dimmed room of his cabin at the end of the compound. It was barely furnished. His shoes lay scattered over the floor and the socks hung from a length of wire. Sweat rolled out of his hair and into his eyes but he ignored it, watching ants run over the leftovers on the counter, dragging breadcrumbs off the plate, over the edge and across the floor to a crack in the wall. He looked up at the neglected cobwebs in the corner and twiddled his toes in the dust.

The world is like this room. So full of life and death and endings of things that should not have been but are so now. I don't give a rip that it is sunny outside, the air sweetened from fragrant rustling shade trees. I don't want to hear the voices of children chasing through their leaves and in amoungst the millet stalks out in the field. The field is their toilet. Life is like that field, strewn with dryed up aspirations and burnt out hopes, withered, faded

away after harvest, picked up by the winter wind and scattered. But then that is what this room is meant for. Gordon knew that. People back home said his life was wasted and should have been used in other ways to do big things and raise great edifices to some end, which nobody here would understand anyhow. Here? They deal in earth and land and millet, not those other things. In any case they lead to the same death in the dust at the bottom of a pit be it the pit of money or a well. What do the others know or care about or what do I for that matter? It is all over and his dust has returned to the earth like everything else to become the seed of something new.

Has it?

Who understands? The others here probably feel the same way, pacing back and forth in their rooms or sitting shocked on the worn out sofa together holding hands, saying nothing, just looking at their worn knees. If only the children outside knew! But when they know and understand they. . . no, carry on playing.

Why was he down that hole? They are such pits. Once or twice was quite enough for me. That well-digging crew came one day to reopen and deepen the well at the main compound, and asked me to go down and unscrew something. Of course I said yes, hoping to be like Indiana Jones and act the playboy of the West African world all in one. The shaft was about sixty feet deep and the stones dropped in slapped against the damp sand. The rope ladder was old too and several of the rungs had long since broken off. Everything swung about as I went down, bumping against that intestinal concrete shaft and grazing my shoulders and back. At the bottom the dizzyness of turning stopped and became another one caused by heavy, layered air. You know, the kind that gives you the shivers and premonitions of pneumonia when you reenter the world above only minutes later. It was hard to even breathe let alone wheeze. Now I respect miners! The walls of the shaft hemmed me in and strangled the imagination; there was no escape from them, no matter where one turned--just me and myself. Whenever I broke wind the crew above would howl with laughter, as all my noises were amplified in the damp concrete soundbox. . . that sweatpore of the universe.

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4a

Although it was not yet noon, the sun began to scourge the land and Tiffen's bleached out hat. As he looked down at his shortened snadow and the glaring dust he reflected now long the walk really was--longer than he had admitted that morning. The brisk march became an effort, even though he knew his legs could do more. He diverted his attention by taking the leather satchel off his shoulder and put it on again backwards, to look at the side that had rubbed his hips over the months. It too glared in the sunlight, the polished leather curving slightly from an attempt to match his side. From off it glanced memories and faces, and Tiffen remembered the footless leper at the leather workshop at Maradi who had made it. Unable to work in town or the fields and shunned by many, the nameless man had nonetheless struggled with great patience and endurance to create a

beautiful satchel, surrounded by his fellow workers. Tiffen rubbed the leather and in his musings brought forth more memories. He thought of Lompo Larraba who had taught him basic Gourma in Maradi, and recalled those walks into town and back on a darkening road with the satchel bumping his hip. After eating millet and gravy in a streetside chop house, surrounded by watching children and curious onlookers he walked down the side streets. The evening call to prayer spread over the town, spell like and haunting. When it was over, the people clustered again around brightly lit shops to talk. Larraba lived in a single room facing a courtyard with two others. When Tiffen arrived he brought out a small table and his oil lamp. Their conversations continued into the late hours as they squinted across the pool of light, hearing but not seeing the forms that flipflopped around them in the courtyard. . .

The vast land and the blue domed sky seemed to shrink into his head as he dreamed in his waking, while in his walking he kicked away at the dust with every step.

Tiffen forgot time until the shadow disappeared underfoot, and he realised he had been drinking heavily from the bottle. He looked around for water, knowing there was none. The last several kilometres of bush hemmed road had opened up again, exposing long bleached grass and fewer trees. What hope is there in this land, he thought, a land dry as a thousand forgotten laundry sponges, a countryside mostly dependant on scanty rainfall? He hung his head and tried to coax saliva into his mouth as he tripped on up a slight rise under the dry season sun. Near the top he noticed a roadside tree and in his curiosity stopped in the way to look at it, while the breeze quieted and was still. The leaves of the tree were scattered over the ground, yet it seemed to burn and come alive in the bright red flowers that rose off the tips of each twig to flicker in the noontime heat. Tiffen thought of the hummingbirds that came to this tree to drink nectar from this oasis in the middle of a parched bush. He took a guarded sip from the bottle of warm, chlorinated water he had been carrying. Renewed, he continued walking.

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4b

I wish I had made the effort to know Gordon better, to understand what he was really like, behind that rugged and apparently callous personality. At first he seemed a real. . . well, how was I to know? I am fresh on the mission field and he came out in '44 when the land was really rough, the frontier ragged like a ten day beard and still under French control. He saw decades of growth and collapse, the maturing of friendships and sudden betrayals, the change over time as a country grew and a church developed. He stood hard but tall in his vision, and yet. . . Each week he dissapeared into the bush with the pastor and his evangelists, driving down a straight red road which left town and our understanding of what he was doing. I remember closing the gate after him one time. When the dust had settled and his bouncing white pickup had vanished into the silent heatwaves I turned back to face the brightly glaring courtyard again, and walked

into the garage.

Isn't it funny how these thoughts arrive when he has gone and is about to be buried and put away from his friends for a great long time? We used to talk behind his back and whisper about his faults, but tonight we will eulogise him beside a hole in the ground. . .

I remember. About a month ago he came up to me to say hello. Instead of shaking my hand he grabbed it and jerked it towards his belly. "Did you know that was the way you shake other people's hands?" No. "Well then, don't do it any more!" That was it, and I doubt I will forget that lesson. Some time before I grazed my cheek with a bad razor and the skin became infected. I was afraid of him and wanted to avoid asking but the dispair was too strong and I went anyway, thinking the skin would be forever blemished. "No," he said, "it will go away in a few weeks. In the meantime, try this." He walked over to one of the plantbeds lining a building and snapped off part of an aloe. The tip oozed a light green juice which he stroked over the graze, and I saw a totally new person. The cheek healed well and without further infection, although I remember looking at it in the mirror each day to see how it was coming along.

Healing? Sometimes he tore me and others apart. I learned the hard way not to whisper about that chicken coop when he looked at me and said, "Shall we go to that person you speak of and see what he thinks?" Always exposing. "I hope you will learn this lesson even if you do come to despise me, for I mean it."

Yesterday he came up to the farm to borrow some tools for the well-digging project at Soura. The last thing I recalled him saying was not to do anything oneself that could be done by the Africans, the more so if it was exhausting or dangerous. . .

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5a

The road continued into the distance, staight and endless as Tiffen's imagination. The trees had dissapeared from the roadside leaving low scrub, less grass, and a few fenced in clearings that had been used to grow millet or cassava the previous season. The sight of constant bush and the piercing sky became irritating so he tipped the brim of his hat forward and started to daydream again, keeping his eyes on the laterite underfoot. He forgot how far he had walked or where he had been in his dreams, for when he looked up the endless road remained ahead and a shadow had appeared behind his feet. He looked back and saw in the distance the same group of dead trees he had seen ahead of him sometime before, and near them on the road a white approaching speck that grew larger and clearer within its dustcloud.

The Peugeot pickup slowed to a halt and the driver rolled down the window. Tiffen remembered seeing the Belgian and his wife across the marketplace in Diapaga sometime before but had never spoken to them. He had been afraid of embarassment if they had suggested going out to a restaurant for supper. . .

"Well, to see you here!" said the Belgian. "What are you doing though?"

"Oh, just walking. How far is it to Mahadaga?"

"I don't know, but it is far. I am going to Namuno and will drop you off at the turnoff to Mahadaga if you want."

"Thank you, but no. I need to walk," said Tiffen, looking down at the ground. "Do you have any water though, please?" He held up the near-empty bottle, wondering if he really wanted to walk all the way and find his memory of Elizabeth at the end of it.

"Finish what you have already as my water is still cool."

Tiffen drank and as the Belgian filled up the bottle he looked at him and his wife, then at the dozens of young potted trees in the back of the Peugeot.

"You are interested in the trees?" asked the Belgian. "These are lucaenas. They survive very well in this area--as long as someone waters them the first few years. My job is to plant them and encourage the farmers here to carry on and plant more when I leave. I did this work in Niger, where there is a real shortage of firewood. You have been there? Then you know what it is like and how the desert will come one day to this country as well. There are a few others working with the Gourmes, but the task is very large when only a few people work on it and there is little concern from within."

"But what keeps you going?" asked Tiffen, turning a circle and imagining the size of the province, and then the whole nation of Burkina Faso.

The Belgian fell silent and looked beyond Tiffen at the land behind him. "I cannot plant all these trees alone, and will not, but there are a few people here who can begin something that will expand over the next twenty years, perhaps longer. The land needs more trees. It will take time but we will have trees. . . I know what you are thinking! That the country is huge and most of the people think there is enough wood to go about today. Remember Niger. Although my wife and I are only two, it is better than doing nothing about it. In any case, we have about twenty years to go before the shortage is painful. What more can one do?"

The Belgian handed Tiffen his bottle and started up the engine.

"There is a hamlet very near the turn off I told you about. You will be able to get more water there, but it will not be filtered. You have pills? Fine. Good day to you and good luck!"

The Peugeot started up and Tiffen looked again at the young lucaena trees in the back that swayed and shook as the pickup bounced over the rutted laterite. The dust returned slowly back to earth, as he stood still and imagined the Belgian's vision and a greener countryside twenty years hence, with trees along the roads and in village compounds. . . It was real. He opened them again to the sun's laughing glare off a thousand bare scrub bushes and the open fields. Yes, it was real, but not yet. He continued to walk the thin red line to the next horizon.

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5b

"I did not realise they buried people so quickly here. Yesterday afternoon he walked about this very compound, giving orders and

borrowing a few tools for the well project. Today he was killed, and tonight they will bury him. So sudden, so quick, no time to think but only to react."

Tony said nothing for a while but looked ahead at the road.

"Yes, they do that in the tropics."

"I'm sorry I didn't stay with you this afternoon. I didn't know whether to stay or leave you and Liz together on your own. I figured it best to go back to my room and be alone."

"Yes. That's alright. I don't want to talk about it now."

The road to Tsibiri was paved and the pickup's desert tyres hummed. Liz sat beside Tony holding Mellissa in her lap, looking out at the passing scrubland through the window. She was crying, he thought. Benjamin lay still across the back seat, his head in Tiffen's lap.

A large truck passed and blew a cloud of dust into the cab, a flash of flapping canvas and strange peering faces before it vanished behind them.

"How much do they charge for the Niamey-Maradi run on that bush taxi these days?"

"I don't know. I'm really not concerned right now."

Twenty minutes later they reached Tsibiri. Tiffen had never been there before but he payed little attention to the new sights. The pickup nudged its way down narrow streets watched by large eyed children from the windows but Tony looked ahead, ignoring the guinea hens that darted underneath. They parked next to another pickup.

"See you tonight. Liz and I want to be alone for a while."

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6a

Tiffen stood at the crossroads and looked at the swinging billboard before him, wondering how far it was to Mahadaga. The sign just advertised a few rural development projects run by the provincial government, but gave no distances. Slowly turning in the crossroads he looked down the four laterite roads, trying to guess which one to take. A few hours ago he had reached the turnoff the Belgian had spoken of. It was the halfway mark of his walk but also the beginning of the pains in his hips and feet. Now, Tiffen sat on an eroded concrete milestone and surrendered his hips to their pain, knowing he would have to get up in five minutes or risk giving up the walk altogether. The pain eased slowly and Tiffen wanted to sit there longer--just a little longer. He looked at the now milder sun and wondered what time he would reach Mahadaga if he rested until sundown. His mind slowly ceased its incessant revolving as he felt the wind come alive around him to cool his head and moist hair. The tightness in his legs and hips went and seemed to ask him to stay on the stone for ever.

Only Tiffen's will protested and he forced himself away from the milestone, refusing to heed his muscles. Behind him he could hear the whine of an approaching motorscooter and as it drew near he recognised two of the Diapaga gendarmes, and asked himself if they had been sent out after him by the corporal who had thought him crazy to be walking.

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The gendarmes were dusty too. Their motorscooter sagged under the weight and the engine died the moment the driver released the throttle.

"How far is it to Mahadaga?" asked Tiffen.

"It is far! Where have you been walking from?"

"Diapaga. I left this morning. Did your corporal send you to look for me?"

The two gendarmes looked at each other while Tiffen studied their weapons, wondering why town police should carry a submachinegun and a pistol between them. The roads seemed safe enough to him.

"No, we are on patrol. Each week someone travels the bush roads on this moto. There is no police station in Mahadaga and Namuno, so that makes us the only police the people there see. A few weeks ago we heard reports of several burgularies and we suspect who has been doing it. Last month he was released from the prison at Ouagadougou and even left us a message of the towns he planned to steal in, but we have not found him. He continues to taunt us."

"What people are you from?" continued Tiffen. "You do not look like Gourmas."

"We are both Mossi, and have been posted at Diapaga for two years. The work is good. But why are you walking to Diapaga? Nobody does that, not even the people who live here. When the French were here the postman would make the trip and back every week, but that was because the roads washed out with the rains. Today you can take the bush taxi. Fifteen kilometres? That is still a long way. Why do you want to walk?"

"I wanted to see how far I could go in a day," said Tiffen, who answered without thinking. He had to reach Mahadaga but did not want to tell them why--or himself. He realised they were searching into his eyes and he dropped his gaze to the ground.

"Don't you mind walking alone along this road?" asked the gendarme in front.

"No."

"Is somebody waiting for you at Mahadaga, and do you have somewhere to stay?"

"Oh yes. Well. . . in a way. I did not say exactly. But they know I am coming. Do you know the nurses out there, Pauline and Betty?"

"Yes! We know Polina, and Potendema too. We will be in Mahadaga and will tell them you are coming. But you really want to walk, and see how far you can go?"

"Yes. I have to."

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6b
DIALOGUE WITH HUGUES.

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7a

The baobab tree appeared around a bend in the road, solid and immovable as when he had seen it several months earlier. It stood leafless and dust-powdered from the harmattan storms that came blowing

off the desert each winter. From several branches swung the dangling seed pods that local children loved to break apart in order to eat the pulp. A few children played about the tree and Tiffen called over to ask if they would give him a taste of pulp. Without answering they ran into the bush in fright, looking over their shoulders. Even at that distance Tiffen could see the bobbing whites of their eyes amoungst the thorns. Ahead of him the road curved, and in a few minutes they left the bush and began to run on it. Tiffen walked over to the tree to look for pulp but found the ground strewn with empty pods and the spittings. Leaving them behind he returned to the road, looking at the cliffs that appeared for the first time in a land that hitherto had seemed flat and featureless. As the road wound its way through rocky outcrops and thorn strewn slopes he avoided the frustration of the walk and the memories of the people he had baffled and hidden from, to think of the last time he had travelled along the road to Mahadaga.

Tiffen dreamed and relived that journey--last July, when he had shared a ride with Betty to the bush hospital. After five weeks alone with his thoughts while working at the beekeeping project he felt what it was like to be newly arrived in Africa yet hardly accquainted with the people, awed at the immensity of the task before him and shocked at what experience and people had told him about himself. Over the past weeks he had lost every mask and stood emotionally naked for the first time and hurt. It was then he glimpsed what his colleagues lived with from time to time. In the midst of encouragement from the other missionaries, the Gourma beekeeper and his quiet time alone he had collapsed and rallied, yet during those long summer sun-spun days he still thought of Elizabeth at Mahadaga. He wanted to talk with her and try to understand what was happening to them. At least he wanted to see her face. . .

As Betty's Peugeot made the last leg of the journey towards Mahadaga Tiffen felt the presence of the cliffs that hemmed in the road, the squeak of the bouncing seat springs beneath him and the wind in his hair. He looked out over the plain from the top of the escarpment and down to the cluster of whitewashed buildings where his friend was living, and for the rest of the trip could hardly say a word to Betty. When the Peugeot drove into the compound Tiffen saw Elizabeth on the concrete porch reading and his anticipation was satisfied. They stood embraced in the fading daylight for a while, then sat down in the falling darkness beside an oil lamp to talk, shocked at what they had been through yet content for the moment of reunion. . .

Tiffen sought to relive the experience as he approached the last bend in the road before the escarpment and the spread out plain. He wanted to see her again, to talk to her about Gordon and the events in Maradi that had led up to his death, and what he had seen. I know you now, he thought, for long ago we met in this dusty land, beside old thorn trees and a well. I crossed this bush and deserts to search for you, and your smiling face was more beautiful than any orchid.

Tiffen stopped at the crest of the road as it looked out over the

great plain and watched his dream blur, obscured by the shimmering heat haze and the harmattan that stretched as far as he could see. The memory of the summer faltered and began to dim, and the face of the woman for whom he had travelled appeared then faded away. He thought he called out her name but the rocks bounced back a thousand echoed laughs into the air.

All at once Tiffen became very tired and wanted to sit down and wait until someone passed by to offer him a ride to Mahadaga. He shuffled over to one of the many rocks that lined the laterite road and was about to sit down and forget that day and his quest when he heard a rasp over the pebbles and into the grass. In his fear Tiffen ran into the middle of the road and looked around quickly, expecting a snake to come out after him. Nothing. His hips continued to hurt, but in his despair he forced himself to continue along the road as it began its descent into the plain.

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7b

I walked over to the small mission cemetary that lay in the middle of the Tsibiri school grounds, surrounded by a low concrete wall. Anywhere, away from Tony's eyes and Hugues' questions. Some Africans were digging in turns, two resting at the top and two at the bottom trying not to hit each other in the face as they shoveled loose earth up and out of the grave. It flopped over the ground and raised up fine, unsettled dustclouds that blurred the air and painted their backs a greased red. They looked up and said nothing then returned to their work.

I remember the people, his friends and adversaries coming in so quickly. They came in from all over, some from Maradi and the surrounding area and others from the deep bush. If it wasn't Death itself calling it would have taken much longer, but they came. Some only knew him as the white man who drove a truck into the deep bush twice a week for years to preach in isolated villages. Some were his enemies yet they came to say farewell to the man of action they respected, who for forty one years had pursued his vision in the land, a land so vast that one could not encompass it except perhaps in dreams. Some knew him when he arrived by snip to the coast and traveled inland for they had come out with him--young and old, their hearts burning within and a message in their mouths--partners in an enormous task. One was Marcia. I used to think she was hard and callous. . . until now, that is. Several times that day when greeting old friends she would freeze in her embrace and just stand there crying. She knew the stories of the past four decades, what Gordon had done and been here with his wife Lena. I suppose she and the rest of us cried because they were to have retired in a few months and gone home for good.

We used to whisper about his faults behind his back thinking we had somehow escaped ours, and tonight we will eulogise him beside a hole in the ground. It is too much to understand, let alone think about. Perhaps I ought to shut up and just let things happen, watching stooped figures wander over the sand waiting for Gordon and

his procession, looking up at the rapidly dimming sky.

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8a--note reversal!

There were several oil lamps scattered throughout the small room that lit up George's face. He looked at the people gathered before him, crammed on the few benches or standing against the wall near the open windows. Someone's chair grated over the concrete. Liz held Mellissa asleep in her arms, leaning against Tony. Out in the darkness that was Tsibiri a donkey began to bray, faint but drawing everyone's attention until it stopped.

"I think you should know how it really happened before the others arrive with the cortege and we have the funeral. I have spoken with John and Calvin who were at the well this morning. Gordon was not below in the shaft as we had thought, but was on the surface with several others. As you know, the well was being deepened in order to reach the falling water table and provide something for the refugees camped on the edge of the Soura station. The work crew spent most of last week digging out the sand and bucketing it to the top, while Gordon prepared to cast the cement casement ring. The three parts for the ring mould came from the farm school; after being lowered to the bottom of the shaft they would be assembled, and the concrete poured in between it and the freshly dug extension to the shaft. However, this time we decided to cast a smaller diameter concrete ring on the top and lower it down the shaft in one piece.

"We had a large tripod erected over the well shaft which we thought was securely anchored. Using a chain block and tackle we planned to raise up the ring and lower it down the shaft. Up to that point we thought we had taken every possible precaution, and there was nobody down the shaft."

There was a pause as George looked at the listeners seated before him in the stillness of the lamplit room. He felt captive to an immense presence and imagined them sitting on an anchored boat swinging at the changing of the tide, waiting, and waiting. . .

"There was something wrong with the mechanism of the block that caused the light chain to drag. We kept on tugging at it in order to pull the chain through and run the heavy drive chain.

"Without warning the tripod fell apart as each of the three legs lost their grip and splayed out. The casement ring fell into the shaft. John and Calvin were able to get out from under the tripod in time, but Gordon was hit by one of the legs and crushed against the concrete rim of the well, under the full weight of that ring. I don't want to talk about what followed but know I must. Everyone worked in a craze to free him from under that burden. He still had enough energy to say 'Get this off my back.' The ring fell to the bottom of the shaft and he was released, but it was too late to save him.

"The funeral will be tonight sometime so that those who live further away will be able to come in time. I think we will have to wait a few more hours before they arrive."

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8b--note reversed order!

The young Gourma on the bicycle was barefoot and wore a faded blue grain sack for a shirt along with his trousers and wool cap. His bicycle had lost its brakes long ago so he walked it along the road that turned and zigzagged its way down from the top of the escarpment to the plain below. A tin of lamp oil hung between the handlebars that sloshed with every bump in the road. He intended to sell it in minute quantities to the few families that lived on the roadway, knowing they depended on him. Strapped on top of the converted bicycle rack was a cardboard box full of candies, a few chocolate bars and other odds and ends that were available in Diapaga but scarce deeper in the bush. In spite of the occasional bush taxi, he could still make a small profit every two weeks by travelling to Diapaga and returning with the sweets so desired by many in Mahadaga, including the nurses at the bush hospital. He also carried news from one community to another and knew the current price of millet in marketplaces as far away as Fada and Kantchari. Although he met several people along the route and passed the news, he spent much of his day in the countryside alone on the bicycle, crossing and recrossing the road on the bush trails that had grown up over the years, avoiding the ruts and sandtraps.

For several minutes Tiffen was silent and brooded as he walked beside him, wondering again how far it was to the bush hospital. He asked, but realised the man did not know enough French to tell him. They continued as before. At the bottom of the hillslope Tiffen expected the man to hop on his bicycle and leave, but the Gourma kept on walking with him, saying nothing. Under the timeless day and the milder sun the only sound was the rasp of the crooked tyre against the bicycle frame, the tick-ticking of the chain and the pad of their feet in the dust.

Why is he staying with me? asked Tiffen, thinking about his earlier encounter with the other man and his guinea hens.

Tiffen looked at the carton strapped atop the bicycle rack and the thought of sweets made him hungry. Sugar. . . instant energy. He opened the satchel and worried fumbling fingers along the bottom until he found the few coins that remained. He had eaten the last of the sardines at the turnoff and abandoned the tin on a milestone. It was the end of his food supply and the comfort that had steadily dwindled since arriving at Diapaga. Five small coins. . . and he thought of the people he had met since then, and all he had hidden from them and himself. Yet they had revealed to him his failing strength and illusions, while time on the road had increased his dispair and frustration. He still wanted to reach Mahadaga and the chance to see Elizabeth again. Looking at the man he felt in the satchel again and wondered how many sweets he could buy and if their sugar could last him until he reached the bush hospital and his rest.

"He! M'boi cida succari. Y han?"

He held out three coins and the man stopped his bicycle to open the box and pull out three wrapped sweets. They continued walking and said nothing, while Tiffen sucked and sucked, imagining the sweets as an enormous chocolate Easter egg, pregnant with hundreds of marbled

candies. The dream took shape and speed as the road left him and he tucked up his legs to take off into the cooling African air on the wings of a sugar buzz. The earth became a blur beneath as he left the bicycle far behind. Far, far into the air he rose and from this height he saw Elizabeth again on the porch, reading and waiting. He had reached the clouds when his stomach cried out for more and his muscles ached again.

For what seemed a long time he held the last two coins in hand, wondering what it must be like to be this way every day. The dimness that had clouded his understanding of the Gourmas was taken away for an instant and he felt their hunger and the weakness that went with it much of the time. It was all too short, and the familiar cloudy viewpoint of the outsider returned, recognised by the still eyes of the man as he took the coins. The second sugar buzz lasted but a few minutes and when it had crashed Tiffen knew his body would begin to eat away at the fat reserves--what little was left. The man swung his leg over the bicycle and looked Tiffen right in the eye and into his unmasked soul, stopping him as if he had run face first into a wall. For a while he said nothing as they stood in the stillness of the lengthening day.

"Qu' Dtienu pati sala."

The man stepped on the pedals and left to the slow creak of aged leather and seat springs, leaving Tiffen in thought. Qu' Dtienu pati sala. . . May God give us tomorrow. A pair of ringdoves flew over the fields and skimmed the road by a few feet, following it and heading towards some distant trees that flanked a group of whitewashed buildings. Forgetting the growing hip pains Tiffen followed them towards his goal and the morrow which he knew was offered to him freely.

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9a

I don't think I will ever forget the night they buried him at Tsibiri. Almost everyone who had known him over the years came to say goodbye, on a night swept of clouds and arrayed in stars as far as could be seen--almost it seems into eternity. . .

For a while we stood apart, away from the violence and hardships of this wide dusted country, with its toil and effort and patience and heartbreak. From the day he arrived the hope in him had spawned courage and vision as he lived out his dream, his life with open eyes. Today it ended under a three-legged tree, but that is not what everyone here thought about. Some sat in shocked stillness while others were secretly glad he had gone. His fellows rejoiced in their grief for they knew where he had gone. He had gone and they knew it through their tears as they sat on those hard backless benches hand in hand under brilliant flourescent strip lights. The mosquitoes and the temptation to dispair nibbled at their backs as they listened to the African pastors and senior missionary colleagues, his old time friends exhorting the anguished asking, "Why do you seek the living amoungst the dead? He has risen." They rejoiced through their silent grief, and I looked for the faces of the listeners from the villages in the

shadows, the dark shadows of the night. I knew they would begin to ask questions about Gordon and his life, why he came to this country and what he had to say that they had not listened to all those years. He lived in this land through all times, the prosperous and the famine-ridden, and gave it his life in spite of his faults. We had them too. . .

What can I say? His death was not a futile waste, a pointless scattering of dry seeds. The other missionaries drew together. After months of stagnation inside, backbiting, bickering, fighting, silence, taking sides, verbally molesting and hurting each other over such trivial issues about the compound they gave up and smashed their teacups. Before then the outsiders had looked in and wondered what they were seeing of these people, who said they brought good news to their land--a land tired from drought, sorrow, despair and a surrender to fatalism. That is past now for the moment. He has gone, and for the time being has left this community and friends behind like a split crabshell on the beach. Yet why did it have to happen this way? I ask myself why so. . . but then the Africans understand this well, too well, every time they kill and eat a dog that has rabies. Of course Gordon never had rabies and it was not his death that saved men from their sins but like the dog it took a death to reconcile the infighters. In a sense it was a picture of the death for which he lived and gave his whole life until it was all gone and spent on the people here in this vast land. There was no more to give. That was the way it was at the end, as they lowered the box into the ground with dozens of oil-lamps plopped into the soft mounded sand round about and casting bright light everywhere, giving the appearance of something almost hidden and clandestine, but in reality open and noble and seen by all, felt by all in the heavy hot damp and expectant night. I watched his bush evangelisation crew fill in the hole, feeling the thump-thump of sand on the new box made by the carpenter. The dust rose out of the grave in clouds, greater and greater and higher and higher, rising into the dark heavens in the lamplight, all swirling and spreading and rising up, to the last puff of incense, the last drop of oil, the last ounce of gold there was left of his life to give.

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9b

The evening sky reddened as shadows from the trees returned and stretched over the ground in slow steady strangulation, while the trees blurred to become indistinct visions of their former daytime selves. Out of their branches burst hidden bats. The smaller, insect-chasing ones darted over the ground in silence while the larger fruit-foxes rummaged through the branches in search of mangoes. The doves had roosted and were hidden. Out in the millet fields the air had settled and was still. Even the dust had returned to the earth, awaiting the morrow and with it the meandering breeze that would blow over it to give life and movement.

Through one of the windows of the bush hospital Tiffen saw the flickerings of an oil lamp as he stood in the middle of the road.

There was no pain now in his hips, only the imagination that he could walk on to Arly if only he tried. . . His dust-scuffed boots left deeper furrows in the ground as he entered the compound between the water tower and the baobab tree. The light in the window drew him on until he stepped into the doorway and listened.

He thought he heard the sound of crying children and shuffling feet as he had heard them before, and with them the voice--her soft voice in broken Gourma. Through the window came the rattle of surgical instruments dropped into enamelled trays and the whirr of a hand-driven centrifuge. Light suddenly seemed to flood into the windows from outside and with it memories of guinea-hens and donkeys and a time under a distant summer sun. She is here, and it has not been a dream after all.

He went down the hallway and into the receiving room.

"Elizabeth. . ."

Silence. The room was deserted save for a faltering oil lamp on the table that added to the dereliction. Above it, a strand of cobweb floated in the heat. The stools rested under the table and the microscope she had used was locked inside a glass cabinet. The hand driven centrifuge lay collapsed and covered with thin dust against the countertop.

As he blew out the lamp a new tiredness swept over Tiffen. Closing the door, he left the dark and empty hospital to walk over to Betty's bungalow and announce his arrival.

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S. Van Wyck. Hindsight diary entry on Lompo Larraba. 19.2.'87.

This is the first of the "hindsight diary entries" I wish to make concerning my time in West Africa. A lot has come out over the past two to three years in magazine article, short story and spoken form; however, I wish to write some things down. They are well known to some in my family and amoungst my friends, but perhaps someone will want to know more in the years to come. I certainly will.

Lompo Larraba was a Gourma from the Piela area (I think) who I met in Maradi. At that time (August, 1984?), I had decided not to study Hausa as I was determined to return to Burkina Faso and the Gourma-speaking area. The Hausas did not appreciate that attitude; in hindsight, it was a very arrogant and childish thing I did, the more so because I made my interest in the Gourmas plain. Oh well, you learn some. I looked about for a Gourma who would spend some time each week with me to teach me basic Gourma. In Maradi, this was somewhat difficult, as Maradi is about six hundred miles away from Fada n' Gourma itself. Lompo later said there were about a hundred expatriate Gourmas living in Maradi, a town of 35,000 in the Hausa speaking area. Someone sent me to the local beer brewery where there was supposed to be a Gourma. I tramped across the millet fields from Tony's station at Maza Tsaye; the millet had headed (I think), but without much seed. What there was was very small--given that millet is a small grain anyhow. The Gourma had left his job at the brewery, and someone helped me find him in Maradi itself.

Lompo worked as an apprentice to a motorcycle mechanic. His shop lay across from the Shell station which I particularly remember, since many Europeans and outsiders would fuel up there. Some of their vehicles were quite expensive, and this contrasted with the immediate area. The shop was a thatched shelter with one or two refrigerators inside. One was totally broken down and fitted with a padlock; it was used to lock up the tools. Lompo would sit atop it quietly looking at the passing world. Of course there was no hurry; that was something I had to learn the hard way. After talking a bit and explaining my needs to him I sort of let slip that I was a Christian. He said he was too. With that I remember the two of us walking down the side streets like good friends towards his home. Perhaps I accepted his word too much on face value; I think I was looking more for someone who would prove reliable and "safe" than for the chance to make a new brother in Christ. Again, the unthought out impulsive nature; yet, something very good came from it. . .

We agreed to meet at his home once a week for Gourma lessons. I think that on some weeks I went twice. The commute and the nightly experiences really took me into part of the African life I would never have otherwise seen. I am still awed that these things actually happened! After work at the farm school at Maza Tsaye and a shower I put on my bush hat and satchel and walked down the hill allong a path that ran between a millet field and groves of trees. On the way out there was enough light to see the ground, for there were snakes in the area. Not many people walked along that path at that time and I thought a lot. I thought a lot everywhere, too much perhaps. The

path ended up on the main paved road and from there it was a mile and a bit walk into town. The day had died but it was easy to follow the road and feel around from the dim light in the sky. On either side were groves of trees or postage stamp gardens that were springing up around certain wells. With the dry season and the end of bringing in the millet and sorghum people could give more time to dry season gardening; in any case, there were fewer parasites. When I first began taking lessons the millet was still in the fields.

I would reach the edge of town, passing a bush taxi stop then going under the large concrete arch that spanned the road into Maradi, and went to a roadside kitchen for supper. It was about six or seven in the evening. About an hour or so before each day certain women would arrive with millet porridge they had prepared that day. Some had leaf gravy and others gravy with bits of meat in it. I suppose it reminded me of a truck stop, with people coming in for supper then going on their way as well as the regulars. This streetside area stood on the edge of a small market; someone sold lettuce and other vegetables, a man barbequed meat over half a 55-gallon oil drum. At that time meat was much cheaper because the drought had forced the northern herders to come into the towns and sell their animals at dirt price. The millet price was jacked up, too. What could you do about it? There was also a stand where a man sold tea and long sticks of white bread, like French bread but shorter and much dustier, since they were sometimes baked in an earth oven that had just had the embers raked out. I did not mind! This sort of food is great, although the other missionaries did not go out and eat this way too much. Although I liked and still like this rough way of eating, I think that I was much less concerned about my health and safety, and ate with a sort of careless abandon that comes with an overpreoccupied mind and a certain tinge of depression. I usually sat at the teaman's stand and talked with him, eating his bread and drinking his tea. In that climate it was easy to become something of a tea addict, since the heat made you sweat and then perspire, and the sugar kept you going when salts and blood sugars were draining fast. I would also eat millet porridge and gravy; it was not as good as Polenli (Wombo's wife) made it, but it was good.

There were streetlights in Maradi but most of the light in the eating place came from constellations of oil lamps sitting on tables or hanging from jutting poles that made up the shanty bars. It was not squalor by my standards, but certainly rough; there was an open drain between the eating place and the street and one had to cross at the footbridges. This lighting had the effect of showing up people's immediate faces but little else--a sort of close range, disembodied atmosphere. When the meat was really barbequeing the flames lit up parts of the eating place. I wonder what it would have been like if I could smell. In the half darkness what you tasted, heard and touched became important--how much more so the smells! I feel I was in a very strange place amoungst the Hausas--so close to their way of living yet a long way away, since I could not understand them unless we spoke French. I think I understand why white outsiders cling to the

interior security of the "golden ghetto" and do not venture out into the local culture--it takes a certain courage. However, I do not agree with that approach. Perhaps one reason why I was so outward in eating with the Africans and travelling in their bush taxis was to satisfy my huge curiosity, but also to escape the constrictions that made up other parts of my life at Maradi--or anywhere else, for that matter. (More on that somewhere else.) I forget what I spoke about with the tea man, but on one occaision I remember him or one of his friends, for he saw right through me and asked what it was that was troubling me. Not the hassle of a hard day, but something much much deeper within my soul. He saw it, and me. I lied and covered up in some way. It was a lesson in the need to have certain things put together before embarking onto the overseas mission field. Just as one would check up a truck before crossing a desert so one should be honest and prepared to accept certain things about oneself and do the necessary homework. It can be very rough out there. Anyhow. . .he saw into me, for as a white stranger in Africa, all the cultural props and masks are removed or are just plain see-through.

After a long and hard day it was such a pleasure to just sit and watch the world go by! The merchants could be just as agressive and work paced as many Americans are, but most of the people just went by. You just do not rush here, unless you want to burn out. People, people, flip-flopping by in their sandals. Across the street was the shop of a man who interested me; his job was to take a small knife and scrape the dust and muck off the toenails of his clients. Walking in the dust ingrains the colour onto toenails such that the best way to clean them is to scrape them. I would have liked to have mine done for that great feeling of "attention" as when you have your back scratched, but was afraid of dirty knives or perhaps because my toes were soft and white anyhow, in a country where feet are really tough and shod with horn and thick skin.

I would leave some food in the plate and give it to one of the children sitting nearby. They sat on the ground looking at me saying nothing. They had wide open, waiting eyes. There are some bridges that I can only look across, but never cross, unless my mother and father were Hausas.

Lompo's home was only few minutes walk from the eating place, down a side street. I do not remember it having streetlights, but the shops were open and passers by or talkers would congregate in the pool of light outside. At the entrance to a courtyard someone sat with his tray and small brazier, brewing up small batches of tea. Tea sellers are everywhere! Some serve it in enamel mugs, others very strong in shot glasses. Sometimes when I walked down the side streets the call to prayer would come from a loudspeaker, floating through the air and casting a haunting spell over the entire neighbourhood. About half an hour later it would all be over.

The courtyard where Lompo lived also housed many foreigners; it was almost a miniature quartier etranger. It was not really a courtyard--just an open piece of ground flanked on two sides by one room tenements and on the other two by walls. I rarely went in there

during the day, so the memories are of a dim courtyard with a few oil lamps here and there. Outside each room was a concrete slab porch; at times Lompo would be sitting there as if waiting for me, and then sometimes he would be inside. The room had no water or lights too, I think, and was curtained off for the three of them. In the other rooms were other expatriates, from Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso and other countries.

I am glad I never went into the public toilet by day. Even Lompo and the others thought it disgusting. Just a small room in one corner of the courtyard with a hole in the earth leading to some unknown pit; forget any idea of sewers. Cockroaches--big ones--scraped over the walls and ran away from the light. The courtyard became open and vast by contrast and looking up, the stars so bright and touchable. The stars! They are so clear; the Milky Way is real and silvered, not sometning you have to half imagine when you look for it in some parts of this country.

It was a strange yet wonderful friendship of sorts that we had. I was very motivated to learn basic Gourma from Lompo and he was keen to teach me. Of course, my motives for doing so were not the best and I should probably have paid more care to the Hausas and their language; however, I learned that half of learning a new language is raw interest and inner motivation. There was one challenge though. In Maradi the marketplace language is Hausa, so Lompo became my only Gourma contact. Considering the case he did a very good job, for when I returned to Fada n' Gourma I knew enough to carry on some basic marketplace conversation. The lessons were loosely structured--we would go over the words and phrases learned the previous sessions, try some new ones, then talk a bit in Gourma. I had a textbook of short passages that I read; much of it I did not understand at first, but it helped give me an ear for Gourma and after a while, understanding. For a while I read from a textbook a language I barely understood, a flowing and poetic language that sounded beautiful in that small dark courtyard under the stars. I read it with the enunciation of someone who was not a Gourma, as I did not know the nuances that mark off Gourma from an approximation of it. Only the experienced language students and those who grew up with the language can do that well. Yet it marked a beginning. I love that language. With a language comes a whole new way of looking at the world, the people who speak it, the land they inhabit and a better understanding of myself. Was that courtyard an oasis, where I was altered and changed? Surely it was, but I can only see this from the more distant pinnacle of 1987. Lompo was perhaps a little bit laid back in forcing me to study hard but after a time he kept after me: I suppose the inner motivation was quite enough.

We talked a lot in French about life, the famine, his work as a motorcycle mechanic's apprentice, my work and interests, as well as various aspects of Gourma culture. The converstaion really flowed easily; those times were an almost unrivalled experience and education in understanding culture--a different culture. As with Wombo, there were places I could never go, let alone fully understand. . . I am not