Normally, in describing the life cycle of ectoparasites for my notebook, I went into great detail, since I hoped to publish an article about the strangest ones when I returned home from Africa. The one exception was Dermatobia bendiense. I could not give it my name; I was not its victim. And the description? One word: Jerry. I needed nothing more to remind me of the discovery, and though I fully intend to test my findings in the pages of an entomological journal, the memory is still too horrifying for me to reduce it to science.

Jerry Benda and I shared a house on the compound of a bush school. Every Friday and Saturday night he met an African girl named Ameena at the Rainbow Bar and brought her home in a taxi. There was no scandal: no one knew. In the morning, after breakfast, Ameena did Jerry's ironing (I did my own) and the black cook carried her back to town on the crossbar of his old bike. That was a hilarious sight. Returning from my own particular passion, which was collecting insects in the fields near our house, I often met them on the road: Jika in his cook's khakis and skullcap pedaling the long-legged Ameena – I must say, she reminded me of a highly desirable insect. They yelped as they clattered down the road, the deep ruts making the bicycle bell hiccup like an alarm clock. A stranger would have assumed these Africans were man and wife, making an early-morning foray to the market. The local people paid no attention.

Only I knew that these were the cook and mistress of a young American who was regarded at the school as very charming in his manner and serious in his work. The cook's laughter was a nervous giggle – he was afraid of Ameena. But he was devoted to Jerry and far too loyal to refuse to do what Jerry asked of him.

Jerry was deceitful, but at the time I did not think he was imaginative enough to do any damage. And yet his was not the conventional double life that most white people led in Africa. Jerry had certain ambitions: ambition makes more liars than egotism does. But Jerry was so careful, his lies such modest calculations, he was always believed. He said he was from Boston. 'Belmont actually,' he told me, when I said I was from Medford. His passport – Bearer's address – said Watertown. He felt he had to conceal it. That explained a lot: the insecurity of living on the lower slopes of the long hill, between the smoldering steeples of Boston and the clean, high-priced air of Belmont. We are probably no more class conscious than the British, but when we make class an issue it seems more than snobbery. It becomes a bizarre spectacle, a kind of attention seeking, and I cannot hear an American speaking of his social position without thinking of a human fly, one of those tiny men in grubby capes whom one sometimes sees clinging to the brickwork of a tall building.

What had begun as fantasy had, after six months of his repeating it in our insignificant place, made it seem like fact. Jerry didn't know Africa: his one girl friend stood for the whole continent. And of course he lied to her. I had the impression that it was one of the reasons Jerry wanted to stay in Africa. If you tell enough lies about yourself, they take hold. It becomes impossible ever to go back, since that means facing the truth. In Africa, no one could dispute what Jerry said he was: a wealthy Bostonian, from a family of some distinction, adventuring in Third World philanthropy before inheriting his father's business.

Rereading the above, I think I may be misrepresenting him. Although he was undeniably a fraud in some ways, his fraudulence was the last thing you noticed about him. What you saw first was a tall good-natured person in his early twenties, confidently casual, with easy charm and a gift for ingenious flattery. When I told him I had majored in entomology he called me 'Doctor.' This later became 'Doc.' He showed exaggerated respect to the gardeners and washerwomen at the school, using the politest phrases when he spoke to them. He always said 'sir' to the students ('You, sir, are a lazy little creep'), which baffled them and won them over. The cook adored him, and even the cook's cook – who was lame and fourteen and ragged – liked Jerry to the point where the poor boy would go through the compound stealing flowers from the Inkpens' garden to decorate our table. While I was merely tolerated as an unattractive and near-sighted bug collector, Jerry was courted by the British wives in the compound. The wife of the new headmaster, Lady Alice (Sir Godfrey Inkpen had been knighted for his work in the Civil Service) usually stopped in to see Jerry when her husband was away. Jerry was gracious with her and anxious to make a good impression. Privately, he said, 'She's all tits and teeth.'

'Why is it,' he said to me one day, 'that the white women have all the money and the black ones have all the looks?'

'I didn't realize you were interested in money.'

'Not for itself, Doc,' he said. 'I'm interested in what it can buy.'

No matter how hard I tried, I could not get used to hearing Ameena's squawks of pleasure from the next room, or Jerry's elbows banging against the wall. At any moment, I expected their humpings and slappings to bring down the boxes of mounted butterflies I had hung there. At breakfast, Jerry was his urbane self, sitting at the head of the table while Ameena cackled.

He held a teapot in each hand. 'What will it be, my dear? Chinese or Indian tea? Marmalade or jam? Poached or scrambled? And may I suggest a kipper?'

'Wopusa!' Ameena would say. 'Idiot!'

She was lean, angular, and wore a scarf in a handsome turban on her head. ‘I’d marry that girl tomorrow,’ Jerry said, ‘if she had fifty grand.’ Her breasts were full and her skin was like velvet; she looked majestic, even doing the ironing. And when I saw her ironing, it struck me how Jerry inspired devotion in people.

But not any from me. I think I resented him most because he was new. I had been in Africa for two years and had replaced any ideas of sexual conquest with the possibility of a great entomological discovery. But he was not interested in my experience. There was a great deal I could have told him. In the meantime, I watched Jika taking Ameena into town on his bicycle, and I added specimens to my collection.

Then, one day, the Inkpens’ daughter arrived from Rhodesia to spend her school holidays with her parents.

We had seen her the day after she arrived, admiring the roses in her mother’s garden, which adjoined ours. She was about seventeen, and breathless and damp; and so small I at once imagined this pink butterfly struggling in my net. Her name was Petra (her parents called her ‘Pet’), and her pretty bloom was recklessness and innocence. Jerry said, ‘I’m going to marry her.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it,’ he said the next day. ‘If I just invite her I’ll look like a wolf. If I invite the three of them it’ll seem as if I’m stage-managing it. So I’ll invite the parents – for some inconvenient time – and they’ll have no choice but to ask me if they can bring the daughter along, too. They’ll ask me if they can bring her. Good thinking? It’ll have to be after dark – they’ll be afraid of someone raping her. Sunday’s always family day, so how about Sunday at seven? High tea. They will deliver her into my hands.’

The invitation was accepted. And Sir Godfrey said, ‘I hope you don’t mind if we bring our daughter –’

More than anything, I wished to see whether Jerry would bring Ameena home that Saturday night. He did – I suppose he did not want to arouse Ameena’s suspicions – and on Sunday morning it was breakfast as usual and ‘What will it be, my dear?’

But everything was not as usual. In the kitchen, Jika was making a cake and scones. The powerful fragrance of baking, so early on a Sunday morning, made Ameena curious. She sniffed and smiled and picked up her cup. Then she asked: What was the cook making?

‘Cakes,’ said Jerry. He smiled back at her.

Jika entered timidly with some toast.

‘You’re a better cook than I am,’ Ameena said in Chinyanja. ‘I don’t know how to make cakes.’

Jika looked terribly worried. He glanced at Jerry.

‘Have a cake,’ said Jerry to Ameena.

Ameena tipped the cup to her lips and said slyly, ‘Africans don’t eat cakes for breakfast.’

‘We do,’ said Jerry, with guilty rapidity. ‘It’s an old American custom.’

Ameena was staring at Jika. When she stood up he winced. Ameena said, ‘I have to make water.’ It was one of the few English sentences she knew.

Jerry said, ‘I think she suspects something.’

As I started to leave with my net and my chloroform bottle I heard a great fuss in the kitchen, Jerry telling Ameena not to do the ironing, Ameena protesting, Jika groaning. But Jerry was angry, and soon the bicycle was bumping away from the house: Jika pedaling, Ameena on the crossbar.

‘She just wanted to hang around,’ said Jerry. ‘Guess what the bitch was doing? She was ironing a drip-dry shirt!’

It was early evening when the Inkpens arrived, but night fell before tea was poured. Petra sat between her proud parents, saying what a super house we had, what a super school it was, how super it was to have a holiday here. Her monotonous ignorance made her even more desirable.

Perhaps for our benefit – to show her off – Sir Godfrey asked her leading questions. ‘Mother tells me you’ve taken up knitting’ and ‘Mother says you’ve become quite a whiz at math.’ Now he said, ‘I hear you’ve been doing some riding.’

‘Heaps, actually,’ said Petra. Her face was shining. ‘There are some stables near the school.’

Dances, exams, picnics, house parties: Petra gushed about her Rhodesian school. And in doing so she made it seem a distant place – not an African country at all, but a special preserve of superior English recreations.

‘That’s funny,’ I said. ‘Aren’t there Africans there?’

Jerry looked sharply at me.

‘Not at the school,’ said Petra. ‘There are some in town. The girls call them nig-nogs.’ She smiled. ‘But they’re quite sweet actually.’

‘The Africans, dear?’ asked Lady Alice.

‘The girls,’ said Petra.

Her father frowned.

Jerry said, ‘What do you think of this place?’

‘Honestly, I think it’s super.’

‘Too bad it’s so dark at the moment,’ said Jerry. ‘I’d like to show you my frangipani.’

‘Jerry’s famous for that frangipani,’ said Lady Alice.

Jerry had gone to the French windows to indicate the general direction of the bush. He gestured toward the darkness and said, ‘It’s somewhere over there.’

‘I see it,’ said Petra.

The white flowers and the twisted limbs of the frangipani were clearly visible in the headlights of an approaching car.

Sir Godfrey said, ‘I think you have a visitor.’

The Inkpens were staring at the taxi. I watched Jerry. He had turned pale, but kept his composure. ‘Ah, yes,’ he said, ‘it’s the sister of one of our pupils.’ He stepped outside to intercept her, but Ameena was too quick for him. She hurried past him, into the parlor where the Inkpens sat dumbfounded. Then Sir Godfrey, who had been surprised into silence, stood up and offered Ameena his chair.

Ameena gave a nervous grunt and faced Jerry. She wore the black satin cloak and sandals of a village Muslim. I had never seen her in anything but a tight dress and high heels; in that long cloak she looked like a very dangerous fly which had buzzed into the room on stiff wings.

‘How nice to see you,’ said Jerry. Every word was right, but his voice had become shrill. ‘I’d like you to meet –’

Ameena flapped the wings of her cloak in embarrassment and said, ‘I cannot stay. And

I am sorry for this visit.' She spoke in her own language. Her voice was calm and even apologetic.

'Perhaps she'd like to sit down,' said Sir Godfrey, who was still standing.

'I think she's fine,' said Jerry, backing away slightly.

Now I saw the look of horror on Petra's face. She glanced up and down, from the dark shawled head to the cracked feet, then gaped in bewilderment and fear.

At the kitchen door, Jika stood with his hands over his ears.

'Let's go outside,' said Jerry in Chinyanja.

'It is not necessary,' said Ameena. 'I have something for you. I can give it to you here.'

Jika ducked into the kitchen and shut the door.

'Here,' said Ameena. She fumbled with her cloak.

Jerry said quickly, 'No,' and turned as if to avert the thrust of a dagger.

But Ameena had taken a soft gift-wrapped parcel from the folds of her cloak. She handed it to Jerry and, without turning to us, flapped out of the room. She became invisible as soon as she stepped into the darkness. Before anyone could speak, the taxi was speeding away from the house.

Lady Alice said, 'How very odd.'

'Just a courtesy call,' said Jerry, and amazed me with a succession of plausible lies. 'Her brother's in Form Four – a very bright boy, as a matter of fact. She was rather pleased by how well he'd done in his exams. She stopped in to say thanks.'

'That's very African,' said Sir Godfrey.

'It's lovely when people drop in,' said Petra. 'It's really quite a compliment.'

Jerry was smiling weakly and eyeing the window, as if he expected Ameena to thunder in once again and split his head open. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he was congratulating himself that it had all gone so smoothly.

Lady Alice said, 'Well, aren't you going to open it?'

'Open what?' said Jerry, and then he realized that he was holding the parcel. 'You

mean this?'

'I wonder what it could be,' said Petra.

I prayed that it was nothing frightening. I had heard stories of jilted lovers sending aborted fetuses to the men who had wronged them.

'I adore opening parcels,' said Petra.

Jerry tore off the wrapping paper, but satisfied himself that it was nothing incriminating before he showed it to the Inkpens.

'Is it a shirt?' said Lady Alice.

'It's a beauty,' said Sir Godfrey.

It was red and yellow and green, with embroidery at the collar and cuffs; an African design. Jerry said, 'I should give it back. It's a sort of bribe, isn't it?'

'Absolutely not,' said Sir Godfrey. 'I insist you keep it.'

'Put it on!' said Petra.

Jerry shook his head. Lady Alice said, 'Oh, do!'

'Some other time,' said Jerry. He tossed the shirt aside and told a long humorous story of his sister's wedding reception on the family yacht. And before the Inkpens left he asked Sir Godfrey with old-fashioned formality if he might be allowed to take Petra on a day trip to the local tea estate.

'You're welcome to use my car if you like,' said Sir Godfrey.

It was only after the Inkpens had gone that Jerry began to tremble. He tottered to a chair, lit a cigarette, and said, 'That was the worst hour of my life. Did you see her? Jesus! I thought that was the end. But what did I tell you? She suspected something!'

'Not necessarily,' I said.

He kicked the shirt – I noticed he was hesitant to touch it – and said, 'What's this all about then?'

'As you told Inky – it's a present.'

'She's a witch,' said Jerry. 'She's up to something.'

‘You’re crazy,’ I said. ‘What’s more, you’re unfair. You kicked her out of the house. She came back to ingratiate herself by giving you a present – a new shirt for all the ones she didn’t have a chance to iron. But she saw our neighbors. I don’t think she’ll be back.’

‘What amazes me,’ said Jerry, ‘is your presumption. I’ve been sleeping with Ameena for six months, while you’ve been playing with yourself. And here you are trying to tell me about her! You’re incredible.’

Jerry had the worst weakness of the liar: he never believed anything you told him.

I said, ‘What are you going to do with the shirt?’

Clearly this had been worrying him. But he said nothing.

Late that night, working with my specimens, I smelled acrid smoke. I went to the window. The incinerator was alight; Jika was coughing and stirring the flames with a stick.

The next Saturday, Jerry took Petra to the tea estate in Sir Godfrey’s gray Humber. I spent the day with my net, rather resenting the thought that Jerry had all the luck. First Ameena, now Petra. And he had ditched Ameena. There seemed no end to his arrogance or – what was more annoying – his luck. He came back to the house alone. I vowed that I would not give him a chance to do any sexual boasting. I stayed in my room, but less than ten minutes after he arrived home he was knocking on my door.

‘I’m busy,’ I yelled.

‘Doc, this is serious.’

He entered rather breathless, fever-white and apologetic. This was not someone who had just made a sexual conquest – I knew as soon as I saw him that it had all gone wrong. So I said, ‘How does she bump?’

He shook his head. He looked very pale. He said, ‘I couldn’t.’

‘So she turned you down.’ I could not hide my satisfaction.

‘She was screaming for it,’ he said, rather primly. ‘She’s seventeen, Doc. She’s locked in a girls’ school half the year. She even found a convenient haystack. But I had to say no. In fact, I couldn’t get away from her fast enough.’

‘Something is wrong,’ I said. ‘Do you feel all right?’

He ignored the question. ‘Doc,’ he said, ‘remember when Ameena barged in. Just think hard. Did she touch me? Listen, this is important.’

I told him I could not honestly remember whether she had touched him. The incident was so pathetic and embarrassing I had tried to blot it out.

‘I knew something like this was going to happen. But I don’t understand it.’ He was talking quickly and unbuttoning his shirt. Then he took it off. ‘Look at this. Have you ever seen anything like it?’

At first I thought his body was covered by welts. But what I had taken to be welts were a mass of tiny reddened patches, like fly bites, some already swollen into bumps. Most of them – and by far the worst – were on his back and shoulders. They were as ugly as acne and had given his skin that same shine of infection.

‘It’s interesting,’ I said.

‘Interesting!’ he screamed. ‘It looks like syphilis and all you can say is it’s interesting. Thanks a lot.’

‘Does it hurt?’

‘Not too much,’ he said. ‘I noticed it this morning before I went out. But I think they’ve gotten worse. That’s why nothing happened with Petra. I was too scared to take my shirt off.’

‘I’m sure she wouldn’t have minded if you’d kept it on.’

‘I couldn’t risk it,’ he said. ‘What if it’s contagious?’

He put calamine lotion on it and covered it carefully with gauze, and the next day it was worse. Each small bite had swelled to a pimple, and some of them seemed on the point of erupting: a mass of small warty boils. That was on Sunday. On Monday I told Sir Godfrey that Jerry had a bad cold and could not teach. When I got back to the house that afternoon, Jerry said that it was so painful he couldn’t lie down. He had spent the afternoon sitting bolt upright in a chair.

‘It was that shirt,’ he said. ‘Ameena’s shirt. She did something to it.’

I said, ‘You’re lying. Jika burned that shirt – remember?’

‘She touched me,’ he said. ‘Doc, maybe it’s not a curse – I’m not superstitious anyway. Maybe she gave me syph.’

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘What do you mean by that!’

‘I mean, there’s a cure for syphilis.’

‘Suppose it’s not that?’

‘We’re in Africa,’ I said.

This terrified him, as I knew it would.

He said, ‘Look at my back and tell me if it looks as bad as it feels.’

He crouched under the lamp. His back was grotesquely inflamed. The eruptions had become like nipples, much bigger and with a bruised discoloration. I pressed one. He cried out. Watery liquid leaked from a pustule.

‘That hurt!’ he said.

‘Wait.’ I saw more infection inside the burst boil – a white clotted mass. I told him to grit his teeth. ‘I’m going to squeeze this one.’

I pressed it between my thumbs and as I did a small white knob protruded. It was not pus – not liquid. I kept on pressing and Jerry yelled with shrill ferocity until I was done. Then I showed him what I had squeezed from his back; it was on the tip of my tweezers – a live maggot.

‘It’s a worm!’

‘A larva.’

‘You know about these things. You’ve seen this before, haven’t you?’

I told him the truth. I had never seen one like it before in my life. It was not in any textbook I had ever seen. And I told him more: there were, I said, perhaps two hundred of them, just like the one wriggling on my tweezers, in those boils on his body.

Jerry began to cry.

That night I heard him writhing in his bed, and groaning, and if I had not known better I would have thought Ameena was with him. He turned and jerked and thumped like a

lover maddened by desire; and he whimpered, too, seeming to savor the kind of pain that is indistinguishable from sexual pleasure. But it was no more passion than the movement of those maggots in his flesh. In the morning, gray with sleeplessness, he said he felt like a corpse. Truly, he looked as if he was being eaten alive.

An illness you read about is never as bad as the real thing. Boy Scouts are told to suck the poison out of snakebites. But a snakebite – swollen and black and running like a leper's sore – is so horrible I can't imagine anyone capable of staring at it, much less putting his mouth on it. It was that way with Jerry's boils. All the textbooks on earth could not have prepared me for their ugliness, and what made them even more repellent was the fact that his face and hands were free of them. He was infected from his neck to his waist, and down his arms; his face was haggard, and in marked contrast to his sores.

I said, 'We'll have to get you to a doctor.'

'A witch doctor.'

'You're serious!'

He gasped and said, 'I'm dying, Doc. You have to help me.'

'We can borrow Sir Godfrey's car. We could be in Blantyre by midnight.'

Jerry said, 'I can't last until midnight.'

'Take it easy,' I said. 'I have to go over to the school. I'll say you're still sick. I don't have any classes this afternoon, so when I get back I'll see if I can do anything for you.'

'There are witch doctors around here,' he said. 'You can find one – they know what to do. It's a curse.'

I watched his expression change as I said, 'Maybe it's the curse of the white worm.' He deserved to suffer, after what he had done, but his face was so twisted in fear, I added, 'There's only one thing to do. Get those maggots out. It might work.'

'Why did I come to this fucking place!'

But he shut his eyes and was silent: he knew why he had left home.

When I returned from the school ('And how is our ailing friend?' Sir Godfrey had asked at morning assembly), the house seemed empty. I had a moment of panic, thinking that Jerry – unable to stand the pain – had taken an overdose. I ran into the bedroom.

He lay asleep on his side, but woke when I shook him.

‘Where’s Jika?’ I said.

‘I gave him the week off,’ said Jerry. ‘I didn’t want him to see me. What are you doing?’

I had set out a spirit lamp and my surgical tools: tweezers, a scalpel, cotton, alcohol, bandages. He grew afraid when I shut the door and shone the lamp on him.

‘I don’t want you to do it,’ he said. ‘You don’t know anything about this. You said you’d never seen this thing before.’

I said, ‘Do you want to die?’

He sobbed and lay flat on the bed. I bent over him to begin. The maggots had grown larger, some had broken the skin, and their ugly heads stuck out like beads. I lanced the worst boil, between his shoulder blades. Jerry cried out and arched his back, but I kept digging and prodding, and I found that heat made it simpler. If I held my cigarette lighter near the wound the maggot wriggled, and by degrees, I eased it out. The danger lay in their breaking: if I pulled too hard some would be left in the boil to decay, and that I said would kill him.

By the end of the afternoon I had removed only twenty or so, and Jerry had fainted from the pain. He woke at nightfall. He looked at the saucer beside the bed and saw the maggots jerking in it – they had worked themselves into a white knot – and he screamed. I had to hold him until he calmed down. And then I continued.

I kept at it until very late. And I must admit that it gave me a certain pleasure. It was not only that Jerry deserved to suffer for his deceit – and his suffering was that of a condemned man; but also what I told him had been true: this was a startling discovery for me, as an entomologist. I had never seen such creatures before.

It was after midnight when I stopped. My hand ached, my eyes hurt from the glare, and I was sick to my stomach. Jerry had gone to sleep. I switched off the light and left him to his nightmares.

He was slightly better by morning. He was still pale, and the opened boils were crusted with blood, but he had more life in him than I had seen for days. And yet he was brutally scarred. I think he knew this: he looked as if he had been whipped.

‘You saved my life,’ he said.

‘Give it a few days,’ I said.

He smiled. I knew what he was thinking. Like all liars – those people who behave like human flies on our towering credulity – he was preparing his explanation. But this would be a final reply: he was preparing his escape.

‘I’m leaving,’ he said. ‘I’ve got some money – and there’s a night bus –’ He stopped speaking and looked at my desk. ‘What’s that?’

It was the dish of maggots, now as full as a rice pudding.

‘Get rid of them!’

‘I want to study them,’ I said. ‘I think I’ve earned the right to do that. But I’m off to morning assembly – what shall I tell Inky?’

‘Tell him I might have this cold for a long time.’

He was gone when I got back to the house; his room had been emptied, and he’d left me his books and his tennis racket with a note. I made what explanations I could. I told the truth: I had no idea where he had gone. A week later, Petra went back to Rhodesia, but she told me she would be back. As we chatted over the fence I heard Jerry’s voice: She’s screaming for it. I said, ‘We’ll go horseback riding.’

‘Super!’

The curse of the white worm: Jerry had believed me. But it was the curse of impatience – he had been impatient to get rid of Ameena, impatient for Petra, impatient to put on a shirt that had not been ironed. What a pity it was that he was not around when the maggots hatched, to see them become flies I had never seen. He might have admired the way I expertly pickled some and sealed others in plastic and mounted twenty of them on a tray.

And what flies they were! It was a species that was not in any book, and yet the surprising thing was that in spite of their differently shaped wings (like a Muslim woman’s cloak) and the shape of their bodies (a slight pinch above the thorax, giving them rather attractive waists), their life cycle was the same as many others of their kind: they laid their eggs on laundry and these larvae hatched at body heat and burrowed into the skin to mature. Of course, laundry was always ironed – even drip-dry shirts – to kill them. Everyone who knew Africa knew that.