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JUNGLE BELLS

On Christmas eve, 1964, I was just about to leave a run-down bar in Lusaka, Zambia, when I offered two bottles of Lion Lager to an African couple I had just met. The Christmas decorations on the walls were tattered – strings of frayed tinsel, dusty cotton snow, a cardboard sleigh covered with fly-specks. Posters from the brewery showed African women posing in Santa hats. They mocked the season and were the opposite of festive. But so what? I had come to Africa, partly as an act of rebellion. I was receptive to the sort of unintentional satire I saw in this bar. It strengthened me; it was an undiscovered world, something else to write about.

‘Merry Christmas,’ I said. ‘And that one’s for your wife.’

‘Happy Christmas. She is not my wife,’ the man said.

The young woman looked frankly at me. A red turban was wound tightly around her head, and its color matched her tight red dress.

‘She is my sister,’ the man said. ‘And she likes you.’

‘I like you too much,’ the young woman said, meaning very much. ‘Happy Christmas.’

She touched her turban and smiled, and toasted me, drinking from the bottle I had just bought her.

None of this was ambiguous to me. I had been living in Africa for a year and I was used to the way, at any moment, anything could happen. It suited my curiosity and my impatient temperament. I was twenty-three, and game for almost anything. I was very skinny and looked harmless – even a bit foolish. My traveling method then was: Arrive and hope for the best; make the fewest possible plans; take the plunge; rely on the kindness of strangers; just say yes. So far it had worked.

A week before this, I had flown from southern Malawi (formerly Nyasaland), where I was a Peace Corps schoolteacher, to Salisbury (now Harare) in Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), intending to travel to Zambia (formerly Northern Rhodesia). From black country to white country to black country and back. These were times of transition and racial uneasiness.

White Rhodesians confided in me: ‘Don’t stay at the Jameson. They’re taking Africans there now.’ In Bulawayo I fell in with an English plumber who was living in South

Africa. He gorged on french fries, got roaring drunk, then collapsed, and when he woke up he vomited hugely. He said he usually spent Christmas doing that. ‘So, how about it, mate. Let’s go back to that poxy chip shop.’

I did not think I would. Christmas was still a few days off. I took a train to Victoria Falls and onward to Lusaka. On the Rhodesian section the whites were drunk, singing their hearts out, and the Africans (all in Second Class) very silent. When the train crossed from white Rhodesia into black Zambia, at Livingstone, the Africans from Second Class entered the bar coach and they quickly became drunk and abusive. ‘Happy Christmas! You!’ they would say to the whites. ‘Buy me a Christmas present!’ Bottles of beer went back and forth.

We arrived in Lusaka at about noon on Christmas Eve, and that was how I happened to be speaking to the African couple, the brother and sister.

In this African bar, with a dirt floor that stank of dampness and cat piss, some of the people held old rinsed-out oil cans on their knees, which they raised from time to time, to drink African beer. Sour and thick, the consistency of porridge, it was plopped from a plastic bucket into the cans. The rest of us drank warm bottled beer. There was nagging music and smoke and shouting, and occasionally the squalling of babies, because the women wore their children on their backs, slung like papooses. Every so often a fight would start, but before they became dangerous the men went outside, and fought there. Even then, Zambia was well known for its beer-party stabbings.

Around midnight, the brother said, ‘Happy Christmas. My sister wants you to come with us.’

‘Happy Christmas,’ I said, drunkenly, and shortly afterwards we were in the back seat of an old car bumping on a back road. It seemed a long ride and when we arrived, and I was swaying, blinded by the headlights, the brother said, ‘Happy Christmas. You give him money.’

I gave some money to the taxi driver and when he was gone we were in darkness. They led me to their hut. The sister took my hand. And then I was lying on a damp mattress, by candlelight, and thinking: There are other people in this room. I heard them but I could not see them.

The following morning I saw who they were, small children – three or four of them – tangled in blankets on the floor, and snoring in a heap like kittens in a basket.

‘Happy Christmas,’ the sister said. She was squirming into her red dress. She was slim, she had a brown scowling face, she never went out without a turban that matched her dress.

It was then that she told me her name – Nina; and her brother was George. I slowly put together the chronology of events that had led me here to this African hut on Christmas morning. I felt ill, I was hung over, unshaven, and my tongue felt like a dead mouse. I had been wearing a tan suit that was now rumpled, and a shirt that had wilted. I dressed, yawned, and said, 'I have to get back to town.'

George put his head into the room. He looked fairly dapper, in a suit. He had brown flecks on the whites of his eyes. 'Happy Christmas. We have breakfast.'

They took me down the dusty village road to a ramshackle building. It was about nine in the morning, a day that was already hot; radios playing plonking Christmas music, children shouting. I had no idea where this village was, except that it was some distance from Lusaka.

'Happy Christmas,' George said in the bar, signaling and muttering to the bartender. The bar, much seedier than the one of the night before, stank of kerosene. In Africa kerosene always meant no electricity and breathing the fumes gave me a headache.

'What do they have to eat here?'

But the ragged barman had already begun to open three bottles of warm Lion Lager.

'I don't want beer,' I said. 'I'd like something to eat.'

'Christmas!' George said fiercely and thumped a bottle against my chest until I grasped it. Nina was swigging hers, as though to show me how.

The bartender asked for money. When I hesitated, George said, 'Christmas!' and I paid.

I sipped the beer, I bought a pickled egg from a cloudy bottle of them that looked like a museum exhibit, and ate it. Long before I had finished my beer, George was ready for another, and so was Nina. I bought them, I sipped, I felt very ill.

'Where's the chimbudzi?'

'Come with me,' George said.

It was a roofless shed behind the tin-roofed building, upright planks and poles enclosing a shallow hole that was furious with struggling maggots. George was waiting when I left it, retching.

Back in the bar, he introduced me to various Africans. 'My brother … Also my brother … My sister – same mother, same father,' and he called to the barman to serve us.

Now, when he opened his mouth to say, ‘Christmas,’ I hated his grin and the spittle on his teeth. And his brown-flecked eyes seemed sinister. But I paid.

Nina sat beside me, as though we had overnight become a couple and had an understanding. Several hours passed in this way. George demanded that the radio be turned louder. He recognized the melody, and he sang,

Jungle bells,

Jungle bells,

Jungle all the way …

‘Sing,’ he said to me. He made a tyrannous insisting face.

I was too weak to do anything but listen. And I began to feel ill again. When I got up, Nina said, as though to a small child, ‘Where are you going?’

‘Outside,’ I said.

‘George,’ she said, nodding at her brother.

And then George was by my side.

‘To the chimbudzi.’

‘I go with you.’

‘I don’t need you,’ I said, and walked outside.

He scowled at me and poked my chest with his finger the way he had with the beer bottle. ‘If I no come with you, you run away.’

I said, ‘I have to go back to Lusaka.’

‘No. You stay.’

Sometimes in Africa, faced by Africans, I felt very pale, very skinny, very weak, and almost incoherent. This was one of those times.

George was drunk. I had made him drunk. I tried to calm him, but he was already suspicious and irritable and hovered around me like a jailer. When we got back inside the bar, the others demanded more beer, and I paid, and I again tried to think how I might get away from them. I especially wanted to leave when a group of Africans near

us began making remarks about the mzungu – I was the only white man in the bar – and Nina infuriated them by answering back.

By late afternoon, I had begun to drink again and became less alarmed; then I was as drunk as everyone else and we went back to the hut, where I fell asleep on the mattress that lay on the dirt floor.

I woke in darkness, and I wondered whether it was still Christmas. I remembered: Jungle bells. I contemplated sneaking away, but I had no idea of the way to Lusaka, and I was further worried by the barking dogs I heard. In African villages, dogs are mainly dangerous to white people. I imagined my hotel room in Lusaka, my bag where I had left it two days ago, the bed I had not slept in.

In the morning, I looked at the children on the floor of the hut, damp and sighing in a little heap, and was silently grateful to them for being there. As long as they slept there Nina would keep her distance. My financial entanglement was bad enough; so far, thanks to the sleeping children, I had avoided a sexual entanglement.

Two of them were Nina's children. So she was married?

'Yes. To you,' she said, with a horrible greedy face, patting her turban.

That made my heart sink. I said, 'I'm leaving.'

'No,' Nina said. 'It's Boxing Day.'

It was the first time in my life I had ever heard that unusual pairing of words. I did not have the slightest idea of what they meant. I put on my clothes again – the same clothes: grubby suit pants, stained jacket, clammy shirt.

George was waiting for us outside the hut.

'We go,' he said. His smile meant: You do what I tell you to do.' He poked my lapel with his yellow fingernail. 'Boxing Day.'

At the bar down the road I bought two pickled eggs and beer for the three of us, and I smiled, and we clinked bottles, and we toasted Happy Boxing Day, and I thought: Get out of here.

The others showed up, the four from yesterday, a few more. I bought them all beer, and I reflected that there was no conversation. They drank, they mumbled the words of the songs from the transistor radio playing loud on the bar, they did not speak to each other. They drank, they scowled, they grunted; their faces seemed to thicken with incomprehension and obscure anger.

They clamored for more beer, provoked by George, and no one noticed that I had not drunk any of my beer. Yesterday a couple of them had bought a round of beer. Today, it was all mine. They drank, I paid; they drank again, I paid again. The cranky men came back. They made remarks, Nina scoffed at them, they replied; she shouted back, defending me, abusing them. A man stood up and yelled directly at her. That made me very nervous.

Soon, there was more shouting, some of it mirthful, and the group of Africans I sat with had ceased to notice me, except when they wanted more beer. It was about two in the afternoon of a very hot day and I felt a rising sense of panic.

‘I’ll be right back,’ I said.

‘George,’ Nina said.

I did not protest. I laughed. I said, ‘I don’t need George to show me the chimbudzi.’

‘He will not come back,’ Nina said, and I realized how shrewd she was in her witchlike way.

‘Of course I will,’ I said. I took off my suit jacket and folded it on the bar. ‘Here’s my jacket, here’s some money. Buy me a beer, get some for yourselves, and hand over that jacket when I get back.’

Before they could reply, I walked away, left the bar. I did not hurry. The sun was overhead, the trees so thin there was no shade, the soil was pale dust. I glanced back; no one had followed me.

It was then that I ran, in a desperate flight, realizing that I had very little time. I made it to the edge of the village. Some children playing on the road looked up, startled.

The village road intersected with another road. I was gasping, still jogging along. A car approached. I waved to it.

‘Taxi?’

‘As you like,’ the driver said.

‘Lusaka,’ I said, and got in. I rode, continually turning back, to see whether we were being followed.

At the hotel I asked the driver to wait. I retrieved my bag and paid my bill and got back into the car.

‘Let’s go,’ I said.

‘Where?’

‘Just drive – there,’ I said, and pointed to a road.

‘That’s south, to Kafue.’

‘How many miles?’

‘Maybe twenty.’

‘Take me to Kafue.’

There was a motel at Kafue, by the side of the road. I stayed there and though there was little nighttime traffic, each time my room was raked by the yellow glare of headlights I grew worried, and trembled with a fugitive’s fear, feeling that they had come for me.

The next day, after I hitch-hiked out of the country, back to Rhodesia, my fear eased, and later all I remembered were the children, and wondered what became of them – the sleepers who had protected me, and the surprised ones who had seen me running. It was an uncommon, even remarkable, sight in Central Africa, in 1964, a white man running in the bush.