Erroll Jeeps was a great talker and lively company; but his jokes could be savage. It was he who first told me the story about the truck with the load of bowling balls that overturns on the expressway outside Chicago. The police arrive and see a Polish workman slamming the bowling balls with a hammer and breaking them into pieces. They ask him what he's doing and he says, 'I'm trying to kill some of these niggers before they hatch!'

He told these stories with the best of humor, but I could not repeat them without feeling guilty and bigoted. In any case, I saw a lot of Jeeps. Every day after lunch, which was usually a cheese sandwich in the Embassy cafeteria with him, I went for a walk in Hyde Park. They were long walks, but I timed them: I could quick-march down Rotten Row or around the Serpentine and be back at my desk in under an hour. When Jeeps came along, I took longer – I could justify it. Wasn't this part of my job?

He said that because he was black, he was treated as if he had an affliction. He had been at the London Embassy for three years and knew everyone. Some people behaved toward him as if he were an invalid – they were solicitous; others acted as if he had something contagious.

'Then there's people who think they understand me because they just spent four years in Mozambique!' He deliberately mispronounced the name. 'Mozam-bee-que,' he said. It rhymed with 'barbeque.'

'You've got high visibility, Erroll,' I said.

'There's all kinds of names for it,' he said. 'I used to be colored, right? Then I was a Negro. And then I turned into an Afro-American. After that, I was just a member of a Minority Group. Now, I'm black. Listen, when I joined the Foreign Service everyone figured I'd put in for Africa – that's where blacks are supposed to go – like people with names like Scaduto angle for the Rome embassy.'

'My first overseas post was Kampala,' I said.

'Better you than me. They've got tails there. I asked for New Zealand. I did my graduate work in economics – the effects on the labor force in depressed capital-intensive economies. New Zealand's a good model – it's going broke. I figured I could get some research done. Instead, I was posted here. England's a good model, too. Three million unemployed, galloping inflation – hey, this place is mummified!'

It was March, but spring comes early to London. The daffodils looked like flocks of slender-necked ducks in pale poke-bonnets, and the crocuses, bright as candy, dappled the ground purple and white. The sky was clear – bluer than any in Malaysia. Girls in riding coats and black velvet hats trotted along the bridleway.

Hyde Park is a series of meadows, big enough so that the habitual park-users – dog-owners, kite-fliers, lovers, and tramps – have plenty of room. They need it. There was heavy traffic in Kensington Road; I mentioned to Jeeps that in three weeks I had yet to hear anyone blow his horn here.

'They know it's no use,' he said. 'Look at all those cars. It's worse than Chicago. And the price of gas! Those people are paying almost four bucks a gallon to sit there in that jam. Hey, life can be kind of abrasive here. I wouldn't stay, except that from an economist's point of view this is the front lines. This is where all the casualties are.'

'You'd hardly know it here. It's very peaceful.'

'People have been mugged in Hyde Park,' Jeeps said. He spoke with satisfaction and now he had a spring in his step.

We had walked along the margin of the park. Jeeps had pointed out the Iranian Embassy at Princes Gate, where the siege had taken place; he had shown me the scorch marks on the windows. We walked farther. At the Albert Memorial he stopped. He smiled at me.

'Hey, some people have had even worse experiences.'

'Killed?'

'Maimed for life,' he said.

He was still smiling.

'That's hilarious,' I said. But my sarcasm had no effect on him.

'I'm thinking of a particular case,' he said, and went on chuckling. Then he turned to the Albert Memorial; the exaggerated grief in the monument, and all that expensive sculpture, only cheapened it and made it more pompous. I looked at it – it was frantic gazebo – and thought of money.

Jeeps was saying, 'England is a terrible place for Anglophiles. This post attracts snobs, you know. They end up so disappointed.'

I said, ‘I’ve never known a snob who wasn’t also a liar.’

‘Right,’ he said. ‘Baldwick was a liar.’

‘Baldwick – is that a name?’

‘Baldwick is only a name. He was CAO before Vic Scaduto took over. It was the only interesting thing about him – his name. He was really proud of it. It was an old English name, he said, one of the great English families, the Baldwicks of Somewhere – he wasn’t sure where. He was about forty-five or so; he’d been posted around the world. He kept asking for London and getting a negative. Like these people who want Africa so they can find their roots – he wanted to find his roots in England. Someone – was it his grandfather? – anyway, someone had told him there was a family estate, a castle, property, shields, suits of armor, all the rest of it. The Baldwicks were in the Domesday Book, the old man said, only where do you find the Domesday Book? Certainly not in Dacca, which was Baldwick’s first post. Not in La Paz, not in Addis, not in Khartoum – his other posts. All he found were telephone books.

‘That was it, see? Wherever he went, even if it was Baltimore, he picked up the telephone book and looked for his name. It’s probably not so strange. I’ve done it myself. But the world is full of people called Jeeps – although you might not think so – and it is not exactly crawling with Baldwicks. He never found one! He found Baldwins and Baldicks and even Baldwigs – I love that one – but he couldn’t find Baldwick. Was he discouraged? No, sir – it made him real proud, because this meant he was the only claimant to the family fortune.

‘And it also made him a little obsessive. He wanted to find another Baldwick, but he didn’t want to hear that there were a million of them running around the place. He kept looking in telephone books wherever he was posted. No luck – but he had hopes. After all, the Baldwicks were supposed to be in England. By this time he had worked himself up to public affairs officer. It was a pretty glorious job for a guy who wasn’t very bright and whose field was visual aids. But that’s what happens when you go to Dacca and Khartoum.

‘He was finally posted to London. In order to swing it, he took a cut in salary and agreed to be demoted to CAO. Was he eager, or what? They say his wife threatened to leave him, but this was what he had always wanted. At last, a chance to climb the family tree! His wife never forgave him. She was the one who told me this story. She was really bitter – she didn’t leave anything out.

‘The first thing Baldwick did in London was get a telephone book. He looked up his name, and bingo! He found one – only one, so that was perfect. It was a John Baldwick, living in some armpit in East London. But then, having found the name, he really didn’t know what to do. Should he tell him he was a long-lost relative? The man might not

believe him. And what if the family fortune was in dispute? What if the will was being probated? He figured they might make it tough for him – cut him out of it altogether. And the last thing he wanted to do was reveal that he – one of the noble Baldwicks – was doing a fairly humdrum job at the American Embassy.

‘He knew he had to get his act together. He decided to pose as a tourist. He would say that he was just passing through and that, seeing as how this fellow and he had the same unusual name, would he be interested in meeting for a drink? Completely innocent, see? Very casual.

‘He phoned the number and got no answer. He kept trying. One day he got a funny noise – not a busy signal, but something that sounded like a bumblebee. He phoned the operator and was told that the line had been disconnected.

‘A few weeks went by. He considered writing a letter. Do tourists passing through London write letters to people in London? Baldwick didn’t think so. He stuck to the casual approach. He called again. It rang this time. It was the other Baldwick! The guy had a funny accent – probably upper class, he thought. I mean, upper-class accents are really strange, hardly English at all, German or “mew-mew” or a bad case of adenoids. Half these so-called aristocrats sound like they have sinus trouble.

‘Baldwick barely understood his namesake. This pleased him – the guy was genuine! He did his routine. Just passing through. Same name. Wonder if you’d care for a drink? The guy was a little leery – wouldn’t you be? – but it worked. They agreed to meet. Now, here’s the interesting part. Being new to London, Baldwick didn’t know where to meet him. The man didn’t invite him to his house – English people never do until they’ve known you about ten years. So our Baldwick says, “Let’s meet in Piccadilly Circus.”

‘Would a New Yorker say, “I’ll meet you in Times Square”? You know he wouldn’t, but Baldwick had every hope of actually finding this guy in Piccadilly Circus in the middle of June. “By the fountain,” he said. “Six o’clock.”

‘Naturally, it didn’t work. There were hundreds of people there. Baldwick paced up and down for an hour and then went home. Later, he called the guy. “Why weren’t you there?” he says. The other man swore he had been there, but how could he find him with a thousand people milling around?

“‘What about a quieter place?” our Baldwick says. “What about a pub?” The other guy says okay and the place they fixed on was the Bunch of Grapes in Knightsbridge. Baldwick said he was staying at a hotel nearby. Actually he had an apartment near there, in Egerton Gardens, but he didn’t want the guy to know.

‘The night they agreed to meet, there was something doing here in Hyde Park – one of

those free-for-all races. And the Bunch of Grapes, which usually wasn't very busy, was packed with people. And yet Baldwick had arrived early. He sat by the main door in the saloon bar and watched every person come in. Every single one. He stared at each one, but no one came up to him and said, "Mr Baldwick – my name is Baldwick, too!" He sat there until closing time. He got pretty drunk, because by now he figured the other guy had his number – suspected him of trying to horn in on the family fortune. Here's this lousy American claiming to be a member of this great English family – castle, swords, paintings, suits of armor, et cetera. Before he left the Grapes he looked into the public bar, stared in each man's face. No takers. He went home.

'The next day he called the guy again. The guy was furious and so was he. Each accused the other of having let him down; each one said it was a pretty rotten trick, a waste of time, and what did he think he was trying to pull? They argued for a while, and then it came out. Our Baldwick said he had been in the saloon bar, the other guy had spent the whole evening in the public bar. "I always use the public bar," the guy says.

'Our Baldwick didn't know the difference. If he had, he might have left it there. He might have hung up and stopped looking for his long-lost relatives. He might have just quietly sized the whole thing up and stopped chasing around for his namesake. I'll tell you one thing – if he had stopped looking then, he would have died a happy man. Not fulfilled, but happy. Aren't people better off with an illusion? The truth is pretty awful sometimes, and illusions can make a nice pillow.

'Baldwick told him he had looked into the public bar, but he admitted that by then he had been in a hurry. The other guy started arguing again. Our Baldwick said he had to leave London in a few days and that he would probably never be back. It was now or never. "And I've got a little present for you." He had to say that. Things were getting a little spooky.

'The other Baldwick cheered up. But still he did not offer our man an invitation to drop in for tea. Somehow, this made our man imagine an even greater house, an even grander estate, even shinier armor, and a fat legacy. He says, "Do you know the Albert Memorial?"

'The other guy says, "No." No!

'Our Baldwick still isn't suspicious. "It's near the Albert Hall," he says. "Across the street."

"'Oh, I went to a boxing match there once," the guy says. They actually have boxing matches in that beautiful building. It's a kind of bullring! Incongruous, isn't it? But listen, here is our man, Baldwick, explaining to the Londoner where the Albert Memorial is, and if that's not incongruous I don't know what is.

“‘I’ll meet you on the top platform of the Albert Memorial at exactly two o’clock tomorrow,” our man says. “We’ll be the only people there. It’s foolproof. And then I can give you the present I mentioned.”

‘It was right here,’ Jeeps said.

We were on the steps of the Albert Memorial – he had walked as he told the story – and now it was just before two o’clock. I wondered whether Jeeps had planned all this – rehearsed the story, dramatized it for my benefit, so that it was the right place and time. We were alone at the monument. The traffic flowed toward Kensington Gore and streamed through the park.

Jeeps said, ‘Baldwick came from down there,’ and pointed past the Albert Hall. ‘He walked to one of those archways and waited until about one minute to two. At exactly two, he saw a guy running across the road, dodging cars, coming lickety-split. Up the walkway, up all these steps, to here –’

Jeeps had been walking up the stairs. He stopped; he stood still; he squinted at the path.

I said, ‘Then what happened?’

‘Our Baldwick almost cried. He stayed right where he was, over there at the Albert Hall. I mentioned that he was a snob. He was a roaring snob. The kind you want to punch in the face. But now all his dreams about his old family and his name –’

‘Was the other guy wearing old clothes?’

‘No, he was fairly well dressed – even carried an umbrella.’ Jeeps had an umbrella. He tucked it under his arm and went on squinting. ‘He was completely respectable. So that wasn’t the matter. That wasn’t why our Baldwick turned away and hid behind a pillar and went home to his wife.’

‘He went home?’ I said. ‘He didn’t talk to this guy, after all that trouble?’

‘Nope.’

‘I don’t understand why, Erroll. They could have been related!’

‘Look. Stand down there a little, and look.’

I moved down the stairs and did so.

‘What our Baldwick saw, you see now. The other guy was right here, at just this time of day. Get it?’

‘His namesake was where you are now,’ I said.

‘Right. But that’s all they had in common, that funny name. The rest was what you see. Look! If your name was Jeeps would you think you were related to me?’

He began laughing very hard in a mocking way, as if jeering at me for not having guessed sooner about Baldwick’s namesake. His laughter was humorless. It was merely a harsh noise, challenging me to look at his black face.