

BILL DIREEN

L

**A STORY
OF THREE PLACES**

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The streets of Ighis are quiet, but Tone is on his guard. There have been some attacks ... some disappearances. He crosses the park, reaches Lee-Lee's block, climbs six flights of stairs, and enters with his own key. The funplace atmosphere is still in Tone's wiry hair, as if he has brought a crowd of the unwashed and grainjuiced with him, until their embraces override all.

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They are breakfasting on toast and Terramarean coffee when Holofern phones—he wants Tone at the funplace now. Holofern likes you to share his enthusiasm. He is a mornings person; that is when he does his accounts. The minute and hour hands of the huge funplace clock might rotate counterclockwise, but Holofern's universe is conventional—his time-piece is tuned to Ighis Policarpia profit-time. For Holofern, a dream is something you have before you get the finance.

So when Tone walks into Holofern's dingy place of postscript—dingy, cold, and dirty, like all empty funplaces in the mornings—it is the last place he wants to be. But Holofern is planning a new funplace in a new city under construction not far from Ighis and he is going to need a manager. He will drive Tone out there right now to take a look at the site.

Tone phones Lee-Lee. She knows it is bad news for their day together and doesn't answer. As he leaves the message he has the feeling of being choiceless, in a world created without people like them in mind.

On the way, Holofern explains the situation. Tone will earn three times his present wage. He will have his own flat above the bar, and, until the monorail goes in, he can take Holofern's luxury car there and back. The car has a picturepalace-wide windscreen and it recognizes voice commands, if they are delivered in a clear, brutal kind of way. It has a screen navigator that uses the latest video sculpture technology. It has an accessory that can monitor your heartbeat. It has a microwave and a little refrigerator stocked with berry juice ...

The new city of Nilrab was conceived inside a computer, and it shows. Its name is a stitching together of the names of the two towns it is being built upon—Nilesia and Rabensville. A few signs already bear the logos of investing companies. The words ‘I love you’ have yet to come to this place, and perhaps they never will. Tone and Holofern are staring into a square pit filled with dark water. Two noisy pumps do their best to empty it. Horizontal layers can be made out in the clay walls, demarcating the rubbish of previous inhabitants. Pale chips jut out, pieces of bones and cracked porcelain. Earth has never looked more like an enormous refuse pit.

That evening they have dinner with a co-investor. Permits to excavate, permits to construct, permits to renovate. Then come the financial markets, talk about women and wives, and finally the tough talk. Protection.

Tone says he can be relied upon and turns in for the night, but he wakes from a dream of victims lying on their sides, their skin pierced with iron hooks and stitched through with catgut. Bodies are sewn one to the other, and above them are torturers who themselves are stitched with wire that seems to give them no pain. An angelic chorus sings a mocking refrain, as the torturers – themselves darned into this net of suffering

– pull the victims up, lifting their skin off their bones.

Over breakfast, the country clubster and Holofern are grey with alcohol and sex hangovers.

“Did you sleep well?” The country clubster is already on the attack.

“Like a babe,” Tone lies, recalling the images of hooks and pulleys.

“We are going to be rich men. We are here at the beginning!” The clubster takes a hard look at Tone for the first time.

Holofern lets Tone drive some of the way back, but it’s a pleasure that soon wears off. Holofern talks and talks. They are no longer gliding effortlessly but slithering monotonously. Tone comments on the beauty of distant Ighis, autumnal smog hanging like a last dirty shirt.

“Oh, yaw!” Holofern doesn’t even look towards it.

The mornings are approaching zero and boutiques selling the latest fads have replaced boutiques selling dated fads. This year, you can send a stimulus to a friend through a coded violet key. Pale green and quiet beige are being touted by interior decoration consultants like Lee-Lee. Today she heard a Polycarpian customer making fun of her Terramarean accent. No matter how hard she tries, she cannot completely get rid of it. To her it seems Polycarpians lack passion – unless they are talking about money, making it. As for Polycarpian fashions, they have done a complete turnaround. The rich kids are wearing black again, but they don't fool her for an instant. They know nothing about grief.

Lee-Lee has orchids and basil in her flat, so there is something of the rainforest's aromatic moistness up there on the top floor—that, and the feeling that nothing is going to last. She grew up in dense Terramarean rainforest, with her Terramarean mother and Polycarpian teacher. She hasn't been back since tending for him while he was dying. Knowing this, Tone brings plants all the way up to her flat, but because they have often been forced to flower, they lose their blooms and often die. They share their erotic volume with the dying plants.

Tone and Lee-Lee drive just far enough to leave Ighis behind them. They turn down country roads until they reach an area that is no longer signposted. They leave the car, walking into a dense wooded area. They lay a groundcloth, but they are so vigorous and lusty that the cloth crumples up and their knees and fingers, their elbows and heels and his cheeks and her cheeks are pressing the dirt. Lee-Lee remembers that smell of earth close when a person whose face she never saw pushed her mouth down till she could not breathe – filth and dryness – and she was not able to spit that taste out of her mouth.

In far-off Terramare a bomb has exploded in a Hork funplace crammed with funseekers, and Holofern announces cut-price Terramarean grainjuice all evening.

Tone phones Lee-Lee and leaves a message. She is afraid she will hear that voice of Tone's which she hates, the hard one that postpones again and again. But it is the voice of the woods, the voice of the dark of their apartments between the hours of the last busses and the first. She will wait for him in his flat.

She lets herself into apartment NQ in building ZY 235/4, and waits for him in his flat devoid of plants. She remembers her home country, her father's house there, nestled in among the rainforest. She reminisces about the people there, their quiet manners, the subtropical zone, its fragrances that no bottle of perfume can capture.

Tone works the Party-Till-Late until very late indeed. The music is loud – so loud that he has to wear industrial ear protectors. After hours of being yelled at, he makes it back to apartment NQ. Though she is awake, Lee-Lee does not stir when he arrives. She hears him fill the bathtub and she hears the silence when he falls asleep in the water. She considers how easy it would be to drown him there like that,

now, before he stops loving her.

The next day, Tone is on his settee, bathrobe around his shoulders, sunlight reflecting off the glass balcony doors of the apartment opposite. Lee-Lee lifts the flannel away from his chest. They are embracing when the balcony doors of the apartment opposite open, sending golden oblongs sliding around the walls. The grandchildren of the tenants vis-à-vis, dressed in traditional Maurolican costume, have stormed the balcony, and one of them has a telescope. He squints towards the gloom where he thought he saw a nude guy and the breasts of a woman! Tone has his bathrobe on again – he forms his fingers into a gun and makes as if to shoot the boy like in the ancient films. He blows imaginary smoke from the ends of his fingers but the boy shoots back at Tone with an imaginary ray-gun. Tone takes a hit. He turns on the spot ... he dies.

The private cinema museum near Tone's flat is a long high room which is also the bedroom of the proprietor. He smokes herbal cigars and smiles as if they all share the most wonderful secret in the world. Sometimes the images of the ancient, noisy projector are projected onto his smoke-clouds. If there are no other patrons, he plays Tone and Lee-Lee their choice from his antique celluloid collection. Tone and Lee-Lee have seen many ancient films in the company of that quizzical man.

They never leave the 'museum' the same couple. A heroine sacrifices herself. She saves her lover and her city, giving herself to a repulsive count. Her lover loses his crazy joy only when she is dead, having given her lifeblood to the count. The count expires in the avenging dawn-light, a victim of his own pleasure-drive. No one is unchanged!

Afterwards, they eat individually wrapped chocolates with their coffee, and he slips the tip of his tongue into a crinkle of the wrapper to pick the last crumb out. It tastes the best of all. Later, Lee-Lee slices open some greengages, levering the stones out with her fruit knife, and her own hands seem larger than life, strangely capable of murder. She forgets Tone's boss, the new satellite city, and the new

funplace. She forgets that Tone's boss has been inviting him to fancy restaurants where they taste rare wine and eat cuts of sythetic lamb that bleeds a blood that is almost real. She forgets that Tone is becoming like his boss, because tonight Tone says those words to her, words they often hear in the cinema museum. Thousands of songs contain them every day, but in real life they are never spoken without sacrifice. To say them is to draw a circle around you both. A circle that shuts people out. How terrible! To know what is happening to them, and to have the feeling that nothing she can say or do will change what will happen.

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Nilrab

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The new buildings in the centre of Nilrab give permits to do almost anything, as long as it isn't done in front of the people giving permission. Other buildings have gone up, ones where you can do what you like inside them without a permit. Nilrab is becoming a real city just like Ighis, a place where the premonition of the paranoiac, unfounded upon any actual evidence, can save your life – a place where people can disappear.

Nilrab has it all. Glass and steel buildings are already brimming with activity. Apartments many floors above ground are occupied now, and the new funplace bar is swinging till the early hours. Tone hires DJs and VJs to work the new bar. He has said goodbye to apartment NQ, but he regularly takes the monorail from Nilrab to visit Lee-Lee. And Lee-Lee does the same, crossing the federal boundary into Nilrab's sector. Her own boss is talking about opening a branch of their interior design consultancy there. The monorail passes through symbolic gates, just as the old motorway used to. She passes under a symbolic arch etched with the insignia of the new city—its eagle and serpent look more to Lee-Lee like a culture and a worm.

The same violence they lived with in Ighis is already

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occurring in Nilrab. A Terramarean DJ has turned up dead on the outskirts. The funeral is disturbingly small for a man who played music for thousands of people. Funseekers in Nilrab are less loyal, and many were scared by the grisly details of his murder.

Tonight they are together, but Tone sleeps lightly. An outline appears from substrata and dissolves. A barb dips into oils. A musical scraping ... and harder plucked sounds ... the boom of a drum vibrating at the resonant frequency of his skull. The next day he is signing for some crates of grainjuice when the squiggle he has made on the clip-board seems foreign to him, as if it is not his signature at all.

Tone puts on headphones which relay commands to him from his coach. They block out all external sounds. He holds the gun before him. He holds it in his right hand, in his left, and with both hands. Each time he fires, his coach reminds him of one of the essentials. When he leaves, his coach slaps him on the back and says, "It will take time before it becomes natural."

Boom, boom, boom, boom
Gonna shoot you right down

He is not sure which is less real, the figment of the barb or his shooting lessons. If life is a dream, he wonders, when he stops dreaming will he wake up or die? And if he wakes up, will he be known to himself, or a stranger?

The names of businesses are shining on ground level entrances, etched on bevelled glass pinned to stone blocks which are not really blocks, but sheets of composite stone disguising cement. Nilrab is shining, apparently; thriving, apparently. But you don't have to look very hard to see that it is full of models, dummies for selves, doll identities, robots repeating scripts from talk shows, lookalikes daring that couple there who, when they wake, do not know the third or fourth persons they have been sleeping with, who met under made-up names on the books of agencies seeking couples. Anonymous bodies move slowly in the dark, bodies whose eyes do not look at each other directly when they wake.

The agency provides minimal information. It guarantees confidentiality and discretion. It is better overall if clients are kept in the dark about each other's preferences. The call comes on Lee-Lee's phone. She agrees to meet the man. She recognizes him from the description. They hardly talk. She has learned how to bring out what is the same in these men who resemble Tone, to identify the times when they are open to persuasion.

Lee-Lee browses in the new Nilrab boutiques and visits the spanking new exhibition spaces. One boutique is selling dresses – dresses shaped to reveal, dresses to conceal, dresses with a suggestion of virginity, wedding dresses with their buttons waiting to be undone. Here they give advice about the make-up to wear on the wedding night. And Lee-Lee remembers that in ancient Ardrapop people used to believe the wealth of the city depended on a flame. It burned on an altar in a chance-hall. If the virgin who looked after that flame did not remain physically chaste, she was buried alive

She meets a friend of an artist who behaves as if he is really somebody, and that makes her feel that she is really nobody. That night, while Tone is at work, it does her good, strangely, to breathe the foetid air of various clubs and to give in to the mesmerizing beats she has always resisted. Beats whose sex is desperate and unsatisfying.

A siren sounds on the street. Who is the victim? She clips her nails and examines her face. She hears a news report of a famine, and though she hates to say the word, her own manner of living, the manner of living of all of them all there in Nilrab, seems indecent.

Lee-Lee and Tone are asleep in his apartment when Lee-Lee is woken with the feeling that someone else is there, in his living room. A cat moving stealthily? A burglar? The window to the fire escape is open. Tone reaches for his gun. As she watches him, illumined in the wash from the streetlight, she thinks this will do – it could end here. The front door is ajar and Lee-Lee's keys are in the lock, and neither of them can remember what happened last night.

Tone wants to fire a shot.

The casino is brimful. Some celebrate their luck with champagne, others show no emotion even when large sums come their way. Lee-Lee watches the wheel turning. The little ball pings about this way and that, defying prediction. It is like her life in Ighis and Nilrab. A day, a spin, a chance, pleasure or pain. The board where the players lay down their bets is divided up, down, left, and right into small rectangles. It is like the mesh of her hope and disappointment.

She divides her money, her earnings from the month before, and makes straight-up bets. She lays the first quarter on a low even number, her age. A high odd number comes up. She holds back, letting the wheel spin. The ball locks into a red number. She would have lost. She hears some groans and squeals of victory from split bets, odd/evens and red/blacks, but the voices of others seem distant. She is focussed, fixed upon her plan. The croupier rakes in the chips. She places the second quarter of her earnings on the number for Tone's birth-date, a high even. It loses. She puts the glass to her lips, but only to feel the iced grainjuice against them, she does not drink. She watches the wheel turn again, counter-clockwise. She would have lost again. She puts the third of her four piles on the number of stairs to Tone's new apartment. Zero

comes up. The bets go en prison. The wheel spins again. The number of stairs to his old apartment in Ighis, 17, comes up this time. The money that was en prison returns, without any winnings. She does not feel cheated. She does not say to herself, If only I had waited one round. Sticking to the plan, like Hermann in the opera *The Queen of Spades*, she puts the last quarter, together with the money she was granted back, onto the day of the month when she and Tone met. It wins! She sticks to her plan: in case of a win, place all on the same number. She places it, twice what she came with, on that number. The gangly croupier wishes her luck, and spins. Seconds pass in which everyone's eyes except those of the house pickpocket are fixed on the jolly ball. Her number, their number, wins. The croupier bats both eyelids, twice. What surprises him even more is that she cashes in her chips. This was in the plan, too, and she sticks to it. She feels that she has triumphed over all hidden hostility – and she has fifty times what she started with.

They are soon out-guessing each other through inverted champagne glasses, they are parts of an organism, a winning one, with hands, arms, legs, and ears, and eyes, no longer a right and a left for each but apices where other people have sides. They are a being, tasting, flirting, mixing, mocking. They club. An illegal funplace full of conscientious types with bad reputations leads them to a high-class covered café full of nefarious types with stainless reputations... The décor of this last one is decadent, with plump plaster busts on purple-painted cement pedestals. When they shut the door of the

flat behind them, the venal whirl does not stop. They are immodest, noisy, abandoning.

Intoxication and debilitation. And Tone talking about the intricacies of target practice. She would never have wished it, but she could never have foreseen it. The more time and money they spend in Nilrab, the less like themselves they become. The more Tone drinks in the covered café down the road, the one for entrepreneurs and executives, the more he imagines he really belongs to that world. Lee-Lee's skirts have been shrinking. She tells herself that she is changing according to the fashions and that it is not 'she' who is changing, but they, both of them, are mutating, or generating doubles of themselves. The trains, the cars on the streamlined internal routes, the gambling wheels of Nilrab are spinning round and round, faster and faster. The cyclists are becoming more aggressive – not at all like the victimised cyclists of old. And the joggers! It is so necessary for high achievers to run around morning and evening without any objective? The city is already a caricature of itself, and Tone's face has changed. He is looking older, ten years older. Except when he is asleep – that's when she reads his old self.

They take with them cutting steel, spoons, and stainless steel eggcups. They walk through woods into the root country, where they can be alone with any and all other species. And when it rains, they run through it. And when it has finished, they stand upon the oozing moss, laughing.

A serial killer has confessed to murdering the DJ. He was burying his victims in the woods. Perhaps he buried someone there. Perhaps the woods around about are littered with dead DJs. Lee-Lee and Tone go deeper into that place, the place not of death, but of all deaths. No longer is each tree marked with a number, they are in a part of the woods that has not been tagged. Their feet upon the moss and broken twigs. Their weight and inadequate skin, quite inadequate for this place. That sense of unholy decency!

The moss receives them. Surrounded by trunks marked with series of rhyming welts, and lichen, golden with patches of lime and emerald; a furry mammal, now, darts to its nest.

Returning by a snaking path, they pass a huge tree being strangled by a virulent creeper. A tangle of vines leans down to kiss the earth.

“The Maurolicans have no word for ‘kiss’, except for the kiss between mother and child,” Lee-Lee tells him, but he is

already thinking of which route to take back to Nilrab.

Child branches kiss the ground. A leaf, dark and waxen where Lee-Lee has creased it, is like one she pressed into an exercise book years ago. The upper surface is rough, with stiff hairs and raised veins, the underside is light-brown and downy. She repeats the genus of the tree, and its species.

She still has most of the money she won, enough to live for many months in Terramare. And that is when she decides to bring him to her, to her place in Terramare where the leaves of her own trees may take on the scent of their unions. She still owns her father's house there, though it has become the headquarters of so-called rebels in the civil war.

The lovers wake up in the cabin of a deformed giant. He is ungainly and sweats a lot, but he promises to protect them. He is unhappy. The lovers dare not leave the cabin for fear of greater dangers, and for fear that they might be separated forever. It is warm in the cabin and life is comfortable. They have everything they want and are happy together. Every day the giant makes bread and a sauce containing chives and other herbs to accompany yams. If he does not make the recipe, he believes he will die. But it is not only because he is afraid of dying that he does this. He does it because the recipe makes a very good sauce, one you never grow tired of tasting. And so every day he goes into the forest to collect what he needs. In the afternoon he washes and chops the herbs, boiling the yams as the sauce simmers. The lovers are not afraid of him, they respect him. Once they hear the howling and snarling of a wild animal outside, and the giant defends them all. When he returns he is wounded, and the couple care for him, going into the forest themselves to collect the herbs and yams. They could have run away then, but did not. They are grateful to the giant, and they love him in their way. They remain there for many years, until one day the giant forgets one of the ingredients of the recipe. He tastes the sauce, realises his

mistake, and the spell is broken. He is free. He is no longer a monster, but a healthy and handsome man. He bids the couple farewell and goes into the forest to seek his destiny. The lovers continue to make the sauce every day. They do this because they are afraid of breaking another spell, the one that holds them together. And they are there in that forest to this day.

Lee-Lee wakes up laughing. It is the strangest feeling, laughing in your sleep.

She makes down her face till it gives a glow, a natural glow. And when they turn the lights down, are they no longer anonymous – they are again themselves.

Redites-moi des choses tendres.

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L — A STORY OF THREE PLACES

Terramare

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Terramare was granted titular independence after the first of the imploding earthquakes that reformed Earth's land masses. Independence meant an end to Policarpian investment in education and health, and a lot of outside companies developing plantations of coffee, oil-rich palms, and bananas, made possible since the planet's mean temperature had risen. It also meant coup attempt after coup attempt, and a civil war involving three rival indigenous guerrilla factions.

More than half of Terramare's 10 million inhabitants live in the capital Hork. It has been called Hork for generations now, due to a mispronunciation by a Policarpian surveyer. Some want to revert to the ancient name, Auckland, still used by its ethnic minorities. This word is usually only whispered, or else it is uttered with a certain amount of embarrassment, since it is a sure sign that you have a connection with one of the early settler brown-skinned or white-skinned tribes of Terramare.

Lee-Lee flies away from Tone the day after his 25th birthday. As the plane lifts above Ighis and its surrounding countryside, it is as if outlandish panels are opening all around her. Hundreds of scenes of herself and Tone are playing out, and yet during the flight she feels, strangely, closer to him than ever.

The former capital, known as Wow, is a trading port and gateway to the landbridge. Her cousin meets her on the other side of the bridge. He escorts her to a public bus for the trip south. There are no trains. The “southern” train line was disabled early in the civil war. On the way, he informs her about the rival factions and developments in the war against their common enemy, the Polycarpian investors and their appointed governors. Just two weeks ago, a battle was fought along the coast road on the way to Judychristville. A state squadron crossed a land-bridge into an ambush, and seventeen of them were killed. There have been reprisals.

They get off the bus and walk a way to a river jetty where they board an outboard motor boat. They pass some burned-out jetties, targeted by fighter planes to reduce river communication. The noise of the outboard is like an affront to the monumental gorge they navigate, and the lingering odour of detonated explosives negates her senses, but when they climb onto land two hours later the perfume of the forest is as she remembers it.

They walk a way, and her cousin negotiates with soldiers dressed in camouflage fatigues. They are driven towards the remains of a village targeted only yesterday by precision bombs. On entering the razed village, Lee-Lee removes her shoes and walks the dampened ashen paths. The huts and houses have been destroyed, but people have been following the paths between them as if the areas where they stood have become gravesites.

In the next village, her cousin switches vehicles and drives

the rest of the way in a pre-implosion jeep. It stutters, and they have to stop while he corrects a setting in the antiquated fuel line. Fuel is hard enough to come by, but soon these jeeps will be undriveable on their own account. They pass a few road blocks. Armed men and women appear out of the forest at intervals, and seeing Lee-Lee's cousin, wave them on. Finally they arrive at Lee-Lee's house, now a hospital. It is full of beaten faces.

The rebels began as a kind of vigilante group carrying out its own form of justice. Her father taught some of the older members of the force, and since Lee-Lee is the granddaughter, on her mother's side, of one regarded as a chief, the commander of the guerrilla faction is polite in a charming way. She responds in the same manner.

The headboard of the house is carved in tribal patterns that once told the story of Lee-Lee's matriarchal line to the mythical ancestors Maui the Shape Changer and Judy Christ who conquered death. Boring insects have riddled it with their own genealogy. The house where our story will end used to occupy half of a clearing in the dense forest. In front of the house was a space once used for relaxing. Now tall trees hide the courtyard – they also hide the guerrilla's limited fuel supplies.

Inside, a short hall opens onto a living and dining area. A number of rooms are dormitories for the wounded. Their bandages are dirty and their bedding is soiled or blood-stained. That afternoon she carries laundry to the old dyeing

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and washing ledges. She finds her way there without any help. She says the word “tree” to herself in her native tongue; it provides a snap between past and future, between the two of them together and the two of them apart.

Weeks pass. The rebels divide into smaller platoons. They go again to kill, and they bring back more of their own dead and wounded. Their unqualified doctors cut away more than is necessary. Bacteria and fungi spread. Corpses are rotting along the sides of the slippery roads; an odour of decomposition pervades the air. Lee-Lee builds a storehouse against dogs and rats and fills it with yams, plantains, kumara, and cassava. She is thinking, 'I used to want to forget this homeland. I wanted it to go from me. Not so that I would forget it, but so that I could dream of other places where there were no trees, no swollen rivers. But this is what I am. He has to know me as I am.'

She has brought with her a page from a book she found eaten by insects in the attic. It's an old poem, written about the time the first people came to Terramare:

*May no sound issue from my mouth
But piece by piece, thanks to this fire,
May I take leave of myself...*

The falls are not far away. She used to make it to the summit of the falls in under an hour. From there she would look out

over the band of rainforest that stretches towards Wow. To the southeast, on a clear day, she could see the nearest of the plains that have become plantation forests.

The bark of a nearby tree seems impenetrable, cork-like. Golden sap has bled from the inner cambium, while higher up, puffy, cream-coloured fungi have found something sustaining among the bark-clefts. Condensation is rife all around; rivulets line the terrain and drain into streams once controlled by a system of weirs.

At the head of the washing pools there hangs a huge vat, suspended by a chain from the crux of an iron-legged tripod above a charred fireplace. The vat is large enough to hold a human. True, cannibalism was practised here, just before the cities were established and named after men who have been forgotten. It was for a friendlier purpose that her mother used to set up a fire underneath the enormous vat, which children filled by carrying water from the stream in jugs. They warmed long-handled pots over smaller fires to extract mordants from fungi or wood-chips, and obtained yet another type of colouring compound by mixing ingredients in a shallow bowl stirred with a brush of bound twig-ends. These concoctions were for grey-cloths which were laid out in the clearing. Different colours, mainly greens, yellows, and blues, were applied onto these; prefabricated stamps were dabbed or pressed into their surfaces. The water was heated to boiling, ingredients added, then it was allowed to cool to blood temperature, as the dyes took effect.

In the trees are querulous monkeys, and on the ground, if

you turn over a rock, incredible centipedes. Once there were no monkeys here, no mammals, not so much as a marsupial. Only birds; flightless, some of them. When man came to the islands, in canoes, sailing ships, steamships, and airplanes, he introduced his favoured mammals and birds, and later, after the implosion of the land masses and the warming of the planet, representatives of all the genuses and families of living things found their way over land bridges or through the fecund slime that was once the ocean to Terramare. The light is soft here in a way different from that of Ighis, which is softer, filtered by dust and pollution. The light here feels like a hand, Tone's hand, on Lee-Lee's skin.

A glow penetrates the lowest strata of forest life, and the fallen leaves seem to shine weakly. She does not give in to panic, though her heart is galloping. She knows there is nothing more appetising than fleeing prey. This too is part of the spell. She must know fear and danger and courage. Some small birds gather on the lower branches and dart away, all of them, instantly, through etiolated saplings and earth-seeking epiphytes.

She steps across a layer of dried leaves, over the detritus, the clutter of the forest, deeper, ever deeper. She lets her linen mantelet drop, exposing herself all the more to predators. She loses the path and disturbs the sleep of a nocturnal ground bird curled up in its nest.

Diurnal animals rustle through leaves, shinny up trunks, leap from branch to branch. Other eyes, in turn, are watching, or appear to be until the veils of skin that we call eyelids rise

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to reveal their real eyes.

Flurries of wind are born, result of the extraordinary microclimatic conditions here. Lee-Lee hears a far-off cawing then, nearer, a callous cackling. A flock of birds sweeps through the branches. Wherever she looks insects are leaping, newly evolved reptiles, caecilians, are appearing and burrowing, small mammals are darting, larger mammals crashing in the distance. Here are wide-petalled violets, horse-shoe pelargonium and gentian, spreading couch-grass dotted with violets on sea-green streaks. Flowers trumpet all about, graceful, vase-like, or like blown glass of the finest silica. Here is a huddle of oval radiating leaves whose centres send up a phalanx, a fanfare of yellow clusters, while on top of each of these a second plant is trying to establish itself. Here are red-freckled pale-orange stalks leading to explosions of orange-red stamens with bright yellow pollen tips. Here are tongue-like rods emerging from the centres of double-lined vulva-like flaps. Here are succulent leaves of amaryllises, barely visible, nestled in the soggy earth. Here! – a giant totara with needle-sharp leaves. Here is a forest within the forest of tall thorn-pimpled stems scarred with inverted boomerang motifs.

Some creatures dare to move, betraying their presence. A bee lands on the frizzy lip of a pendulous violet urn-shaped flower; it grips the edges and clammers within. A breeze brings a flavour of resin to her, as if the trees are perspiring around her. Her own sweat is sweet, and she is thinking of the scent that comes from her and Tone, so different from the other

sweat, sweat of their jobs, sweat of income, sweat of duties.

A sound like the wind in the trees, only continuous. The falls! The air has become a vapour bath. Her blouse is clinging to her skin and her hair is soaked.

As she strips off her dress and hangs it up to dry, a bird cries out with a voice unmarried, unmusical in the typical sense, almost mechanical. It is like the sound of an antique metal toy. She is aware of an insistent, efficient rustling in the ground cover. Again the unseen bird releases that cry, with its connotations urban and industrial, and this time it is joined by a protest of unmelodious shrieks and a burlesque of arpeggios from other birds. The cacophony is comforting.

A giant butterfly passes overhead, and some of the birds switch trees, flashing extravagant colours. There are dark shapes in the water, no, they are reflections of shapes, disconcerting shapes descending out of the sky. Dark clumped handkerchiefs dive towards earth and enter the river with hardly a splash.

She is sitting on the weathered planks now, thinking of the silence that exists sometimes between her and Tone. It will be like that, when he is there in her forest.

Thinking she hears a motor heading upstream she reaches for her dress and peers down the quiet waterway for long, unanswered minutes. Perhaps the sound of a motor had leaked in here from the city she remembers. Partly naked, she is an ill-defended zone! A kingfisher arcs easily towards the water, dips its beak in, and rises to a branch on the other bank with a silvered victim in its beak. She feels confident

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here among the predators as she remembers those words that matter more than any and all of other words.

A lizard slips under some leaves and reappears at the base of a trunk. A martelet scurries away. There are plenty of edible fruits about, berries and a kind of quince. And there is smoke in the distance as the sun drops towards the mountains. She pulls away some peeling raffia palm leaves to make a couch.

Shade gives the river a more solid appearance. With the dark sky dissolved in its depths, the water has body now, and density. Night has brought with it big-eyed, harmless vegetarians. It is the time of the moon, of a calm touched by refined signals and that thing that exists between the apparent decay of sound and the apparent approach of sound, which we call silence.

All who need light now rest. The trees themselves, or that part of them committed to photosynthesis, the precious leaves, all that functions in the world of colour, of form actual or pretended, all cease their activity.

Shadows, moths, figments. The furtiveness of mice and the circularity of bats. A person here has no meaning, but is a part of the meaning of harnessing night, cunning, warm, odoriferous.

The moon has arced away leaving only planets and stars. Above her is that darkness where more suns than ever, the most suns possible, are visible as pin-pricks or smudges of light. Lee-Lee looks towards the beginning of time and cries quietly, "I am here!"

The first time Lee-Lee dared to fly, she told herself, 'we are going to fall out of the sky,' and she waited for it to happen. She is still expecting it at any moment, that the earth may fall. An owl verifies its position, to another owl, presumably. A mouse streaks to a point on open ground before the jetty, picks up a morsel of food in its teeth, and bounds back to safety, to other smaller, hairless mice. Later, she can hear a sound like the lapping of water against the pier; it grows closer, louder. A huge rodent of some kind climbs ashore, shakes itself, and wobbles into the forest. Its fur seems polished as if it is made out of oil or wax.

Will she be human by the time Tone arrives, or marsupial? Her hand rests on her own furry pocket. She lays her own scent upon the post of the pier. If he comes for her in the dead of night he might detect it, raise himself up on his hind legs and howl for her to come. Light is returning between village and mountain, like molten bronze and blood. The surface of the river curves in the rising light. Cells will soon be dividing again, leaves photosynthesising. She lays over the side of the pier and stares into the water, baring her teeth. She lifts some water to her face. Her face falls and scatters in the water. She slides into it, and pushes off from the pier. She breaststrokes back, feeling like an anagram of herself, as if the cells in her body have been repositioned.

When she used to gamble, Lee-Lee bet what she could afford to lose... But that time is over now. Sky of blush and orange of fire. Now it is all or nothing.

When Tone arrives in Terra Mare, the airport at Wow is closed due to a terrorist attack. He has to go from Hork to Wow by train. The pharmacies and hospitals have been ransacked. In a hotel for foreigners, Tone sees a trader selling cures which he suspects are bottles of coloured water. Notices in various languages have been posted. There are assembly points where foreigners can go to be escorted to safe houses. Tone crosses the landbridge from Wow. On the other side he is questioned in a lean-to and has to pay to go free. A soldier fires a shot into the earth near his feet. His passport goes. He sleeps by a lagoon sheltered by a forest of lianas covered in giant convolvulus.

A man is approaching him. A cat runs before him, which reassures Tone, but this is a man to be afraid of. His oiled hair falls in curls, the skin of his face is red, and his left cheek is scarred. Tone learns that Judychristville has been seized. The rebels have retreated and are being bombarded in their refuges in the rainforests. It is a massacre, some say a genocide. They don't stand a chance against fighters that can target a man from the air. If Tone wants to go to the rebel sector he will have to trek through forest using a relay of guides. The man gives him a map of the terrain, describes

the edible fruit, and takes the last of his money.

Tone enters the forest, walking hard in spite of the rising heat. Gusts drive through the hanging lianas and dripping palm leaves. A few cool drops strike his burning head. Rivulets speed over bark and course along the rough crevices of bug-drilled trunks. He leaves the path at dusk, to rest beside the flange-like buttress of a massive teak.

Bats are soon arcing unerringly among stilt-like aerial roots. Moths the size of hands perform their deathly nocturnal dances, darting from tree to tree. Giant snails glide over palms. He eats yams and millet he has brought with him, but will soon have to eat the forest fruits. He is staring into a set of eyes, dilated to four times the extent of human eyes. The moist snout and immobile lips of a furry primate belong to an unidentified prosimian, such a scent-laying thing as the insect-eating ancestor of all primates might have been.

Life around him is unconcerned at his presence. A few monkeys recline in the upper canopy, let fall scraps of bark. One of them urinates, just missing him. Another swings indolently on a branch, disturbing a colony of feather-winged insects that fly up into a cloud and resettle.

The bark of this tree, as that of no other tree nearby, is covered in a colourless glistening lichen. The trunk of a Poohutu tree has become the skin for crazy beards to grow from. The pointed ends of their zany trails hook his hair, and he has to tear himself from them. The trunks of other trees are smattered with icing, as are higher ridges of lateral bark pointing all the way up to the offending birds and monkeys.

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The air is tannin-flavoured, and he feels the strength draining from his legs.

He is a beast of relative size, monstrous among the microscopic, tiny beside the gigantic. He pushes on into a clearing covered in a lush carpet of succulent oxalis whose deep salmon-pink flowers are closing, scrolling into spiral cones, lowering their pussy-like pursed mouths. A rug of vibrant spring-green shamrocks, so like clover, holds a danger; in one step a human would plummet into black water up to his thighs. A giant toad plops into the liquid and swims to the bank. A flurry of dragon-flies darts this way and that in confusion. The viscid water closes over as discoloured marbles roll off the shamrock pads.

He passes a shivering mass; it is hundreds of flies, unflapping flies crawling over a sugary rot. The biosphere relies on the necrosphere.

Here and there are the inedible deep-green crenellated leaves of wild coffee plants. The small fruit of an unknown tree splits into ovoid hemispheres releasing a creamy, musty, pine-like juice. It is like Lee-Lee, the smell of the forest concentrated. All around him are the same thin trees with crusty gnarled trunks and lateral virgin growth. Elsewhere tiny brown-black lemons have a peppery smell; they have an anaesthetic effect on his sinuses and at the roots of his front teeth. Sleep.

Sounds of the day-forest suggest other sounds beyond the range of human hearing. Vines hog the light, while

other odours related to bark and soil, sap, excrement and insemination rise out of the forest-floor. He passes through a grove of cedars with the softest of barks. Their trunks plunge directly into the earth, driving their roots vertically, invisibly, into the deeper clay and weakest rock. The bark of some trees is glistening with the external skeletons of a local species of cicada.

He is standing by a deformed tree which has suffered the attentions of browsers in its early years. The tree sports scarification marks on its trunk near ground level. Something like a fibrous vein divides the tree at head height where it forms three equal divisions, sending out massive upwards-curving branches that reach in wide arcs towards the canopy, where golden seven-fingered leaves reach for sunlight.

He hears a sound like a bee in a web and catches a blur in the periphery of his vision. A spear is sticking out of the sapwood of the trunk to his right. The spear releases a fragrance he recognizes, of sweet licorice. He counts five men.

They appear to be hunters. The tallest is naked, circumcised and scarred in other places. A tubular ring runs through his bottom lip. Five flat rings penetrate the cartilage of his auricles and grip the helices of both ears. He is wearing a tightly bunched string of white and yellow beads around his neck, while a shorter beaded leather cord suspends a tiny mirror upon his breast bone. His hair is cropped except for three strands plaited and tied with red and gold ribbon from which individual hairs have been teased out.

In spite of their fierce appearance, they are smiling. Tone

follows the tallest of them to a village of nine huts. They offer him a bowl of a sweet milky substance. The drink contains a salicylate salt needed to protect you from the Red Fever, a problem in these parts. It also brings on sleep. As he closes his eyes, he hears again the whizz of the spear's flight, but this time it has found its mark in his breast-bone.

At dawn the leaves of the deciduous trees around the village have fallen. The sky has changed from an inky blue-black to an even grey. A doctor drops a stick in the sand, recites a few lines, throws some red beads about the stick, and sprinkles sand on top of that. The chief's son brings out some curiosities – a set of vinyl discs with 45 rpm written on them. He lays out some pages, torn from erotic Policarpian magazines, of white uncircumcised men and shaved women. The chief's son draws from a hat-box an enormous rust-red wagon-wheel silk hat lined on the underside with velvet and topped with flowing, identically-dyed Ostrich feathers. It has been devastated by moth larvae. Finally, he activates a music box, whose internal workings are visible through a glass window – the teeth of a steel comb pick away at a revolving brass cylinder. On the ivory-inlaid lid, two kiwis among spiral motifs support in their beaks a heraldic ribbon, on which two words only may be read: “God defend...”

The chief points to his own penis and says, “We accept you.”

This means not that they accept him now, but that they will accept him. There is no future tense in their language, you must sense it. The chief continues, “You lose the person

dreaming, become the person dreamed. Live always.”

Drumming. Tone’s head is shaved, and now his body is washed by grown men who laugh as they sponge him down. A strip of raw cotton is wrapped around his waist, and the remainder slung over his shoulder. The women are wearing headpieces of twirled cloth and hand-dyed robes. There is a similarity about the faces, a family one. The doctor is accorded the same respect as the chief. He sings and stirs a fire, burns herbs and sacrifices, drawing lines of blood over himself while singing. No one takes much notice of Tone, except a few children who stare at him seriously before running off to play.

The doctor takes Tone to his hut. In a corner are more fetishes and artefacts made out of synthetic plastics that must have come from Polycarpia. The doctor takes a bowl, drinks, and hands the remainder to Tone. The singing outside ceases, and the doctor operates the music box. As the long-forgotten tune plays, the doctor takes his scalpel and cuts Tone’s skin, leaving a circle.

Tone feels no pain. With the blood, the doctor draws a line between Tone’s eyes and nose, then over his lips and chin. He takes some white tempera and draws an incomplete oval over his chest, then turns Tone onto his front so the wet paint and some of the coagulating blood encircling his glans takes up the ground-dust. The waltz is getting slower. The village empties out. He hears the doctor saying “You are waking — when the light comes, go!”

Tone sets off behind his guide under rose cumulus clouds. Heavy, slow-moving, they descend as the humidity rises. Late morning sees a change of guide, and still no rain. They press on with hallucinatory determination. All about them animals are copulating with an ebullience that seems like the embodiment of a spiritual accord. A chrysalis is about to release its beauty, but before the newly formed female can crawl out, male butterflies are hovering about, battering against it. There are four or five around the chrysalis. Finally, one succeeds in inserting its abdomen through the membrane and impregnating the female. Her wearing out until death has begun. The third guide is a woman who resembles Lee-Lee. Her body ahead of him possesses a hypnotic charm. Tone would act in the way that he behaves with Lee-Lee, but the sensation of this wish can only be described using the vocabulary of pain. It is so painful he cries out. The guide does not falter.

The clouds have thickened to purple and crimson. It is even darker than before. The earth is covered with a welcoming mattress of thick moss, but they will not rest. The brilliance and the savageness of the place is typified by the order and danger of a colony of red ants transporting

corpses of its own kind.

Tone does not feel the scratching of serrated leaves, nor the tips of thorns that have pierced the soles of his sandals. He is an organ, the male one, in a moody dark as of night, a purple and crimson night. Speech comes back, as words partly-sounded. He spits at himself, into the cavity of existence, into the clearing. He opens his mouth as if to speak, but he is no longer homo, he is monkey. His throat is clogged with tar. He slips in and out of consciousness but does not fall. The spear is flying again, but at the same time he feels that it has already pierced his breast. And yet they walk. The in-focus-out-of-focus nature of a vibrating string is the moving event of Tone's mind. He is a jumble of synapses and ganglia of unknown polarity. The sound of the falls!

From the top of the precipice he and his guide look over the treetops towards where the house lies snug. Following the wavering line of the river they identify a jetty near a hydroelectric station. Lines of pylons protrude on both banks. The guide refuses to go any further. Not her people.

And—she gives him a warning glance—there is Death in the sky.

The falls' foliage and creatures have adapted to constant cool and odourless mist. It is a place partly terrestrial and partly aquatic. Some four-legged fish occupy a rock. Tone wades downstream through shallow pools until he finds a track along the bank of the river. This form of equatorial somnambulism causes him to see lights, yellow, flying balls of light passing out of the clouds. The track leads to a jetty where a canoe is moored. Lee-Lee has been forewarned. She is on the other side waiting for him.

Death ceases its massive circling and climbs in the sky. Lee-Lee and Tone watch as it turns in the air, seems to set its coordinates, and fires. They hear the fizz of a missile growing stronger. They cry out together at the last instant of its homing. There is a flash, a wave of heat and a boom strangely like a howl, as if this man-made imitation of lightning has suffered pain in destroying man's own kind.

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