

THE SLEEP ROOM

JOHN GRITTON

Past the main road, on the ill-kempt side of the village, at the mouth of an alley known by all but spoken of by none, the boy stands. More accurately, he is propping: propping his thin frame up on his crutches, mouth agape, since he can barely believe what his eyes see; it is broad daylight, after all. And there is only one reason for a white man to come here, to this alley, to this side of the village. But it is. It's him: Pemberton. And the sight of Pemberton moving quickly down the rutted dirt of the road brings laughter to his lips; he does not bother stopping it.

It has been two weeks now since Butterworth, the old policeman, left the village in the back of the rattletrap ambulance. He had been wrecked with Blackwater. But even before DC Butterworth—*former* DC Butterworth—left, the village was growing wild, sinking back into the jungle. That is, if ever it was truly a village at all: the reed-thatch huts are rebuilt every year, after the rainy season. Reed runs to soil, soil to Madera, Madera to reed. It is only jungle. There is no village here: just a word, a kind of lie.

Now young Pemberton brushes past the boy, into the alley proper. To the boy, he is a gust of odd buttery stink, the faintest scent of palm wine, and a cloud of gnats. The boy thinks of the stories: his cousin is Mahomet, Pemberton's houseboy,

and Mahomet swears they are true. He swears that every night, from under Pemberton's door, you can hear the sound of his crying. Mahomet swears that there are days Pemberton does not even leave the office, where his cot is kept. He swears that one morning, just after the rains quit, Pemberton did not answer when Mahomet came with coffee; did not answer later, when Mahomet brought tea; did not answer when Mahomet came holding nothing, calling only: "Missah Pemron, sah? Missah Pemron?"

But there he is, Pemberton, blustering down the alley, a cloud of dust scattering the chickens and pye dogs. If the game leg could have carried his body on, the boy would have followed, laughing his head off.

And maybe twenty feet down the dirt lane, an old woman is rearing up, driving her crooked frame into the millet, rearing up and coming down, again and again, stopping to watch Pemberton pass before the open doorway of her hut. She knows there is one reason, one reason alone, for a white man to be in this alley. In an instant the village gossip floods her mind, like water in a gourd: stories of palm wine, of whores, of some unfathomable debt Pemberton owes the Syrian merchant, Yussef. She almost laughs to watch him pass, too. But something checks her. There is something in Pemberton's eyes, something like a swamp's quiet oozing: he is afraid here. Afraid, that is, and lonely.

Ten feet down the road, the woman's granddaughter is making her way home from the schoolhouse. To her, Pemberton is just a rush of gnats and khaki, rancid butter and Communion Wine. Rot. She remembers a day, maybe two or three weeks hence, Pemberton came to Father Clay's mass; but rather than sitting in the pews, he'd just stood against the mud wall, watched with his strange blue eyes. Father Clay had stuttered through liturgy and sermon, and Pemberton had leaned mute

against the wall, like a length of dead wood against a stove.

And when it came time, the girl knelt for the wafer in the swept dirt of the church floor, tugged at Father Clay's robe, pointed to Pemberton: "He no take the wafer, Father?"

For a moment more, she watches Pemberton moving quickly down the alleyway—and then, with something like shame, she turns away. From down the lane comes the sound of him knocking on the heavy wooden gate of the brothel.

And at the gate stands the strongman, who undoes the latch to admit Pemberton, who meets the glassy blue eyes with complicity and mockery, and, smiling, lowers his head until he hears the deeper click of the iron latch in the oak door—

And in the dark foyer bows the squat eunuch doorman, muttering a winsome greeting to District Commissioner Pemberton of His Majesty's et cetera and so forth, now whispering as to an old friend: "And your health, Pemron, sah?" and "Pemron desires tea?" And all the while, the eunuch is thinking that if a man comes to his brothel twice, then he will come a hundred times. The policeman refuses tea, says that his health is fine, thank you. His eyes are two black shadows in the light of the hurricane lamp. He is still shy, thinks the doorman, and so he claps his hands once and calls the name of Pemberton's favorite girl, "Fatima!", and she enters then, filling the air with the smell of hair oil, of henna, of rose water—

And Fatima thinks to herself that she has somehow been expecting him, Pemberton, as one might expect rain. She greets the policeman warmly enough, but, taking his hand in hers, she dreads the inevitable pant, the confused, shy moment of his orgasm, the sight of acne dotting his shamed back like fire ants. Now, his hand in hers, they make their way past the low furniture in the ill-lit lounge, out the back door and up the shallow staircase to the place they call the Sleep Room.

It doesn't turn her stomach as it once did: the soiled sacks of rice, the gray light, the close, already-breathed taste of the air: it is like a visit to a latrine. With a deep breath she guides Pemberton to the mattress, knowing that, like last time, she will have to start, to fiddle loose the khaki uniform, to kiss narrow chest and stooped shoulders, tease prong from strut and cracking leather.

She helps him, as she would help a blind man or a cripple, with the sheepskin, until bearing up, bearing up one final time, she fits their bodies together. When it is over, he faces the wall. She lies on her side with an arm over his body, connecting the red dots on his back—until finally he turns over and, frowning a little, speaks his strange words:

"Cigarette, love. Tobacco." He reaches across her body, tugs the pack from the heap of his uniform. With a small laugh, he says, "Where're my manners? Vous desirez, mademoiselle?"

She shakes her head: "I no like, Pemron." He smiles. The blue eyes are strange and otherworldly to her, but his smile has a childish niceness to it (if you can ignore the beak of a nose above it).

"You always refuse," he goes on, when she says no more. "You don't like them? Humbug you, do they?"

"Humbug my stomach," she says, rubbing the flat space between breasts and navel.

"Has the opposite effect on me." He speaks the words casually, almost absently; but still she can tell he feels nervous in their talk, that he talks for her sake. So she says nothing, and they sink again into their old, their usual, quiet, as into a tub of tepid water. For a moment his eyes trace the contours of the Sleep Room's ceiling before coming to rest. She follows his gaze, up to where a green fly twitches in a spider's web. "What is—" he begins, staring. "What is it you say about us?"

"What *say*?" she echoes.

"Yes," he says, almost curtly. "What do you say when

you—when you talk about us? Do you understand?”

“Yes,” she says, almost half-certain she does.

“What did you say, for example,” Pemberton goes on, “when you talked about Commissioner Butterworth?”

She studies Pemberton now, wondering how much he has guessed already. Has he guessed that Butterworth was, as Pemberton is, a kind of breathing joke? The truth is that, before he contracted Blackwater, Fatima had only seen Butterworth once or twice, and then only in town. She knew that he had been sick almost since the day he arrived in the village. The story runs he thought his servants were poisoning him. Butterworth is supposed to have gone through a half-dozen cooks before realizing, finally, that he could not stomach the food in Africa very well. After that, he'd caught Blackwater fever: strange, unmarried man who had never, not once, come to her brothel.

But there is, too, she thinks, what they say about Pemberton: of crying in his office with the door closed; of the money he owes Yussef; of palm wine (of whores); of a framed photograph of a girl, buck-toothed, faintly cross-eyed, skin the dun of corpses, which is kept on his desk at the police station.

“It's all right,” says Pemberton now. She stares at him. “Butterworth was a nasty poor man.”

She says: “I no like Bumworth.”

“No.” He turns on his side and knocks some ash on her breasts. “Oh, dear—” And now, as he takes a drag, squinting at her body but not wiping it clean, a stream of ejaculate dribbles from his penis, which resembles a very small yam partially buried in dirt.

“Humbug you?” says Pemberton. “Humbug you, Butterworth, did he?”

She meets the terrible blue eyes and beneath the reek of the Sleep Room is another smell: of sour milk and coffee and palm wine. Him, Pemberton. His smell.

“Bumworth he no come here,” she says at last. But it is as

if he has not heard.

“And me?” says Pemberton. “I humbug you? Pemron humbug you?” Her stomach churns, twists. She shakes her head, wondering how to tell him how much she hates what he is doing now, the question itself. But Pemberton persists, repeats the question until it flattens itself out, until she can hear his voice finding the cold fact in the words.

“I humbug you,” says Pemron. “You no like Pemron. No like.”

And the strange thing is this: that she is finding the truth in these words, too, a thing buried somewhere out of sight of her indifference, like a viper coiled at the bottom of a dry well.

Above them, spider watches fly; light fades from ceiling.

“You no like Pemron,” he says. No like, no like, no like.

When he leaves the Sleep Room, night is come like some vast smudge of lampblack across the horizon. The eunuch doorman takes what he is owed, bows, opens the door. At the gate, the strongman nods and snickers. “Bloody nigger,” he curses, but feels no better. In the streets, there is no one to watch him go. Nothing in the alleyway stirs, in fact, but the pye dogs, bold, now, that their masters sleep.

The town is theirs now, Pemberton sees.

And Pemberton sees how at some nameless point, the town ceases to be town and becomes jungle. And he thinks how the jungle never really ends, how the village is just some lie that Africa tells itself, some voodoo to keep the hyenas out. And all this he considers, walking the quarter-mile back to the other side of the village, to the pale-painted square that is the police station, to his room in the rear: How, how, how? And the thought is coursing through him like a greasy river, even as he strings the knot about the picture railing, slips the noose about his neck. And that is what his ghost considers when it leaves his body with a sound like a rubber ball against pavement, floating above him until the next morning, when the

houseboy Mahomet comes and finds the corpse of Pemberton and, without shouting, closes the door and goes for the village's other white man.

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A priest, thinks Father Clay, holding Pemberton about the legs while his houseboy severs the cord with a pocketknife: a priest in the jungle. Then Father Clay thinks, How light he is. Laying him upon the bed, for a moment Father Clay studies the blue eyes in the pale face, the village gossip flooding his mind: debt; liquor; the whore called Fatima. All that day, Father Clay considers the eternal soul, the forgiveness of God, failing to remember that in Africa a soul does not go to heaven or hell but stays, rather, and sort of watches things.

These are the sick months, the months after the rainy season, and to breathe is to drown slowly. A sleepless night follows the five o'clock mass. And then the next day, a day that flows by like a curse, the commissioner in the capitol sends a detective named Scobie, and somehow it falls to Father Clay to show him Pemberton's body. And bending over that pale figure on the plain cot, the severed cord still dangling grotesquely from the picture rail, Father Clay turns to him.

"Mightn't there be a hope that it's murder?" says Father Clay.

"Hope?" says Scobie.