

LIZA CODY

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FONTANA/Collins

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RIFT

Liza Cody grew up in London. She studied painting at the City and Guilds of London Art School and the Royal Academy Schools. She has worked as a painter, furniture maker, photographer and graphic designer. She has a daughter and now lives in Somerset. Her first book, *Dupe*, won the John Creasey Award for the best crime novel of 1980.

by the same author

Dupe
Bad Company
Stalker
Head Case
Under Contract

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For Angus



Chapter One

16 FEBRUARY 1974

If you want to drive from Kenya to Ethiopia, the most direct road is north out of Nairobi, past Mount Kenya, through Samburu, on beyond Marsabit. Eventually you will arrive in Moyale. Moyale is a border town and you must pass through it to get to Ethiopia.

Five small boys ran by the side of the car, and I opened the window to ask the way to the crossing point.

One of them said, 'Go to the prison.' The rest hung back.

'Prison?'

'Yes,' he said, holding on to the door handle. He was bold and very curious. 'Where you going?'

'Ethiopia.'

'Why go there?' he asked, and spat into the dust. 'Is bad place. Stay here. Are you Christian?'

I was so surprised I merely shook my head.

'Muslim? Jew?'

I shook my head again. I couldn't imagine why he wanted to know, and having just driven through the desert worrying all the time about the engine overheating, I was in no mood to discuss religion.

'You are Pagan,' the boy announced decisively. He let go of the door handle and spat again.

I drove on slowly. Orange dust swirled up from the wheels and settled in the car, on my clothes, in my hair. It smelled of pepper, and like pepper irritated the eyes and lining of the nose.

Moyale perched on an outcrop of small reddish hills. It

looked as if it had been dropped there from a great height and broken in two. The southern half was in Kenya, just an untidy collection of huts, houses, and dukkas.

The most solid part of town was around the prison compound, a dusty oblong surrounded by the prison, the warden's house, the police station and customs and immigration. It was deserted. Doors were locked, windows shut tight against the dust, shutters down to keep out the white, vertical sun.

I stopped in the middle of the two-acre yard and got out to stretch my legs. A scrawny, slow-moving dog appeared from nowhere and crawled under the car, where it lay as if dead in the meagre patch of shade.

The water in the plastic bottle was warm and tasted of chlorine tablets. I was too tired and overcooked to eat anything, so I lay across the two front seats and closed my eyes.

Bravado gets you into trouble. It leads to foolhardy actions. It can lead you to Moyale.

Two weeks ago, on the veranda behind Nairobi's YMCA, overlooking the swimming pool, it hadn't seemed such a bad idea. In fact it seemed fresh and exciting. But then it was about seven o'clock and the sun was doing its sudden vanishing act. Bats were making jagged lightning raids on the swimming pool, and crickets sang in the bushes. There was a cool breeze, I remember, and we were drinking beer with two guys who had recently fled Uganda. They were the latest émigrés who spoke wistfully of their homeland and the hardship they had suffered in the fight against tyranny. They both wore beautifully cut lightweight suits and cheerful collars of fat spilled over their identical white nylon shirts. I would like to have known more, but already one of them was eyeing me up in a predatory way, and I knew I had to ration my curiosity.

I moved a little closer to Charles and let him take over

the conversation. It was a shift I hoped the Ugandans would notice and that Charles would not.

Charles had been in Kampala during the coup which had brought Idi Amin to power, and what had been a catastrophe to the Ugandans sounded like an adventure coming from him. He was thirty-three, had been everywhere, and talked with nostalgia about a golden age when you could wander from country to country and barely needed a passport, let alone a visa. On the set he was called Wandering Chas. He was very good-looking.

'Where haven't you been, Chas?' I asked when the Ugandans had gone and we sat alone in the dark.

'Nowhere,' he said, stretching his arms out along the back of the bench. His arm grazed my shoulder and made it tingle. I wondered if it was intentional.

'No, I tell a lie,' he said lazily. 'I haven't been to Ethiopia. No one wants to make movies there for some reason. Ready to eat?'

We drove, in one of the unit cars, to a Chinese restaurant close to the Kenyan House of Parliament. In less than a week's time the car would be returned to the hire firm and the crew would fly back to England. The actors had already gone. All I had to do was help pack and label the costumes. My first feature film was nearly in the can, and in a few months my name would flash past on the credits: *Fay Jassahn, Wardrobe Assistant*. It was almost over but I didn't want to leave. I hadn't had enough of the brilliant sun and the huge domed sky.

'I don't want to leave,' I said, and picked at the chicken and almonds with the tips of my chopsticks. I successfully transferred some to my plate and felt cosmopolitan. A fan in the ceiling stirred the cool air and made the candles flicker. Romance, I thought, was just a step away.

'I'd like to explore the Rift Valley from here to Addis Ababa,' I said. I wanted to impress him, but he said, 'What for? Me, I wouldn't go anywhere I wasn't paid to.'

It's all very well to say things like that if your nickname is Wandering Chas and you are a lighting cameraman who is in demand all over the world. But wardrobe assistants are two a penny and I might not get the chance to come to Africa again.

'There's more to life than work,' I said. 'And there's more to Africa than what we saw from the window of an air-conditioned coach.'

'Yes,' he replied, 'and all of it's tough.'

'Beautiful, though.'

'You're a romantic,' he said lazily. In the candlelight I couldn't tell if his smile was complimentary or not, but I continued in the belief that it was.

'I could follow the Rift Valley north,' I sighed dreamily, remembering a bend in the road where we had come across it unexpectedly. The high ground disappeared, quite literally as if the bottom of the world had fallen out, and I had felt as you do when a lift drops suddenly – my stomach rose to my throat and I gasped for breath.

'I wonder if the Rift is the abyss part of Abyssinia,' I went on.

'Don't be daft,' Charles said. 'How would you get around: hitch like a hippy?'

'Of course not. I'd buy a car.' I had been told that a second-hand car doesn't lose its value in Kenya. You could buy a car, take a trip, and then, if you hadn't flattened it against an elephant, you could re-sell the car for what you'd paid. It was like keeping your money in a bank, I'd been told. I had the money. While the others stayed at the PanAfrica Hotel, I was putting up at a Quaker lodging-house for a quarter of the price. Freelance people often have to exchange comfort for hard cash if they are to survive the lean spells.

'You really are a romantic,' Charles said, and this time it was plain that his smile was amused and not at all complimentary.

'All adventurers are romantic,' I said, in a huff. 'Look at T. E. Lawrence.'

'All adventurers are adventurous,' he replied. 'Or daft. You aren't either. Put the idea out of your head. Anyway, what would Tony say if I told him you'd gone off jaunting? I promised him I'd keep an eye on you, you know.'

Tony. I was deflated. This explained the flattering attention I'd received from someone who was quite a big wheel in the film crew. I do not normally attract much attention. And normally I don't want much. I like my position on the edge of big projects where I can play a part but do not have to carry a lot of responsibility. The rewards are not great, but then I don't want to be fabulously rich or a star. On the other hand, there's no doubt that I like to be part of the process that creates wealth and stardom.

'You like the excitement without the risk,' Tony said once, and there was enough truth in that to make me protest.

I protested now to Charles. I said, 'I don't need anyone to keep an eye on me. What on earth makes Tony think I do?'

'He's a good chap,' Charles told me unnecessarily. 'You don't have a lot of experience and he's just trying to be protective. Don't knock it.'

That was the end of the evening as far as I was concerned. We nibbled on some fresh lychees and afterwards Charles dropped me off at the Quaker house with a brotherly peck on the cheek. I don't know what else I had hoped for, but with the equatorial sky full of strange stars and crickets singing in the bushes and the air pulsing with the hot scent of Africa, I felt let down.

'Anyone got a copy of the *Standard*?' I asked when I got inside and found two of the other residents still up and drinking tea in the kitchen.

'Hello, Fay,' Rajib said. 'I didn't see you there.'

'She tiptoes around like a mouse,' Tom Okolo said. 'The *Standard's* on the hall table.'

I took it to my room and turned to the used car column. There were two possibilities. I circled them and then went to see if Rajib was still in the kitchen.

Rajib was not a native Kenyan, but he had come in the first wave of refugees from Uganda when Asians were still grudgingly welcome in Kenya. There were several sets of distant relatives already in Nairobi who were helping to finance his law studies at the University. I liked him, and although sometimes he adopted an aloof, patrician attitude, he was not above bantering with me.

'Ah, Fay,' he would say as I scrambled to be on time for an early morning call, 'off to the illusion factory again? These big stars must be dressed and ironed and polished or they would not be beautiful. Hurry, Fay, the world needs beautiful people.'

Once when we were shooting in Nairobi I invited him to come and watch. He turned up his fine nose at the offer and sent instead two of his cousins, an exquisite pair of sisters, who intrigued the whole crew with their silent, fragile modesty. Actually they were a lot more modern than they let on in mixed company, as I discovered later, but at the time hardly a fingernail emerged from their blue and silver saris or a soft murmur passed their lips.

Because I had entertained Rajib's cousins a sort of bond had grown up between us. 'Obligations,' he sighed. 'My life consists entirely of obligations.' But really it was how he expected things to be. He truly believed that if I was a friend to Gita and Shanti he owed me advice when I asked for it.

I thrust the *Standard* under his nose and asked how to go about buying a car in Kenya.

'No, no, no,' he said after carefully reading the advertisements. 'Not these. See, this one belongs to someone up country. It will not be in good condition. And this one

too. Why do you wish to buy a car, Fay? I thought you were going home.'

'I want to go to Ethiopia,' I told him, expecting to be applauded for my bravery.

'But you have a job,' he said. 'How can you afford to give it up?'

'The job is nearly over, and I want to see more of Africa before I go home.'

'Well, I don't think you will find work in Ethiopia.' The notion of travel for pleasure did not seem familiar to him.

'It sounds like a silly idea to me,' he said at length when I had explained the plan in terms of an adventure.

'And I do not think your family will approve. But in the matter of a car, please let me check about prices or you will be cheated.'

That night I remember thinking how old-fashioned and cautious he was, and how smothered and protected Gita and Shanti seemed to be. I was glad I was free to wander without the dead weight of family approval around my neck.

Chapter Two

He tapped politely on the bonnet of the car – a small man in an immaculate blue uniform and peaked cap. It was as if he were knocking at my front door. I sat up.

He coughed gently and said, 'You must wait till four o'clock for immigration.'

'Thank you for telling me.' I was inspired by his courtesy. I got stiffly out of the car and looked at my watch. It was stuck to my damp wrist and showed signs of corrosion. Two-fifteen.

'Perhaps you would take a cup of tea with me?' He

made a vestigial bow and gestured towards the warder's house. 'I have many interesting artefacts on display.'

He led the way across the dusty oblong to his house. It was as neat and well-kept as his uniform. Even the rain barrel had a tidy wooden lid. I knocked it inadvertently with my bag as we passed and it gave a hollow sound.

'Daily we hope for rain,' he murmured as he opened the door. It sounded like an apology.

The warder had not anticipated refusal: everything was ready and waiting on a coffee table beside two 1972 copies of the *National Geographic*. The tea was very strong and made the Kenyan way with condensed milk. I had hated it to begin with, but now I was quite addicted. As a pick-me-up it was second to none.

'You enjoy Kenyan tea?' he asked happily.

And not only your tea, I thought. I would have liked to lie down on his clean floor, shaded by his chintz curtains, and take a nap, but it was time for the real object of his invitation to be made plain. He wanted to show me his 'interesting artefacts', and if I really appreciated his hospitality I would buy one. This was a problem. The car might have been money in the bank but it did not leave much in the pocket.

However, I am white, I own a car, I travel, my clothes are good. How can I possibly be too broke to afford an artefact? I bought a fat little pot carved out of Kisii stone by one of the prisoners.

Sadly, I took it back to the car. Everyone here seems to want a patron. Everyone has something to sell, and whether it is an object, a service, or simply company, if you are not Kenyan, you are expected to buy. Clearly, it is not a matter of colour: Tom Okolo had problems as well. Like Rajib, he was from Uganda, although he was a refugee for political rather than racial reasons, and when he first arrived he had been depressed about the way everyone expected him to pay for the drinks. But Tom