

'The Midnight Witch' by Paula Brackston

Deleted Scenes

[Bram is fighting in the first World War, posted to Africa. Lilith visits Mangan in jail in London]

It is not yet noon but the heat of the African sun has already rendered the unacclimatised British troops lethargic and bad tempered. Bram sits amidst a crowd of khaki, his pack beside him on the dusty track, resigned to the lack of shade or respite from the high temperature. His battalion disembarked from their ship less than two weeks ago and yet somehow it seems as if life before wartime Africa, life before heavy boots and puttees, before lumpen kit bags and stony ground for a bed, and all the myriad challenges his new environment contains, such life never existed. His world is shrunk to the next march, the next camp, the next meal, the next assault, the next ambush. The next blessed drink of water. There is no past, there may very well be no future. All he can concern himself with is the here and now. And here is an arduous, unforgiving place. And now is a dangerous, deadly time.

'Right you are, gentlemen!' Second Lieutenant Bryant barks at the men, knowing they will not be quickly roused from their torpor. 'Let's have you on your feet, shall we? Look lively, now, or I'll leave your sorry carcasses for the hyenas!' He strides down the shambolic line, assisting the troops to their feet with further cajoling, reinforced by the occasional prod from his ever-present cane. The men haul themselves upright and shoulder their packs. Bram is pleased to be on the move once more. It is the sitting around, the waiting, that he finds the most difficult aspect of his posting. The march-camp-march-camp routine is a dull slog, the tedium of which is relieved only by the terror of being caught in an ambush, or, very occasionally, being required to mount an attack. But at least when they are traveling, putting one blistered, booted foot in front of the other, covering the endless dusty miles, at least

the rhythm of action and the attention such exertion requires occupies him. For it is in the empty times that his mind wanders to painful places he would rather not visit. Places inhabited by Lilith. Or, more precisely, his loss of Lilith. On good days he can enjoy recalling her, and find comfort in picturing with his mind's eye her beautiful face, her rare but heartwarming smile, her deep, watchful gaze. It is a pleasure then, to be lost in the memory of her. But other times, most times, what strikes him first is the blow of having given her up. The agony of having had her turn away from him. Even after three long years the wound is as fresh and raw as ever it was.

'Cardale, have you got a cigarette?' Private Billie Brathwaite sidles up to Bram. He is a skinny twist of a Yorkshireman who decided on the rolling, interminable outward passage that fellow northerners should stick together. This regional solidarity consists mainly of his badgering Bram for rations of one kind or another, in exchange for giving him lengthy and detailed nightly accounts of the number and condition of his blisters. 'Some bastard's nicked the last of mine. Swiped 'em from my kit bag. Reckon it was one of those flaming Boers. Don't trust 'em, Cardale. I'm telling you. Don't trust a man of 'em. You'll not have a damn thing left outside a fortnight if you do.'

Bram, who does not smoke but carries cigarettes for bartering, hands one to his troop mate, quelling his desire to take him to task. He knows such unfounded accusations are rife in the battalion, and it is not hard to understand why. Only a decade or so before the British and the Boers were shooting at each other. Now they are expected to fight alongside one another. For some it is too great a shift of allegiance in too short a number of years. The battalion commander is not immune from such feelings. Colonel Johannes Plessis is a formidable South African, with an abundant beard and blazing eyes, given to screaming obscenities at civilians and soldiers on both sides, lapsing into tirades of unfathomable Afrikaans, and engaging in acts of bravery beyond anything that might be reasonably expected, even of a commanding officer. He is, even his dissenters must allow, an experienced soldier and leader of men. Most concede that he is their best hope of success, even if that means only staying alive. He does not have the men's love, but he does have their unswerving respect. They will follow him wherever he leads. They will do whatever he asks. They just won't ever like him for it.

With further pushing from the lieutenant and not a little groaning from the men, the company is at last on the march. Bram takes his place somewhere in the front half of the line. He has not been selected for point or sweeper duty, and the safest place to be is in the body of the group, but near one end. They were warned on day one to be vigilant for signs of ambush, but the reality is that the alertness required to spot such clues is impossible to maintain over long hours of foot-slogging. And besides, the enemy forces are expert at guerrilla warfare, and are not in the business of giving themselves away. The first Bram knew that they were under attack, on the first occasion his battalion marched into an ambush, was when a bullet removed his helmet from his head. Had he been wearing the cap of an officer he would have been dead. Indeed, had he been an inch taller, the bullet would have traveled through his skull as well as the tin of his helmet. The men either side of him had died without ever knowing about it. Then the initial rifle fire had been replaced by the relentless spewing of a machine gun, and the company had fled to what cover existed. A third of those soldiers Bram had left Portsmouth docks with only weeks earlier died in that ambush. For the rest, the attack may well be the reason they live long enough to return home, showing them as it had what lay in wait for them in the long grasses of the savannah, and how best they might avoid it.

Bram notices the army chaplain, Father Michael, a little way ahead and quickens his pace to fall into step beside him. It is not his faith that draws him to the man, but a shared love of art. Their conversations on the subject have, Bram is convinced of it, saved his sanity on more than one occasion.

'Ah, Lance Corporal Cardale, striding out in good order this morning, I'm happy to see.'

'Thanks to your talents for obtaining sticking plasters, Father.'

'Think nothing of it. After all, am I not bound to assist where a sole is in torment?' He allows himself a girlish giggle at his own joke, even though he must have used it many times before. 'In any case,' he goes on, 'can't have the only person around here who knows his Monet from his Manet being hospitalised, now, can I?'

Bram gives a rueful smile. 'You don't see our noble Commanding Officer as a lover of the Impressionists, then?'

'I think if you furnished the redoubtable Colonel Plessis with a paintbrush he would more than likely kill someone with it. Noisily.'

'He hasn't been asking you for plasters, I don't suppose.'

'What blister would dare go near one of his feet? No, the good Colonel has many fine qualities, most of which we must all be grateful for, but sensitivity, of any kind, is not listed among them.'

They march on in companionable silence for some time. It has been three days since they have encountered the enemy, so that the twang of tension which ordinarily runs through the line has slackened a fraction. Bram finds himself focusing on the distant horizon, enjoying for the moment the fact that it *is* distant. They have previously spent days pushing through the hellish elephant grass that covers the plains in the summer months. It stands higher than a man's eye line, so that, even when he knows they are in open country stretching great distances in all directions, Bram feels the choking panic of claustrophobia rising within him. He has had cause to wonder if a person could drown in this sea of grass. All that is visible is the back of the man in front and a stretch of featureless sky above. The air is dirt-dry and buzzing with biting flies. And what flies there are in this land of extremes. Flies and other bugs of such tenacity, such apparent mania to devour, to sting, to bite, to breed, to inhabit, to infest, to conquer beings so many hundreds of times their own size. That a man can be felled by a bullet fired into his body at speed makes sense, just about. That a strong, healthy human can be brought to his knees by nothing more than a small swarm of innocuous-looking flies, or a little burrowing worm, seems to show a place out of kilter with normality.

But then, Bram reflects, has not the whole world spun off its axis these past, mad few years? Whole nations are consumed in the madness of war. And before that my own, personal world – or at least the world I thought I inhabited – was turned on its head by Lilith. By my love for her. By her revelations. By the discovery that I lived – live? – among witches. Among magic. Yet, there does not seem to be much evidence of magic among us here, as we stumble about trying to kill, trying not to be killed.

On this particular day, there is a brief absence of insects. They are marching along the Ugandan railway line, patrolling this vital supply link, without which the entire

British campaign in East Africa would simply cease to be. Bram has already discovered there are threats every bit as deadly as those posed by the enemy which decimate the well-fed troops drafted here. The flies are one, with their various diseases, along with their co-conspirators the bacteria that skulk in the dirty water and open sewers encountered along the route. The other is hunger. The German military have long understood that interrupting the supply of food to a marching army unit is an effective way of halting its progress, either temporarily or permanently. Sickness and malnutrition efficiently weaken and debilitate without regard for rank, or even species. The mules and horses suffer terribly and many die. They are left where they fall, to be cleaned up by the lions and hyenas who shadow the brigade's footsteps, silent and stealthy in the daytime, roaring and raging in the night. Bram can see the train track running ahead in a long, shimmering straight line that wobbles into a mirage on the horizon.

How many miles is that? Twenty? A hundred? Out here nothing is measurable. We are Lilliputians one moment and giants the next. A man could go mad trying to make sense of it all.

And it is against that madness that Bram has begun to paint again. Or at least, to draw. He carries with him a small sketch book and a stash of pencils and charcoal, which he sharpens with his pocket knife in the evenings. Father Michael likes to sit with him while he sketches, and Bram finds he is content to share the humble results of his efforts with the clergyman.

What was it Mangan always said? 'Art insists upon being viewed! It cannot exist otherwise.' And yet I showed no-one my painting of Lilith after I left London. No more could I paint, back in Yorkshire, beneath my father's eloquent expression of I-told-you-so.

The outbreak of war, and the opportunity to sign up, had come almost as a relief to Bram. He had been among the first to offer himself up for king and country. He had lost count of his postings, of his watches, of his killings, since then.

Braithwaite appears at his shoulder.

'It's too quiet, Cardale. D'you not think? Too quiet by half.' He tugs his water bottle from his webbing belt and gulps greedily at it. His action is spotted by Second Lieutenant Bryant.

'Private Braithwaite! Put that canteen away, Private!'

'It's this heat, Lieutenant, sir. I'll drop if I don't drink, sir.'

'Water is rationed. Even a pitiful example of a soldier such as you knows this for a fact. Or have you gone soft in the head, Private Braithwaite? Has this lovely sunny day cooked your brains?'

'Appen it may have, sir. Least, it will if I don't drink.'

'You'll drink when I tell you to drink, lad.' The officer gives the water bottle a thwack with his cane and tuts as Braithwaite returns it to its rightful place. 'You'll be wanting afternoon tea next!' he observes.

He might have taken up this theme and berated the private further, but his attention is taken by a rider returning to the line at speed. All eyes turn to the breathless scout who exchanges urgent words with Colonel Plessis. After a moment's consideration, the CO issues orders which are quickly passed among the officers and sung out to the ranks by the lieutenant

'Wheel about, B Company. Forty-five degrees, look lively!'

Bram watches with mounting dread as the line is turned and orders are given to the effect that the route has changed. Word has arrived that there is an enemy unit a day's march inland, and they are to set off in pursuit. Bram feels his stomach tighten as though he is a swimmer about to dive headlong into uncharted waters. But he has no choice in the matter, and within half an hour he is trudging westwards, once again swallowed up by the undulating ocean of grass that has become the stuff of nightmares to him. There follow hours of exhausting tension. The flies are at their busiest now, and to brush through the long stems of the plains grasses is to offer oneself up as a feast. By five o'clock he is starting to hope that the intelligence had been inaccurate, so that they might be freed from this torment by the mercy of a German bullet. But the trudge continues, hour upon hour, until at last the sun drops through one of its swift African sunsets. The brigade reaches a small clearing upon a low ridge, blessedly free of tall grass, with even a tree or two for relief from the

maddening monotony of the plains. Orders are given to make camp. Fires are lit. Greasy stews are set to boil in blackened pots. The men make themselves comfortable as best they can, which for Braithwaite means holding his swollen toes up to the firelight for inspection by the army Medical Officer. For Bram it means taking out his sketch pad. To the accompaniment of a million strong chorus of insects, and the disconcertingly close grunting of a lion, he puts charcoal to paper and slowly loses himself in the act of creating, capturing the scene around him on the page. And as he does so he allows himself to think of Lilith, just for a moment, just one more time. And he wonders how she is spending her war, and if she ever thinks of him.

The next day, soon after breakfast I have set in motion the arrangements that will see Mama taken to Radnorshire. She put up a token resistance, but agreed really quite readily to go. This surprised me at first, as she has always preferred London, but things are different now. Without Papa or Freddie, and with the gloom of the war, and the frightening bombs, there is little to recommend staying. It is agreed she will take her Lady's maid and William Radley, the footman, who will stay with her at Radnor Hall. Her good friend, Lady Margaret Spires, who is also widowed, has agreed to go too as a companion. I have promised Mama I will visit as soon as I am able.

With packing underway I set about fulfilling my promise to help Mangan. A series of phone calls, more than one of which was to a fellow coven member, quickly result in my being given permission to visit, so that by noon I find myself sitting in a tiny, dark room in Wormwood Scrubs. I had brought some biscuits and ham and brandy with me, but all were taken away when I entered, and I fear none will reach their destination. When the prison guard leaves me alone, closing the heavy iron door behind him, I have to master the panic which rises inside me like bile. The walls of the room are rough stone, misery grey, and emanate both cold and a tangible sadness. As if the despair of those who have passed through this horrid space resides within them still. And there is an odour. A smell of dampness and poor food and stale sweat.

The heavy bars on the small, high window block out what little daylight tries to penetrate this awful place. I try not to think about how damaging to the soul it must be to be incarcerated here.

Footsteps herald the return of the guard. He opens the door and stands back. Mangan appears in the doorway, hesitant, peering into the dimness of the room. He is a large man, whose personality usually makes him appear larger still, but now his posture is timid, stooped, diminished. How terribly his confinement has affected him, even in this short time. I leap to my feet and go to him.

‘Mangan! Oh, my dear Mangan.’ I reach out my arms but a stern look from the gaoler reminds me that physical contact of any kind is forbidden.

‘Lilith?’ Mangan steps a little closer. ‘Can it really be you?’ A faltering smile lights up his face.

‘Let’s sit down,’ I suggest, horribly aware of how frail he is. My eyes are brimming with tears but I blink them away, determined not to add to his troubles with my own distress. We take our seats either side of the narrow table. Mangan begins to brighten a little, leaning forwards, his eyes shining as he looks at me.

‘How wonderful of you to visit me. How kind.’

‘I should have come sooner, had I known. I went to see Jane.’

‘Poor Janey. Is she coping? No, that question requires no answer, for I know Jane will always cope.’

‘She is terribly worried about you. She has asked me to try to help.’

‘She should not have. No point in laying our troubles at your door.’

‘I know I have stayed away since.... But Mangan, I hope you still count me your friend. I hope you will let me help you.’

‘My darling girl, there is nothing to be done. My conscience has brought me here and will keep me company until the end of the conflict in which the world is embroiled. There it is. Do not ask me to compromise my principles, Lilith, please. You must know I will not. I cannot.’

‘I wouldn’t dream of trying,’ I tell him, ‘I wouldn’t waste my breath!’ We both smile a little at this. ‘I admire your courage, you must know that, but, your health is suffering here. And, well, there seems no end in sight to this terrible war. I just wanted

you to know that I will do what I can. For your sake, and for Jane's. It may be possible to have you moved.'

'A prison is a prison.'

'I cannot secure your freedom, that's true. But some who object, who refuse to fight as a matter of conscience, they are sent out to the country. There are places so much better for you than here. You would be outside, able to breathe the air and feel the sunshine. You would be given work to do on the land. You might even be permitted to draw or paint.'

Mangan gives a bark of laughter. 'And what promises and compromises would you have to make to send me to such a rural idyll? I will not have you selling your soul to save mine. I will not.'

'I do have friends who may be able to help. You know that.'

'Ah, yes. Our brethren.' He steals a glance at the door, knowing the gaoler will be listening to our conversation. 'Tread carefully, darling girl. Your position may give you influence, but you must not undermine that position. At any cost.'

'Do not concern yourself about me. I will be cautious. But I will do my very best for you.'

He nods, smiling, and pats the pockets of his drab uniform, forgetting for a moment that he has neither pipe nor tobacco. He takes a breath and I see something of the old familiar Mangan - the feted sculptor, the man of principle - I see something of him return to the bony form in front of me. At last he says, 'Then I am in the best of hands. Now, tell me of the world. Tell me how those society artists fare without me to stir them up and shake up their stuffy notions of what can truly be called art!'

After a further day's trekking across the plains, with the distant mountains looming ever nearer, the decision is taken to head south. There is a rumour circulating of a gunship cruising up the Rufiji, and it is thought the elusive German unit may be making its way to a rendezvous. To Bram, they are all phantoms. He has not seen an enemy soldier for days. By now, he has ceased to question, or indeed to care about, what it is they are trying to do. He has reeled in his mind to suit his circumstances as best he is able, so that he thinks only of marching, or making and breaking camp, or cleaning the Maxim he has been given charge of. It is, after all, his only responsibility. He has no say in where he is sent or what the purpose of his being there actually is. He is, however, in charge of the machine gun, responsible for both its maintenance and operation, with the grudging assistance of Private Braithwaite.

There has been a subtle change in the weather, which everyone present knows is due to the imminent arrival of the rains. Bram is under no illusions that these will provide a cleansing respite from the dust and heat, for he has been told with something approaching glee by several long-serving soldiers that the conditions will worsen beyond his wildest imaginings after the first day of rainfall. As if to prepare those new to the tempers of Africa, Colonel Plessis has seen fit to direct the battalion through the damp forest that fringes the river. The high grass of the plains has been exchanged for undergrowth so dense and so tangled, that progress is ludicrously slow.

'We'd be better off with a bloody boat,' Braithwaite complains, forcing his way through the vines and stumbling over the bulging mangrove roots. 'If we're going to be up to our knees in this stinking water we might as well be on the river,' he reasons, plucking a leech from his neck and flinging it into the mud with an oath to send it and all its kin to hell.

Bram has not the strength to talk to him. The Askari troops who have joined their company do their best to hack through the jungle with their fearsome machetes, but still the vegetation seems intent on strangling, or tripping, or scratching, or stinging, anything it can do, indeed, to halt these foolish humans in their lumbering, blundering steps. A fit, well-fed man would struggle in such terrain. The greater part of B Company are debilitated by lack of food, and by illness. Second Lieutenant Bryant himself has only just returned to duty after a bout of malaria. The unit started out

numbering thirty and is already down to twenty-one men. Some have been sent back to Mombassa to be hospitalised or even taken home. Others have died on the march and been buried with little ceremony. The feeble markers used on their graves will be swallowed up by the wilderness and very soon become invisible. Whilst malaria is to be feared, what has decimated the battalion is the dreaded Blackwater Fever. Bram has witnessed several of his fellow soldiers felled by the disease. To him it seemed that all had the mark of death upon them even before the first appalling symptoms appeared. Every one of them suffered. None survived.

There is a shout from up ahead as a corporal encounters a snake. He survives the serpent, only to receive a scolding from Colonel Plessis, who tells him if he is going to shriek like a girl every time he sees a worm wriggling he will shoot him himself.

The day feels nightmarishly long, as if the heat has stretched even the hours out of shape. At last they come to a clearing above the riverbank, and the order is given to make camp for the night.

Bram stands for a moment and tries to make sense of the river itself. It is a fat, grey slug of a thing, slipping silently by. There are no rocks or rapids, just a thickness of water, devoid of any of the customary charm of a river. It is opaque. It does not sparkle. It does not appear to support life, although he knows it must. It seems to him a terrible thing, full only of different ways of dying, with the promise of the surprise of that death, which might sneak up on you in the night on whining wings, or leap from the depths with fetid jaws agape. He wants to draw it. He wishes more than anything right now that he had paints to capture the brooding, muddy colours, but he knows, in any case, he won't ever forget them. He will be able to reproduce them one day, a long time from now, so long as he first gets down the likeness of the river on paper. Its scale, its noiseless power, its horror. Somehow, its stink. His fingers itch to get at charcoal and sketch book and capture the malevolence of the thing, but Second Lieutenant Bryant has other ideas.

'Lance Corporal! When you've finished admiring the view, would you be so kind as to set up the Maxim? Pointing down river, if you please. Don't want to be caught with our trousers down, now, do we?' He turns to go and then adds, 'Up here, Corporal, nice and safe on the grassy bank. You might fancy a little sunbathing on the beach

down there, but I'd rather not have to explain to the CO why he is short one expensive piece of artillery when the croc that eats you uses it to pick his teeth.'

'Yes, sir. I mean, no, sir.'

The officer throws him a despairing glance and moves away.

By the time he has carried out the Lieutenant's orders darkness has fallen. Bram is still often caught out by the fleeting nature of an African twilight. One minute the sky is cerulean, the next crimson and scarlet in sunset, the next, ink blue-black. He pulls a small sketch pad from his pack and stares into the gloom. He knows the river is there. He can smell it. He can feel the thick wetness of it cooling the air above it. But he cannot see it. There is little moon to speak of, and the gathering clouds block what light it might have thrown down. Gaps between them show fierce stars, stars that can surely not be the same ones as hover gently glowing above England? One of Thomas Hardy's poems comes to him, where he speaks of 'strange-eyed constellations'. He remembers now that it was written about Africa, about a fallen soldier buried on the plains in the Boer War. Closing his eyes for a moment he whispers the last verse to himself.

" Yet portion of that unknown plain

Will Hodge for ever be:

His homely Northern breast and brain

Grow to some Southern tree,

And strange-eyed constellations reign

His stars eternally."

Bram recalls listening to Lilith read the poem, and the memory clutches at his heart. He pushes it away, and pushes himself back to his sketch book. He can barely see the paper resting on his knee. He shifts slightly so that he can look at the camp fire, over which some sort of supper is being cooked. As the native bearers and army orderlies lean over the low flames to tend the pots their faces are illuminated. In and out they dip. Appearing and disappearing. Visible. Invisible. Like some sort of mime show in a Paris theatre. Their skin, whether white or black, gleams and shines as the firelight reflects off the sweat-drenched plains of their faces. Their eyes burn an unnatural

orange. Wisps of steam from their drying sleeves mingle with the woodsmoke. Bram picks up a stub of charcoal and begins to draw.

Four Battalion, the Royal Lancashires have, Bram calculates, followed the Rufiji river for approximately an eighth of its length when Colonel Plessis gives the order to strike inland once more. The search for the elusive gunship is abandoned. What the Askari call the 'small rains' have begun, rendering the riverside terrain impassable. Bram can only wonder what the 'big rains' must be like, and fervently hopes they will have reached Nairobi before they start. Already they are forced to wade through thigh-deep water in many places. It is too tiring to jump at the sight of every snake that slithers past, so that the men are reduced to a tense silence, punctuated only by gasps and curses, and occasional bursts of singing from the native bearers, who seem immune to the exhaustion that the western troops suffer.

After several days of this terrible slog, the unit is once again out on the plains. It is a relief to be free of the grabbing roots of the mangroves and grasping vines that have so affected their progress these past weeks. The tall grasses have been flattened by the downpours or cropped short by wandering game, and are being replaced by bright new shoots, so that the colours of the landscape have altered. Gone are the dusty ochres and umbers of earlier months. The sweeping vistas have been repainted in a bolder, brasher palette of vibrant viridian shoots and leaves, and scarlet flowers on small shrubs. And it is not only the vegetation that has changed. The new carpet of green now provides a verdant setting for all manner of animals that have come to feed upon it. And upon each other. There are zebra, Thompsons gazelle, giraffe and Hartebeest. Big cats prowl a carefully judged distance off. Families of warthogs dart among the thorn trees and root in small wallows. They never look more comical than when they reach the safety of their dugout homes only to swing round and reverse through the entrance, so that they remain tusks outmost to repel those who might consider them lunch. Flocks of colourful birds have arrived to feast on the buds and

blooms thrown up, it seems to Bram, almost overnight in response to the rain. At every opportunity he draws what he sees, endlessly frustrated by his lack of paints.

The rain falls in deluges lasting an hour or two in the day, sometimes more at night. When it is raining, the noise is such that even the bearers cease their singing. The volume of water that descends is something Bram could never have dreamt possible.

How is it people do not drown? Why aren't small animals washed away, their homes flooded? How adaptable they must be to survive such a place, such extremes. And how I long for the temperate moderation of England.

When the rain stops, with a rude abruptness, everything steams in the heat. Men, mules, horses, the ground itself, so that all are shrouded in curls of pungent vapour for at least an hour. And then, so intense are the sun's rays, it is as if the rain never happened. The air is clearer, there is less dust, but once again the plains return to their hard, dry, unyielding state.

But the water has released more than plants from the arid soil. The combination of warmth and moisture provides the perfect breeding ground for a thousand types of flies and insects. Theirs is a short life, and so, the instant they are hatched from their maggoty nurseries, they set about living it with a frenzied zeal. There are fat tsetse flies that carry a painful, burrowing death in their bloated bellies. There are smaller, biting flies that inflict a less deadly but maddening suffering that might make a man wish for the release of oblivion. And of course there are the mosquitoes with their gift of fever and delirium. Bram has witnessed a stout corporal driven insane by the incessant onslaught from this winged plague. He became obsessed with swatting them at night, or wrapping himself in a net, or slathering himself in anything from petroleum jelly to ox dung. This last remedy repelled the smaller tormentors, only to attract the larger ones in swarms. After a month of this unwinnable war, the wretched man had surrendered himself to his own rifle.

The order is given to make camp. It is nearly noon, and the giant African sun is sapping what little strength the men still have. Many are ill, and it has become clear that they are no longer a fighting unit, but a sorry group of weary soldiers incapable of useful action. The aim now must be to reach the garrison at Nairobi before more of their number succumb to the myriad diseases on offer. The Askari troops set about

wielding their panga to clear as much of the vegetation as possible around the camp area, in an attempt to limit the mosquitoes in the vicinity. There are some flowering thorn trees and bushes, so that, with the tall grasses cleared, Bram has the impression he is in the exotic garden of some grand house in one of the more glamorous colonies. He wonders if Lilith has ever traveled to such a place. He can picture her in the shade of a cool verandah, a broad-brimmed hat casting a mysterious shadow over her beautiful face. He still misses her with a powerful force, even after all these long months that have turned into years. Even though the world he now inhabits is so impossibly far from the one where he knew her. Where he held her in his arms. Where he kissed her.

'Lost in thought there, Lance Corporal?' Father Michael comes to stand beside Bram and joins him in gazing at the far mountains.

'I'm trying to remember what the Yorkshire moors look like,' he tells him. He has not ever spoken of Lilith to anyone in the regiment. He cannot bring himself to do so. He is sure the clergyman would be sympathetic and would listen, but to recount the tale of love and loss would only be to relive it. Every soldier pines for home. There is no need to question precisely what home means.

Father Michael gives one of his short giggles. 'Fewer water buffalo, one would imagine. Bad tempered creatures.'

'I suppose I might be bad tempered if I spent my life pursued by lions.'

'Well, that is certainly true of poor Braithwaite. The man has talked of little else since we returned to the plains.'

'They do roar rather at night. Makes it hard to sleep sometimes.'

'I heard the colonel calling him a baby, and pointing out that there are far more appealing things for lions to eat just now than a scrawny Yorkshireman.'

The camp has been set up, the weapons attended to, ordinance stowed carefully away, and the two men take the opportunity to rest in the shade of a baobab tree. Bram pulls his sketch book from his kit bag and turns the pages slowly, studying his dog-eared collection of drawings. He feels a familiar excitement tugging at his stomach. It is a sensation so long buried he has almost forgotten it, but now he remembers. Now he experiences once again the thrill of that creative challenge. The

fizz of glimpsing what might be done, what could be produced, what possibilities lie within reach, if he had only the courage to grasp them. Beside him, Father Michael takes out a worn pipe and begins packing its bowl with tobacco. Bram shifts sideways a little so that he can see him clearly in profile and starts to make marks on the paper, tentative at first, then growling bolder. His sitter is used to this attention and seems entirely unselfconscious. Satisfied that his pipe is loaded adequately he sets a match to it. For long minutes, and several matches, nothing happens. He frowns and perseveres until at last he can suck air through the stem and flames leap from the bowl. There is a deal of puffing before smoke plumes and the thing is properly lit.

He shakes his head as he inhales the fragrant fumes. 'God finds ways to test us all,' he says. 'Either the tobacco is dust dry and has lost all flavour, or the rain has got to it and the stuff won't light at all. An Askari sergeant gave me some leaves the locals smoke to try.'

'Were they any good?'

'Dashed if I can recall. That whole afternoon is somewhat hazy. Thought it best to stick to my own blend after that.' He puffs on, and then adds, as if by way of an excuse for his small indulgence, 'Keeps the mozzies away, at any rate.'

Bram does not answer. He is deep in his work now, blocking out the negative shapes behind the clergyman's head, adding shadows beneath his eyes, shading gently to show the curve of his jaw. It is a pleasant face. The face of a kindly man.

Father Michael glances over at Bram and gestures with his pipe.

'That's quite a collection you're gathering there. What are you going to do with them all when you get home?'

'Oh, I don't know. Put them in a drawer somewhere, shouldn't wonder. I expect there will be plenty of work at the steelyard to keep me from my paintings. My father will see to that.'

'And you could stop drawing? Just like that?'

'I did once before.'

He raises his eyebrows. 'Looks to me as if you didn't. A pause, maybe, yes. A hiatus. But a full stop? No. Not you, Lance Corporal. You are an artist, in the same way that I

am one of God's clerics. We are what we are. No use fighting against it. By the time you get back I would have thought you will have had enough of fighting.'

Not for the first time Bram has the sense that his soul is laid bare to the chaplain, whether he wishes it or not.

The man seems to know me better than I know myself, he thinks.

He hesitates, looking at the man and then the image of the man in his hands.

Here is somebody who has built his whole life on a story of miracles. The work he has dedicated himself to is founded on a belief in things he cannot touch or see.

Would Lilith's revelations about her magic, about her coven, would they have seemed so very strange to him, I wonder.

'Tell me, Father, have you ever met anyone who had, well, who could do magic?'

'Tricks, d'you mean? I saw a conjurer at the Leicester Playhouse once. Made rabbits appear out of the most unusual places.'

'No, not that.' He smudges a line of the drawing with his thumb. 'I mean a person who... who has magic *in* them.'

He can feel the chaplain watching him closely now. The older man sucks on his pipe for a moment and then says, 'I sense that *you* have met such a person.'

Bram can only nod, still keeping his eyes on the sketch pad in his hands.

'And what did you make of this person?' Father Michael asks.

'I loved her,' he says. Then, 'I... love her still.'

'And she loved you?'

'Yes. At least. I thought so. No, I am certain she did. But... there were too many obstacles. We were too... set apart.'

The chaplain sighs. 'Of course, historically, my lot have not been particularly friendly to anyone able to do anything that can't be explained. The Church is supposed to have the monopoly on the miraculous. For myself, well, I think a person should be allowed to follow their true calling, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else.'

Emboldened, Bram says, 'She called herself a necromancer. I didn't know what it meant at the time.'

‘Ah, spiritualism. Indeed. Well, there’s common ground there, after all. Quite helpful really, having non-Christians insisting on an afterlife. Doing part of my job for me, if they can convince anyone of that, d’you see?’

‘She...’ Bram looks up at him now, needing to read his face when he tells him, ‘... she called herself a witch.’ The words sounds faintly ridiculous, spoken out loud, without her there to demonstrate the very real possibility of such a thing, but Father Michael’s expression is serious. Bram is appalled to find that his own eyes are full of tears. He tries to blink them away and hopes that the chaplain will think he is irritated by the sunshine and dust, nothing more. There is a long pause.

He is waiting for me to say more, but how can I? I don’t even know what I am expecting from him. Answers? A warning to stay away from her?

‘If life has taught me anything,’ at last Father Michael speaks through some vigorous puffing on his pipe, which has gone out again, ‘it is that there are more things in heaven and earth than any one of us is able to fathom. And that, whoever one is, wherever one comes from, whatever difficulties one faces, well, you know, there is no greater magic than love. None. I’ve seen what it can do. I’ve seen what people can overcome because of it.’

The silence that follows this observation crackles with Bram’s own desperate wishes. It is suddenly as if saw Lilith only yesterday. Held her hand only last night. Kissed her only a moment ago.

‘You think I should find her again?’ he asks urgently.

Father Michael takes his pipe from his mouth and points with the stem.

‘I think you should finish that drawing before the light changes any more. Don’t want you making me look any less dashingly handsome than I actually am, do we now?’

Two days later Colonel Plessis is so insistent that they make better progress he has them march on through the afternoon, regardless of the wilting heat. Every step becomes an effort of will. The men trudge on, focused entirely on covering the ground, no longer so much as registering the wild animals that jump and grunt in the undergrowth around them. No longer contemplating the enemy, or even home. They

are simply engaged in the business of marching, boot-thump after boot-thump, each pace taking them nearer the promised respite.

It is in this sleep-walking state that they step into the ambush.

The first Bram knows of it is when Private Braithwaite - who is in the middle of a long complaint about how his stomach is so bad he is now pissing out of his arse - ceases speaking mid-sentence. He does not so much as drop to the ground as fold. Neatly. First at the knees, then the waist, in two economical movements, until he is face down, clutching his rifle with a grip only the dead can muster.

In the next instant, chaos crashes onto Bram like a breaking wave. Men shout. The wounded scream. The mules bray in alarm. Cries in four different languages urge or curse or plead in an incomprehensible chorus. The high notes which accompany this human cacophony are provided by the whine and whistle of rifle fire. The bass percussion underlining it all is the mechanical crack-crack-crack-crack of the machine gun. Bram hurls himself to the ground and crawls for cover, losing both hat and rifle in the process. He flings himself into a small ditch, along with several other soldiers, so that they land in a tangle of flailing limbs. To the stink of sweat is added the stench of urine and excrement as terror loosens already rattling bowels. One infantryman is too slow in his effort to reach the hollow, and is propelled the last stride by a burst of gunfire that perforates him in a cruelly straight line across his back. Bram draws his handgun, without the slightest notion of what he intends doing with it. He peers over the top of the hollow and sees Colonel Plessis still on his horse, wheeling the animal about with one hand whilst firing into the bush with his pistol in the other. He is in the middle of the attack, and bullets strike the ground all around him, felling soldiers left and right, but, in a manner that is nothing short of miraculous, the commanding officer is not hit once.

Turning, he finds Father Michael next to him, leaning back against the far wall of the ditch. He wears his familiar expression of gentle concern, but there is a blankness in his eyes now. Bram reaches out and squeezes the chaplain's shoulder. He knows he is calling to him, shouting his name over and over, but it is as if he is hearing his own voice spoken by someone else, someone far away. He shakes Father Michael, but he does not answer, does not respond, does not so much as blink. As Bram watches, the

khaki of his friend's jacket darkens. The kit webbing across his chest turns first scarlet, then vermilion, with ruby droplets falling into his lap as his lifeblood flows from him and seeps finally into the thirsty African soil.

Bram feels himself struck hard on the shoulder, as if one of the panic-stricken mules has kicked him. He falls forwards to lie across the body of the dead clergyman, and a darkness even blacker than the African night claims him.