

Lonely as a Cloud

Bradley Stoke



When Albert Hiribango was told that there was an American tourist in his town who was looking for a lift to the capital, he initially had mixed feelings. On the one hand, he felt it was his Christian duty to give a helping hand to anyone in need, and he knew there were many out there who would be less ethical than him in extending this hand. On the other hand, he feared that his general loathing for America and all it represented would prevent him being the ideal host. His worries were further heightened when he met Hannah, in her skimpy tee-shirt and her large baggy khaki shorts. She was dressed so immodestly, with the whole of her waist revealed, her arms bared to the shoulder, and even some kind of jewellery pierced into her navel.

But he was not a man to go back on his word, even if the woman was clearly one of loose morals. However, this was typical of Westerners. They'd come to Africa bringing their preachers and their faith - which was, of course, the greatest benefit brought by the white man - enforcing their morals, and then, when it suited them, they changed the rules: now dressing with the immodesty that they had initially condemned in the African. However, Hannah was not a young woman. She must have been in her early thirties, but typically for a Westerner, she dressed and behaved like someone much younger. Albert couldn't help admiring Hannah's trim figure and her self-confidence. Her hair was cut expensively, two horns of dark brown hair against her cheeks and an immaculate fringe. Albert carefully placed her large heavy cases in the back of his jeep, covered them with a tarpaulin sheet and invited Hannah to sit next to him.

“So, you come from America?” he asked, as he shifted the jeep up into third

gear.

“Yup. California. Small town not more than two hours ride from LA,” she agreed, throwing a strip of chewing gum into her mouth.

“How many miles is that?” Albert couldn’t help wondering. He’s heard that roads in the United States were rather better than here, and he reckoned that two hours drive was probably more than the forty or fifty miles he could normally do in that time.

“A hundred or so, I guess. Though when you get to LA, the traffic’s so bad, you just don’t know your luck.”

Albert smiled grimly. So, Americans had bad traffic as well, but he doubted whether that meant dodging the insane drivers and straggly cattle he was accustomed to. “And so, what is it you do for a living?” He asked. Then qualifying quickly, because it might be that Hannah was a married woman, though he could see no evidence of a ring on her third finger. “That’s if you do work, of course.”

“I’m a sex poet,” Hannah replied with a smile.

Albert couldn’t help himself. “You’re a what?” he asked abruptly, hoping he’d misheard her.

“A sex poet,” Hannah repeated. “It’s the big growth area in poetry. You don’t write about landscapes, flowers or whatever these days. Some poets write about urban squalor and drugs and stuff. Like rappers only without the twelve inch discs. Some of us write about sex.”

“Sex?” Albert wondered, carefully steering his jeep to avoid the carcass of a

dog sprawled out across the road. “How can you find anything to write about that?”

“Well, it’s not as easy as you’d think,” Hannah remarked. This, of course, was contrary to Albert’s own opinions. Surely sex was something very private. Not something that one ever wrote poetry about. “After a while you run out of fresh words to rhyme with ‘fuck’. You know, there are the obvious words like ‘suck’ and ‘muck’, but not long you start resorting to words like ‘duck’. And you know, I may be broad-minded but I’m not as broad-minded as that. You know what I mean?”

“Not really,” admitted Albert. “But ‘sex poetry’. What exactly is it?”

“Poems about sex. The before. The after. The during. The wanting. The missing. The having. You know.”

“What about love and affection? What about the virtues of chastity and fidelity? Do these have a part to play in ‘sex poetry’?”

“Of course they do. You don’t just write about fucking. Although, fucking’s mostly what it’s about. And BJs, DP, BDSM, homosexuality. Everything.”

“Homosexuality?” wondered Albert, who reasoned that this was surely something the Good Lord would never countenance. But, he reminded himself, California was the new Sodom and there was no limit to these Americans’ depravity.

“Well, yeah. But naturally I’m not too hot on the men-men stuff. After all, I’ve been close, fucking close, close enough to touch and feel the heat, but it’s not something I can really understand. Not really truly. Though I have written a couple of poems about it. You know, from a woman’s point of view. But girl-girl. Well, that’s another matter. I used to get so much inspiration from my girlfriends, I could just

hammer the old keyboard all night long.”

“I see,” remarked Albert, who didn’t understand at all. He glanced at Hannah, hoping to see an expression that told him that she was merely kidding, but her face was set and there was a look of frankness in her face. Without a comment, he silently concentrated on the badly scarred road, past the parched fields and the odd scattered tree. Occasionally, an antelope would gallop by or a brightly coloured bird would swoop from the sky, but generally there was as little evidence that this was the land of big game, as it would be obvious to a visitor to America that he or she was in the land of the buffalo.

“Sex poetry is still poetry, of course,” Hannah continued. “You have to struggle to get the right words. To capture those moments that make it worthwhile. And that was something I was so good at. I would do poetry readings all through the State. And I got a bursary from several colleges for my stuff. And my first volume of poems, *They Fuck You, Your Mom and Pop*, did very well. For poetry anyway. I got interviewed on National Television. I even appeared on Breakfast TV. And my second volume, *Innocence Regained*, didn’t do too badly either. That had a theme of examining all the different variations there are. You know, transsexualism, incest, hermaphroditism, group sex, all that sort of stuff.”

Albert coughed. Hannah would be arrested for peddling that sort of filth in this country. “Where do you get your inspiration from?”

“Personal experience, mostly,” Hannah boasted. “I don’t believe I can really capture the essence of any situation unless I’ve been in it myself. Some sex poets, they

rely on watching sex videos or reading porn. It's all second-hand for them. I don't believe in that masturbatory shit. I've got to actually do it myself. Or be pretty darned close to it. I mean, I'm no transsexual, for instance. But I've had so many lovers. My best girlfriend and her husband and I, we've explored well nigh everything together and with everyone who's game. The only things I draw a line on are non-consensuality, bestiality, and, of course, child sex. Those sick fucks just deserve to die."

"Indeed," agreed Albert, though aware that when he got married to his wife so many years ago, she was what would be considered a minor in most Western countries. At least this American was showing some ethical considerations, he mused.

He set his eyes back onto the road as it wound around the ancient African landscape. Above were a few hovering vultures which told Albert just how far they were out from the nearest town. He leaned forward, and turned on the radio. He tuned it through all the different radio stations, most of them broadcast in different native languages, until he found an English language one playing Western music. Out trilled some Country music, of which Albert was rather fond. He enjoyed those mournful tunes with their lyrics of lost love and quiet despair. This was an America he could understand. Not one that revelled in excesses of godlessness.

Hannah was clearly not enjoying the Country songs as much as Albert. But she was too polite to complain, and fixed her gaze through the dusty window at the plains beyond, steadily chewing her gum.

"So, why have you come to Africa? And by yourself?" he asked after long last.

“Writer’s Block!” She replied. “That was the reason.”

“‘Writer’s Block’?” wondered Albert, unsure whether this was some illness peculiar to California.

“Yes. About a year and a half ago. Somehow, the flow just stopped. I just could no longer write poetry. I would spend hours on the computer, and inspiration just did not come. My muse had deserted me. And to date, it still hasn’t returned.”

“But why come to Africa then?” wondered Albert. “I don’t see the connection. Although this continent is famous for many things, poetry is, unfortunately, not one of them.” Nor, he almost added, was ‘sex poetry’.

“Well, I struggled for weeks, months. I had poetry commissions that I couldn’t deliver. My work of sonnets, *Lonely as a Cloud*, was just getting nowhere. The words just weren’t coming. I would imagine a sex scene or an erotic incident, but I wasn’t able to capture its essence. What I did write was banal and basically not very good. There was no rhythm to my verse. The poems had no structure and I couldn’t find words that didn’t sound clichéd or leaden. Sex had somehow become reduced to nothing more than gynaecological observations. My portrayals of love were clunky and unconvincing. Something drastic had to be done. I had to do something to break this cycle of despair.”

“And then you came to Africa?”

“Well, I was making love to Angela, who’s one of my regular lovers and she said I just had to leave California. Go somewhere. Travel anywhere. Just go to new places, meet new people, pick up things abroad. And, you know, except for a few

short visits to Canada and England, I'd never really left the States. Sure, I'd been around so many of the states: mostly on lecture tours. I've been to Oregon, Minnesota, Louisiana, Maryland, even Hawaii. But not for very long elsewhere. So, I put a blindfold on, opened an atlas randomly at any page, and stuck in a pin on whichever page was open. And it was here in Southern Africa. So that's why I'm here and why I've been travelling around here for the last six months. It's all because of writer's block and the Readers Digest Atlas."

"So you must have got to know Africa quite well."

"You'd think so, wouldn't you? But I dunno. It's always other Westerners I meet mostly. Other people travelling. Or people staying at the hotels. It's not as if there are that many Westerners here, but I seem to meet them. I've seen a lot of the continent, but I don't really know the people."

Perhaps, thought Albert, her profession might be part of the reason. That and her immodesty and strange views. He continued driving along the broken roads, the sun glancing through the open window onto his arms and onto the sharp crease of his smart brown cotton shirt. Even with his dark glasses on, the glare of the sun sometimes made it difficult to see too well.

Hannah had put on her own sunglasses, which, unlike his, were small and metal-framed. She smiled at him, and then without warning she started coughing. And coughing. Big wheezing coughs that quite frankly worried Albert. He wasn't sure whether he should stop the jeep. But after a minute or so Hannah stopped and wiped a trail of yellowish mucus off her lips.

“Are you alright?” Albert asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve not been feeling too good recently. A bit of the trots, this funny cough that just comes and goes, and sometimes a bit feverish. But I guess you expect that in Africa.”

“Do you?”

“Well, you’ve got so many germs here, haven’t you? Cholera. Typhoid. Malaria. Hepatitis. Everything. And, of course, AIDS.”

“Well, yes,” admitted Albert. “Most of that’s due to poor sanitation, unreliable water supplies and the climate. But AIDS of course came from America with the batty boys.”

Hannah frowned. “‘Batty boys’? I’ve never heard of them before. But I heard AIDS originally came from Africa. You know, from baboons or something.”

“Baboons!” snorted Albert. “There was no AIDS in Africa before you Americans left the way of the Lord and brought Sodom and Gomorrah back into the world.”

Hannah frowned. She studied Albert with his slightly greying hair, the sharp creased shirt and cotton trousers, as the realisation took hold on her that there were people in the world whose view of things was quite different to that which she took for granted in the Golden State. She was to spend several more hours in Albert’s company, and she didn’t want to spend them arguing on the rights and wrongs of things. Fuck! He might even approve of smoking, or be unsympathetic to vegetarianism, or deny the virtues of tantric sex. All the things she held dear. It even

occurred to her that Albert might not approve of sex poetry. But then this *was* another land, and it was best that she respect people's rights to believe and practise what they believed. As long as they didn't smoke in front of her or force her to eat meat. Or force her to indulge in any unnatural practices.

Albert turned up the radio and the rest of the journey was spent listening to a mixture of Country music interspersed with a curious mix of contemporary (and not so contemporary) pop music. The conversation they had veered away from anything about which either passenger could claim to have a strong opinion, and Hannah gradually began to warm towards her African driver. He was going to the capital on business that seemed to relate to the bank and finance house for which Albert was district manager. But he accepted Hannah's invitation to come back to her hotel for a drink.

The area in which the hotel was situated was markedly smarter than almost everywhere else Hannah had been in this country. The tree-lined roads were marked by consulates, embassies and the national headquarters of many multinational companies. Albert parked the car in the hotel's vast but nearly empty car park, and the two of them sat in the hotel bar. A man in a black suit and tuxedo was playing a selection of inoffensive standards on a huge white piano, while the large leather seats were occupied by a mixture of black and white guests speaking to each other in a multitude of languages, of which, naturally, English was the most prevalent.

A few drinks and a conversation about Albert's job was all that it took for Hannah to proffer Albert the invitation to join her for a coffee in her hotel room.

Albert wasn't at all surprised by this, though most such conversations he'd had with women markedly younger than him which had resulted in such an invitation had usually had a price tag involved, something which Albert accepted as part of normal life and an almost expected feature of his visits to the capital.

He was not at all alarmed when Hannah, in the privacy of her large hotel room, dominated by a huge television screen where two European football teams were silently running around amongst the on-screen score-cards, took virtually no time at all, and with no sign of shame, in removing her top and shorts. He was actually more surprised to note the light rash that coloured her bare shoulders and the bottom of her neck. She pulled down her knickers and Albert saw that the lips of her vagina were pierced just as surely as her navel. He thought it strange that Westerners attacked the tradition of female circumcision, but had no apparent qualms in practising genital mutilation themselves. Typical hypocrisy, he thought.

Hannah took it on herself to unclothe Albert and gave a whoop of delight as his penis sprang up relieved of his boxer shorts. Albert knew that he wasn't the most well endowed man there was (his times showering with other men after playing a game of rugby had disabused him of that vanity), but he'd heard that Western men were quite pitiful in that department, and Hannah's joy as she took his prick in her hands was evidence that this view might be true.

She took his erect prick in her hands and touched the glans with her tongue. Albert quivered with tension as he felt the soft warm moistness of her tongue on its tender edge, causing it to stiffen to its maximum extent. And then she knelt down in

front of him and guided his penis into her mouth: placing a finger firmly between his scrotum and his anus, and gulped it up and down her neck, her cheeks bulged out. This was something Albert's wife had never assented to. She had always objected to the smell and the association with urination. The only women to ever have agreed to that were the scrawny prostitutes who hung around the bars at the rather more modest hotels he usually stayed in. And although his penis was almost bursting with the need to release, Hannah had the expertise of these same prostitutes to ensure that he didn't reach his climax too soon.

She removed her mouth from his prick and ran her hands up and down his black torso and thighs, while her teeth worried at the strands of black short curled hair around the base. She took her mouth away briefly and coughed in a wheezy throaty way, while one hand kept a grip on the hard throbbing shaft of his dick. He looked down on her from above. Her hair flopped over her cheeks and he admired the whiteness of her skin. He'd never had sex with a white woman before and he found the contrast between the tanned flesh of her arms, legs and waist a frightening contrast with the anaemic whiteness of her crotch, arse and bosom. He supposed that in America, white people were probably as white as that all over. The strangeness of it almost excited him to ejaculate there and then.

But thankfully that was not to be. Hannah guided Albert back onto her large double bed, the thin sheets pushed back, and as he descended onto his back, she kept herself astride and on top of her. And then, the moment that defined sex, she positioned her crotch above his erect prick, and let it slide, easily and smoothly into

her moist vagina. She sank her crotch bit by bit down to its very base, supporting her weight on her long thin tanned legs, her arms falling lengthwise on either side of him.

“Ooh! It’s been so long! Days! Maybe weeks!” she gasped as she pushed her crotch slowly and smoothly up and down, while Albert lay recumbent, his own arms stretched uselessly on either side of him.

“Is that so?” he asked, watching with almost academic interest as his penis was alternately swallowed and eased out by her labial lips.

“African men! They’re all mouth and trousers!” She explained. “You don’t know what a struggle it is to get a fuck round here. I’m just glad there are a few women here who don’t mind.”

“Don’t mind what?” asked Albert, not really expecting an answer, but guessing her meaning. The perversion of the suggestion actually aroused him the more, and he took Hannah’s waist in his broad hands, the watch sliding slightly down his wrist, and drew her body close to his. Her breasts, so pert and white, pressed against the short curly hair of his chest, tingling his nipples and urgently commanding his buttocks to thrust harder and faster into her.

The two kept this up for several moments, uncomfortable as it sometimes was to fuck someone from underneath, even though Hannah seemed to be thrusting with an equal amount of urgency as him. And then they turned round, Albert on top of her: the position he most often enjoyed with his wife and which had resulted in three healthy sons, one healthy girl and a second girl who’d unfortunately died from a bout of dysentery when she was still a very young child. His penis thrust back and forth,

feeling redder and rawer against her rough vaginal lips while sweat poured down his chest, lubricated the hairs, and slid against Hannah's own shiny perspiring skin. These white women seemed to sweat so easily, the pearls of perspiration glistening on the pits of her tanned shoulders, and gathering in a pool by his prick. He pushed in and out, while every now and then he felt Hannah's finger press against the skin between his testicles and the hairs of his anus: a trick he'd been told by one prostitute whose body he'd enjoyed would keep his penis erect for that much longer. In. Out. In. Out. Slap. Slap.

And then, Hannah again broke off to cough. This time for longer and more violently. She pushed herself away from under him, and with a weak smile ran into the bathroom, where Albert could hear her cough for several minutes. Long enough for his twitching penis to gradually shrink to half its erect size. He studied the football teams on the silent screen, punctuated every few minutes by a startling spin of the image as a replayed shot or tackle was rebroadcast.

She came out from the bathroom, rubbing her lips with the back of her hand, and the two of them recommenced in their lovemaking as if there had been no break. Although Hannah had to first of all coax his penis back up to its full size. And their lovemaking went on and on, for longer than Albert could recall ever having made love before, whether with a prostitute or with his wife (even in the early days of his greatest sexual enthusiasm and especially now where it was usually perfunctory and not very frequent). She knew how to vary the diet to keep up their mutual interest, and even after he had released a mass of semen all over her breasts and waist (as she bizarrely

insisted), he somehow regained the energy to begin again. Outside the sun went down and they put on the bedside lamps to allow some, but not too much illumination on their fucking.

At one stage, she positioned herself head down, arse in the air, and got him to fuck her from behind. This was something he'd never done before, and was not too sure he really enjoyed. The sight of a bare back (especially one with that strange rash) was not as appealing to his eyes as a woman's face and breasts, but the strange tightness of her vaginal opening from this angle gave him fresh desire, and he pushed in and out of her with vigour, supporting himself by arms stretched out alongside her own. But then she took his penis in her hand, while still beneath him and motioned it towards her anus. Before Albert was sure what he was doing, his penis was thrusting into a smaller tighter hole, one whose type he'd never been in before.

At first he was enjoying it. The tight squeeze it gave his prick, the slight resistance it gave to his thrusts gave his lovemaking more passion and more thrust. And then his prejudices took hold. He was no batty boy. This type of sex was quite unnatural and almost certainly would require penance either before or during his after-life. He pulled his penis free and reinserted it into her vagina, enjoying its now familiar warm liquid welcome as it sank into its more capacious depth.

Albert and she spent the night together, their arms around each other, occasionally chatting, but more often sleeping. In bed, Albert found her conversation about the lovers she'd known, the sexual escapades she'd enjoyed, the variations she'd experimented in, that much more acceptable and even quite erotic than when he'd

driven her along the African roads.

Albert never saw her again. When morning came and they'd enjoyed breakfast together before his meeting at the bank headquarters, they'd made promises to keep in touch that both of them knew would never result in anything. A final kiss and a friendly squeeze of his sore testicles through his neat linen trousers was the last of Hannah.

At least until a few months later, when his wife drew his attention to the scandal of the death of a famous American Sex Poet who had died of double pneumonia, which it was suspected had been exacerbated by the disease that was decimating Africa. Much of the article concentrated on her fame and her controversial reputation, but also on the quality of her verse. But these parts of the article were the ones that concerned Albert the least.

Hannah had unsuspectingly been carrying the retrovirus for many years, and it had matured into its full-blown manifestation while she was in the African continent. It would not have occurred to a worried Albert as he contacted his doctor, but her lonely agonised death in the top floor of the Garret hotel was not at all unlike the traditional death of a poet that Hannah might have aspired to in moments of foolish romanticism.