

The Kenya Project

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Extract

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ONE

The Discovery was already running by the time Richard jumped in. Lucy was playing a Vivaldi CD and as soon as he slammed the door shut she gave him a stern look and drove away. The clock said seven a.m.

“Plenty of time,” Richard said, wiping the sleep from his eyes.

“It’s a five-hour drive, don’t be bloody silly.”

“I’m tired. Late nights don’t suit me.”

“Well whose idea was that?”

“It’s our first wedding anniversary, for God’s sake! Can’t you turn that music down?”

Lucy lowered the volume, but only two notches. Richard leaned back and tried to go to sleep again, while Lucy stabbed at the accelerator, heading out for the M4 and the West Country. The music still grated, and Richard found it impossible to sleep, so he gave up and tried to *look* as if he was asleep. Personally he’d rather have Radiohead than all this pretentious classical stuff, as he’d told Lucy often before.

She was a good-looking thirty-eight-year-old, and whatever she did she did so for a purpose. Richard was younger – twenty-five – and learning to be a stockbroker.

They'd first met two years ago, when he lived with his parents in Fulham, not far from the flat Lucy was renting. There was a fair bit of overseas travel involved in her job but he wanted her to buy a place.

"Why?" she said. "I'm only home for a couple of months at a time."

It was his idea to get a place together, as without her income he couldn't afford it alone, but this never troubled her – she was happy to subsidise him.

Their first meeting hadn't been auspicious. Lucy was distracted, her father having just passed away – and who wouldn't be distracted, given that he'd left her upwards of £10,000,000. She had no idea what to do with it and was inclined to trust no one.

By their third encounter her attitude had changed and she began to like him, though she knew he was an adventurer – especially when it came to advice on investments. She had a background in finance herself but still went along with his suggestions, trusting him more and more when in a few months her fund had grown by twenty-five per cent. How things had changed in just a few months.

He was dozing less when the Discovery left the M4 to join the M5. It was 9.15. He shuffled across and rested his head on Lucy's shoulder, a gesture she loved. She stroked his hair softly. Richard squeezed her hand in response and rubbed his head against her shoulder.

"Stop it!" she said at last. "Can't concentrate."

He straightened himself in his seat and left her alone. She pulled into a service station.

"I need some coffee," she said.

"Where are we?" He yawned, opened the door and

slowly clambered out. There was a chill in the air, and he put on his coat.

"I don't mind driving if you're tired," he offered.

"Definitely not! I want to get to Akeminster in one piece."

They had breakfast and coffee.

"Anything worrying you?" he asked.

"No."

"Not the new venture? I can take care of it, you know."

"I don't doubt that, Richard."

"You don't sound convinced."

"I don't?"

"Look – I've ditched my career, my job. Sometimes I don't think you really appreciate just what that means."

"We all run risks..."

"You've no regrets investing in the company?"

"That doesn't come into it. It was always my father's dream before he moved to London." The present owner had been a good friend of her father's. Often when picking up his roots he'd spend his entire vacation helping Mr Hawkes.

Hawkes had owned the factory, but due to financial losses he was about to close the place down. Bertram, an old family friend and an Akeminster solicitor, had told Lucy. With not much hesitation she'd decided to use part of her inheritance to buy the factory. She had no intention of running it herself, and suggested to Richard that he should. After a year or so, once it was re-established, he could move back to London. Richard saw it as an opportunity.

Lucy was the only child of John Moore, an accountant, whose wife had left him when Lucy was twelve. John

decided not to marry again, but all the same packed Lucy off to boarding school, which she resented – a feeling she hadn't entirely understood until her early thirties. She knew she was cold and detached, and not really capable of love, but that was all because her education and upbringing had been handed over to strangers, or an institution. That institution had taught her that all in life was a political negotiation, and that in order to be successful winning was everything. There was no room for sentiment. This extended into all her intimate relationships, so that Richard was more a possession than a husband, to be dealt with like anything she owned. Richard, having half worked this out himself, saw it as a price worth paying, because he was ambitious himself, and didn't see fidelity to his wife as forming any part of that. One might say their relationship was mutually material.

On graduation she'd found a job with a US merchant bank. Her aim in life was to earn a lot of money, as compensation for the things in her life that were missing. After six months on relocation in New York, her father unexpectedly died of a heart attack – a massive one. Soon after this she got to know Richard, and once, after a party, she took him home to her flat and seduced him. That's really where it all began.

They resumed their journey to Akeminster, and to lighten what had so far been a bad start to the day he asked her if she remembered their first visit to the opera.

"The one you hated, you mean?"

"I didn't exactly hate it. If it's not quite your scene, you never really know what they're singing about."

"Yes – you made that quite clear."

"Is that why you told me it was just a silly love story?"

"It's not easy to deal with the culturally ignorant."

Richard could see he'd get nowhere with this, so he shut up, and instead put his arm round her. She smiled, and kissed him gently on the cheek.

"So you do have a soft spot," he said.

"I do, Richard, I do. It's just that you don't always know where to look for it."

"Boss, I love you."

Richard came closer and hugged her.

"Get lost! I'm driving."

"Truce?"

"Truce."

Some thirty miles out of Akeminster the road was wet and thickly overhung with trees, darkly leaved and slightly depressing. To business, he thought.

"Those factory papers been finalised?" he asked.

"Yes, don't worry. Everything's set up. All you've got to worry about is managing the company."

"We've discussed it a hundred times, I know – but are you *really* prepared to let go?"

"So long as you don't interfere with what *I'm* trying to do, it'll all work out."

Richard hoped so. His mum had warned him not to marry Lucy, but as it was less for love and more for his career it had never occurred to him to take that advice. At the moment he was prepared to compromise everything, because he needed her.

"Sorry to be so snappy," Lucy said.

"I know. You've a lot on your mind."

"I knew you'd understand. I'm here for a week – then you're on your own. For about a year, I guess."

The CD stopped blaring.

"Thank God for that," Richard sighed, and switched off the audio system. He opened up his briefcase and took out the booklet Lucy had given him – "Ashgrov Engineering Limited" – all about the company. He skimmed the accounts page, and told Lucy they should give it no more than three years to succeed.

"I can fund it for five."

"If you allow that sort of timescale there's the danger it will drift."

"Listen – I'm the chairman, you're the MD. I'm prepared to give it five."

"Why can't I be chairman?"

"How would I keep an eye on you?"

The M5 was a long way behind them now, and they were deep into country lanes. Clouds were gathering and the atmosphere was grey. It was 12.30 when they reached the outskirts of Akeminster.

"I expect Bertram's at lunch. Let's book into the hotel and grab a bite to eat. Exciting, isn't it? In just a few hours' time the factory will truly be mine."

Lucy smiled and drove on to the County Hotel, taken by how quiet everywhere was. "Isn't it wonderful here?" she said.

Richard and Lucy had a light meal after checking in and drove to Bertram's office on the High Street, at 2.30 p.m. in time to conclude any remaining matters before the handover the following day.

TWO

After meeting Bertram, they drove back to the hotel, planning to be well rested in preparation for the next day. Unlike Lucy, Richard was restless and only managed to sleep lightly. He was woken at six by the birds. The hotel was situated away from the town in a pleasant rural spot, where you could hear foxes bark and the trundle of farm vehicles. Not much noise came from passing cars, especially at night. He wished he hadn't woken so early, as there was nothing to do. He picked up the notes he'd left on the bedside table and switched on his bedside lamp. The glare of it roused Lucy.

"God, what's the time?"

"Six."

"Bit early, isn't it?"

"Couldn't sleep. Bit apprehensive, I guess."

"Don't worry. Bertram's got everything in hand."

He returned to his notes, but must have dozed off, because when he came to, Lucy was towelling down after her shower. His thoughts immediately turned to sex, but he resisted and made his own way to the shower. When he came out, Lucy was battling to zip up her dress.

"Let me," he said.

She dropped her hands, and her dress falling open exposed her slender back. He spread his hands and very slowly reached the head of the zip to pull it closed. She turned round and very fleetingly had a glimmer of lust in her eye. He kissed her. Slowly, she pulled away.

"Don't tell me – we're going to be late," he said.

Lucy tied a floral scarf to match her dress, which was above the knee and hugged her figure. She did her makeup while Richard threw on his suit.

"How do I look?"

"Stunning as ever," said Richard, his eyes fixed on her face, which still retained its youthful beauty. He put his hands on her shoulders and kissed her cheeks gently, then knotted his tie. He looked at his watch. "Breakfast time!"

Over their grapefruit juice he remarked how fortunate they were that the Foreign Secretary, who was also the local MP, had agreed to perform the opening ceremony down at Ashgrow's. The Rt Hon Alex Millard MP was expected at 10.30.

"What I can't understand," Richard said, "is why Millard's so interested. It's no big deal and it's not as if there are jobs at stake."

"Oh, didn't I say? He knows Hawkes. I mean knows him well."

"And I suppose he's got his local profile to think about."

Lucy had a hat she'd ordered for the occasion. It was black with a pink ribbon. She slanted it meticulously, an operation Richard watched with curiosity. She reapplied her lipstick, then reminded him to ring Bertram's office.

Bertram wasn't at his desk. When, after what seemed an age, he finally came to the phone, Richard told him they were on their way. "See you in twenty minutes." He

pocketed his mobile phone, took one final look in the mirror and set off with Lucy for the car. He wanted to drive fast, but the road was wet and he was constantly washing the windscreen. Then of course he had to slow for tractors. Lucy could see his impatience.

"They're having a party after the ceremony," she said. "After that I want our first board meeting."

Richard nodded. They were now stuck behind a milk tanker.

"You'd better get used to this pace of things."

"Doesn't do to be in a rush, does it?"

"You'll adapt."

"Don't think I'll cope with staying in a hotel."

"Rent a cottage. That'll be cheaper anyway."

"Sounds ghastly!"

"It won't be forever."

"Let's hope not. I'm a *very* social animal, and there's not much action round here."

"There's always weekends in London."

They had now reached the town centre, where the *Akeminster Gazette* offices were prominent, which reminded Lucy that one of its reporters was covering the ceremony. She told Richard

"Some scoop!" Richard said.

"Well at least the locals will find out about us."

When they arrived at the factory car park Mr Hawkes was there to greet them. Lucy wound down the window.

"Good morning."

"Lucy!"

"This is Richard."

"Good to meet you, Richard. We're all ready for you."

They went inside.

“Your father would have been proud of you.”

“We intend to carry on the good work. Richard here’s all fired up.”

“Glad to hear that, Richard.”

“Can’t wait to get started,” Richard confirmed.

The whole place was neat and newly decorated, especially the boardroom, where Hawkes reminisced on Lucy’s childhood in the village, which to Richard seemed all rather pointless. He was glad to get away for a look round the factory. That proved to be not very thrilling either. There was a dank old storeroom, whose huge picture window offered a perfect view below of the whole factory and its manufacturing processes. He could see a handful of workers. The plant was open, with its two doors at each end lifted up. It was black with age, with all the machinery looking antiquated too. Most of the operatives were wearing earplugs. They were working on a partially assembled unit, which had been rolled out on a trolley. They split it into three sections, and once the welders had moved away an electrician started the engine. The plant doors lowered and simultaneously the lower part of the machine closed – this was to extract pressure and immobilise the unit before assembling it. With a big bang, the plant stopped. The engineers checked the alignment of the middle section using a gauge, then, after a hand signal, the electrician restarted the engine. It was all a bit cumbersome, and Richard wondered what he’d let himself in for.

The foreman examined the now fully assembled unit and got involved in an animated discussion with Mr Hawkes, and shortly after that he took one of his boiler-suited men aside and wagged his finger at him angrily. Mr Hawkes then left.

Hawkes in fact had gone off to a small office, from which he emerged with a young woman. She was tall, and had streaky blonde hair, which she wore loose. They returned to the assembly area, where Hawkes wiped down a surface for her to unroll the drawings she'd got. She pointed certain things out, first on paper, then on the newly assembled unit. The foreman compared the work with the drawings. The worker he'd berated picked up a fitting and showed it to the woman, who it seemed had made her point. It looked to Richard that they were puzzling over something new the company had introduced to its manufacturing process.

The woman returned to her office, and Hawkes on removing his overalls returned to his. Richard turned away from the window, wondering how he would cope with the technical side of things, and how to improve productivity.

Valerie, Mr Hawkes's secretary, interrupted him. "Mr Purcell is here," she announced.

"Be with you in a minute."

He strolled to the boardroom, whose large round table was highly polished, having eight chairs, two of which were ornately carved. These, he assumed, were for the Rt Hon Alex Millard, MP, and Mr Hawkes.

"Had a good look round?" Lucy asked him.

"Sorry to keep you all waiting." He pulled up a chair opposite Bertram and looked around. Behind Bertram was a white screen, and in the opposite corner a projector, where there was also a TV and video equipment.

"You two have met?" Bertram asked.

Mr Hawkes nodded.

"Alex is due at eleven, according to his agent. Got some business in London this afternoon, apparently."

"That doesn't give him much time," Lucy said.

"That's life in the fast lane."

"He is at least showing interest in local issues," said Bertram.

Hawkes looked at Richard. "I'll introduce you to key personnel."

"Excellent idea," Richard said.

"Please excuse us." Hawkes rose from his seat and led the way.

The factory occupied 12,000 square feet and was partitioned to make maximum use of it all. The finished units took up roughly half, the production area just over forty per cent, with the remainder as offices and other ancillary space. Away from the offices there were signs of disrepair. Hawkes explained:

"We were due to refurbish this summer." He opened a door marked "Authorised Personnel Only", which led into empty factory space and an inventory room, with a small table and shelves for stock. An employee was busy with paperwork.

"Andrew, please get Roger at once."

Andrew, a mild-looking man around the mid-forties, put his pen down and left. Richard glanced over his entry book, which was of weekly goods movements.

Hawkes opened a metal cupboard and took out some white overalls and safety gear. "Wear this," he said, pulling on his own outfit. Andrew returned with Roger.

"Ah, Roger, this is your new managing director."

"Pleased to meet."

"He'd like to meet everyone. Let's see now – Samantha Bishop, Stewart Hill, Peter Alderman, and Philip Bearish I think – and the computer staff. You might as well include

the assembly people. Get them all together, in the workshop say, there's a good chap."

"I'll get all the others, but Samantha's in a meeting."

Much of the stock, Richard saw, was covered in dust, and he wondered whether this was because it was old or surplus to requirements. Either way, it didn't look like good management, and now he had doubts that he could do much better. "I'll either succeed," he thought, "or dust will be *my* monument too."

Out through the window he saw that the employees had congregated in an open space in the assembly area. Roger knocked on the window to draw his and Hawkes's attention.

Hawkes said all the usual things. There were changes, yes, but this was a new beginning. The new boss, Richard Nunn, had everyone's interests at heart. They could all work together. There was a muted round of applause, on the instant of which they were joined by Samantha.

"Guys," she said, "you can surely do better than that!"

Everyone laughed.

"Richard, meet Samantha."

They shook hands.

"Sam heads up the computer department. She's also quality controller."

There was instant chemistry between Richard and Samantha, he with his brooding Italianate looks, she with her classic style – tall, blonde, elegant. She was wearing pink – a dress and a matching scarf.

"Sam's got a degree in computer science. These last couple of years, I don't know what we would have done without her."

"You'd have got through," she said modestly.

“Look after her.”

“That goes without saying,” Richard said. “After all, we’re in the era now when a company’s assets *are* its people.”

The Rt Hon Alex Millard’s car arrived on time, and was greeted by Bertram. Lucy was respectful, though not over-awed. He was fifty-five and had been an MP for twenty years. Uncontroversial, he was regarded as dependable, and had climbed the political ladder on that strength alone. He had no desire to reach the very top.

It was windy and Lucy held her hat as she shook his hand. She was warm and welcoming and thanked him for giving up his time. There were photographers in tow, and among his entourage was his agent, Andrew Green.

Millard took the chairman’s seat, and Bertram sat next to him. Lucy sat on his other side. Just as they’d settled down David Tolchard arrived – the reporter from the *Akeminster Gazette*. Val left him in the waiting room.

“I’ll let Mr Hawkes know you’re here.”

Hawkes meanwhile was treating his MP like royalty. “I’m delighted you could come,” he said.

“The pleasure’s all mine. I’m so glad you’re passing on this wonderful firm to such a solid family.”

With the news that Tolchard was here Bertram raised his eyebrows.

“That’s down to me,” said Hawkes. “I asked him to do the story.”

Bertram knew David’s reporting style and political views, which were usually anti-Alex Millard. Today though belonged to Mr Hawkes, and he had no wish to spoil it.