

Three

Claude 1948 Aden, Yemen



Gladys and Ray

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It is hot, stinking hot, hotter than Iraq, even hotter than Egypt, and I don't knock off for a couple of hours. The new Marelli fan we recently brought only seems to heighten the discomfiture, pushing the murderous hot air around my overcrowded office.

After two years, I should be used to it, but there are days, like today, when the heat gets to me. I can't wait for the weekend, and some relief when me and some of the gang, will be driving out to the beach. Alexandria it is not, but needs must, and it beats the swimming pool at the club, which is more like a bath. A few weeks ago, one of the chaps suggested we empty buckets of ice into it. Tempted as we were, we needed that ice to keep our beer cool.

I have been waiting for this day to end and for tonight. She is older than me but a real honey, a class act. Shortly after meeting, she told me she was planning to be an actress, but her folks had other ideas, and she ended up as a secretary to a bank manager. Her fate was sealed. The bank manager, Peters, married her and brought her to this, as she succinctly put it, "God-forsaken place in the middle of nowhere."

I'm her bit of fun, her bit on the side. That suits me down to the ground as I'm not ready to settle down just yet, not like Gladys, who recently married and moved to Ethiopia. That's another hot place, but then again, they all

are, at least, all the places we've lived. My beautiful sister, Gladys, was swept off her feet by a dashing aviator. Girlfriend, fiancée and wife, all within nine months. What a lucky man. I can only dream of finding someone as wonderful as my sister when I finally, if ever, decide to settle down.

Ray Foulger is the lucky man. But Gladys is lucky, too, as she found a good one in First Lieutenant Raymond Foulger from Texas. He flew Flying Fortresses in the war, earning the Air Medal with oak leaf cluster for his endeavours, bombing Germany before coming to these sunnier parts. Loving it up in the clouds, he just wanted to carry on flying when it was all over and quickly found a pilot's job with T.W.A. and is now seconded to Ethiopian Airlines based out of Addis Ababa. They met in Cairo, and it was love at first sight.

The bank manager's wife, Alice, doesn't want to meet my friends, saying the risk is too high and that she prefers to avoid a scandal if possible. That suits me down to the ground as I'm in enough trouble right now, running around and playing the field. Alice is a force of nature and highly promiscuous. I'm sure I am not her only beau. But, despite this belief, I love spending time with her. She is eloquent, stylish, and, above all else, very sexy. With childlike delight and provocation, she called me Errol Flynn the first time we made love and sniggered her mischievous laugh. She has used my nickname ever since. I call her Mata Hari for obvious reasons, which she accepts as a badge of honour.

We have been seeing each other for a few months already, and I feel it may be time to move on. Hiding affairs here can be tricky, plus we have a new girl in town, Sarah, who recently arrived with her parents from London, and I'm sure she has already noticed my giving her the eye at the club.

When I accepted this posting, I never imagined so many opportunities would be available. The place is swarming with the British as they hold on to the remnants of their empire. Aden has been a crown colony for ten years and is a stopping-off point for their activities in India and beyond. I got lucky and landed a job with a new airline setting up here—hopefully, another rung on my ladder upwards.

Aden is a melting pot of nationalities and cultures. Soldiers, bankers, traders and spivs are all here, along with their restless, lonely wives, passing the day in the club, attending coffee mornings and afternoon tea. So many of them sweating their way through love affairs to relieve the boredom. Aden is a smaller version of Cairo, a distant cousin. Nothing compares, or should I say compared to Cairo. But Cairo has changed since the war—less fun, less decadent. The locals are getting restless back home, and, like the rest of the world, they want payback for supporting the winning side.

The heat intensifies as the day drags on, and I call out for one of the boys to bring me iced mint and lemon tea. The small office is crammed with furniture and filing cabinets

and offers little in the way of comfort. As Harry said on my first day, "It is a shoestring operation for now, Claude." He is not wrong, but I'm sure we'll all benefit from his frugality if things take off.

When the boy returns with my drink, he hands me a telegram. The message sends a shiver through me despite the unbearable heat. I reread it. I cannot take it in; what on earth does it mean? I'm in shock. I do not know what to do, so I stand and stare out the window, out to the tarmac, not taking in anything happening around me.

A telephone rings and jolts me out of my trance-like state. I do not answer; instead, returning to my desk, I pick up the telegram and read again. "Hister Died."

It takes a couple of hours before my call connects to Addis Ababa, and I'm put through to Ray. I hope and pray that it is all a terrible mistake, but as soon as I hear the strain in Ray's voice, I know the nightmare is real. Gladys is dead, found murdered at home earlier today. I cannot believe what I am hearing. Ray is distraught, sobbing uncontrollably as he tries to explain what the police think happened.

If I understand him correctly, one of the servants they recently employed has disappeared along with several valuables from their home. The police are trying to track him down, their only obvious suspect. Ray asks me to fly to Addis as quickly as possible because there will be a coroner's inquest in a few days. From his distressed state, it is clear he needs some support, but my real incentive to go is to be close to Gladys.

I hang up the telephone and flop down into my chair. She was suffocated, smothered with a pillow, presumably to silence her screams for help as she interrupted the robbery. I am filled with sadness and rage. My darling sister is gone. My only sister, only sibling. Father disappeared, and now Gladys is dead. I look at the telegram. The misspelling makes me even angrier. "Hister." 'No, you stupid idiots, she was my sister, my beautiful, darling sister,' I shout out in rage.

Instinctively, I pull out the family photo I keep in my wallet. I took it last summer. Gladys with Mamma and Alex at the Shepherd's Hotel cafe, all smiling and so happy. I remember the smiles were bigger than usual as we laughed so much because the waiter delivering our drinks had leaned forward, and his fez fell off into Mamma's lap.

Alex took us there to celebrate the impending marriage of Gladys and Ray. She was more radiant than usual. So tall, slim and always beautiful, a picture of elegance wearing an outfit from Paris, with a matching coat and hat. An Ingrid Bergman look-alike, straight out of a scene from 'Casablanca'. We were all so excited—one of the last photographs of us together as a family before her and Ray's marriage.

My emotions are in turmoil. I'm angry and feel so powerless. Eventually calming myself, I realise I need to speak with Mamma and Alex. Have they even been told? I forgot to ask Ray. Mamma will be devastated. More

pain and grief, how much can she bear? Poor Mamma, who finally moved on after Father. Many thought she was lucky to find Alex, but that wasn't luck. Mamma, as her name means, is *a gift from God*, and the truth is they were fortunate to find each other.

Alex will also suffer greatly. He took Gladys and me to his heart and is the best father that anyone can wish for. He worshipped her, both of us, but her especially.

I'm composing myself for the dreaded call I don't want to make. I need to be on the first available flight to Addis to be at the inquest and support Ray as best I can. Most of all, I want someone to find the animal that killed my sister, and I want revenge.

Everything is spiralling out of control, and as I smoke through half a packet of Lucky Strikes in the hour that follows my call to Cairo, I know life as I know it will never be the same again. The call was horrific, speaking to Alex first and then Mamma. Her cries of anguish were heart-wrenching. I can't begin to imagine how they are coping. If Alex could get hold of the bastard, he'd rip his head off.

I spend the rest of the day clearing my desk and squaring things away with Harry and the boys to free myself for four days of compassionate leave. The gang here are swell about things, full of sympathy, and Harry is personally arranging a seat on tonight's Addis flight. I shoot a telegram off to Ray to say I'll arrive early tomorrow.

To make matters worse, through his sobbing, I understood from Ray that they were expecting their first child. I never knew Gladys was pregnant. He says they planned to surprise the family when we were due to meet in a few months. My beautiful little sister, a mum-to-be, taken so brutally, and for what? Some jewellery and cash. It makes no sense, and it is so pointless. I cannot stop the rage that keeps returning and won't be calmed.

I rush home to pack a few essentials. Home, like everything in my life, now seems so strange. I feel distant from everything and everyone. Perhaps the shock at what unfolded today is finally fully taking a grip on me. I'm dreading the inquest but even more so meeting Ray and facing his unbearable grief.

That they loved each other is beyond doubt to anyone who saw them together. True love, not the frivolous experiences I have enjoyed. Theirs was meaningful and deep, and we all knew it from that first evening when Gladys introduced her American flyer to the family. Aunt Nina had invited us over for dinner, and Gladys said she would swing by later and surprise us.

Unbeknownst to us, the surprise was Ray. The second surprise was that they were engaged to be married. Gladys always kept her cards close to her chest, only opening up when necessary. Less than a year ago, that dinner was such a joyous occasion. Gladys was beaming from ear to ear and couldn't take her eyes off Ray, who had been a winner with the whole family from the outset.

He is tall and athletic, in his mid-twenties, with a warm, easy smile and a lazy Texan drawl that made him an instant hit, especially with Mamma.

Teddy was in awe of his cousin's handsome airman and wanted to know about his war exploits, first flying sorties all over Europe and then the Middle East. To add to his many assets, Ray is also modest and made out that his was a minor contribution, but with my time served in the R.A.F., I knew that the Flying Fortress pilots had no easy ride, and many of Ray's fellow flyers never made it back.

After their marriage, Ray took his beautiful new wife to live in Ethiopia. What a splendid couple they made. My sister was a fantastic catch for any man, and I had seen with my own eyes many try to bag her, but she always slipped out of their grasp. Laughing when she once told me that Mr Right was still to make an appearance, and she would know him as soon as she saw him. Mr Right was now a broken man, and I was desperately sorry for his loss. How he and any of us will cope, I cannot fathom.

Back at the airport and with a strong Italian coffee I impatiently wait. My flight is due to depart within the hour, and as I sit in the dusty waiting room, the stifling heat has not eased from the day, I think about their special relationship. I reflect on their love for each other, comparing it to my infidelity, which constantly thwarts my attempts to find my true love. One woman at a time never really seemed like an option to me. The world was my oyster in Cairo, and every shell held a pearl. My mind

often drifts back to Cairo and our fun, and I now let it wash over me as a welcome distraction.

I would hang out with the gang; we called it our club, Johnny Overton, Johnny Pinere, Lula Dewick, Eddie Raise and Harry Stanton—all fantastic chaps. Teddy was always so envious and wanted to join us, but being a few years younger, we couldn't admit him. Our headquarters was a room we discovered under the B.O.A.C. clubhouse in Heliopolis.

We would grab hold of some chicks, bundle into cars and set off for a day of fun. Our favourite daytime jaunts were to the pyramids or the canal. We once climbed halfway up the Kleops-Kufu pyramid for a jazz jam session, taking a gramophone and records. We dared each other to climb to the top, where we carved our initials.

A local chap wagered the tourists he could climb to the top and back down again in less than eight minutes. Looking up at the giant towering pyramid stretching above, it seemed an impossibility, and many an unsuspecting tourist took up the bet and lost a packet. I timed him once, five minutes up and two and a half down, and he did this many times daily. The little chap was a cross between a goat, gazelle and bird. My record is eleven minutes 28 seconds.

Alexandria was another favourite trip, but usually for a weekend. We would scrape our money together and gather enough to stay at one of the swankier hotels. Boys in one room, girls in another, although it never stayed that way. We called it moral separation for people with

very few morals. Alexandria is such a vibrant place, but with talk of local unrest since the war's end, Mamma and Alex think there are troubles ahead and life in Egypt will never be the same.

The foreign journalists have names for Alexandria, calling it Egypt's summer capital, the Egyptian Riviera, and more often, 'The Jewel of the Mediterranean'. It is etched in our memories as our playground. One massive golden sanded playground. Those weekends away from Cairo and the prying eyes of our parents were weekends never to be forgotten or relived and filled with unimaginable fun. The war changed everything in Egypt, and a tiny part of me is pleased to have left. To have moved on to new places and to hold on to my memories of that special time just as it was.

The girls were always game and jumped at the chance to join us on our excursions. Some were such sweeties, and I had more than my fair share of them. We were an international bunch, me half Greek and half English, a few other English, some Italians and French. One Spanish and one American. It was little wonder we all speak more than one language. We would switch tongues and practice our linguistic skills during most days out.

And, the girls were as adventurous and sexually liberated as us boys. Was it the heat? Or, perhaps our elitist existence, foreigners in a foreign land?

No, I never found anything resembling a serious relationship; only fiery Yolanda for a brief period left any imprint, but was that love? Love like Gladys and Ray? Definitely not, their kind of love I have yet to experience.

Compared to Cairo and Alexandria, Aden does not even come close in what it offers. We have sun and sea, but there's no razzamatazz, glitz and glamour. Or soul. We have the beaches and trips out to Crater, but they are mediocre by comparison. Those glory days, the Cairo days, are over. Long over.

Harry makes an appearance and shakes me from my thoughts. He's asking how I am coping and says, 'You'll be boarding in about ten minutes Claude.'

In my call to Cairo earlier today, through her tears Mamma insisted that we bring Gladys home to be buried saying that she didn't want Gladys left with the savages that took her away from us.

I will have to address this with Ray as soon as I arrive, as in these parts, due to the climate, funerals typically happen very quickly. The thought of leaving her in Ethiopia is too horrific, so I totally agree Gladys must return to Cairo. With Rays standing in the airline, this should be possible, and I'm sure he will want her to rest close to her family.

I get the call and wander onto the tarmac, where a DC-3 Dakota noisily waits to taxi out. They are making final checks, and her gleaming silver skin glistens under a full moon and the nighttime airport lights. I board, settle into my seat, and strap myself in for a journey that only this morning was totally unimaginable. The pilot runs through our routing and safety instructions, but I barely notice as I am lost in my thoughts. I sit back and think, with a dread I have never known before, of what lies ahead.