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Martin Egblewogbe

PART I

They Call Am 'Lie Lie Fight'

Chapter 1

To-morrow

HE WALKED OUT of the office. The sun was shining strongly, a white hot spot that no one could abide at one. It was break time. He would not go back. Maybe he was mad. He did not care. His suit made sense in the air-conditioned trap of the office – in the exploding heat of the tropical outdoors it was insane. He kept the jacket on. His armpits became soaked. Sweat streamed into his eyes and made him squint. The powder was in his pocket. His destination was sure. The beachfront! The bar! Just as for regular lunch – only a little late this time.

The Universe had had enough of man already. An avenue with a verdant green beyond the trees that would bring joy. This was distress – this blistering land-landscape with motors and people rushing about raising dust and fumes and noise, only to retire when the sun died and to resume again to-morrow. This was a desperate situation.

But he would go back to work to-morrow. The clients would wait till to-morrow. The world would go on. The sun would come up. The radio would come alive. People would rush to and fro. Life will happen and history would repeat itself.

The dustbin of history empties into the landfill of tomorrow, he thought. Nonsense exists in the way we juggle words.

The end was coming. Islam was the religion of peace and the believers emphasised this with blood. There would be rivers of blood as the Jihad came around. Jesus was also coming. Everybody had had enough. The African gods had long retired to sterile spacescapes in the cold reaches of the Cosmos.

Man was now alone, left to his nefarious devices. To-morrow he would make all his apologies and ask for forgiveness. Remorseful, he would turn over a new leaf. He would pay his taxes. Everything to-morrow: when the sun came up again the world would be brand-new.

He now understood that society detested the recluse. As he became detached from it all, the only thing he wanted was more silence. Yet when he stopped speaking to people they considered it a hostile act, but how could keeping your peace be a hostile act?

Burdened, weary, the soul was fatigued and maybe it was all because of the abandoned cross. Come to me. *Ecce Homo*.

Somewhere in his mind a woman was weeping. It could not be his wife. He had not asked for a divorce. And he was not dead yet.

He did not care about his wife, not lately at least. In any case it was all a lost cause, this human experiment. His wife – she was impossible to fathom

and she cried and she cared about the good life and security. He cared about absolute truth and philosophy. Maybe he had been lucky anyway, marrying her. What if she had turned out to be one of those far out types – the hardened, non-menstruating she-men with muscles instead of breasts, who read Law and spoke in public with much passion and no sense. But those types never married. So his wife could not have been such.

Dreamy sex-starved Freud had a finger on the pulse of humanity.

Women wanted to be like men. Men wanted to be like god.

He wanted the stars. To see the god who made man. There was noise in the air. On the radio, the TV. In the newspapers. A concatenation of the usual fare. He had heard it all, over and over and over again. War! Victory! Defeat! Cancer! Pain! Love! Resurrection! Dead people arising at spiritual command, to the dismay of the heirs.

The bar! The beachfront! They passed him a dog-eared menu. A list of drinks, not recommended during working hours. An indulgence to be kept secret from the underwriters. He chose a liquid of great strength, whose alcohol content stood cheekily close to the half-past mark.

The refreshment was served, blood-red and glowing maliciously in a tall glass, with a dash of ice.

His fingers passed lightly over the health warning. Cigarette smoke is bad for you but good for the economy. But he did not light up. He wanted to smoke something else, something ultimate. A powerful drug that would make him grin endlessly. He wanted to make love, but not to an ordinary woman – a woman astonishingly lithe and beautiful, with tremendous hips and formidable breasts.

But such were not available.

He pushed the packet away, watching it slide across the table top.

The story had appeared in many versions. There were many forms of the same. The world had run out of ideas, the old templates were used over and over again.

He eased the powder into the drink. It was a sleeping concoction of the old-fashioned kind, in a powder, meant to kill. There was no way he could survive this. He drank steadily; everything down to the dregs.

The stars were glimmering in the sky. He could not remember having seen this earlier.

Chapter 2

Coffee At The Hilltop Café

THEY ARE SITTING just by the window inside the café and she is happily conversing with the man. I can see the two of them quite well through the large glass window; she is laughing heartily at some joke from her partner. Her lovely laugh – I imagine I can hear it now, peals like jewels falling from her lips . . .

I am seated outside in one of the chairs placed here for those who wish to enjoy the picturesque and refreshing view: the café is near the crest of the hill.

I try not to watch the woman all the time, concentrating instead on my cup of coffee and the view. The coffee is good and strong: the café has a tradition for excellence.

My chair is just a few feet from the street. There is a jewellery shop directly opposite the café; adjacent to it is a beauty parlour and next to the beauty parlour is a tailor's shop. The shops and houses that line the street are painted sedate and stately shades of orange, green and white; their glass windows glint in the late afternoon sun and each entrance looks as inviting as the other. It is a shopping street, but, being late afternoon on a Sunday, is quiet and deserted.

Further off in the distance I can see the mountain peaks against the slowly darkening sky.

Every Sunday afternoon at four-thirty I set off from my house and take a walk up the hill; I get to the Hilltop Café at about five o'clock and order a cup of coffee. Over the next fifteen minutes, I allow myself to enjoy the coffee and the scenery. When I finish my cup, I set off again, down the other side of the hill. Another fifteen minutes brings me to church in time for the evening service.

Today I was saddened, on taking my first sip, to glimpse at the couple inside the café. My afternoon was nearly spoiled, but I quietly drank my coffee, determined not to disturb my afternoon leisure.

So I share my glances between the street and the inside of the café and soon it is all the same to me, whether she is there, or whether she is not there: I enjoy my afternoon cup nearly as much as I have always done.

My fifteen minutes are up; I drain my cup and get up to leave. Inside the café the woman is listening intently to the man, she is looking him in the eye. I cannot tell for sure if the couple inside the café saw me, but it did not seem as if they did.

I reach the crest of the hill just in time to see the sun set.

This evening's display is unusually brilliant. The whole western horizon is tainted a mellow, mature purple, with the sun, a purple-gold orb, sinking majestically behind the tree-crowned hills. The town is bathed in gentle light and wrapped in beautiful shadows. There is perfect stillness and even the gulls winging across the western horizon do not flap their wings, but sail majestically across the darkening sky.

I stop in mid-stride and the beauty makes my head spin. I stand and watch, but the glorious sight soon fades and darkness begins to take over as the sun disappears behind the hills.

I resume my walk. I know I will be in time for the church programme. The street lamps come on, casting a dreamy brilliance onto the street. I think about the girl in the café. It seems that my Sunday afternoon has been spoiled. I'll never go that way again on my Sunday stroll, never pause at the Hilltop Café for my cup of coffee.

I try to enjoy the rest of my walk in the deepening dark. A few people pass me by and I nod quietly in response to their greetings.

I have reached the chapel. This evening an evangelist from another town will conduct the service and the faithful prayerfully await its commencement. The organ is playing softly and the music swells gently in the background.

When I am seated I call to mind the wonderful sunset that I witnessed. It was a fitting epilogue to my long-established habit of a Sunday afternoon stroll with a coffee break. There is something at least to smile about.

I open my Bible but I do not read. I close my eyes and listen to the music. It is beautiful.