

# THREE DEGREES OVER

## By Brian Aldiss

On the flight back to England, Alice Maynard found herself restless, and in a curious state of mind generally. She avoided conversation with the other passengers, who, she saw immediately, were in commerce and not the sort of people she usually mixed with. She tried to withdraw into herself. Really, she had been *so* outgoing in the States.

So Alice refused all offers of alcohol from the solicitous hostess in First Class, rejected the proffered magazines, donned her eyepads, and lay back as far as possible in what the airline liked to call her armchair.

Gradually, the drone of the Boeing's engines faded into the background of her thought. Yet she remained tense, trying to vanquish that unease which always attended her on transatlantic flights, despite a helpful air-sickness pill.

Perhaps it was not so much the fear of the air — or of the weary hours to be passed before they reached London Heathrow — as the fear of the ocean. On European flights, she felt no such unease; she had made such excursions recently on behalf of her college fund-raising activities. But that great stretch of ocean beneath the plane, directly below her seat, that great stretch of amorphous water, grey, insatiable, impossible to comprehend, represented a threat. Her life, and her husband's, bless him, were so secure, so free of the ghastly crises which afflicted other Oxford people in their mid-forties — so, in a word, if indeed there was such a word, *so un-oceanic*.

Really, the Atlantic was like the subconscious. Drop into it and you were lost. The very notion of falling into that mass of water, as into unforeseen circumstances, and being swallowed—becoming an unconsidered mote and being swallowed — was enough to set the pulses racing.

Of course, one told oneself that that was nonsense—some clever people would call it a manifestation of... well, rather personal fears. One thought of other things. A well-disciplined mind could do that with confidence. For instance, one thought of that nearly completed critical edition of Emily Dickinson's poems, to be published by an American university press. It would be a pleasure to return to one's desk in Septuagint College and resume one's ordinary work.

As freezing persons recollect the snow  
First chill—then stupor—then the letting go

A disconcerting person, Emily Dickinson, but her shrinking from the sexual side of life was something with which one could entirely sympathize.

She roused, removed her eyepads, and looked about the cabin. Everything was as normal. All armchairs were filled, mainly with men, most of them sipping champagne, as if a flight were something to be celebrated, like a wedding.

Alice had thought that a white-haired man was sitting in the chair next to her. She saw she was mistaken. A heavily-built young woman was leaning forward, right elbow on the armrest, writing left-handedly on a notepad balanced on her lap. Her shoulder-length hair obscured her face, though Alice moved position to try and see more than a slab of cheek. The woman wore a dark heavy dress with three-quarter-length sleeves.

This was the source of Alice's unease.

No, what an absurd thought! True, there seemed something vaguely unpleasant about the woman, but that was nobody else's business. Alice did not have to talk to her neighbour.

She lay back, more determined than ever to sleep. It was silly to worry. She was not the worrying kind, any more than Harold was. The fund-raising tour of the States had tired her, which was natural enough. Now she could rest until they reached Heathrow and English soil. Heathrow! Suddenly the word sounded so English.

Alice had enjoyed lecturing about the need of the University, and Septuagint in particular, for funding. The American audiences had been most receptive, and generous as Americans always were. She had spoken eloquently—and not without quoting American authors — of the opportunities facing Britain in 1988, of Mrs Margaret Thatcher's remarkable drive to revive the economy, and at the same time of the considerable drawing in of horns to which the University had been forced. She spoke of Oxford, that ancient seat of learning, to which universities all over the world still looked for example. And she asked for their support over a difficult period. In fact, she was asking for no more than American colleges everywhere asked of their alumni, and many Americans had benefited from the Oxford system. It had been calculated that there were some six and a half thousand living American Oxonians, many of them leading distinguished careers as a result of their education.

Nor did she refrain from alluding, in the closing passages of her speech, to Mrs Thatcher's wish for a moral revival in England. She approved of that, as evidently did the majority of her audiences, fired by the example of their own President (soon, alas, to step down).

The mere notion had a sense of mission achieved, and Harold would be proud of her. That success would certainly constitute no impediment to his own career in the University. Dear Harold.

She thought of the woman at a mid-Western university she had visited: Frances someone, wife of a lecturer in English Literature. Frances was a New Yorker, totally lost in Nebraska. 'Oh, yes,' she had said, in answer to a remark of Alice's, 'we sure are quiet here.' A quick look round to see if anyone on the faculty might be listening and then, traitorously, raising her glass almost to her lips, 'In fact, I sometimes wonder if we aren't all *dead*.'

Alice smiled at the recollection. How different Oxford was from Nebraska . . . Oxford, the very centre of intellectual life.

Her thoughts drifted, but she was not asleep. Again the drone of the plane seemed to echo a deeper unease, which again came to the surface of her mind. She opened her eyes.

It seemed as if the woman in the adjacent chair had shuffled herself closer. Her dark-clad arm now overlapped the armrest, a loop of sleeve hanging down on Alice's side. An old-fashioned analogue watch and a chunky bracelet on the right wrist might be observed through half-closed lids. The thick dark hair—really, it gave no appearance of having been washed recently—obscured the plane of the cheek. The woman was still writing, writing, with savage intensity.

The nails on the hand clutching the pen were bitten down to the quick—always a sign of savagery. Alice glanced at her own hands, small, neat, the nails immaculately well maintained, and covered with a transparent varnish to protect them from the world.

Drone drone drone went the engine noise, almost as if it were the sound of the pen against the paper.

Somehow, this woman—this *squaw*—seemed immense and, because immense, threatening. Alice herself was of middle height —*petite* was the word her mother had used – with small, delicate, but sharp features. Her body likewise,

really. Not really built for child-bearing—and, after all, a modern feminist, a career-woman, had no place in her life for the bother of children. Harold had seemed not to mind. Thank God, they had both made rational choices in marrying each other (she had kept her maiden name because, well, other considerations apart, Maynard was to be preferred to Badcock) ... Neither of them had ever carried the sensual side to excess. Dear Harold. Somehow, Harold Badcock was Harold Badcock in the way that Oxford was Oxford, an exemplar of rationality and decorum.

Supposing the aircraft went down into that awful grey ocean... Then, she was sure, Harold would be the last thing she would think of as she drowned.

Harold, and Emily Dickinson. Certainly not the woman in the next seat...

Who was still writing ...

She knew it, even without removing the eyepads and opening her eyes. Even as she sank, she would know the woman was still leaning forward, great uncouth lump, writing. Writing what? Writing out her soul? Writing out menus, more like? She was a big clumsy woman in middle age, her figure gone, a greedy eater, probably greedy about everything, greedy in the way clouds were greedy when they obscured the sun, just when she was sitting out in their neat little garden in Chadlington Road. That was where she liked to mark papers, under the laburnum tree Harold had planted when they had moved in, many years ago.

Leaning forward to study the papers more clearly, she realized that she could get a better view of the pad on which the squaw was composing. The woman, writing in that cramped way, left hand curled about the pen, used a bold sloping script. It unravelled itself across the page. Now it was forming a name.

Alice read the name. Harold Badcock.

She uttered a grunt of dismay and surprise.

The squaw turned head and shoulder and looked at her. Great dark eyes stared up from under broad brow and untidy hairline. Generous lips drew back in a smile to reveal small, pearl-like teeth. Little beads of moisture dotted the upper lip.

‘Did you say something?’ The enquiry was couched in a low voice, almost a murmur, although it contained a hint of a rasp on the V sounds.

'My husband ...' Alice said. She did not know how to complete the sentence, an unusual slip for a lady with an Oxford degree in English. She gestured towards the squaw's pad.

'Is your husband a writer, too?' asked the squaw. 'I am a writer of sex novels.' She gave her name. Alice missed it, as she groped to orient herself. Those large eyes were disconcerting and somehow overheated.

A dangerous woman, no doubt of it.

'How do you do. My name's Alice Maynard. I'm from Oxford.' There were always polite formulae to which one could adhere. But the mention of Oxford in no way deterred the squaw, as intended. She leaned closer to Alice, so that Alice could smell a warm perfume, reminiscent of a flower, the name of which could not be called to mind.

'Oh, you're from Oxford. Then you can help me. I'm heading for Oxford, and this is my first time away from the States. I'm real excited, as you can imagine, and greatly looking forward to the adventure.'

This was said with a direct simplicity which normally would have had its appeal for Alice. The woman was younger than she had supposed, although it was difficult to judge her age at all precisely.

'And whereabouts are you from?' Alice asked, rather sharply.

'Oh, you won't have heard of it. A place in Nebraska. Just a hick town, I guess. Right off the map.'

There were formalities in these exchanges.

i was in Nebraska recently. Lecturing.'

The squaw extended her hand.

'I'm sure we are going to be friends, Alice.'

Reluctantly, Alice accepted the hand.

It was noticeably warm, as if it had been hiding somewhere snug.

'You can show me all the delights of Oxford,' said the squaw.

\* \* \* \*

And so Felicity Paiva arrived in Oxford, England. Alice was not entirely sure how.

The Victorian house in Chadlington Road seemed curiously dim — dim and cold behind its formal stone exterior, although the month was June. In this context, Felicity (Alice was still trying to banish the word 'squaw' from her mind), Felicity gave off an impression of light and warmth, as if she had never presented herself as dark. She strode with a determined step into the hall, and in no time was going from room to room, throwing open doors, exclaiming with interest and delight.

'Such a heavenly home! So British! And you've kept it in period, which is such a smart move!'

Alice was vexed by this remark, since she and Harold had updated the house in many ways, only five years earlier. While tearing out the old central heating and installing new, they had daringly put in new patio windows looking on to the rear garden (where they had done away with mouldy flowerbeds full of Michaelmas daisies and had built a tiled area complete with ornamental pool and a lion's head which dripped water into the pool), as well as redecorating most of the house in a lighter, more 'eighties', way. They had also knocked down the wall of the old breakfast room to extend the kitchen, and put in a super scarlet Aga such as the Vice-Chancellor's wife possessed. This was not what Alice called 'keeping it in period'. Besides, they had David Gentleman prints on the hall walls, framed in aluminium frames.

Felicity cooed over her bedroom, though in a rather disappointed way, and inspected the bathroom without comment. It was true that the shower curtain should have been renewed. She strode over to her single window and looked towards the Cherwell, over the garden.

'Nice yard you have. Well, well, I wonder what's going to happen to me in a place like this ...'

'I expect you'll do much as our other American tourists do,' said Alice. 'I anticipate that my husband will be home in about an hour.'

Her intention was to speak to Harold and prepare him before he got sight of the girl. She was sure he would be serious, although, Harold-like, he would attempt not to show it. Harold was as well-mannered, she considered, as anyone

in the University, including the stiff old Prebendary Porkadder, who lived in the next-door house with his housekeeper. And Harold could not abide young women — though of course he was too polite to manifest dislike, even of *trendy* young women.

She sat down at her dressing table, feeling a curious lethargy overcome her. Her shoulders sank, her head sank. Perhaps she even went into a doze, which was very unlike her usual alert self.

When Alice roused herself, it was with the realization that her husband was already in the house. She heard his voice downstairs, talking in the rather affected boom he put on for strangers. Drone drone drone.

It seemed a longer walk than usual from the bedroom, along the passage, down the stairs and into the living room. The house really was surprisingly dark. And chilly. And quite unfriendly.

Harold Badcock, Tyndale Lecturer in Medieval European History, shot his wife a look of hate as she entered the living room. He stood by the empty grate, resting an elbow on the mantelpiece, so as almost to prod the Meissen shepherds and shepherdesses. Upon his wife's entry, he drew back slightly from Felicity Paiva and straightened. She had changed into a golden dress of a loose-flowing kind, and had brushed her hair back to reveal a high, broad brow. She was smiling at Harold. One hand, with its bitten nails, rested on the mantelpiece, also close to the innocent shepherdesses.

Harold Badcock conquered his glance of hatred immediately, and came forward with his arms out to greet his wife. She went to him. He clutched her elbows.

Harold was slightly fleshy at this time of his life, in his mid-forties. They lived well in Magdalen, no doubt of it. He was balding fast, with a monk's tonsure. That, and his pointed nose and small moustache, gave him a rather naughty, pixie-like look, quite at variance with what Alice considered his real character. Harold was a tie-wearer, against the fashion, but he had already removed it, and his grey jacket, which surprised her. The room was full of a tension Alice had not known before, not even during their sometimes rather stiff North Oxford dinner parties.

'So, we've got a visitor, Alice. How jolly!'

This remark was so out of keeping that Alice became alarmed.

'I hope you don't mind, Harold dear.'

'Mind? Of course I don't mind. Felicity may find us a bit stuffy in our ways.' This was surely one in the eye for Alice, but Harold, without pause, turned to address the golden visitor. 'But are you all right, my dear, after your long journey? Not running a temperature, are you? I thought your hand felt rather hot.'

'Three degrees over,' she said, as if quoting, languid of voice as she stared across the hearthrug at him, one hand up to her bosom, as if protectively.

Or as if saying, the hussy, Look at my ample—too ample—bosom, Alice thought. Really, she could not think what had come over Harold. He was eyeing the young woman as if she were a — well, a confectionery shop.

'What's that?' she asked in best classroom style. 'What does "Three degrees over" mean?'

"Three degrees over." That's my permanent body temperature. There's a medical term for it. I'm always three degrees above normal blood temperature. Have been ever since puberty.'

It was amazing, thought Alice. Almost as if key words had been uttered — body, blood, puberty—Harold was drawn across the hearthrug to Felicity's side. He put a hand on her forehead, an unusual and disturbing expression on his face.

'By George,' he said. 'You're not ill? Don't want to go to bed?'

'I'm not sick, no. Just kind of feverish compared to other folks. One of my boyfriends said that it's as if I was from another planet. Venus, most like.' She was grinning at Harold in what could only be construed as a saucy way.

He kept his hand on her brow, smiling in a little-boy manner.

'I expect you have a lot of boyfriends.'

'You don't get the effect in full force on my forehead, Harry. Try a hand a little lower — in my armpit, for instance.'

'Really! Why should Harold want to place a hand in your armpit?'

There was no response to Alice's question. Harold was more preoccupied with medical matters. The girl lifted her arm, he slid his hand in. Immediately his



face lit up, as if he had found a treasure.

‘Mm. Quite a fever ... Amazing. And of course it’s like that all over, one gathers?’

Felicity laughed. ‘What do you reckon? Want to check it out?’

Although not loud, her laugh seemed to reverberate in the room, destroying its solemnity. For a moment its two square bay windows, which stared across the road to the rear of the Dragon School, seemed to lighten as if with sunlight, and the carriage clock on the mantelpiece chimed five as if in sympathy.

‘I expect you have a lot of papers to mark, Harold,’ Alice said.

‘Could we have some tea, do you think, Alice?’ he asked her, in a remote tone. He looked at her impersonally, solemn-faced, as if they had never met before.

Fifteen years of determined feminism dropped away. She turned to do as she was told. As she did so, she saw her husband remove his hand from Felicity’s armpit and place his fingers daintily to his nose.

She slammed the door behind her, then instantly regretted that she had left them shut in alone together.

\* \* \* \*

She had no memory of making the tea. All she knew was that she was back at the closed door with a tray, wondering what Harold and Felicity might be doing on the other side. The cups rattled in response to her uncontrollable trembling. She knocked.

Harold and Felicity were sitting together on the sofa, heads close. They straightened as Alice entered, laughing in a conspiratorial manner.

‘We’re out of ginger-nut biscuits,’ she said severely.

Barely looking at his wife, Harold said, ‘I thought I’d drive Felicity down to see the College after we’ve had a cup of tea.’

‘Harold, Felicity may not want to see Magdalen, she’s probably tired after her journey. I expect you’re tired — you generally have a sherry and a nap when

you come home at this time, and, besides, there are those papers to correct and I hoped you'd help me unpack. I want to have you about the house because I brought you a little souvenir from New York, only it may take a while to get it out of my suitcase. Don't you think it looks like rain? I should save the trip until the weekend, when we can all go, besides, she'll be bored with all your old historical studies, she'll want to be with other people of her own age, other Americans, perhaps — I mean, there are plenty of them about the place, goodness knows, and that shirt should really go in the wash straight away.'

'Let's have our tea, dear,' he said, with a show of patience. 'Why is there no chocolate cake? Felicity writes sex novels, you know? *Skirts* was her last title—just that, *Skirts*, one word, very cute. Arouses the interest at once. Not published over here yet.'

'I should imagine not,' said Alice. 'And the traffic will be so congested at this time of afternoon, you'll hardly get down the High at all, and it's clouding over, and Felicity should acclimatize herself before she goes out, particularly since Magdalen is so cold at this time of—'

'It'll be just fine, Ally,' Felicity said.

'My study's always warm,' they said simultaneously.

When they had left the house, Alice went back upstairs to her bedroom. She undressed. Naked, she walked into the bathroom and there surveyed herself in a way she had not done for some years. She put her hands under her breasts and lifted them slightly. True, they were not particularly large, but they were keeping their shape well. She had not ruined them by child-bearing.

She ran the bath, loading it with bubble-bath, and sank down into the water. Again she felt overwhelmed with fatigue, but sly, lecherous images slunk into her mind, like a guilty dog sneaking in after a roll in something bad. She was simultaneously pleased, revolted and delighted. The thought of Harold's penis, erect and engorged, slipping between the hairy lips of Felicity's vagina was something that no counter-thoughts of the corridors of Septuagint could dispel. She moaned and clutched her sudsy breasts.

Perhaps she drifted off in the bath. In a vivid dream, someone offered her a plate of peacock breast. She refused, as she usually did. She woke and dressed, spraying on perfume in a manner quite unlike her usual self. A good burst between the thighs.

It was after ten o'clock, and almost completely dark, when Harold and Felicity returned to the house. He was holding her arm, looking peculiarly young and unprofessorial.

Alice had the impression, as she rose from her chair, that again Felicity was dark and hag-like, her eyes glittering from a wigwam of jet-black hair. It was difficult to make out the essential nature of the girl: it seemed to change with the time of day, the season.

'Did you care for the look of Oxford?' she asked, striving for a conversational tone.

Felicity merely shrugged and looked up at Harold, as if expecting him to answer for her. Then she gazed at Alice through languorous and drooping eyelids. It was dim in the living room, and Alice could find nothing else to say. She seemed to stand staring at the two of them, and they at her, for a long time, while outside, where night was making of the road a strange country, the vegetation grew black and monstrous.

'I think we'd better go to bed,' Harold said, shuffling impatiently.

Alice's heart stopped.

He clarified his statement by adding, 'Felicity's tired and wants to unpack.'

Watching the girl slink from the room without so much as a goodnight, Alice took hold of her husband's hand. She could almost hear him sub-vocalizing the dreadful phrase — how vulgar it was — 'three degrees over'. As soon as Felicity had left, she let go of him and they stood side by side, as if waiting for someone to photograph and frame them, listening to the slow ascent of Felicity up the stairs. She was heard to pause before going into the bathroom, the latch of which gave its distinctive click.

Harold raised a finger, to indicate that they should listen. They heard nothing until the sound of the toilet flushing. He smiled and licked his lips.

'Let's go to bed, my dear,' Alice said. 'I want you to make love to me tonight.'

'It's been a long time ...' he said, letting his voice die away.

'I expect we shall remember how to do it. Come on.'

‘You look very tired, Alice.’

‘Come along, Harold.’

‘Haven’t you got a headache?’

Up in the bedroom, she switched on her bedside light, leaving off the other lights. Rapidly, she undressed, to prance before him, coquettishly covering and uncovering breasts and quim with outspread hands.

‘Disgusting,’ he said. ‘A Septuagint fellow ...’

But when he also stepped out of his clothes, she saw he had an erection. She flung herself upon him, going down on her knees to kiss the ramrod. A long time since she had done that. It felt marvellous, both hard and upholstered. Perhaps it had grown fatter since she had last stroked it. She wondered about the other men who had been on the plane, and what theirs felt like. What fun to have them all lined up for inspection ...

Once in the bed, they fell on each other, doing it sideways, Harold bending over to get her nipples teased between his teeth, while he placed a middle finger over her anus in the way he knew she enjoyed. She groaned and cried, feeling, oh, so much readier than usual. That it was all undignified, that it was really rather unpleasant, that it was somehow dehumanizing for Harold — these considerations went by the board as he finally rolled on top of her, grunting fiercely in a tone no one at Magdalen would have recognized. She called her affirmatives and gasped, clutching him tight as she had not done in years.

‘Oh, that was so lovely,’ she whispered, gazing into his eyes.

He was smiling too. ‘OK, dear, fine, *great*, now, if you don’t mind, I want to pop into Felicity’s room and just say goodnight to her. Won’t be long. You get some sleep. You must be exhausted.’

Alice sat upright, heedless of her swinging breasts, still wet with his saliva.

‘Harold, how dare you? I forbid you to go.’

‘No, dear, it’s OK,’ he said, reassuringly, although he never used the word ‘OK’. ‘I promise I won’t be more than an hour. Only she is feeling desperately homesick. She misses Nebraska. I’m sure you understand. Poor girl, so far from

home, and, you realize, her sexual quarters are also three degrees over, and what man could resist the thought of that? Can you imagine how deliciously hot they'll be? It would be preposterous — and cruel besides — not to go in and comfort her a little. She is our guest, after all.'

'Harold, please, what are you saying? After all these years—that's adultery ... What would Prebendary Porkadder think?'

'Now, Alice, dear, don't get worked up, it's just a little hospitality. We don't want Americans to think we aren't hospitable, and besides, she's bound to be lying there thinking of sex, poor little thing, and it'll be all wet and hairy, and so deliciously—'

As he was talking, he was sliding out of bed, still trying to face his wife, but finally leaping up with a glad cry and rushing for the door, clad only in his pyjama top, his penis smacking against his thighs as he ran, as she noted.

'Bugger,' she said. Seven years ago, she had allowed a man from Christ Church to do it to her on a sofa during a Commem ball, and really she had not liked it. His breath had smelt of beer and his shirt of mothballs. And he had asked her afterwards if Oxford had moved.

Since then, nothing but virtue. Now this. Bloody Felicity. What was the creature? A harpy? One of the harpies ... Harpies with herpes.

'I hope you get bloody herpes,' she shouted — rather an old-fashioned shout in Oxford in 1988, when the younger dons were talking about nothing but the case of AIDS in Merton. Of course, it was hushed up, like everything else in the University.

'Did I really say "bugger"?' she asked herself, in an awed whisper.

Slipping into her silk bathrobe, she crept to the door and listened. She could hear nothing. Not a sound. Perhaps that foul seductress had developed a way of doing it absolutely noiselessly, and without movement. She had once been told by a graduate in oriental studies — Studmeyer? Studebaker? Shuckskin? — some foreign name—rather handsome, actually — that such things were possible as far as Japanese women were concerned. Apparently it involved developing the muscles of the pelvic floor. Foreigners were really very odd...

'I'll damned well buy a book and learn the art. It's not too late ...' She sighed. 'And practise on someone other than Harold,' she added.

Of course, Felicity was not oriental. Not even a squaw with Indian blood. She had announced that her father was Albanian. Who knew what strange rites went on in the savage mountains beyond Tirana, what musical instruments they played, where mad King Zog had ruled.

Noises. Definitely. Felicity's door opening.

Oh, God, her heart failed her. They were going to rush into her bedroom, to annex the double bed, in order to thrash about. What was she supposed to do? Bring them tea while they copulated? No doubt they would find new and disgusting ways in which to do it.

Rushing over to the open suitcase standing on a side table, she snatched from it the long paper-cutter she had brought back for Harold from New York. She would stab him to death if he dared bring that hideous hag in here, even if it involved blood spurting over the recently redecorated ceiling.

.. . But the footsteps went past her door. They were neither hurried nor stealthy—the sort of footsteps old acquaintances might leave behind.

With great caution, she opened the door and moved breathlessly into the corridor. It was dark and airless. She put out her hands so that her fingertips brushed the wall on either side, almost as if she were floating. The water was thick and murky, full of currents that ran rudely against her face.

Alarmed, she thought she saw a black man lurking just behind her. Not that she had the slightest prejudice against blacks. In fact, one of her students who was black showed a remarkable sympathy with Emily Dickinson, and had written a good essay on the short poem beginning, 'Drowning is not so pitiful/As the attempt to rise'. It was not a black man, just a dolphin.

Floating down into the depths, she heard the kitchen door into the back garden close the very moment she switched on the hall light.

At that, the door opened, and her husband looked back at her, his moustache bristling. 'Don't come out, dear, you'll catch your death of cold. Go back to bed. We're just going to have a fuck in the flowerbed.'

'Mind the bloody peonies,' she shouted, but too late. The water went sluicing out of the house into the garden. She heard the prebendary's cat from next door weeping in feline fright.

Trembling with rage, Alice rushed to the refrigerator and flung open its blind white door. As she might have expected, it was almost empty, except for an air hostess sitting on the toilet, smoking. There was not even any ice in the ice compartment — the ideal antidote to this whole obnoxious ‘three degrees over’ pretence of Felicity’s.

Felicity! What an absurd name for that primitive slut! There were decent Felicitys at the University, along with the Penelopes and Rosalinds—all acceptable high-protein English names. Why, there was even a Felicity at the other end of Chadlington: Felicity Chugg, who lived with her widowed sister, Deborah Henspaw, and her two cocker spaniels. Felicitys were not supposed to be irresistible to men. That was left to the Valeries, Tinas and Marilyns of this world.

Either she could hear jungle drums or the beating of her own heart. Drone drone drone. Why, there was a positive orgy going on out there, in her respectable garden! The Medes from over the way were joining in, perhaps, or the dreadful Throckmorton brothers from Number Thirteen. Surely not...

She ran upstairs again, heedless of the dolphin thrashing wetly on the upper landing. Damned creatures—Harold had been leaving the landing window open again. Climbing over Felicity’s tousled bed, she shone a torch out and down on the garden.

The sight was confusing. Evidently the garden had been badly neglected during her ten days’ absence. It looked as if Old Hubbard had been drinking again and had not shown up on Tuesday. The laburnum had gone. Where the lawn had been grew a large clump—you could hardly call it a copse — of coconut palms. She could scarcely believe her eyes. But she could believe her ears. Sexually coarse — no other term for it — sexually coarse laughter sounded from the region of the raspberry canes, on the other side of the goldfish pool. The balmy Oxford night air was alive with lechery.

She ran downstairs again, clutching her wicked New York paper-cutter. My God, she would have vengeance for this! She had never killed before: in her heart, she foresaw what she had missed. Intense though Emily Dickinson was, Emily had never experienced the spume and spray of arterial blood. Many though the pleasures of Septuagint were, they did not include *crime passionnel*. Or only very rarely, and then Alice Maynard had not been remotely involved.

On her feet were no shoes. On her slender body was only the bathrobe, which fluttered out behind her as she ran into the steaming night. She could smell

the lust, tainting the air like distant barns burning. Night birds screamed, rejoicing.

Pushing her way through the hordes of little black boys with bones through their noses, she looked up at the sky. A full moon hung above the distant mountains. Over New Marston way, the volcano flared briefly, its great tit black against the last bars of sunset. Something roared down in the swamp. Prickles formed over her flesh at the sound. Well, we know where we are, don't we, Alice? This is Papua New Guinea, and the remote end of it at that. A tell-tale phrase came back to her as she ran over the dew-wet marsh grass: The White Girl's Grave.

My God, but there would be blood-letting this night.

It hardly surprised her that the goldfish pool had spread so much. She had been away too long. The natives had run amok without her firm guiding hand. Something lumbered and crashed out on the sandbank. The hippos, she thought, with a sure hunter's instinct, the hippos always mate at the full moon, to whelp during the monsoon, as they had since Tertiary times.

Harold and the girl were dancing ahead or, rather, pursuing each other at a ritual pace round and round a flat white sacrificial stone. They paused when Alice came up to them, their bodies painted with symbolic whirls and animals.

'What do you do here, white woman?' Harold asked, raising his great fists threateningly. 'Dis de sacred mating place of de tribe. Meat dagger belong me he quench flaming tip along passage she belong she-minx. You go vamoose from here plenty chop-chop, tuck up in him blanket, take sleeping pill.'

But the girl cried in a clear voice, 'No, Mighty One, let de old lady stay. She come to do worship, ain't it, She-Who-Carries-Torch?' She had a bougainvillea blossom in her tousled mane.

Alice set the torch down on the sacrificial slab. She was not going to be fooled by their silly voices and accents. As she began to tick them off, a manservant rushed up with a magnum of champagne. When she waved him away, he poured the foaming liquid reverently over the stone.

'You two don't deceive me,' she said. 'Harold, come inside at once before you disturb the prebendary. You're simply making a spectacle of yourself. This is not a College Gaudy.'

The hell-cat rushed up to her, pointing to Harold. 'He sing. He dance. He know secret how place de stick in de hole of flesh. He Mighty One.'



‘Nonsense, he’s my husband Harold, and don’t you forget it.’

Felicity was wearing nothing but the great swirl of hair and the flower in it. Her breasts wobbled as if with a slow rhythm of their own. Her hips vibrated with energy. Down in the forest of her sex hair, something glinted in the moonlight like a jewel. She came closer.

Harold pointed to her and chanted, ‘She sing. She dance. She shake it like you don’t know how. She screw like rattlesnake all the same one-piece.’

They chanted together, leaping up and down, ‘We sing. We dance. We shake it.’

An infant’s skull tied by a thong rattled round his loins. It did not conceal his monstrous organ, the end of which had temporarily found lodgement in the eye socket of the defunct toddler. He and Felicity moved nearer. He snatched the knife from Alice’s hand.

‘He armed. He know no fear,’ Felicity chanted. ‘He sweat like pig.’

Alice was powerless. Yet she had lost her terror. Tearing off her single garment, she stood naked before them, proud little breasts pointing upwards as if to offer the cherries of her nipples to the Papua moon.

‘Take me, take me,’ she said, her voice low and thrilling, ‘penetrate me — only, for God’s sake, don’t wake the neighbours.’

Felicity flung herself down on the sacrificial stone, opening wide her legs, arching her back, so that her pudendum rose in the air like some nocturnal flower. Her labia opened in a welcoming smile. Her orifice steamed. Moët & Chandon was poured over it.

‘Worship, Alice, do de female stuff, dear! You come makeum pact along us,’ she called.

Impelled by an instinct greater than herself, Alice slunk forward, walking between the bent legs, looking that magical organ in the eye, caught by its immodest yet complex configurations. She could hear her own animal noises. A scent came to her nostrils, like the mingled smell of laburnum honey and lobster thermidor. Her tongue came out, waving with a life of its own. She bent forward to the glistening flower, amid the cries of the others. The jungle drums were

beating again. Her lips met those luxurious other lips.

Orgasmic shudders seized her body.

‘Three degrees over!’ she cried.

Now she knew what the heat meant. The heat birth of the universe. The terrible tandoori oven of the womb, the essential kindling of sex, the force that woke the dormant dog of philoprogenitive penis.

‘Three degrees over!’

Now the lust was in her head, burning in her body. Everyone was shouting and singing and chanting.

‘He sing. He dance. He take us both.’

And he did. The infant skull went flying. They writhed upon him, writhed under him. The great lip-smacking moon flailed their flanks with silver as they tumbled in ecstasy. For a while they were more than human. Inexhaustible, like creatures of legend, Indian sculpture, pornography. Once more, Zog gloried and drank deep in his distant palace, while the head-hunters ran on the fevered margins of the lagoon, a frieze from prehistory.

‘He come. He go. He come again.’

She knew she was more than human — a goddess, born for the eternal burn of love. There had been many nights like this, and she had been furiously ridden before, as now, by this tireless Mighty One, face fixed in the inhuman lineaments of lust. Something in her drank in his savage juices, as the mango trees suck up rain, and, in her turn, she spurted liquid from every pore and orifice. Even from her ears, golden treacle flowed, which the others lapped like nectar.

‘He suck. He blow. He know. He got de rhythm.’

And indeed he had. Now they were all three degrees over. There seemed to be many of them. No longer was it necessary or possible to tell which limb was which, which body. Oh, oh, that there should be nights like this — and her mother need never know.

‘He shout. He shag. He got de rhythm.’

They all had the rhythm. She heard her mouth calling strings of obscenities, sweet to be heard, lullabies, jocularly Jurassic love songs, meaningless aphrodisiacal noises. And there was another voice, a new voice.

And the new voice was saying, 'Mrs Badcock, what do you think you are doing?'

Only one person was brave enough, fool enough, to address her as 'Mrs Badcock', a name she hated; that was their obstreperous old neighbour, Prebendary Denzil Porkadder. He had climbed on a garden seat to peer over the wall at their activities. Although she could see he wore pyjamas, he had on his head as usual his old straw hat with its black band.

'Are you fornicating with those persons, Mrs Badcock? They're not Oxford people, are they?'

Alice was immediately embarrassed, and shrank back into her usual self. It felt extraordinarily like the process of detumescence she had witnessed in her husband on many an occasion.

'They are members of the University, Prebendary,' she muttered, covering her nudity.

Although not exactly a religious person, she was pained to think that a senior member of the Church of England should get (albeit by moonlight) a good glimpse of her sexual organs in their present somewhat engorged state. Abashed, she tried to shrink behind the sacrificial stone, and hid her eyes.

'Get inside, the lot of you, or I'll call the police,' shouted the prebendary, foaming at the mouth. 'The gardens of North Oxford are designed for peaceful horticulture, not these heathen goings-on. Besides, it's gone midnight.'

But Harold and Felicity were less easily cowed than Alice. Harold gave a murderous cry of rage and jumped up on the stone, aiming the knife straight at the holy old blatherer. It flashed in the moonlight.

Alice saw that murder was going to be done, and shrieked uselessly. To kill off the prebendary, a reverend old man whose one hundredth birthday was going to be celebrated on the next Sunday, the second Sunday after Trinity, at St Andrew's Church and just about everywhere else in Oxford ... Well, it would be the end of her career and of Harold's. They would be imprisoned, and, when released, would probably have to live out their stained lives in Cowley, or

Kidlington. Old acquaintances would cut them dead when they chanced to meet in the Covered Market.

She lifted a hand to stop her husband, to grasp the knife. But she fell back, reading in both Harold's eyes and Felicity's an unstoppable blood lust. It was a life they needed now, a life they were going to have.

'He hate. He conquer. He know.'

The prebendary was still ranting on, unconscious of danger, as he quoted scripture and mentioned the Prime Minister, whose determination to get rid of sex and violence, and anything else amusing on TV, he commended.

Harold was flexing his muscles for the perfect balance, teeth bared, knife poised over his head.

And the savage woman shouting, chanting, naked and outrageous, goading him on.

'He throw. He kill. He throw.'

Alice covered her eyes and groaned. All round was a hubbub. People were pressing against her.

And still the squaw was shaking her and repeating the chant.

'He throw. He throw.'