

Death in Love

Zin Murphy

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Shining Past Books

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For all Angolans

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The oppressive heat of January that blasts its way into the Land Rover is still a surprise to Kenny Brakeman. It makes him realise he is in Africa, despite his surroundings: odd pieces of colonial architecture scattered among buildings typical of 1960s provincial Europe. The unforgiving African sun makes him sweat so much that he notices his own smell. The young Englishman is glad to be alone and not sharing odours with any of his colleagues. The traffic is heavy this evening, but not so heavy as to cause any jams.

Brakeman is late, but most people in the city are even later, so he does not give the time a thought. The American friend he is going to meet, Tony Montatigre, has the vice of punctuality, but will wait. Even if he does not, lobster and wine will make Brakeman's trip worthwhile, if the grapevine proves reliable this time, and provided those luxuries have not disappeared as suddenly as they arrived in town. Brakeman accelerates.

Brakeman slows down as he approaches Kinaxixi Square. The human overspill from the large market that sprawls next to the Square is

often a hazard to motorists, and Brakeman does not want fresh blood staining the bonnet of his white Land Rover. Not to mention the possibility of getting lynched. A horn sounds behind him.

Brakeman's mirror shows him the pale, angry face of a woman he judges to be Portuguese, mid-thirties, too old to be interesting. He smiles at her nevertheless. Her open-topped yellow Citroen overtakes him and she gives him a sour look as she passes. He catches sight of his increasingly sun-reddened face and lank blond hair in his own car's mirror, and gives himself a sour look, too, but then he brightens, and beams at the reflection of what he regards as basically handsome features.

The air fills with the sound of horns, rhythmic and repeated. Brakeman brings the Land Rover to a halt, bangs his knee on the door as he gets out, and stands to attention beside it. As you do. As everyone has to. He sees the Citroen negotiating the roundabout that encapsulates the heroic statue in the middle of the Square. Doesn't she know? He hopes the woman will choose the correct exit.

The Presidential motorcade rushes past. Brakeman avoids eye contact with the gun-toting bodyguards standing alert and ready in the back of the two leading vehicles, and averts his gaze from the

President' s own vehicle. He looks instead at the roundabout, where the woman has brought her car to the side of the road, but it seems to have stalled because she is leaning forward, looking down, as though repeatedly trying the ignition.

Brakeman hates the sound of gunfire, especially at close range, even when he is not its target. This time it is short and sharp. The motorcade disappears in the direction of the Presidential Palace. The Citroen' s windows have shattered. The body of its driver is slumped over the steering wheel; blood oozes from what is left of her head.

Brakeman decides it is safe to go. He gets back into his Land Rover, mechanically performs a U-turn and heads back the way he had come. Behind him, on the top of a plinth in Kinaxixi Square, a South African tank, captured by valiant Angolan soldiers, looks over the city its crew of invaders had once hoped to help lay waste.

About a mile from his suburban home, a traffic policeman overtakes Brakeman on a smart motor bike, and signals for him to pull over. Brakeman' s throat feels like the Namib Desert. He was not speeding; his lights were working last time he checked; his mirrors are intact; even his windscreen wipers have yet to be

borrowed. The traffic policeman takes his time walking towards the Land Rover, as though showing off his smart new dark blue uniform and immaculate leather boots, generously provided by a Soviet satellite state that had either retained or discovered a sense of style. The policeman proffers a polite greeting that Brakeman is barely able to respond to, then asks to see the foreigner's papers. Brakeman flips open the glove compartment and leaves it open so that the policeman can see that it contains only documents.

“If I may ...” The policeman reaches in, takes a handful, and starts to peruse them. Brakeman's back feels like a waterfall.

The policeman calmly replaces the documents in the glove compartment. He walks around the Land Rover, observing it carefully, first from a distance, then through the windows. He completes his circle and stands outside the driver's door, looking steadily at the sweating driver.

Brakeman starts as the policeman snaps to attention.

“Good job,” the man says in English. Then he strides to his bike, mounts it and disappears into the distance faster than is prudent on Luanda's pot-holed streets.

Brakeman slowly relaxes. When he is able to swallow, and to breathe normally, he restarts his vehicle and drives the rest of the way home with far greater care than usual, anticipating the hoppy taste of the chilled beer waiting in his fridge to indulge his relief.

The fridge gives him only the hint of an electric shock when he opens it. He pulls out a bottle of Cuca, the most-prized local brew, and holds its chill against his throat before rummaging for his opener and easing the bottle's cap off. He lets a few drops of the beer slide down his gullet, pauses until they make him feel human again, then savours the taste of the rest from the bottle and reaches for another.

With his third Cuca in his hand, Brakeman tries to make himself comfortable on his plastic-cushioned sofa and contemplates his possibilities for the evening ahead. The original plan, to spend it with lobster, wine and his drinking buddy from the Italian Embassy, discussing his portfolio of get-rich-quick schemes, has been scuppered by the incident at the roundabout. Once there is blood on the streets, no matter whose, tension rises in the city's air: driving and drinking become even more dangerous, separately or

together. With none of the few restaurants within walking distance of his flat known to be open, he will have either to improvise something from his own cupboards and fridge or else impose on any colleagues or acquaintances he might find at home in the neighbourhood. The heat and the effects of the beer on his empty stomach make the former a more alluring option. For entertainment, he can wait and see who turns up.

Brakeman is hunched over a bowl of “Spaghetti alla Rimedia” , incorporating tinned tomatoes, tinned tuna and leftovers rescued from the shuddering fridge, when the evening entertainment offered by his assorted Cuban neighbours in the block opposite starts up - Julio Iglesias on the stereo system set up to relay Fidel Castro’ s hours-long speeches to all and sundry. Brakeman closes his window. This gives his Cuban-installed air conditioning the chance to do him a double favour: cooling the room a fraction and reducing the assault on his ears. For aural reinforcement, he inserts a Brahms cassette into his portable stereo, but it takes too long to build up any useful noise, so, with a tinge of regret, he replaces it with a tape of Nigerian highlife music and turns the volume up to full.

Brakeman has moved on to Congolese rumba when he realises that the beat of the music is being supplemented by banging on his flat door. He gets up to answer it, hoping it will be Luisa, or maybe Filomena for a change. Instead, he opens to the grim face of Tony Montatigre.

The tall, heavy-set Italo-American staggers into the room, brushing moisture from his crew-cut with one hand and gesturing at the stereo with the other.

“Turn that goddam music down, will you?” Seeing the bottles littering the floor, he adds “And get your buddy a beer.”

“Can’ t hear you!” Brakeman counters. “You look awful! Even more haggard than usual.” Nevertheless, he turns down the music and heads for the kitchen. He returns clutching two beers and the opener. Montatigre snatches one bottle, lifts the cap off with his teeth, spits it onto the concrete floor, and perches on a straight-backed chair to swig the beer. When the bottle is empty, he holds it out.

“God, that Cuban music is murder on the ears. Turn the African stuff back up and give me another beer, preferably a Bud.”

“That music assaulting the neighbourhood is Spanish, and this is a Cuca household.”

“Whatever.”

Brakeman obliges.

“Long day?” he asks as he hands his visitor the cold bottle, which he has already opened.

“Yeah. All the longer ’ cos I waited two hours in a crowded restaurant with a load of noisy drunks for an English asshole who never showed.”

“Oops. Yes, sorry about that. The President’s bodyguards were on the rampage, so I thought it best to get home and stay home. They shot a woman dead right in front of me in Kinaxixi. After that ...”

“Jesus! What did she do? Give Mr President the finger?”

“She didn’ t get out of her car before they passed. Sat there fiddling with the ignition. They must’ ve thought she was reaching for a gun.”

“Jesus H. Christ! Women!”

“I think she just didn’ t know the drill.”

“Well, I didn’ t see no motorcade, nor no dead dames.”

“Lucky you.”

“Nor no English assholes.”

“OK, I said I’ m sorry. We’ re having a beer together now.

Plenty more in the fridge. Relax, Tony. Have you eaten?”

“Yeah, lobster. That’ s what the restaurant had in. First time in four months. Crissake! Look, I need to talk to you. No, don’ t turn the music down, turn it up if anything, and if anyone at all bangs on your door, don’ t answer it. You got that?”

“I’ m expecting Luisa, or Filomena, or maybe both. Are you sure you won’ t want me to let them in?”

“Damn right, I’ m sure. You wanna get me killed?”

“Well, they’ ve both said you’ re the caveman type, but Filomena didn’ t seem to think it was necessarily an insult.”

Brakeman is pleased with his own joke, but Montatigre stares at him with eyes of flint.

“You don’ t get it, Kenny, do you? I’ m on the run.”

“Oh, I see. Have your hosts at the Italian Embassy pulled the plug on your little clandestine operation?”

“No, not a bit of it. They understand full well that looking after American citizens’ interests in the absence of a US Embassy means doing a damn sight more than playing with visas. So do the

Angolans. Having a few Americans around the place suits them. Keeps channels open until things change.”

“Even if the puppets you hope to install will chop them into little pieces before breakfast? Or *for* breakfast?”

“Fucksake, Kenny, I’ m not here to discuss politics!”

Brakeman wonders whether his friend is actually being serious, for once.

“Well, what are you here for? Do you want me to hide you?”

“No! They’ ll come looking for me here soon enough. You never saw me, OK? I’ m not here now! Some money would help, proper money I mean.”

He leans forward and puts his head in his hands. When he raises it, Brakeman is standing in front of him, holding two opened beers in his right hand and a small bundle of dollar bills in his left.

“It’ s only two hundred. I don’ t keep much in the flat.”

Montatigre grabs one of the bottles and takes solace in the contents. He eyes the money in Brakeman’ s grip, then reaches out his free hand, grasps the notes and slips them into a back pocket.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate that. And this.” He raises his bottle.

“Another?”

“No. I’ ve had enough. Enough of this whole goddam place and everyone in it, ’ cept you and a few others.”

Brakeman hopes his friend is not going to get maudlin on him. He would hate to remember him that way, if indeed he really is on the run. But Montatigre’ s eyes are still dry as parchment, and steady.

“Are you going to tell me what’ s happened?” Brakeman asks.

“You don’ t look harmed.”

Then he remembers Montatigre’ s two American colleagues based very unofficially, like him, at the Italian Embassy. “The others? Are they OK?”

A wistful look flits across Montatigre’ s face.

“Ghita?” asks Brakeman.

Montatigre winces at the sound of his lover’ s name.

“She’ s gone.”

“Gone? She’ s left you? And left her husband?”

“No. They put her on the first plane to Rome. Then straight back home to the States.”

“What about Chuck? Has he gone with her?”

Montatigre puts down his empty bottle and stares through Brakeman, not answering. Brakeman realises someone is banging on the door. He does not move. The knocking stops. The music inside the flat comes to an end. Even Iglesias outside is taking a break. The two men sit in silence until Montatigre flicks his eyes at the stereo. Brakeman puts his Brahms cassette on again.

Montatigre takes a deep breath.

“Emmett - Chuck - found out about us. Christ only knows how he never found out before. Blind as a bat, willingly or otherwise. She said it was over between them, and I assumed he was past caring. Turns out he cared too damned much. Goddam idiot!”

Brakeman wonders who he means.

“Day before yesterday, I stayed in the office after they’ d left, waiting for a call on the private line from Jo’ burg. They’ d been tense all day, hardly spoken to me, I could sense they’ d had a row. Thought that was a good thing. When she’ s angry, Ghita - well, I don’ t need to tell you.”

He lapses into silence for a while.

“Now that she’s gone, I - , I hoped she’d come back to the office that evening. I waited longer than I had to. I guess I’ll never see her again.”

“Plenty more - ” Brakeman catches the look on his friend’s face. “Sorry.”

“It was Chuck who came back. Crazy bastard! Madder and drunker than I’d ever seen him, which is saying something. I couldn’t - I didn’t deny anything. Let him have his say, get it out of his system. He called me all the dirty names under the sun - like I’d care - but his temper only fed on itself. Goddam it, I told him he could have his wife back if he really wanted her, but that only made him madder. Then he socked me, not a good move. I told him to stop and talk, but he punched me again. Kenny, I tell you, don’t pick a fight with a man who’s been trained to kill with his bare hands. Ever.”

Brakeman can see where this is going.

“But haven’t you *both* been trained to kill?”

“Yeah, but only one of us was sober enough to do it.”

“You killed him?”

“I killed him.”

Brakeman does not believe him.

“So you called the police.”

“I called Washington. They called the Italian Ambassador, he called who he had to. I went home to my condo.”

“Just like that? End of story?”

“They’ ve shipped the body home; they’ re shipping Ghita home; they’ re gonna ship me home ... when they find me.”

“And the Angolans? What do they think of foreigners murdering each other in their capital?”

“It wasn’ t murder, buddy, it was self-defence. And the Italian Embassy is extra-territorial. So when two Americans who are not really here have a fight in it, the Angolans prefer not to know. They’ ve got a civil war to run.”

Brakeman still does not believe him.

“Don’ t you feel any remorse, any guilt?”

“No guilt, Kenny, I acted in self-defence. You would’ ve done the same.”

Brakeman doubts that.

“Remorse, yeah. Plenty. I should have kept my hands off the broad, sure. OK, she was beautiful, Ghita, still is, but even so ...

She had - she has - a certain sweetness that - I guess it was that lilt in her voice that really got to me. Now she's just a widow I used to know. I'm sorry we ever set eyes on each other."

"Where are you going to hide?"

"I'm not going to hide. It wouldn't last. I'm just gonna do the rounds tonight, say a few so-longs, and show up at the Embassy tomorrow. The Angolans still won't want me, and the Italians and our lot will still want me out, not in a filthy prison in Luanda where they might have to visit me."

"One for the road?"

"Nope, I'm outa here. Take care, buddy."

Montatigre gets to his feet and moves quickly to the door.

"Will do, Tony. See you tomorrow. Or whenever."

The American pauses and glares at his host. He opens the flat door, looks carefully, and slips out, muttering.

Against the sound of Brahms, Brakeman cannot quite make out his words, but the last one sounded like "asshole". The Englishman locks the door, turns down the music and rummages among the bottles on his bookshelf for a suitable nightcap.

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