

Martha was standing in the back of a small pick-up, jolted and bounced as they ricketed over the rough ground. She clutched the roof of the cabin, the wind blowing back her hair, her face receiving the last of the sun's rays. She was entering Mogadishu after days and nights in the bush, after arid expanses of nothingness, unending stretches of brown and grey, rocky tracks and treacherous sands, monotonous shades of barely varying greens. She felt the quickening of her heartbeats as she saw the pale blue sea beyond the rolling grey-green and then a rush of joy at the first sight of the dazzling white town.

They dipped into a hollow and lost both the sea and the town and she waited impatiently for them to climb the next rise and to see the town again, closer, a different view. There it was. She picked out some distinguishing features: the two tawny towers of the cathedral reaching far above the cluster of white buildings and here and there a splendid splash of pink. She made little exclamations, gasps and rapid intakes of breath that drew puzzled looks from her companions.

They passed groups of low nomad huts, woven grass mats spread over hooped wands of willow, the shifting periphery of the town. With its recycled waste products it had an untidy slum-like appearance not found in the bush. Then came the first shacks and simple houses down sandy

side tracks, row after row of mud and daub and thatch and sheets of tin, a mottled brown suburbia on the edges of the white centre. The sandy streets were alive with the colour of women's garments and running children; the white here was the dome or minaret of a modest mosque.

All too soon, before she could get her fill, the main road brought them into the centre of town. They pulled up outside the Croce del Sud.

'We're back,' announced Raf superfluously.

Martha thought, 'No. You may be back – but I have just arrived.' She did not tell her companions that she had not just returned with them from a half-day excursion into the bush. Instead she was imagining her first entry into Mogadishu by road after she had been travelling hard for many days. This was the journey she had not made all those months ago. She did not regret the first sight of her chosen town from the air but, greedily, also craved a first sight from the road, a canvas built up from seized snatches and fleeting glimpses, a mirage in the distance revealed at last in all its solid white reality.

This had been her first time animal-watching in the Somali bush. An Irish couple had bought a small four-wheel drive and invited Martha, Raf and Jack Kopp to join them on a day's safari. Jack had very good Somali connections and knew a huntsman, Marodi, who came as their guide. *Marodi* means elephant, and he had been given this nickname since that was what he hunted, when he could.

They picked him up from his village-like suburb in outer Mogadishu. This was the beginning of the adventure for Martha. She loved the mish-mash of do-it-yourself architecture, the lack of a grid, the bright colours, the improvisation in design, and she longed to explore further.

They lunched at Afgoi and mid-afternoon drove westwards along a rough road before turning off into open bush, flat grassy land that was surprisingly green, given that this was the end of the rainy season. It seemed almost like parkland, rolling green grazing lands, spiny stunted trees, a huge breadth of sky and the light soft and gentle.

Marodi was a good guide and, with the exception of baboons, he found them all the animals you were likely to see in this part of the country: jackals, warthogs, three varieties of gazelle and, in the late afternoon when they had looped round to re-enter Mogadishu from the north, seven ostriches, the three males splendid in their black-and-white plumes. They also saw plenty of birds and wildfowl, and Marodi shot two guinea-fowl for the family pot.

Their hosts, the Johnstons, had a small flat at the Croce del Sud and Raf walked Martha home from there. She was sated with the pleasure and excitement of the day and very tired. She really wanted to be alone. She did not feel like talking, but she knew she must, for Raf would want to, and to stay with her a while to round off a wonderful day.

Inside the door he went straight to the fridge and took out two cans of beer. He now kept Martha well supplied with beer and tidbits from the UN commissary.

Martha took a draught of refreshing cold beer straight from the can. Then she said, 'Oh, I'll just ...'

'... get into something more comfortable,' he finished for her, laughing.

'Yeah.' She laughed too, pulled off her dusty clothes and tied on a cloth.

'Ah! That's better,' he mocked. They rocked together and fell onto the bed.

'That was a marvellous trip! A mini safari! Did you

enjoy it too? I know you can see more game in Kenya – but it was good here too, wasn't it?

'Yes, it was great to be back in the bush again. But it's true: there's more in Kenya, in the right places.'

There was a light tap at the door, a tap so light and discreet it could never disturb, so soft it could easily be ignored with a clear conscience.

'Leylo,' Martha said happily, for the nature of the tapping announced the tapper. She got up and opened the door. Leylo had her *futa* draped over a shoulder for the evening air. She smiled lovingly, chewing on her dental twig. 'Would you like some coffee, Signorina?'

Martha put her hands together. 'That would be marvelous. But are you sure you have enough? Is it already made?'

Leylo smiled that it was. This was a familiar ritual. Martha always asked the same questions and received the expected replies.

'It's hot,' said Leylo. She went next door and returned with her coffee pot, walking with the slow, sure steps she always took, swaying slightly. She went straight to the wooden shelf with its few glasses and took two, showing that she knew Raf was there. She poured the coffee and Martha opened her sugar jar to put a spoonful in each glass while she was telling Leylo a little about their day.

She called out in Italian, 'Raf, Leylo has made us some coffee.'

He came out immediately. '*Buona sera*, Signora. How are you? This is kind of you. What would Martha do without you?'

Martha smiled happily, ready to recognise her dependence on Leylo and her deep affection.

'It's nothing.' Leylo smiled, eyes twinkling, happy to see

them together and to bring them her offering.

They sat side by side on the bed and drank their thick black coffee. The fresh strong aroma filled the flat.

‘I did enjoy the bush today – but what I enjoyed most was your enjoyment,’ said Raf. ‘You’ve been here – what? about eight months, and this was your first real time in the bush. I understand why you were frustrated. I really regret that I didn’t buy a four-wheel drive in Paris. I considered it – but I hate to drive one around a city and I didn’t think I’d want to do much rough driving here. Nor did I know that I was going to fall for a woman who was breaking her neck to get into the bush.’

‘You didn’t know either that she would finally fall for your charm.’

‘I don’t know if she fell.’ He looked at her sharply. ‘I think she was pushed. Anyhow, my car should be here at Christmas or New Year. I couldn’t take it into the sort of country we saw today, but we should be able to use it on the road to the south. There’s more game down there. If we can both get some leave, we’ll go.’

Martha put her arm round his waist and hugged him and appreciated him and almost loved him.

‘You know something? In the last few weeks, since we got together, my life has changed. I used to think I had two lives here, my Via Roma life and my expat life, and that there was no meeting point. I know lots of people have a big division between their work life and their home life – but this was more extreme. There was nobody I could talk to about my interests, my discoveries, my concerns, my friends round here. I can now, a little, with the Prices. But you’ve become a big part of my life here. And I love that.’

‘Sweetie.’ He was moved.

She picked up his arm and ran a finger down the deep scar. 'And you're a nice man. Even if you are a cynic and a philanderer!'

He caught her hand and laughed. 'I knew you'd get that in, somewhere. I'd better go – you're tired ...'

'No, stay a while ...'