

## BALLEA WRITERS

*Bealtaine, the annual national festival, promotes the participation of adults in the arts. This year the festival organisers launched the fourth publication in the series titled 'Consolation and other short stories'. One of the writers featured in this year's publication was Elaine Rhys Davies, a founder member of Ballea Writers Club.*

Everyone clapped when the plane bump-landed at Lagos. I held my breath and squeezed past women in head wrappers touching the roof.

'What's that smell?' I announced, as I climbed down the steps.

'That, child, is Nigeria. You'll become immune to the smell if you survive that long. It's the salted fish in their sweat that makes them stink.'

'I don't believe you,' I said, and recoiled from the most ugly man I'd ever seen. His nose hair was at one with his moustache, and his eyebrows formed a hedge from ear to ear. I slipped in front of a woman with a child on her back, but the hairball crept up on me like a tarantula.

The immigration officer asked the purpose of my visit. I told him that I'd got engaged to an English professor at Port Harcourt university and hoped to be lecturing there as well. He told me that I should pretend to be married, as I'd only arrived on a visitor's visa. With an ivory grin he told me that if the professor didn't marry me, he'd bid a hundred white cows for my hand. He added that I'd need at least a month in a fattening house before the wedding.

We laughed and he tweaked my ears.

'Those jewels could get you killed,' he said and handed me my earrings. 'My countrymen would cut off your fingers for the rings. Put them away.'

Speechless, I shoved all my jewellery into my bum bag and concealed it under my smock. He kissed my hand and I savoured a hint of spice on his breath. I didn't stop smiling until the hairball accosted me at baggage claim.

'You mustn't let locals befriend you, they're not to be trusted,' he said. 'Your attitude stinks.'

'You young ones are all the same with your political correctness; left wing namby-pamby if you ask me.'

I swatted mosquitoes and was tempted to take a swat at him.

'He could tell his mates to rob you or worse.'

'I'll take my chances. And my fiancé will take care of me. He came ahead on the Madrid flight and is waiting for me.'

When I got to the concourse and didn't see Charles, I was disappointed but didn't panic. While I looked for him, I noticed that the fluorescent lighting soaked up the colour and revealed African and European as one, a universal grey.

There was neither a flight monitor nor an information desk, and the hotel desk was closed. It was approaching midnight when I walked outside and a wall of heat pushed me back against the glass. A taxi driver grabbed my case and, before I could stop him, he put it in the boot of his cab, held together with tape. We shouted at each other and struggled, but he refused to give me back my bag. In seconds I was surrounded.

'Madam, I take you.'

'Me, Madam.'

'Very good price, Madam!'

'Christian, I not cheat you, Madam.'

Sweat ran between my breasts and I gulped for air. I yelled at them and tried to run, but one of them gripped my arm. I could feel the adrenaline shoot through my veins as I clenched him round the waist and launched him over my head. I've four gold medals in judo, so keep your hands off me,' I shouted to the crowd, as they stared open mouthed at my prostrate victim. I clutched my bag and ran back inside, straight into the path of the hairball.

'What did I tell you?'

'I can take care of myself.'

'And when they come after you with knives? Nigeria isn't a sports hall. You're fresh blood to them.'

'You're paranoid,' I said, as I ferreted in my bag for a Wilbur Smith novel. With Charles presumably delayed, I reckoned that my only option was to sit and wait. The bench rattled when the hairball slid alongside me.

'No show from the Professor then?' he introduced himself as Bert and lifted my bookmark.

'University College Cork. My girlfriend goes there.'

I stared at the print and tried not to think of the physical permutations of this man in any kind of sex act, never mind with one of my age mates.

'Dorothy Murphy, she's doing history and shares an apartment at

## Fresh Blood

by  
Elaine Rhys  
Davies



Brookfield.'

'Not one of the grannies. Does she share with Rebecca and Jennifer?'

'That's her, but what's with the grannies?'

'They're short and fat and live on tripe. Talk about the smell of Nigerians!'

He moved to the far end of the bench and sat in silence. Wilbur Smith didn't prepare me for this Africa. Maybe I am fresh blood, I thought. Bert stood over me and cast a shadow on my page. 'I'd love to leave you here but I can't,' he said. 'But the sooner we get you packed off the better. Come with me to the control room. There'll be a radio there and we'll be able to find out what's happened to that Madrid flight.'

I lifted my luggage and followed him in silence. I hesitated before accepting his arm, while we picked our way up unlit stairs and along dark corridors.

The control room was nothing like I'd expected. There were no screens or any equipment other than the radio, and only one person manned it. Bert gave the attendant a bottle of whisky. They shared the drink. I looked on from a distance and shifted from one foot to the other while I tried to kick mosquitoes away from my ankles.

'Still in Madrid,' Bert said. 'Engine trouble. It could be ages.'

'Give me a glass.'

He handed me a tumbler of whisky. 'May I have some water in it, please?'

'Have you a death wish? It'll give you amoebic dysentery and you'll shit your guts out.'

The first gulp burnt my throat and made me cough. I screwed up my face. The two men laughed and I felt my temper rising. They nodded when I swigged back the rest. They opened a second bottle. I declined to join them and turned to leave.

'Where are you going?' Bert asked.

'To hire a car and find a hotel. I don't suppose they've got breathalysers.'

The two men slapped their knees and howled with laughter. I opened the door to blackness. As my eyes adjusted, I could see a light in the distance and headed in that direction. It took me to the top of a flight of stairs. I was about to go down when I heard a commotion below and ducked back into the shadows. I crept forward, looked into the stairwell and saw the taxi drivers. Dizzy and nauseated I sat hunched against the wall. All I can do is wait for them to leave, I thought.

Mosquitoes feasted on my blood. I could feel their bites like a series of pinpricks. But that wasn't as bad as the itching. I scratched my wrist until it bled and when I licked the blood it tasted metallic. I couldn't hold back my tears and once they started, they came like a monsoon. It had been a year since my mother's passing, and the first time I'd felt truly abandoned. I fumbled in my bum bag until I could feel her earrings. I ran my fingertips over the settings and prayed.

I didn't hear him approach and muffled a yelp when he tapped my shoulder.

'Hush, you're looking for you and won't leave until they find you,' the immigration officer said, 'I've heard what happened. Come with me.'

He helped me to my feet and lifted my bag.

I leaned on his shoulder, as he led me back towards the control room.

'No, not in there. The hairy white man who was behind me at your desk is in there and he's drunk.'

'Bert's harmless; nearing end stage cancer; this could be his last tour.'

'How do you know?'

'We have to clear his drugs. Bert's a former British Airways pilot. He used to fly Concord, but works for a government minister now. It has more perks.'

I heard shouting and before I knew what had happened, I'd been propelled into the control room.

'I see you've recovered our lost baggage. Good man Stephan,' Bert said.

'They're after her. Barricade the door,' Stephan said.

I stood and shook while the three men heaved cupboards the scale of Victorian wardrobes and positioned them, four deep, in front of the door.

'Kill the lights and everyone quiet,' Stephan said.

I slid down the wall and could hear my own breathing. Bert flicked his lighter and passed me a tumbler of whiskey and I knocked it down in one. He handed me another and this time I dipped the hem of my skirt in it and dabbed the alcohol onto my mosquito bites. Hell, did they sting! But moments later the bites were numb.

Nothing stirred all night but the occasional flare from a lighter when drinks were refilled. A red ball appeared on the horizon and I staggered to the window to watch my first African dawn. But the runway looked more like a scene from the Tour de France. 'What's with the bicycles?' I asked.

'The smugglers go out every morning to hide in the long grass,' Stephan said. 'The freight planes drop and collect parcels as they taxi up and down the runway.'

'Why isn't it stopped?'

'In Nigeria we have our own solutions. Like I've worked out how to get you over to the domestic airport and aboard your onward flight to Port Harcourt. You'll travel in a suitcase.'

'What? No, not in this heat. You're not serious. How would Charles find me?'

'I'll be able to intercept him when he comes through immigration,' Stephan said.

'But couldn't you just paint me black?'

'We are no more black than you are white. Do you think if you painted me white I would look like a European?'

'I'm sorry, that was stupid of me.'

I felt tears welling in my throat. I bit into my lip and licked the blood. I sat down on the floor with my head on my knees and rocked. Stephan turned his back and used the radio. He spoke in clicks that sounded like the crescendo of a cicada orchestra. Soon there were similar cricket like sounds at the door I helped the men pull back the barricade and in walked an African carrying a Union Jack patterned trunk. I'd seen one just like it in Carnaby Street and struggled to stifle a laugh.

'Wait outside, drivers. I've a lot of papers to load,' Stephan said.

He shut the door and explained how I'd travel with Bert as part of his luggage.

Bert crunched a cockroach under his heel. The beast was the size of my ear and I winced.

'At least the suitcase will be free of those,' Bert said.

I nodded and we smiled at each other as I got inside. Curled up, there was ample room. Stephan used his penknife to cut out one of the locks. Bert handed me a chart rolled up in the shape of a tube, and helped me position it on the air hole. I practised sucking air through the tube while they packed me snug with papers.

'I could believe you've done this before. Have you?' I said.

Stephan winked.

'Hold your tummy and breathe from your diaphragm. Your judo training will come in useful now,' Bert said.

The men looked at each other and laughed and I was laughing with them as they closed the lid.

'You've passed your initiation. You're one of us now,' Bert said.

'If I'm caught it'll be because of the whisky fumes. I stink.' I can still hear their clapping.

The following year a drugged Nigerian was found in a suitcase at Heathrow Airport. He was speculated to be the victim of a practical joke. I'm still not sure what to believe.

## Carrigaline Active Retired Tea Dance

The Carrigaline Active Retired Association held its first annual Tea Dance in the Carrigaline Court Hotel on Sunday afternoon last. The event was well supported by Active Retired groups from Douglas, Ringaskiddy, Crosshaven, Passage West, Turners Cross, Kinsale, Ballinhassig, Minane Bridge and Midleton. Beautiful tea and coffee

was served with an abundance of sandwiches and specially made Country Market cakes by the pleasant staff of the Carrigaline Court Hotel. The gathering certainly came to dance and musician Kevin McSweeney had the floor full for the whole afternoon. Cathaoirleach Sally Bannon thanked all for coming together we all had a most

enjoyable afternoon and hoped we will repeat the event again next year. The Tea Dance was so successful that many of those present wanted one every week, or at least a few more for the Christmas season, however, while Carrigaline Active Retired group meet weekly, the Sunday afternoon Tea Dance will be an annual event.

## Active Retired

Cara held their regular get-together on Thursday last in the Parish Centre. After 'Go for Life' exercises they joined in a variety of games before the tea. This Thursday 6th November CARA are going to visit Griffins Garden Centre – the bus leaves the Bandroom at 2.00 p.m. a few seats are still available: Contact Sally 021 437 2840. Thursday next 13th Nov CARA members meet at Thompson's Farm Shop, Aghamarta. Some members are attending a special cookery course and other are visiting the gardens and the animals; all will join for afternoon tea at 4.00p.m. Enquiries contact Edna 021 437 3816