

# emagazine Close Reading Competition 2015

## The Constant Gardener

The news hit the British High Commission in Nairobi at nine-thirty on a Monday morning. Sandy Woodrow took it like a bullet, jaw rigid, chest out, smack through his divided English heart. He was standing. That much he afterwards remembered. He was standing and the internal phone was piping. He was reaching for something, he heard the piping so he checked himself in order to stretch down and fish the receiver off the desk and say, 'Woodrow.' Or maybe, 'Woodrow here.' And he certainly barked his name a bit, he had that memory for sure: of his voice sounding like someone else's, and sounding stropic: 'Woodrow here,' his own perfectly decent name, but without the softening of his nickname Sandy, and snapped out as if he hated it, because the High Commissioner's usual prayer meeting was slated to start in thirty minutes prompt, with Woodrow, as Head of Chancery, playing in-house moderator to a bunch of special-interest prima donnas, each of whom wanted sole possession of the High Commissioner's heart and mind.

In short, just another bloody Monday in late January, the hottest time in the Nairobi year, a time of dust and water shortages and brown grass and sore eyes and heat ripping off the city pavements; and the jacarandas, like everybody else, waiting for the long rains.

Exactly why he was standing was a question he never resolved. By rights he should have been crouched behind his desk, fingering his keyboard, anxiously reviewing guidance material from London and incomings from neighbouring African Missions. Instead of which he was standing in front of his desk and performing some unidentified vital act – such as straightening the photograph of his wife Gloria and two small sons, perhaps, taken last summer while the family was on home leave. The High Commission stood on a slope, and its continuing subsidence was enough to tilt pictures out of true after a weekend on their own.

Or perhaps he had been squirting mosquito spray at some Kenyan insect from which even diplomats are not immune. There had been a plague of 'Nairobi eye' a few months back, flies that when squidged and rubbed accidentally on the skin could give you boils and blisters, and even send you blind. He had been spraying, he heard his phone ring, he put the can down on his desk and grabbed the receiver: also possible, because somewhere in his later memory there was a colour-slide of a red tin of insecticide sitting in the out-tray on his desk. So, 'Woodrow here,' and the telephone jammed to his ear.

'Oh, Sandy, it's Mike Mildren. Good morning. You alone by any chance?'

Shiny, overweight, twenty-four year-old Mildren, High Commissioner's private secretary, Essex accent, fresh out from England on his first overseas posting – and known to the junior staff, predictably, as Mildred.

Yes, Woodrow conceded, he was alone. Why?

'Something's come up, I'm afraid, Sandy. I wondered if I might pop down a moment actually.'

'Can't it wait till after the meeting?'

'Well, I don't think it can really – no it can't,' Mildren replied, gathering conviction as he spoke. 'It's Tessa Quayle, Sandy.'

A different Woodrow now, hackles up, nerves extended. Tessa. 'What about her?' he said. His tone deliberately incurious, his mind racing in all directions. Oh Tessa. Oh Christ. What have you done now?

'The Nairobi police say she's been killed,' Mildren said, as if he said it every day.

'Utter nonsense,' Woodrow snapped back before he had given himself time to think. 'Don't be ridiculous. Where? When?'

'At Lake Turkana. The eastern shore. This weekend. They're being diplomatic about the details. In her car. An unfortunate accident, according to them,' he added apologetically. 'I had a sense that they were trying to spare our feelings.'

'Whose car?' Woodrow demanded wildly – fighting now, rejecting the whole mad concept – who, how, where and his other thoughts and senses forced down, down, down, and all his secret memories of her furiously edited out, to be replaced by the baked moonscape of Turkana as he recalled it from a field trip six months ago in the unimpeachable company of the military attaché. 'Stay where you are, I'm coming up. And don't talk to anyone else, d'you hear?'

Moving by numbers now, Woodrow replaced the receiver, walked round his desk, picked up his jacket from the back of the chair and pulled it on, sleeve by sleeve. He would not customarily have put on a jacket to go upstairs. Jackets were not mandatory for Monday meetings, let alone for going to the private office for a chat with chubby Mildren. But the professional in Woodrow was telling him he was facing a long journey.