

Zaire

by David Ackley

The air conditioner in the bedroom window whined and wheezed under the assault of San Antonio's July. They lay motionless on the bed, drying, hoping to cool off. He told her about the café on the tip of the Isle St. Louis where they served *glace* in chilled silver bowls, coated with frost.

She said, I've never actually *been* to any of the really great places. Barcelona, Crete, Paris, Istanbul. Nowhere you'd really want to live. The only time I ever went abroad it was to Zaire for chrissakes. Whatever that's worth.

Really? What was *that* like?

Thick. The dictator, whatisface, was crazy nuts.

Aren't they all? Was it Mobutu? The heat made it hard to remember things.

Yeah, him, I guess. Ben had some kind of government fellowship to teach at the university. We hung out with some other expats who all had copper-lined livers. All we did was drink a lot, dance a little, occasionally get hit on or hit on somebody else. Once we drove out in the bush to look for elephants, but it didn't seem like bush to me. Kind of scraggly, like north San Antonio. We saw some bones that could have been anything. A cow, maybe. It was hot, yeah. You sweat constantly. Rivers. I'd have to change two or three times a day. But I had one girl to wash my clothes and cook and another to clean. The place was so poor, we had servants! On faculty wages! Anyway, there's this red-faced guy, always hanging about, drunk most of the time that everybody knew but nobody seemed to know what he did. If they did, we weren't in on it. Once he sat down with us in a café. He was making a bad job of being sneaky, all hearty and shit. How *are* you folks? How are the quarters? Bit hot for us yanks aint it? Then he leans toward Ben, and asks if we'd like to make a little cash. Ben's already shaking his head, scared of drugs and his stipend, but the guy spreads his hands: No-no-no. No drug stuff. He's "Our side," he says, which we took for the C.I.A. or somebody. We'd be doing a

service to our country. We just had to keep going where we went, and doing what we did with the people we did it with. Brit officers. American low echelon embassy types. Israeli teachers. Ben's Zairean students. Eastern Europeans with no visible means. French traders. Whoever we'd connect with at embassy parties, faculty receptions. This one grubby nightclub where everyone drank and danced. And after, we were supposed to tell him what people said. That was it.

These were your friends.

I guess so. I don't know. They were people we knew.

Was he asking for anything specific? From anybody in particular?

No. He didn't seem to care. Whatever we heard.

Did you do it?

Are you kidding? For a thousand dollars a report? That was a lot of money then.

Still not bad. Do you think he was paying other people?

Duh. But, here's the thing. It's so interesting, when you're paid to listen. And other people are—you assume—paid to listen to you. How sparkling and sharp it all becomes. How rich the conversation suddenly is. How intriguing the speakers, with all their valuable secrets. How important you feel listening and trying to hear what they're really saying or not saying. And what he wants to know about them and what they're up to. Even now I can sometimes remember things people said, almost word for word.

She smiled, looking not at him, but at the sleepily turning fan overhead. He was sweating again. He could smell himself, his spoor, in the air and on the sheets, and wondered if she'd bother to change them before Ben came home.

