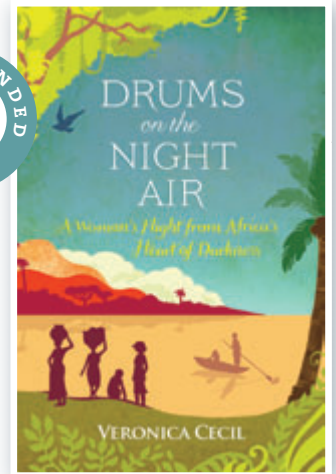


Drums on the Night Air

Veronica Cecil



Directory reviewer Mandy Jenkinson gives this a five-star rating: "In the early 1960s, 25-year old Veronica Cecil accompanies her husband to the Congo where he has been offered a good job with a multinational company. But by the time the couple and their baby son arrive, the Congo is descending into chaos after the assassination of Lumumba, and it is not long before a brutal civil war breaks out and the family have to flee from the advancing Congolese rebel forces.

Fully in command of her subject, Cecil writes with considerable mastery, never descending into melodrama however dramatic the events. I found this a powerful and absorbing read and recommend it wholeheartedly."

PREFACE

I CAN SEE IT QUITE CLEARLY. I AM OUTSIDE THE store at Elizabetha. It is a dull brick building with a tin roof, one of a rash of European dwellings and offices in a clearing of the plantation above the river. The heat lolls in an air heavy with moisture. In the distance I can hear a patter of drums. Twelve people are being lined up against the wall. Ten whites. Two blacks.

One of the whites is the Portuguese trader. He is a small man with a beer belly and bad teeth, but such spirit. It isn't just his money and his colour that have made him a king; it is his sexual prowess. Even in extremis he carries himself with a certain swagger.

Then there are the nuns. I can hardly bear to think of them. Fluttering, broken birds, this may be their chance to become martyrs, to return in triumph to their maker. But how can they hold up their heads when they have been violated? Wimples awry, they form a confused heap of black and white, like seagulls on an oil-polluted beach.

The old planter and his wife are another thing. *Vieux colons*, old colonials. Living here so long they have become weather-beaten, intertwined with one another and the jungle. They could face even this catastrophe with equanimity, were it not for the child. That is the part that is unbearable. The child should be at boarding school in Europe, but she is still

young – too young for parents of their age. She arrived unplanned and has become so precious they cannot bear to part with her. One of the planter's arms is crooked round her head, which he clasps to his chest, while the other holds her body. All the captors can see is a neat back-parting and two thick blonde plaits. His wife stands beside him. She has grey hair neatly pulled back into a bun. Straight and still she is, as she has always been, the rock in adversity.

In contrast, the young planter who lived down-river is in hysterics. He is a *nouveau colon*. He holds up his two-year-old child to the rebels, shaking her and shouting hysterically until he gets knocked in the mouth with a rifle and collapses in a heap. His young wife is already down on the ground. Mute with shock, she is on her knees. She doesn't even hear her child crying any more. She lifts her head and a silent scream rips the air.

It is the black men, however, that I am most troubled about – not the rebels, who are drug-crazed, faceless extensions of a gun – but the two Ghanaians. They have stirred up something more complex than pure horror. I see them dressed improbably in torn suits and grubby ties. How else would we know that they are ordinary businessmen caught up in a mess that has nothing to do with them? For the past few weeks they have been trying to escape through the

jungle, sleeping beside the mosquito-infested river, hacking their way through the mangrove swamps. They speak no Lingala. Their limbs are stippled with sweat, and the blood has drained from their faces like the colour from a badly dyed garment. As far as the Ghanaians are concerned, these rebels – who call themselves Simbas, lions – are savages. Young men, barely into manhood, they are doped up with dagga and primitive superstitions. As soon as they were captured, the Ghanaians knew they were doomed. Not only are they foreigners in an alien country, they are middle-class businessmen working for a European corporation. This makes them worse than whites.

How could I have imagined that I'd leave the Congo unscathed? That I could simply jet in, live a dream, and jet out again? But then, come to think of it, that wasn't how I'd imagined it. I'd wanted to be involved. Wanted to make a difference. What I hadn't imagined was that it would all turn out the way it did.

It was a dank February evening when David, in starched collar and tie, arrived home to a flat draped with nappies and felted-up matinee jackets, to announce that the company had suggested sending him to the Congo. I didn't want to go. Instant visions of mangrove swamps and mosquitoes flooded my mind. Followed by images of disease, death and disaster. The Congo was the armpit of Africa. At the same time, I knew that questioning the company's decision would be futile. This was the early 1960s, when employees fell in with their bosses' wishes. And wives did as they were told.

Ever since he'd joined the company we'd known that David would be sent abroad. We were looking forward to it. He had left his safe job as a chartered accountant to join the burgeoning world of big business. 'We comb the country,' the company chairman had boasted in one of the Sunday newspapers, 'for the cream of Britain's young brains and talent.' David was known as a management trainee. He was one of the chosen. We'd envisaged a high-status job in New York or Sydney – but the Congo? What was there for a future captain of industry to do in the Congo?

'They want me to reconstruct their accounting systems,' David said rather grandly. 'Make long-term financial forecasts. Bring the whole thing up to date.'

'What about Charles?' Charles was our small baby.

'Oh, he'll be fine. The company wouldn't allow children to go out there if it wasn't safe.' The company, he assured me, would look after us in every way. They'd provide us with housing, a car, even a large hamper of food, chosen by us and shipped out every six months. We would live in luxury. David had never travelled beyond Europe, and I was beginning to sense that he viewed the idea of going to Africa as a bit of an adventure.

'And,' he added, playing his trump card, 'they

pay half my salary in Congolese francs and half in sterling. We should be able to live on the Congolese francs and save the sterling.'

That was the clincher. Apart from the fact that I, too, felt seduced by the exotic idea of going abroad, the money was an undeniable lure. There may have been plenty of kudos in being a management trainee, but the pay was low. We couldn't even afford proper heating.

The winter of 1962–3 has, rightly, gone down in history. It started with the smog. For those who didn't live through those times, it's almost impossible to imagine. A large wad of cotton wool descended on London, making it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of our faces. Traffic was brought to a standstill. In the mornings, David struggled off to the Tube station with a gauze nappy tied across his face to protect him from the polluted air. While the cattle that had been brought up to town for the Smithfield Show died in the confinement of their stalls, I'd holed myself up in our flat with my baby.

There was a red alert at all the hospitals, which were only taking extreme emergencies. These, we were told, were the elderly and the very young. The pollution was so bad that a saucer of ammonia left on a dresser was neutralized within an hour.

The fog was followed by a cold so intense that it, too, has become legendary. A permanent film of ice had formed inside the kitchen window and icicles hung over the sink. The only faint warmth came from a pathetic gas contraption, and an electric heater with one bar. There were no washing machines in those days, or at least I didn't have one, and I had to scrub everything by hand. I am by nature, or upbringing, a Spartan, and I regarded lugging my baby and his pram – no handy pushchairs in those days – down three flights of stairs as a challenge. Yet my capacity for endurance was being seriously tested. I'd forgotten what it felt like not to be cold. Rhodesia, where my parents had decided to settle when I was ten years old, might have been a cultural desert – but it was warm. The Congo was becoming more and more alluring.

There was, however, one pretty hefty fly in the ointment, and that was the racial question. No one who had grown up in 1950s southern Africa could have been unaware of this. It was undeniably there,

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part of the privileged, balmy air we basked in. But history was shifting. India had been granted its independence; South Africa had been made a dominion like Australia and Canada. Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), on the other hand, was what was known as a crown colony. This meant that the country ruled itself, or rather was ruled by the small proportion of white settlers. Opinions, however, had begun to divide, and the status quo had already been shaken when the Nationalist party was voted into power in neighbouring South Africa – and introduced the infamous policy of apartheid.

I was born in British India, and my family had moved briefly to England in 1947 before emigrating to Southern Rhodesia in 1948. After the austerities of rationing in post-war England, the food, the light, the feeling of space and, above all, the freedom to be a child again had felt truly wonderful. But, even as a ten-year-old, I'd been vaguely troubled by the relationship between the black people and us. Our servants in India, while admittedly still servants, had also been our friends and mentors, substitute parents even. They'd teased us as children, and I'd felt able to discuss things with them. In the Southern Rhodesia of 1948, most Africans were, it seemed, automatically 'munts' and 'kaffirs' – pejorative words that stained my lexicon. My moment of epiphany came when our 'houseboy', Joseph, told me he'd seen me in town. I realized then that I'd never looked at his face, and that I wouldn't have recognized him outside the house; that all black faces looked the same to me.

My older brother, who came out to join us a few months later, fresh from his English preparatory school, dealt with the racial unease by tackling it straight on. He was a brilliant mimic and I remember coming into the kitchen to find an audience of Joseph, the gardener Job and a couple of 'piccanins' – probably Joseph's children – literally falling about in mirth as he re-enacted, in the accent of the locals, a scene between my mother and her houseboy. My mother was castigating Joseph for stealing some sugar. My brother played both parts. He'd often entertained our Indian servants in the same way, earning himself the lifelong nickname of Joker.

It was at the posh girls' boarding school in South Africa, the closest thing my parents could find to an English public school, that everything I had sensed uneasily about race began to fall into some sort of logical order. My guru was a maths teacher called Mrs Roux. She was married to an Afrikaner and was passionate not only about her subject but also about politics. 'I will not talk small talk,' she flared when an unfortunate girl asked her what she'd done during the holidays. 'What is the point of being alive if you don't care about the condition of the world you live in and the people around you?' For Mrs Roux, ideas were everything. She was a feminist, an atheist and, above all, a champion for black freedom. She castigated the newly formed apartheid system as an abuse of human rights. It was impossible to disagree.

I can only describe my perception of the South African political scene in the mid-fifties as a subliminal war zone. Apartheid had divided white opinion in South Africa, like a glass wall where the people on either side breathed a different air. There was no room for ambiguity. You were either on one side or the other. During my last year at school, I witnessed what to my young, impressionable eyes were shocking injustices. The government, on what appeared to be pure whim, bulldozed Sophia-town, which was close to my school, and was where many of the black people working in Johannesburg lived. Pass laws were also introduced, which meant that black people, merely because of their colour, had to carry identity cards and were restricted to the areas where they lived and worked. In response to these iniquities, there were many acts of personal bravery. Political activists such as Helen Joseph stuck their necks out for what they believed in, and marched on parliament. Ordinary housewives, the mothers of my schoolfriends, put their husbands' jobs, and possibly even their own lives, on the line when they wore black sashes and convened in small groups at public functions to protest, passively and mutely, against the death of the democratic rights of coloured voters.

By the age of eighteen, I was aware that I had a moral choice. The right one, of course, would have been to stay in South Africa and fight for the rights of black people, but... but... I wanted to get on with my life. I'd been unhappy at school and couldn't wait to get away. Besides, I rationalized, it wasn't really my problem. I'd lived only half my life in Africa. And in any case, what real effect would I have? The future looked so bleak. South Africa, everyone predicted, would one day turn into a bloodbath. I pictured a rising tide of crimson sea flooding the country. I didn't want to die young. When my parents told me they weren't prepared to pay for university in South Africa, my dilemma was resolved. They wanted me to become a secretary, and although I wasn't too keen on the idea, at least it entailed a one-way ticket overseas.

The England of 1956 should have been a gloomy place. Post-war rationing had only just ended, taxes were high and the lifestyle austere. But I fell instantly in love. I loved the architecture, the history, the people and the culture. Not to mention the young men. I didn't even care about the grim weather. London, I discovered, was brimming with ideas about art and theatre and philosophy – and I flung myself into my new life. Ironically, it was the very lack of money that I found most liberating. Most people in England, particularly the young, were still comparatively poor – far poorer than the average white settler in Rhodesia. During my time in Johannesburg, the ostentatious wealth was one of the things I'd disliked. Yet, ironically, it was the high standard of living that had accounted for the wave of immigration, including my own family's, after the war. In England I felt accepted for myself. I could be whoever I wanted to be. Having trained as a secretary, a job I never practised (except as

a stopgap) because I was so hopeless at it, I went on the stage. My family back in Africa were horrified, but I didn't care.

By the time I met and fell in love with my husband, I'd been acting for a couple of years. He was a conventional man, and there was no way, he said – and indeed society concurred – that I could combine marriage and a career. Besides, I wanted to become a wife and mother. David was everything I admired about English men; thoughtful and kind, as well as gentle and generous. He was a historian, and he shared my love of literature. Although he was, at heart, an intellectual – he'd been offered a scholarship to Cambridge – he'd trained as a chartered accountant in order to make a good living. His venture into the world of business was a challenge. He was ambitious and I was ambitious for him. We were a team. That was what I'd signed up for.

When I met David I'd still thought of myself as the little colonial girl. Marrying him had made me feel properly English. I went on to give birth to an English baby. If I did ever think about the country I had been brought up in, it was from a safe distance. I had abandoned for ever, or so I thought, the person I had been in Africa. That was another reason why David's announcement that the company wanted to send us to the Congo came as such a shock. It was as if all

my carefully constructed cards had been knocked down; as if I'd been confronted with my former self – the self I'd been at such pains to get rid of. But, as the idea of returning to Africa seeped into my consciousness, I found myself warming to it more and more. The Congo was not the same as Rhodesia and South Africa. It was a newly independent country. The black people had been given their freedom. They were no longer subservient. Above all, they could determine their own future. I pictured a country of happy, smiling people. I would love them, and they would love me.

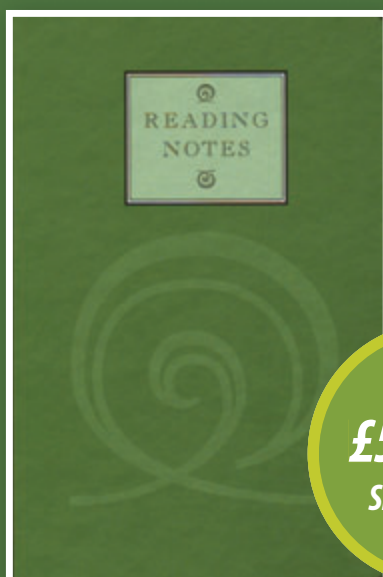
What I conveniently managed to overlook was the fact that there had been internal turmoil ever since those very people had been given their autonomy in June 1960. Independence had been followed by chaos, and Belgian paratroopers had been called in to quell the rebels. They had been succeeded by a United Nations peacekeeping force. The eastern province of Katanga had seceded from the rest of the Congo because of its mineral wealth. The result had been an undignified flight of many of the whites, who included some of my friends, into neighbouring Rhodesia. ●



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