



Vincent Barry

## The Line That Stopped Me Cold

I heard a line in a film I'd never seen, and still haven't all the way through. It quickened my nerves and sent my temples buzzing, and reminded me that I once taught at a school in Africa.

The school sat on a hill overlooking Lake Victoria. "Lake Vic"—the long-sought source of the Nile, on whose shores once trod Burton and Speke and—or so said Lily—Luanda Magere, the fabled warrior made of "hard stones," for his impenetrable body. . . . Lily taught me other things, more exotic than esoteric, much as that "coaster" Madeline taught "Doc" Harvey —y'know, Marlene Dietrich, in *Shanghai Express*? That's the film I saw up to the line that stopped me cold, a lifetime ago since I taught at a school in Africa.

Like Madeline, my Lily was a well-traveled blonde in her mid-thirties, with warm fine eyes set in an even-molded face. Moody, mysterious, irrepressibly romantic, if not exactly living by her wits. True, I never saw her in tails and top hat or kissing a woman; but of trysts, affairs, encounters—some with men, others women—of such my Lily left no doubt.

Why? I couldn't say, she just did. Just as you knew it took more than one man to make Madeline "Shanghai Lily."

Lily taught history and English at a school in Iganga, about fifty miles east of Jinja, where I taught, geography. I met her at a swim party, at a British expatriate club in Iganga. She was in a leopard-skin bikini pulling on a Sportsman, I was in Bermuda shorts quaffing a Tusker Lager. The last time, I'm not sure what she was in. I was in bed, feigning sleep on the heart side and squinting at a gecko on a full length mirror, while Da Costa, "Doc," at my entreaty, entertained her—in the most innocent sense of that word, by the way—as in "amused" or "diverted." Y'see, we'd said our goodbyes, Lily and I had, or so I thought, days earlier in Jinja, or was it Iganga? No matter, up she pops is the thing, and that's when, as I say, I delivered her to the shelter of Doc's talk, an act I now view as—well, less callow than caitiff. . . . 'S amazing, isn't it, the effect that the words can have, of a cinematic high-class hooker in a first-class car of a train hurrying across war-torn China?

Anyway, we were, at the time, in Kampala, the capital, about fifty miles west of Jinja. I remember the dim light of the dingy room that Doc and I were sharing at the Paris Hotel, a grungy misnomer of a place with free breakfast of tea and eggs, always scrambled, like the brains of the rats scuffling out back on top of the cinder-block wall, a chalkboard of urban political graffiti, mostly in Swahili, of the *uhuru, watu* variety— "freedom," "people"— with more than one vulgarity directed at the Prime Minister, Apollo Milton Obote. We'd gathered there, y'see, Doc and I and a party of other Peace Corps Volunteers, for mustering out after two years of teaching within the Nile basin.

I remember wishing she'd leave, Lily, and feeling, even now, as the procession of shadows lengthens, a spasm of vexation when, in my conflicted, brooding mind, I hear her ask Doc what kind of name "Da Costa" is, and he indulges her with, "It's Dutch," then, "Not really—it's complicated." He is, he explains, descended from Portuguese Jews whom the Inquisition chased out of Portugal to Amsterdam in the sixteenth century. "While I consider myself a Christian, this- this," he stutters, "this whole other thing," adding almost

wistfully, “y’know, where you come from, where-where you belong?” A pause, then from Lily, “*Saudade*.” . . . Doc doesn’t get it. Me, I’ve ’bout had it. “The feeling,” Lily goes on, “of yearning for what you love and that is lost,” then most earnestly, “You should know that— *saudade*—it’s Portuguese.”

There follows a promising pause, and just as I’m hoping she’ll leave, Doc says something about how he’s been teaching in Musaka, which is about seventy-five miles south of Kampala, both strongholds of the Baganda people, who are ruled by the mythological war god Kibuka. No doubt, it was one of the Baganda who’d scribbled out back, “*Kuma nina Obote!*”—Swahili for “motherfucker”—’cause, y’see, the Prime Minister had recently suspended the constitution and sent his protégé, General Idi Amin, to drive the Buganda king and country’s President, Kabaka Mutesa, into exile. Not that that has anything to do with the connection between Shmita and Mount Sinai, except that it inspires Lily to tell the story of how Kibuka died—betrayed by a woman. Only it takes her—what?—ten, maybe fifteen minutes, to recount the myth. Meanwhile, with every excruciating detail, I’m feeling a senseless anger welling up because—well, she hasn’t played by the rules . . . the unspoken rules. I mean once you’ve said your final goodbye— your *último adeus*. . . . your *kwaheri ya mwisho*—Isn’t that the end? As in, no encore, “Poof!”

The talk drifts, then mercifully dies away, but not before Lily mutters, in a damp and dreary voice, something that sounds like “smothered *moyo*”—“heart.” Then, quick as thought, her thick, troubling sillage is again beside me, and I steal a glance at her reflection over my hunched shoulder—only now, with newly opened eyes. She’s pushing her fingertips inward and firmly from navel to bikini line, over and over again, while Doc stares gimlet-eyed under beetling brow, lips soundlessly parted, as if in an ancestral frozen gasp. And, with a sinking heart, I hear spoken in a terrible monotone, the line that seems to travel forever from a place more distant than equatorial Africa, a place that bears the chill of Ultima Thule: “You haven’t a cigarette, have you, Doc?”

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After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including recently: *The Saint Ann's Review*, *The Bitchin' Kitsch*, *The Broken City*, *The Fem*, *Dual Coast*, *The Fiction Pool*, *Subtle Fiction*, *FictionWeek Literary Journal*, *Ariel Chart*, *Star 82 Review*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *Children, Churches, and Daddies*, *The Blotter Magazine*, and *Cerurove*. Barry, whose work was nominated for Best of the Net 2017, lives with his wife and daughter in Santa Barbara, California.