

Heat

Constance Cottrell

Even through the closed blinds, beams of golden light had managed to escape through the cracks into the dark room. Dust motes floated slowly in their midst and settled on a faint floral pattern that was just visible on the faded olive bedspread. The day was hot and stifling. Bruce Mackenzie reached over to his left and picked up a half-opened book, squinting and adjusting his glasses to check the page number. The musty smell of moth eaten furniture had been intensified by the humid atmosphere and as he leant back into the armchair he could feel his shirt sticking to him like a sheet of cling film. He mopped his brow with a cotton handkerchief and called out in aggravation.

‘Nurse!’

There was no answer and he readjusted himself in the chair irritably. Leaning forward and called again.

‘Nurse!’

He could hear nothing but silence outside in the hallway. Most of the residents were outside enjoying the hot weather. The screams of excited grandchildren could be heard from the garden and he expected the nurses were making the most of the day by getting out of the home for a few hours. No one would have thought about him, or if they had, it wouldn't have held them back. In many ways he didn't blame them. He put his book down and stood up from his chair. The air conditioning might be better in the lounge, and, seeing as he was the only one inside on 'a day like this' it would be completely deserted. He made his way to the door and opened it to a wash of blinding light. He put a hand over his eyes, turning his head slightly and squinting through the gap of his wrinkled fingers.

It was a moment before he could see again. The screams of the children outside and the heat burning on his face seemed suddenly magnified. He reached for his handkerchief in his dressing gown pocket to wipe the sweat from his brow, but his hand slipped past his waist and fell into nothingness. The material against his skin began to feel coarse and ill fitting, beads of sweat were trapped on his neck against a starch white collar that was gently strangling his throat. He knew the uniform immediately, the khaki drill set of jacket and shorts, black tie and long socks, completed with a green hackle set in his bush hat. His heart raced. He knew exactly where he was, the sandy, dehydrated ground, the thin, stunted trees, the raging white sun that never ceased to bear down upon him, he knew it better than he would ever wish to. The parched and foul landscape of northern Cameroon stretched out before him. The children's screams had merged into the piercing wails of the wounded, and he could smell the pungent stench of horses and gunpowder mixed into a disgustingly familiar odour. The back of his throat was burning, his tongue felt like

cardboard against his cracked lips. He reached for his water bottle, but it was empty. A man rushed past him and then stopped in his tracks. He turned around, a deep gash visible in his composed face. As the two soldiers looked into each other's eyes a flash of panic crossed the strange man's face and he shouted out in desperation.

'Mackenzie! We need to move!' The soldier waited for a response, but none came. In two minds, he looked behind him and then back at Mackenzie before slipping his shoulder under his friend's arm and dragging him forwards.

'Mackenzie, you need to snap out of it... If you want to get out of here, you need to move.'

Mackenzie looked up at the man supporting him, and with a sudden wave of understanding, he recognised the face he was looking into.

'Blake?'

An expression of relief crossed the man's face.

'Yeah, that's right, it's me. Now do you think you can run on your own?'

Mackenzie swallowed and nodded. Blake made to move on but halted when he realised he was walking alone. He turned back to Mackenzie.

'What now?'

'What about MacLear?'

Blake's expression hardened, and he shook his head. Mackenzie froze as a huge rock dropped into the bottom of his stomach. If he had felt ill before, it was nothing compared to this. He had to move.

'Let's go.' He said and ran ahead of Blake, concentrating on his blistered toes and dry mouth. He let the heat consume him, focusing on every bead and drop of sweat that trickled down his pounding forehead. He tried to keep only the physical pain in his mind, but it kept screaming the same name over and over again, MacLear. He knew it was his fault, he knew that Blake knew it was his fault.

The screams inside his mind became louder and louder until he felt cold hands on his shoulder restraining him. The burning light was gone. The tight, scratching uniform was no longer trapping him, and he realised the pained wails were coming from his mouth. He silenced himself and spluttered. He was lying on the floor in the home, his dressing gown twisted around his neck and his throat burning. Three nurses stood around him with serious looks on their faces.

'It must have been the heat.'

'Someone should have been watching him.'

He tried to stand up, and the nurse held his arm to support him.

'Mr. Mackenzie we're going to take you to the lounge until they come to fix your air conditioning, is that alright?'

He nodded slowly and followed her down the hallway. The lounge was completely deserted, bar one resident who sat reading the paper with his back to them. As Mackenzie went to sit behind him, the man reading spoke quietly.

'I never did like the heat'

Blake put down his paper and gave Mackenzie a knowing smile.