



Island of the Midnight Moon

When I was a small boy I used to travel back and forth from Uganda to England on an aeroplane with four propellers. It landed and took off in five different places before finally wheezing down through the thick clouds into Heathrow. One of those places was Khartoum. It was always night time when the plane landed there. All you could see from the aeroplane window were a few twinkling lights and flickering desert fires. When they pulled back the rusty bolts and opened the door there was a huge blast of red hot air, impregnated with indescribable aromas. Back then, when I was four foot six, I used to think that Khartoum was a suburb of Hell and I promised myself I'd come back when I was six foot four for a closer look.

Perhaps I've been too good because the powers that be in the universe have so far chosen to spare me an adult visit, let alone forced me to live there permanently. Good on you, powers of the universe.

Mind you I probably haven't been that good because I've ended up in any number of places which were undoubtedly colonies of Hell. Fernando Po tops the list, an island with a name so unlikely that up until the time I actually set foot on it, I doubted that it really existed. In this island paradise one half of the population had been murdered by the other half. The survivors had apparently eaten just about every other life form, vegetable and animal, even the monkeys. The glass in the hotel

windows wasn't there anymore, or maybe never had been, and the water in the swimming pool had long since disappeared into an enormous jagged hole, one that presumably led straight down to the ornamental fountain in Lucifer's foyer. The harbour was the crater of an extinct volcano, open to the sea, the water so black and deep even the light from the midnight moon was scared to go there. Today Fernando Po goes by another name and a sudden and unexpected windfall of oil money has enabled the locals to call in a glazier and generally spruce up the place.

Why, you may ask, am I telling you all this. The answer is that I have a theory: we don't really choose our destinations in life; they choose us, at least in the eerie sense of giving us our just deserts. Don't get depressed, at least not yet: it is not an entirely melancholy theory. You may have recently got back from a fortnight lolling on a palm fringed beach with Angelina Joli. If you have, I'm sure you have a contented grin on your otherwise vacant face, you lucky bastard, and probably agree with me. Or maybe the sixteen kids came along too and you have a scowl on your face and you still reluctantly agree with me.

But it's not as simple as taking your baggage with you, so to speak. It's easy to turn the Heaven Hilton into a doss house if you arrive there with a bad attitude. No amount of pampering will add sparkle to the wine; no amount of

bosomy dancing by hula-hula girls can cheer professional grumps. People like that hold season tickets to Crapville and its everywhere they go.

No, what I'm trying to say is that there are places on earth with your name on them, whether you like it or not. When you travel on business that's obvious; you usually don't have a choice anyway, you have to go where the customers are. But when you're going on holiday you think you have a choice. You pick up a magazine or maybe troll the Internet and something leaps out and grabs your attention. It may be a gob stopping photograph of a stupendous view or even something quite mundane, like a picture of a particularly delicious looking breakfast. It doesn't matter. The point is that you intuitively feel you've found the ideal place when all the while the place has actually chosen you. It knew you were coming and has been there all along, waiting for you to arrive. If you've been good this past year, take comfort; it will inevitably be delightful. If you've been bad it'll be the island of the midnight moon.