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CATHERINE COOPER



WHITE ELEPHANT

A NOVEL

Dr. Richard Berringer, his wife, Ann, and their thirteen-year old son, Torquil, have abandoned their dream home in Nova Scotia and moved to Sierra Leone, despite warnings that the West African country is in a civil war. Two months on, things are not going well. Tensions are rising between Richard and his boss; Torquil – who hates Sierra Leone almost as much as he hates his father – has launched a hunger strike in an effort to convince his mother to take him back to Canada; and Ann is bedridden with illnesses that Richard believes are all in her head. While the Berringers battle with themselves, each other, and the worlds they inhabit, the narrative repeatedly returns to their past, shedding light on what brought them together, what keeps them together, why they have come to Sierra Leone, and why they might not be able to go home again.

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a novel
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CATHERINE
COOPER



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White Elephant is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, events and incidents are either the products of the author’s imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, actual organizations or actual events, is unintended.

For Sammy

WHITE ELEPHANT (NOUN): *a possession that is useless or troublesome, especially one that is expensive to maintain or difficult to dispose of.*

Origin: from the story that the kings of Siam gave such animals as a gift to courtiers they disliked, in order to ruin the recipient by the great expense incurred in maintaining the animal.

— Oxford English Dictionary

Her face looked ugly in the attempt to avoid tears; it was an ugliness which bound him to her more than any beauty could have done; it isn't being happy together, he thought as though it were a fresh discovery, that makes one love — it's being unhappy together.

— GRAHAM GREENE, *The Ministry of Fear*

1

CHAPTER

AS ANN RAN DOWN the front steps of the British High Commission cradling two thick, brown envelopes addressed in Tony McCann's loopy handwriting, a sense of panic rose within her. They were late. The boy was waiting at the wharf, the store would be closing any minute, and Maggie still wanted to go to the fabric market. Something would have to be left out.

"How long does it take to get to Choithram's?" she asked as she climbed into the truck.

"I cannot know now," said the driver.

"What time is it?"

"Four o'clock."

"Ugh. And how far is it from Choithram's to the wharf?"

"I think this boy is not there."

"You said he would be there."

"At eleven o'clock he was there. He is a good boy. Now it is four o'clock."

Ann turned to Maggie. "Why don't we leave you at the fabric market while I quickly go to Choithram's and the wharf, and we'll pick you up afterwards?"

"Why do I get the feeling I'll never see you again if I agree to that?" Maggie said, and Ann wished she hadn't invited her to come.

It was partly her fault they were late, she hadn't even offered to help pay for gas, and now she was going to be angry if Ann didn't arrange for her to get to the fabric market, but there simply wasn't time.

Ann turned over the package. Tony's elegant, feminine script formed soothing curves that wound over each other economically, as if the surface of the envelope were something precious that shouldn't be wasted. How strange, she thought, that such an ordinary, familiar thing should seem so exotic.

She looked out of her window at the neat hedges and walls, the palm trees, and people under colourful umbrellas selling fruit and sweets. They were still close enough to the ocean to smell the salt air, and Ann wished they weren't in a rush. She was feeling relatively well for once and longed to sit on a terrace at one of the hotels, eat good food, and breathe for a while, but instead she had to go directly into the furnace of downtown Freetown with Maggie pouting in the back seat.

Another pang of anxiety. She couldn't miss Choithram's. She'd been washing her hair with soap for two weeks after having an allergic reaction to the chemical shampoo Jusuf bought at the junction, and she had to get Tor his candy. He had so little to look forward to, and although at thirteen he was too old to be making lists of treats, she wanted him to have at least some comforts, despite Richard's insistence that suffering built character.

How had it become four o'clock? The driver had been late to pick her up, as always, and when they'd finally arrived at the orphanage, Ann had waited for at least half an hour while Maggie and Pastor Mark prayed over one of the kids, who was having an epileptic fit or something. Then there was the road, which was even worse than usual because of the heavy rain, and they'd been held up at every single checkpoint along the way, where Maggie insisted on preaching to the soldiers and giving them Bibles if they asked for bribes.

They had to go to the High Commission first because it had recently moved and the driver wasn't sure exactly where it was or

what time it closed, and they'd arrived just as the gates were being locked. The janitor asked Ann not to tell anyone that he had let her in, so when the rude man at the desk barked, "Who let you in?" as she rounded the corner at the entrance, she'd said, "I couldn't say," because she didn't like to lie. He tried to tell her that he couldn't release her mail because they were closed, and he made an obnoxious comment about how it was highly irregular for people to use the High Commission in this way and it was only meant to happen *in extremis*. She'd had to smile and try to be charming even though she was furious, knowing that there was no way he would have been so rude to her husband, who was English and a doctor. In the end, he'd given her the mail, and she'd been as quick as she could, but now it was four o'clock, and the boy was probably gone, and Richard would blame her for everything, because he always blamed her when things went wrong.

She opened the first envelope from Tony and took out the contents. There were some bills marked PAID, some medical magazines for Richard. Flipping through the pile, for a moment Ann thought Tony hadn't written to her, and she felt wounded until she saw, near the bottom, an envelope addressed to her in his handwriting, which she slipped into her purse.

In the second package she found two envelopes bound with an elastic band and a note from Julia — "*Looks IMPORTANT!*" — stuck to the top. Ann hated it when people used capital letters. It was so alarming.

Re: Request for Records

Dear Dr. Berringer,

Audit of income tax for the period of 1990–1992.

Your account has been selected for audit for the period noted above.

Please contact me before 15 days from the date of this letter to arrange a date, time, and place for the audit to begin.

Subsection 230(1) of the Income Tax Act requires that you keep records. Subsection 231.1(1) allows authorized auditors of the Canada Revenue Agency to inspect, audit, and examine the records. Your prompt reply is appreciated....

Ann flipped to the second letter, which looked the same as the first.

Re: Request for Records

Dear Dr. Berringer,

Regarding the audit of income tax returns for the period of 1990–1992.

We are auditing your records for the period noted above. Section 231.1(1) of the Income Tax Act gives us the authority to inspect, audit, or examine your records. You are required to provide all tax records for the period above. Please mail or fax this information to my attention at the tax service address shown below.

If you do not comply, we may issue a requirement notice to provide the documents under subsection 213.2(1) of the Income Tax Act. Please contact me at the number listed below before 15 days from the date of this letter.

THE FIRST LETTER, which must have arrived at their house in Canada just days after they left, was already over two months old. Ann's first thought was that she should do what Rita Bergman had done and use the war as an excuse to convince her husband to go home early. She wasn't about to ask Julia and Tony to go through all the boxes of receipts she had packed in the basement back in Nova Scotia, because they would never understand her system. When she got back she could manage everything, but she had to put it off until then. This meant she would have to write one of her letters, and that wouldn't be easy, because her mind wasn't as clear as it used to be, although she was feeling clearer than usual after a day away from the Foundation House.

Living in that place was like living in a swamp. No one had told her that they would be arriving in the middle of the rainy season, and their first two months had been relentlessly wet. Everything was damp all the time, and her lungs felt constantly swollen and inflamed. She thought of the Foundation House not as a house, but as a pulsating mass, a throbbing white body of liberated spores and perpetual oozing. She had tried for a while to fill holes and stop leaks, she had tried insisting that they move, but nothing had worked, so eventually she had given up. Then Jusuf, that idiot, had brushed off the black mould that ran along the base of the living room walls without even closing the door first, so Ann and Tor had had to run through the house like a SWAT team with their T-shirts over their faces spraying a diluted bleach and Dettol mixture on every surface, but even that, she knew, was hopeless. The Foundation House was free, and Richard didn't believe it was making her illness worse any more than he believed that the house in Nova Scotia had caused it.

ANN COVERED HER NOSE with her blouse as the truck crept down a gridlocked street. She caught sight of herself in the side mirror, the bags under her eyes highlighted by the afternoon sun, and she had to turn away.

"How much further?" she asked. The driver shrugged. Maggie sighed loudly.

Ann had never met a Texan or a missionary before she came to Sierra Leone, but Maggie was exactly what she would have imagined if she'd been asked to conjure an image of either: overweight, badly dressed and full of aggressive certitude. She had short, feathered white hair and always wore one of two shapeless outfits – a long sleeveless floral dress over a faded yellow T-shirt or a short-sleeved denim dress with mismatched metal buttons down the front. She was loud and bossy, always trying to get things for free and criticizing people and denouncing their beliefs. When Ann made the mistake of talking to her about Richard, Maggie had quoted the Bible,

Judge not, or you too will be judged, but she was the most judgmental person Ann had ever met.

Perhaps what bothered Ann most about Maggie was that Maggie had sacrificed her relationships with her own children and grandchildren for people she didn't even know. Ann couldn't understand that. As difficult as he was, Ann would find it unbearable to be separated from Tor, but Maggie hadn't even seen any of her children or grandchildren in over fifteen years. She said she couldn't justify the expense of flying to the States when they were so short of money at the orphanage, but Ann was sure there must be more to the story than that. Maybe her children didn't want to see her. Maybe she was trying to make up for all the mistakes she had made with them by taking care of her orphans, who would be grateful for any kind of care.

Ann checked her reflection in the side mirror again, and again she had to look away. She wondered why she was being so negative. Maggie was a good person, and despite her pushiness and fundamentalism, Ann did admire her in a way. She was giving up a lot to take care of those kids, most of whom had been abandoned because of some disfigurement, and she was doing it because she wanted to serve God. There was something about that which Ann couldn't judge, even if Maggie was indoctrinating those kids, even if Maggie was a self-righteous American, and even if Maggie was judging her.

Some boys selling toothpaste stood next to the car chanting, "*Oporto, oporto*," so Ann had to roll up her window. She hated it when people did that. Richard said it was something to do with the Portuguese, because they were the first white people there, and she shouldn't take offence. This was the same man who didn't like her calling black people black people and said she was clueless when she asked what else she was supposed to call them. It was true that she'd never known a black person before she went to England as a teenager. When she was growing up in Nova Scotia, black people were a mystery to her. They lived at the extreme south end of town and

didn't go to her school, and although you sometimes heard about someone marrying one, she didn't know anyone who had. But people were people, as far as she could tell, and it was just as weird to pretend you didn't notice something as obvious as skin colour as it was to shout about it for no reason.

By the time they reached the part of Freetown Ann recognized, it was pouring. She put her head out of the window to find out what was making the traffic move so slowly, but she couldn't see through the rain. When they stopped moving altogether, she became frantic. "Why have we stopped?" she shouted at the driver. She felt an urge to take the wheel, but there would have been no point. No one was moving.

"We are very near," the driver said. He was sucking something from a bag he'd bought from a vendor the last time they were at a standstill.

"How near?"

He yawned and waved vaguely to the left. "Choithram's is there, and the wharf is there."

"Can you draw me a map?" Ann looked through her purse for some paper. She had only been to Freetown once before, and she had no sense of where anything was. She was also afraid that she might have one of her breathing attacks while she was alone out there.

She gave the driver an old receipt to draw the map on and straightened out her skirt, noticing that she had dried food on her chest. She looked in the mirror again. Her face was red, the pores enormous; the skin under her eyes was swollen and her hair was sticking up wildly. She looked like her mother, she thought with horror. She turned to Maggie.

"You two go to the market and meet me at the wharf as soon as you can, okay?"

"That's up to John, isn't it?" Maggie said brightly. She patted the driver on the shoulder, clearly pleased that she had her way, and gave Ann her umbrella. "Be careful out there," she said. Ann took the

umbrella from Maggie and the map from the driver and stepped out of the truck into a puddle of mud and garbage.

“Shit,” she said. She had to limp to scrape her shoe against the street as she walked, and she had trouble getting Maggie’s cheap umbrella to open, so it wasn’t until the driver was out of sight that she looked at the map and saw it was written in some kind of code and half soaked, the lines bleeding into each other.

“Excuse me, where is Choithram’s Supermarket?” she shouted across the street at a man in a suit holding a newspaper over his head and running in the opposite direction. He stopped and crossed over between two cars.

“Pardon?” he said.

“Choithram’s,” she shouted. “Please.”

“There.” He pointed at a building on the corner.

“And the wharf? Where is that?” She wanted to get all the directions she needed now, so she didn’t have to stop and talk to any more strangers.

“Keep going to Gloucester Street, turn left and walk to the waterfront,” he said.

“Thanks,” she said.

“I can escort you,” he said, but she was already off, leaping over puddles toward the store.

Most of the pedestrians had moved inside or under awnings to get out of the rain, and Ann was aware of people laughing at her as she ran down the now empty sidewalk, one hand on her purse, the other gripping the umbrella. She couldn’t tell yet if the shop was closed. No one was coming in or out. At the entrance, she passed a man sweeping, and he held the door open for her.

Inside the store, the air conditioning hit her like a cold slap, and she stood in the doorway gasping. “I’m sorry, we’re closed,” came a voice from behind the counter.

“I’ll be one second,” Ann said. Tor had given her a long list, but she’d only promised to do her best, and she didn’t have time to look

at it. She took some Smarties off the shelf and did the math. The prices were outrageous, and she was glad she hadn't brought Tor, because he would have driven her crazy with wanting everything.

Hurrying through the aisles, she picked up three bottles of gin, some shampoo, two bars of soap, a jar of raspberry jam, some Dettol for Billy's wound, two cans of tomatoes, two boxes of spaghetti. She was trying to add it all up in her head, but she'd started to lose track after the jam, and she couldn't remember how much cash she had with her. She had to keep something for the boy at the wharf, to pay him for his time and for his ferry tickets to and from Lungi, where he'd picked up the package from the airport.

When she had everything she needed, she took another box of Smarties and put it in her purse, reasoning that at those prices, whoever owned the store was stealing from *her*.

There was a Middle Eastern-looking man closing up the till. "We're closed, Madam," he said.

"Please," she said, and her voice broke, because by that point she was feeling quite desperate about Richard's package. The man shook his head and started to unload her basket.

After paying for the food, she only had one thousand leones left. She had no idea how much she was expected to give the boy, but she imagined it would be more than that. Then she remembered he might have had to pay for his transportation from the airport to the ferry and back as well, and she knew there was no way she had enough.

Outside, it had stopped raining. She looked around for a bank, but there was none in sight, and the street was once again chaotic with pedestrians and vendors. She wondered if she could return some of her purchases, but the store was closed, and she hadn't bought anything extra — she needed it all. She decided to go to the wharf and see if the boy was still there. The money thing could be sorted out later. The driver could probably lend her some, or maybe Maggie could, if she hadn't spent everything she had on fabric.

There wasn't enough space on the footpath, so Ann walked on the tiny bit of street between the gutter and the oncoming traffic, and she was repeatedly knocked by side-view mirrors and splashed with filthy water. By the time she got to the wharf, one of her bags had split open, and she was cradling it in her arms. The ferry had just left. Apart from a few people collecting their luggage outside the main building, the terminal was empty.

She turned to catch her reflection in a window. In the sunlight, she could see only the outlines of her face and body, her long neck, the shape of her breasts, the curve of her full lips in profile. There were no details in the reflection, no wrinkles or huge pores or dull, uneven skin.

"Are you Mrs. Berringer?" said a man in a dark blue uniform.

"Yes," she said.

The man held out a piece of paper. "This boy was waiting to give you a package. He was here for several hours, but finally he had to leave. He left you his particulars."

Ann put down her bags and sat on the steps. The note was a limp square of graph paper ripped from a school notebook. She stared at a math problem written in the top corner for a full minute before realizing that she was looking at the wrong side. Turning it over, she found a neatly printed address and the boy's name written in pencil.

Why hadn't he had the sense to leave the package instead of this note? Now they'd have to pay to send the driver back to get whatever was so important. And why was a schoolboy delivering the package in the first place? Why hadn't it been sent to the High Commission with the rest of the mail?

Ann took Tony's letter out of her purse and opened it. It was only the second letter she had received from him, but already the repetition was annoying. They should come home. Don didn't hold a grudge. Things had blown over. No one had even looked at the house, let alone made an offer on it. They weren't safe in Sierra

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

The book Ann is reading is the “Workbook for Students” section of *A Course in Miracles*. The letters written by Torquil to his grandmother and to Mrs. McCann are based in part on letters and journal entries written by my brother, Sam Cooper, when he was a child. The conversation that Richard and Sandi have about circumcision on the dockhouse balcony is based in part on a report written by my father, Dr. Phillip Cooper, for an academic course at McGill University, entitled *Regarding Cultural Factors Influencing Maternal and Perinatal Mortality and Morbidity in Rural Sierra Leone*. The “rebels are fighting” song that Torquil sings is taken from “The World,” written and recorded by Thomas George. The “goat” song that Kelfala sings is one that I remember a boy at my school in Sierra Leone singing, which I assume he made up. Aspects of the storyline about the herbalist are inspired by experiences I had while in Sierra Leone researching a story about mental health, which was published in *Guernica Magazine*. The two letters that make up the Epilogue are based on letters my mother received from friends in Sierra Leone.



CATHERINE COOPER is a Nova Scotian writer with a Masters degree in English Literature and Creative Writing from Concordia University. Her fiction and non-fiction have been published most recently in *Brick Magazine* and *Guernica Magazine*. Her first book, *The Western Home: Stories for Home on the Range*, is a collection of short stories published by Pedlar Press in 2014. *White Elephant* is her first novel. She lives in Prague, Czech Republic.