

# Change of Heart

by Peggy Ehrhart

**He fetched up at twilight** on a motorcycle, narrowly missing the goats raiding the garbage heap for yam parings. Twilight dies fast in the tropics, so it was dark by the time the two old Peace Corps buddies had settled down on the porch of the clinic with a couple of Guilders. From the village came the smell of wood fires as the women cooked.

“It’s been what?” the doctor said. “Twenty years?”

“More. My oldest just graduated from Yale.”

“And Michelle? As beautiful as ever?”

The visitor leaned close to the kerosene lantern and flashed a picture of a woman in a fur coat posing with a late-model Mercedes.

“Whew,” the doctor said. “You’ve done well.”

“The corporate world’s been good to me.”

“What brings you back to Malana?”

The visitor shrugged. “Missing my youth, I guess. And there’s stuff I never saw back in the Peace Corps days--like those mud mosques.”

“Be careful. They’ve had trouble at the border.”

“I’m not worried.” The visitor slapped a revolver on the table. “Anyway, I won’t be on the road long. I could only get away for a week.”

“Nice of you to fit me in.”

“Well . . . I felt bad, you know, about Michelle. But it looks like you made out OK.”

“I’ve built up the clinic. The way things are going with medicine in the States, I’m probably better off here. Not what I pictured though. I figured I’d practice somewhere in New England, a small town. Michelle said she’d like that.”

“Women say a lot of things when they want you to be in love.” The visitor fingered his bottle of Gulder, now empty.

“That gun’s making me nervous,” the doctor. “Remember the Chekhov quote? If there’s a pistol in the first act, somebody should fire it in the second.”

The visitor laughed. “Not to worry.” He lifted the empty bottle. “Got another? Or better yet, something stronger? At home I’d be on my third scotch.”

“Want some *akpeteshie*?”

“Palm liquor? That should do the job.”

The doctor reached for the lantern and disappeared through the beads that cloaked the doorway, returned with a bottle and two glasses.

“Speaking of Chekhov,” the visitor said after he’d shudderingly choked back a slug of *akpeteshie*, “Do you still write?”

“Lots to write about.” The doctor nodded toward the village. “Hear the kids playing? They can see in the dark, I swear, like cats.” He laughed. “How’d you end up in the corporate world? I figured if either of us really turned into a writer, it’d be you.”

“Life costs money,” the visitor said. “Michelle had ideas about how we should live. Westchester County isn’t cheap. And once the kids came, there were private schools, Ivy League colleges. No scholarships in my income bracket.” He reached for his *akpeteshie*, polished it off in one swallow, and refilled the glass. “And, you know--” He sighed. “You work all week and you think you deserve a night out, dinner at a restaurant where the maitre d’ knows your name. Michelle loves that stuff. Who’d’ve thought it? Twenty-five years ago she was the perfect hippy chick. But now she’s the perfect corporate wife--and she’s got to have the clothes and

jewelry to prove it.” He reached for the bottle, even though he was slurring his words. “You never married?”

“I found it hard to trust women after that.” The doctor refilled his own glass. “And I thought you were a sonofabitch, if you want the truth.”

“She made the first move.”

“We’d been cooped up with those Norwegians and that fish project for two months. I was sick and grouchy. So of course when we get the chance for some R&R, she’s going to be friendly to the first person that acts human. You didn’t have to take it seriously.”

“No, I didn’t have to.” The visitor slowly twirled the liquid in his glass.

“But you got her.” The doctor was drunk now too. “And you’ve got her kids, and you’ve got a big-deal corporate job and a Mercedes. . . .”

“Maybe I would have liked to do something adventurous,” the visitor said. “And have time to write. But you get stuck. I got stuck.”

“I loved her so much,” the doctor said. “And when she left with you--” He flung his head back with a monstrous sigh and wept. But after a few minutes the weeping ceased and he pulled himself up straight.

**Kids in the village** were making their way catlike among the mud-walled houses; women were murmuring as they tidied up from dinner.

Then a shot rang out from the direction of the clinic.

Kofi Mwgabe worked with the doctor during the day, helping with files. Now he set down his vegetable stew and ran across the packed dirt to the clinic. Silhouetted against the glow of the kerosene lamp, he could see two men. One of them was injured, slumped on the concrete floor, and the other was standing over him, holding a gun.

“You deserved it, you SOB,” the one with the gun said. “You don’t know what hell my life has been. If not for you, things would have been so different. I’d never--”

Kofi hesitated, not sure what to do, but then he crept closer. Close enough to realize with a start that the man slumped on the floor, the injured man, was the doctor.

The man holding the gun fell to his knees. His head sagged forward, and he began sobbing in a horrible way that reminded Kofi of a hyena. But he was still talking, talking through the sobs. Kofi could just make out the words.

“Why didn’t you fight harder to keep her?” the man holding the gun was saying.

Peggy Ehrhart is the author of *Sweet Man Is Gone* (Five Star, July 2008), a mystery set in the world of blues and bar bands. Visit her online at [www.PeggyEhrhart.com](http://www.PeggyEhrhart.com).