

The following text is part of the first chapter of the novel Cheap in August, by Graham Greene.

Cheap in August

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It was cheap in August: the essential sun, the coral reefs, the bamboo bar and the calypsos — they were all of them at cut prices, like the slightly soiled slips in a bargain sale. Groups arrived periodically from Philadelphia in the manner of school-treats and departed with less *bruit*, after an exact exhausting week, when the picnic was over. Perhaps for twenty-four hours the swimming pool and the bar were almost deserted, and then another school-treat would arrive, this time from St. Louis. Everyone knew everyone else; they had bussed together to an airport, they had flown together, together they had faced an alien customs; they would separate during the day and greet each other noisily and happily after dark, exchanging impressions of "shooting the rapids", the botanic gardens, the Spanish fort. "We are doing that tomorrow."

Mary Watson wrote to her husband in Europe, "I had to get away for a bit and it's so cheap in August." They had been married ten years and they had only been separated three times. He wrote to her every day and the letters arrived twice a week in little bundles. She arranged them like newspapers by the date and read them in the correct order. They were tender and precise; what with his research, with preparing lectures and writing letters he had little time to see Europe — he insisted on calling it "your Europe" as though to assure her that he had not forgotten the sacrifice which she must have made by marrying an American professor from New England, but sometimes little criticisms of "her Europe" escaped him — the food was too rich, cigarettes too expensive, wine too often served, and milk very difficult to obtain at lunchtime — which might indicate that, after all, she ought not to exaggerate her sacrifice. Perhaps it would have been a good thing if James Thomson, who was his special study at the moment, had written *The Seasons* in America — an American autumn, she had to admit, was more beautiful than an English one.

Mary Watson wrote to him every other day, but sometimes a postcard only, and she was apt to forget if she had repeated the postcard. She wrote in the shade of the bamboo bar, where she could see everyone who passed on the way to the swimming pool. She wrote truthfully, "It's so cheap in August; the hotel is not half full, and the heat and the humidity are very tiring. But, of course, it's a change." She had no wish to appear

extravagant; the salary, which to her European eyes had seemed astronomically large for a professor of literature, had long dwindled to its proper proportions, relative to the price of steaks and salads — she must justify with a little enthusiasm the money she was spending in his absence. So she wrote also about the flowers in the botanic gardens — she had ventured that far on one occasion — and with less truth of the beneficial changes wrought by the sun and the lazy life on her friend Margaret who from "her England" had written and demanded her company: a Margaret, she admitted frankly to herself, who was not visible to any eye but the eye of faith. But then Charlie had complete faith. Even good qualities become with the erosion of time a reproach. After ten years of being happily married, she thought, one undervalues security and tranquility.

She read Charlie's letters with great attention. She longed to find in them one ambiguity, one evasion, one time-gap which he had ill-explained. Even an unusually strong expression of love would have pleased her, for its strength might have been there to counterweigh a sense of guilt. But she couldn't deceive herself that there was any sense of guilt in Charlie's facile flowing informative script. She calculated that if he had been one of the poets he was now so closely studying, he would have completed already a standard-sized epic during his first two months in "her Europe," and the letters, after all, were only a spare-time occupation. They filled up the vacant hours, and certainly they could have left no room for any other occupation. "It is ten o'clock at night, it is raining outside and the temperature is rather cool for August, not above fifty-six degrees. When I have said good night to you, dear one, I shall go happily to bed with the thought of you. I have a long day tomorrow at the museum and dinner in the evening with the Henry Wilkinsons who are passing through on their way from Athens — you remember the Henry Wilkinsons, don't you?" (Didn't she just?) She had wondered whether, when Charlie returned, she might perhaps detect some small unfamiliar note in his lovemaking which would indicate that a stranger had passed that way. Now she disbelieved in the possibility, and anyway the evidence would arrive too late — it was no good to her now that she might be justified later. She wanted her justification immediately, a justification not — alas! — for any act that she had committed but only for an intention, for the intention of betraying Charlie, of having, like so many of her friends, a holiday affair (the idea had come to her immediately the dean's wife had said, "It's so cheap in Jamaica in August").

The trouble was that, after three weeks of calypsos in the humid evening, the rum punches (for which she could no longer disguise from herself a repugnance), the warm martinis, the interminable red snappers, and tomatoes with everything, there had been no affair, not even the hint of one. She had discovered with disappointment the essential morality of a holiday resort in the cheap season; there were no opportunities for infidelity, only for writing postcards — with great brilliant blue skies and seas — to Charlie.