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Bembeya

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BEMBEYA

A Project

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English

San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

By

Eran Williams

May 2006

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ABSTRACT

BEMBEYA

by Eran Williams

Bembeya is a book of short stories about Americans in contemporary West Africa. The stories are woven together by location and by characters who reappear throughout the book. *Bembeya* begins with *My First Village*, in which Peter, a Peace Corps Volunteer, is initiated by his African family. Peter later appears in *Report from Sèvere*, about the remnants of the Cold War in Africa. Finally, he is the narrator of the story *American Apartment*, where, house-sitting for an embassy employee, he remembers and falls in love with the luxury of the first world. Thus the book plumbs different depths of the expat experience in West Africa. There is very little success in the eleven stories in *Bembeya*. Africa keeps the Americans from accomplishing their goals but offers them other gifts.

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My First Village

We arrive in five white Land Cruisers. The red, laterite dust of the raised road swirls into the village as we descend into the square. I say square, it's not more than a patch of worn dirt, surrounded by a few simple wood frames for shops on market day. One mango tree, trunk smooth from human contact, offers shade for the villagers crowded beneath it. The little girls and boys begin to dance to the percussion and song of the village. They bring their knees up high and clap under them as though very excited to see us. Even the toddlers get up to dance. Next the women, their backs low, parallel to the ground, dance a planting dance, hands plowing the imaginary manioc fields. As though in victory, sometimes a villager comes over to us in mid-dance, grabs a wrist, and holds a hand up into the sky. The hunters in bark-brown vests dance with their rifles. Even the elders who sit upon wooden three-legged stools get up and dance in slow, bouillon-thick gestures.

And when it is all done we Americans huddle next to the Cruisers. We need a song of our own to sing and a dance. Does anyone know one? This is years before the *Macarena*. Some of us, those who have been to birthday parties at roller-skating rinks, know the *Hokey Pokey*. We decide on a song, turn in chorus and sing "Oh say can you see, by the dawn's early light," but after that line we diverge. Some know the words and

some know the wrong words and some of us just go silent. No one finishes. The children who had come up to us easily upon our arrival now hide behind the legs of their parents. There is muttering under the mango tree.

Bill, the bravest of us roars, "Happy birthday to you" and the rest of us pile on to that simplest of odes, faltering only at the very end, where we have to choose *who* is dear. "Happy birthday dear...Africa," sings Jennifer, rather lamely and I say "Peter," not really thinking anyone will notice. We all stop dead in that verse until Bill pulls us through once again shouting "Katibougou, happy birthday to you." And of course, yes, that is the right choice; the village name itself, this is our offering to the village. We sing the whole song through again, this time knowing exactly where we are going, and with not a voice faltering. Something about the laughter and applause lets me know that the villagers do not think us ridiculous, but rather think it a joy, that cultures can meet in the late afternoon next to the road and share songs.

They want more, clearly, and we are encouraged by the village's kind exuberance. This is why we have come after, all. This sort of thing. We remember *Row Row Row Your Boat* and sing it, after some staging, in rounds. A group of volunteers even breaks into a party of rowers and paddles merrily through the square. The kids of the village surround the boat and chant "row row row." (It is a phrase we hear for weeks after in Katibougou. "Row row row," someone offers as you pass their hut. Perhaps they mistake the three repeated words for a greeting. It would be months before we had enough language to explain the English and even then it was embarrassing, giving a lesson on one of the least useful verbs in the language.)

After *Row row row* Lisa remembers the *Brady Bunch* song and we are off into that mother lode of childhood memories: TV theme songs. We do the whole shtick, the two families, the youngest one in curls, everything. *Gilligan's Island* flows out naturally after that. It is as though the two shows followed one another in prime time, and though we have forgotten the channel and the hour we can still feel their musical proximity at our cores. *Now sit right back* we tell the villagers amassed under the mango tree. When in the song the storm gets rough, all can hear the thunder and terrible waves. The village is captivated. We sing Saturday morning, *Scoobie Doo*, and *Puff 'n Stuff*, *Fat Albert*, and *Alphabet Rock*. We sing the retro-seventies, *Laverne and Shirley*, and *Happy Days*. And then every decade after that; the whole of our recorded time. And when the sun sets and we have sung our songs to Katibougou, each family of the village claims one of us. They break us off from our party and lead us in different directions. They lead us by the hand to our hut where they give us names, their own names, names we can almost pronounce.

Modibo Coulibali takes me to his compound where he introduces me--using his hands and a foreign language--to his wife and child. I am their new baby, six feet tall, white and unable to use the toilet. Alou, they name me, Alou Coulibali. Modibo has built me a hut. It is a hut just as I imagined: Made of mud and roofed with dried palm fronds. My bed is woven straw. The one luxury, a prerequisite for hosting an American, is screening in the door and window. Malaria is our greatest concern. Our standard-issue blue med-kit is supplied with mosquito repellant so strong it's illegal in the developed world; it will weld your plastic flip-flops to your feet. We go about in the night roasting, our skin

covered as though for autumn, in long sleeves and socks too thick for mosquitoes to reach through. But here there are just two seasons and neither of them is autumn.

Termites gnaw at the rafters of my hut, dusting me with their debris as I sleep. In the morning Minata, Modibo's wife, pulls one bucket of water from the well and tells me to wash. She points to the toilet, a low mud wall around a hole in the ground. At first I am able to wash only my hair with the water of one bucket, but as the days go by I learn to cup the water in my hand and drag it over my skin. I learn to stand over the bucket so I can reuse the water that runs off me.

At night Modibo shows me how to squat and eat with my hand. My right hand, always the right hand, he insists. This becomes easy to remember when my roll of toilet paper, brought in from the States, dwindles into nothing but a brown tube. A tube which I try to throw away but later see the children have fashioned into a version of a cell phone.

After dinner Modibo points to everything in range and names it. I repeat the sounds until he is satisfied. And when, the next day, he finds I remember nothing, not even the word for *woman*, or *spoon*, or *water*, Modibo knows I am an idiot.

A sleep shattering ruckus. Have the devils come up from the wells? We few Americans exit our huts, standing like albino giants amidst the noisy children, we the only tall people out of bed. Terrified, the children swarm through the lanes of Katibougou, banging on tin cans and gourds: one concerted noise maker. Someone who speaks a little French finds out it's the moon. A cat has stolen the moon and the children must frighten the cat away

if they are ever to see their beloved light again. The eclipsed moon is shaded in the sky like a red ghost. It is faint and red like a bright light held in the mouth. Little ones who have never lived through this before wail, the snot on their faces collecting dust. The children continue to beat upon gourds and aluminum pans. They scream up at the black sky. The stars! Stars I never dreamed of. Not a light on for half a continent. Even Bamako, the capital, goes dark at night. Satellites cruise through the Milky Way. A sliver of silver appears, then more. The children of Katibougou roar. The cat has left its prey. We adults go back to bed but the children stay up all night playing games under the rescued moon.

My family brings a goat home, ties it to a rock near the fire, and feeds it grass for a month, then kills it on a holy day. Modibo calls me out of my hut, where I am declining French verbs. He wants me to see the goat's testicles.

"Humma humma," he laughs and holds them up to my face. Is he offering them to me, or teaching me vocabulary?

"Humma humma," I repeat, repulsed by the dark, hairy sack which he holds closed. He hangs the scrotum from a pole near the mud fire ring then continues with the butchering. Modibo hangs up the goat, blood still draining from the slit neck, cuts a small incision in the leg and blows into it as though inflating a balloon. The hide lifts off the animal, and Modibo peels the goat in one cylinder with holes where the head, hooves and genitals were. The skin, once soaked and shaved, will be made into a bag. The meat is hacked off and divided between the visitors who pass through accepting it with heads

down, mumbling. When the whole process is done and he sees that I am still attentive, Modibo calls me over again to the balls. He shows me with his hands that we will eat the goat's testicles that night. Sincerely, I gesture to him that I won't eat them.

We have discussed this in training: How to politely refuse food. It was suggested that we feign illness. I do my best mock up of vomiting for Modibo and he just smiles. Has he misunderstood me? I walk up to the testicles, point at them then point at my mouth and waggle my index finger. Modibo smiles.

That night, around dinnertime I visit another household. I find volunteers gathered around a kerosene lamp, bidding over bridge hands. They have a large bag of M&Ms from a mother's care package, but the candy has melted together into one aggregate lump and so we spoon out bites. We reminisce, our memory walking us down supermarket aisles. At bedtime I sneak home, hoping that no one has waited up.

For breakfast the next morning, sitting on top of the usual millet gruel in the communal bowl, is the skinless, steamed goat's head. Modibo, as the oldest man, reaches in first, tears off a cheek and eats. Now it is my turn. I pat the head of the goat. I brush my fingers over the gray under-skin on the forehead, hoping that if I just model the act of eating they will accept it. But poor Minata won't eat until she sees me take some goat; she comes after me in the pecking order. I stare at the goat a long time so that finally Modibo reaches out an eye for me, and puts it in my region of the bowl. It is an offering. I can't do it. I shake my head and they laugh. I laugh too, but with my nerves, and resort to explaining myself completely in my foreign language.

“We don’t eat the head. Here you eat the head of the goat but in America we don’t like that part. Actually we don’t eat goat at all in America.” I try to remember, had I eaten goat before coming to Mali? Modibo and Minata just laugh. It is not the way they are supposed to react. They are supposed to be insulted.

Dinner that night is late. It is a communal bowl of steamed millet with a few scraps of goat meat in the middle which I have to grope for in the dark. Modibo passes scraps my way.

After dinner, Modibo draws a daisy in the dirt. By lamplight he points to its parts, naming them for me. There is Mali, the circle in the middle. He points to the center of Mali and says “Modibo.” He is from the middle. Around his country are the petals of the contiguous nations. Guinea, Senegal, Mauritania, Burkina Faso, Niger, Cote D’Ivoire and Algeria cling to Mali in perfect symmetry. He points to the map and then me. I know what he wants. But there is no place for me on his map. I shake my head, draw a rough North America as far away as I can from his daisy. I point at my continent and fly my hand from there to the circle of Mali. Modibo’s suspicions are verified, I am not from anywhere he knows, I’m not even from the center of my own map.

Modibo brings out his papers which he stores under his straw sleeping mat. He shows me his identity card, then two pictures of a cauliflower, and a woman from a shampoo ad that look to be out of a magazines.

After all this, Modibo leans towards me to break the news: “Humma humma,” he says, patting my belly: Those were the testicles I ate for dinner.

The strangers of Katibougou act as if they know me intimately. I cannot walk by one of them without being seriously delayed by handshakes. They repeat over and over again greetings that would do very well spoken only once. The proper thing to do, according to our training, is to repeat “fine,” as often as you are asked “How are you?” This frequently means ten *fines* in a row, fired out rapidly, as if by machine gun. My suspicion at moments such as these is that these people have nothing better to do than talk to strangers.

If a stranger asks my name and I reply with “Alou Coulibali,” they comment invariably with great amusement about how I eat lots of beans.

“No I don’t,” I tell them, but they insist that I do.

“Coulibali, you eat beans.” It is so riotous to the villagers, this connotation of my name that I finally ask my trainer about it.

“It’s a way of connecting families,” he tells me. “Joking cousins: They say you eat beans and you say they don’t wash.”

How am I to prepare for my post if I am so consumed with greeting every member of this village in precisely the right way? All through these mandatory greetings the hand is held, not just for an initial shake, and if it occurs to the villager, he clamps down hard and drags me into his hut.

I am dragged into compounds and even yelled at for having presumed to pass by without stopping for a greeting or two. And once in the compound they insist on feeding me, or giving me tea. And the tea here is not a simple one cup and out, it comes in three rounds, each one cooked up serially, using the same leaves, slowly diminishing in

strength. To the second round is added sugar, to the third, mint. The whole ceremony takes an afternoon.

Added to these trials is the further social complication that once per journey through the village someone asks me for my shirt, my shoes, my pants or some object I happen to be carrying.

“Give me that,” they demand in the local language. In Bambara, it is one word, *Givemethat*. “Nice shirt” they will note, “give me that.”

“Mine,” I tell them, “mine.” And this amuses them to no end.

In the training they say this is a game of interaction. It is like flirting but takes place between all members of society. “Make endearing excuses,” our trainers tell us. “Play the game. Tell them, ‘This shirt is not nearly good enough for the likes of you,’ or ‘I will give you this shirt but it is dirty. First let me take it home and wash it, then I will bring it to you.’”

I don’t have the patience to play this game. I find myself slinking through the village, avoiding strangers as I hear them come near. I duck behind a mud wall and find there, hiding, another volunteer. We say nothing to each other, holding our breath.

The Coulibalis have a tomato patch on the Niger River. When we get there for a morning of weeding and hoeing I am excited by the prospect of productive labor, but instead Modibo takes off his shirt and places it in the shade of a Tamarind tree along the bank. He pats his shirt to indicate my place. When I pantomime drawing water from the Niger and hoeing the soil he laughs, grabbing my bicep in a painful pinch. In contrast, Modibo

offers me his own arm, which while not bragging of muscle, is steel. Modibo calls the wife and kid over as further exhibits of fitness but I refuse to feel their arms.

I have watched Minata pound millet for hours at a time. She is like the sinew that holds the two bones of mortar and pestle together. The percussion of women preparing millet is so constant in the village that the silence of the Niger is startling. I sit on Modibo's shirt and watch the brown river until bored enough to attempt a nap. I have begun to succumb to napping, what with the heat and the vast, uncultivated tracts of time here in Africa.

I awake to a ringing bell tied to a fisherman's line. I open my eyes to see the old man wading into the Niger and pulling out of it a large fish they call Capitain. He comes over to show me his catch and ask me, in French that I have to hear three times before understanding, how many factories I own. I tell him I own not one factory and he tells me not to lie. He tells me, in a dabbling of three languages and mime, that he fought in Europe in the first world war, and so knows of white people's ways and factories. He asks me again how many factories I own. I don't even own a house, is what I wish to tell him, but I find it so difficult to negate in French that I just say *Maison* and wave my arms as umpires do when the runner is safe. When this does not satisfy the old veteran I look over to Modibo who, with Minata, is bent over at the waist holding a short hoe called a *daba* in both hands, aerating the soil. The veteran calls out to Modibo, "*Eh, Coulibali, I ni bara.*" It is a greeting meaning *you and your work*. Coulibali comes over and greets the old fisherman. They joke for a while about eating beans and then joke about me. The fisherman calls me *toubabou*: White person. I am Modibo's white person. Finally,

Modibo asks me how many factories I own and when I shake my head Modibo translates that for the fisherman who walks away satisfied.

“Bozo,” Modibo explains, pointing at the man who is setting his line again.

“Bozo.” And it is not until a year later that I figure out this is a tribe of fishermen, not a name for an idiot.

After three months of training and acclimatization, I receive my post and orders: I am to plant trees to prevent desertification. The Sahara is marching south, it seems, invading whole villages, gulping them up in its great sand gullet. And I am to stop it with eucalyptus and neem trees. They have placed me, as I hoped, on the front lines, in a village called Konna right there where the dunes come off the Sahara. They don’t speak Bambara up there so I’ll have to learn a whole new set of greetings. Here in Katibougou, we have left more cement than when we came: A nice new set of sturdy wells, improved stoves, and paved toilets.

All the families come to see us off as we board the Land Cruisers. Modibo stands close to me, holding my hand and saying nothing. We stand together a long time beside the red laterite road as men tie down the luggage to the white Land Cruisers. Guitars and bicycles bulge off of the vehicle’s roof as though it were Santa’s sleigh. In parting I have given Modibo a watermelon, a photo of me and Modibo in his manioc plot (a photo I sent to my mom to develop, which she sent back in the diplomatic pouch) and some money. When I give it to him, Modibo holds the photo to his heart, then shows it to Minata. She caresses my photographic image. I find my face is surprisingly red in the photo. There

are no mirrors in the village or even windows to reflect my face, and I have begun to assume I am black.

I can say little more in Modibo's language but "hello" and "goodbye," yet he tells my trainer I am fluent. The greetings are what matter. He is satisfied with my Bambara upbringing. All I am missing for true adulthood are the scars and if I stayed much longer Modibo would probably take care of that with the aid of the local blacksmith. He would send me off with the boys of a certain age to undergo the manhood rites.

Just as I am getting into the Land Cruiser that will take me seven hours north, into a part of the country that Modibo has never seen, he takes my hand, my left hand, of all hands, and shakes it, saying "goodbye" and "Allah protect you." I am shocked into speechlessness. I had thought you never got to use that hand for anything but an imitation of toilet paper. Later, cruising up to my post in the Land Cruiser, my trainer explains that the left hand is reserved for wiping the ass and, on occasions of great importance, for shaking hands. It means, confirms the driver, "that he will wait for your return. It is a way of assuring that you will return."

We drive north, through Bamako with its street light, toward the Sahara. Near Segou at the edge of a rainstorm the driver stops to crush a cigarette on the window. "It will keep off the water," he explains. This is some of the magic of the road, like when the driver presses his fist against the window the few times a car passes us heading south. At first I assume this is some sort of black power salute between drivers, but then he explains it is to make sure the window does not shatter if a rock is kicked up by the

passing vehicle. The trees seem to be plucked one by one each kilometer we travel north until, when finally there is nothing to see but distance, we have arrived.

“Will I have a well?” I ask my trainer.

There is no one waiting in this village, Konna. It is midday and everyone is asleep in the shade of their mud roofs. Even the lizards hanging on the walls sleep. We wake the mayor who accuses me of being a spy. He points at my Walkman as proof. I put the earphones on him to show this is just a device for listening to *Dire Straights*. Konna, my second village.

The Helpmeet

My first conversation with Karamba, because of my whiskey and his English, was incomprehensible. Still, it was pleasant to have someone on the other side of the table, leaning towards me, putting all his youthful energy into getting something across. I say "youthful energy" because I assumed he was young. I couldn't be sure; I hadn't yet learned to read age on an African face. When he finally left the bar after what must have been an hour I understood this much: He had used the word "wife" many times.

I asked a few times that night for clarification: "You have a wife?" "You are getting married?" "You are looking for a wife?" but after none of my questions clarified I dropped that strategy and just started nodding and throwing out "uhuhs." Not understanding what was being said gave me plenty of time to examine who I was dealing with. The young man had a shaved head that looked as though it had been sculpted by careful hands. The eyes and teeth set into it were shocking in their whiteness. He never looked me in the eyes. Instead, he looked down, at the table between us. Once, when my glass was empty, he called the bartender over to fill it. Naturally, I asked him if he wanted a drink but he gestured "No."

When I was next in the bar I asked the bartender what had happened. He told me the young man's name, Karamba, and his place of origin, Sierra Leone. He was one of

the refugees. The barman said Karamba worked across the street at the soda shack and had seen me a couple times and just wanted to be my friend. The bartender didn't know how old Karamba was, or if he was married, but he assured me Karamba was a decent man.

The soda shack, constructed out of corrugated tin, stood on the corner next to the National Post Office. Approximations of American cola logos were painted on the tin walls. The shack's awning was a blue plastic tarp taken from the UN refugees program. It carried the emblem of people sheltered under cupped hands and was tied down at the corners to heavy auto parts against the wind. There was no plumbing in the shack. Instead, the employees carried water in large yellow jugs from a pump two blocks down. Electricity for the heating coil and the refrigerator was got by way of a long extension cord run through a window of the post office. They had an understanding with the postmen--free Nescafe in exchange for electricity.

The first time I went to the cola shack Karamba wasn't there. I ordered a tonic and watched the boys at the corner selling phone cards. I knew tonic water wouldn't keep malaria away but I still drank it when I was in West Africa. Most of the people at the shack bought nothing. They didn't have the money. Still, they were nice, saying hello and good-bye at the appropriate times. They asked me if I was American and when I said "yes" they seemed pleased. I concluded that the soda stand would be a good place to sit after or before the bar.

Every time a car pulled up the boys would rush to its open windows and thrust their phone cards upon the passengers. What I wondered was why the boys didn't

cooperate. They all seemed to be friends and yet when a car pulled up they all raced and pushed and shoved. Why didn't they just take turns? Surely the customer would prefer a calm purchase without the pressure of five boys sticking their arms through every open window, insisting on their card, identical though it was to every other card?

Later the next evening, after the bar, I met Karamba for the second time. He was pleased to see me. In between demands for Coke, coffee and sandwiches he sat down next to me. He said "How da day?" and I said "Fine." I said "How are you," and he said "Small small." He said "How da body?" then gestured over his whole body and repeated the question three times quickly as though I was crazy not to understand. "Fine," I finally answered. Karamba explained that he worked the graveyard shift, sleeping in the day in a three story building that had almost been built but for the walls. He liked to sleep up there, he told me, because of the breeze, but thieves were a problem.

"You wan chop?"

"Chop?"

"Chop, chop. You know, chop." And he moved his right hand, half clenched, forcefully towards his mouth to show me what he meant. It looked to me like a pitcher starting his windup. But then, I don't eat with my hands. I told him I was full but would have a tonic. Karamba wasn't like the other young men I had met. He was proud but his pride wasn't like a land mine. He was quiet and kind and after he shook my hand he touched his heart.

Karamba wanted a white wife. When he noticed me going into the bar across the street on more than two occasions he suspected I could help him; I was white and I spoke and wrote English, the language of many white women. What he had asked me that first night over whiskey and what he asked again and again was if I could get him a white wife. In my two months in Guinea I had gotten used to being asked for things: I was asked for money every time I went out; often I was asked if I could help people go to America; women in clubs asked me if I wanted to pay for sex, and boys came up to me on the street and asked if I had any work for them, but Karamba was the only person who ever asked for a wife.

He had already given it a go on his own. Someone in the market had sold him an address and helped him write a letter to a woman in America. Karamba had sent money in the letter, money for the wife.

"Fifteen dollars?" I asked, "Jesus Karamba, you should never send cash in the mail. Fifteen dollars? That's a lot of money."

"Yea, is much money."

"Did anything happen? Did you ever get a response?"

"Can she write here? No. The man can say he write but lose it."

"Karamba, you can't find a wife through the mail. It doesn't work that way. I don't know. Who is this guy who..."

I was interrupted when a man who had ordered a canned meat sandwich on what they called Lebanese bread opened it up before taking a bite and complained there weren't enough tomatoes. He and Karamba argued back and forth over the normal

amount of tomatoes and then Karamba had to go back in the shack and repair the sandwich. I saw it happen over and over during my time at the soda stand: There wasn't enough water in the cup; the order was taking too much time; the coke wasn't cold enough. Along with their food these customers were purchasing the right to complain. They were not buying products as much as paying to have their way.

When Karamba came back I had it all ready to explain to him. "If you want an American wife you have to go there. You have to be around the woman you are going to marry. There are even lots of people in the States who have lived there all their lives and they still haven't found the right person. It takes a long time. You have to date the person. You know date? You can't do it by writing one letter and fifteen dollars. Look at me," I pointed my hands at my torso, "I have been surrounded by white women all my life and I'm not married. I'm 35. I don't have a wife."

"You?"

"I'm not married."

"Why you no married?"

It was a question only I had dared to ask of myself before Karamba vocalized it. I took the humorous way out. "I don't like American women. They never do what you tell them to. I want an African wife. I'm here in Africa to get a wife."

Karamba laughed and translated what I had said for the other men at the shack. They laughed and wanted to shake my hand to share the joke but then they started calling to some of the women nearby and the women started coming over. I told them seriously that I was kidding. I didn't want a wife.

"The truth is, I never felt like it," I said to Karamba and the people at the shack but that didn't sound true so I tried another explanation, "You are supposed to be in love before you marry. I was never in love. Or I may have been but it's more complicated than just being in love." It was the simplest summation I had ever given myself and it left a lonely silence in my mouth. Karamba looked at me confused or disgusted, I couldn't tell which. I looked up at the sky and found Orion, the only constellation I know, right above me. I told Karamba that in America, in the capital, you couldn't see stars in the sky. "Even in the country you can't see the stars this well. Too many lights," I explained.

"In America you can love before you marry?" Karamba was still weighing this idea.

"That's right. Before. Here it's not that way? When else are you going to be in love? After?"

Karamba looked like I was scaring him. "In Gambia I can love the white woman."

"You were in love with a white woman? Ah, so that's why you want to marry a white woman." But then I realized, by the way he said the word "love" and the way his eyes got wide when I told him you had to be in love before you got married that he heard "make love" when I said "love." "Wait a minute, what do you mean when you say love? Are we talking about the same thing?"

Two young men sat down in the red plastic chairs next to ours and demanded sodas and sandwiches. I told them to say "please." They asked me if I was from America and said that America was good. I asked them if they were from Guinea and

gave them the same compliment. After about forty more minutes of watching Karamba fill orders and watching the boys push phone cards I walked the two blocks to my apartment.

The next night, after thinking about it over a beer, I asked to see the address. Karamba had it with him, tucked in with his identification card. The possible wife was in Rochester, NY, an address unlikely enough to be real. There was a phone number and the area code looked right, even though I had never called Rochester. I offered to look the address up on the internet and call the number when I went back to Washington. But I didn't encourage him. I told Karamba flat out that you didn't get wives this way, by writing a letter or calling them up. I mean what are you going to say? I told Karamba to marry a black woman.

"If I don't marry the white I don't marry nothing. I can leave like so."

"So you never marry? You have to get married."

"My small brother can marry."

"How old is he?"

"This time Freetown."

"No. How old is he?"

"'Old?' I don't know this."

"You don't know how old your brother is?"

"'Old?' I don't know this."

I tried another approach, "What is his age?"

"My small brother can have like twelve, thirteen years, fifteen years."

"And he is married?"

"Yeah, my father can say marry. After to tell me let him marry. I say I will not marry to take that woman to give my small brother. To say when your big brother can not marry you you can marry."

"Your small brother married the woman you were supposed to marry? Wow. How old are you?"

"Old?"

"What's your age?"

"At this time I can have twenty."

I looked around the intersection. There were no white women. "Twenty is young." The only advantage of being thirty five is that you are just old enough to tell twenty year olds they are young and so can afford to wait. "You'll get over it. You'll find a nice woman here. White women and black women are the same. Did you have a bad experience or something? Why does it have to be white? They are the same, Karamba. A woman is a woman."

Karamba translated this, too, so that the others sitting around drinking Nescafe mixed with condensed, sweetened milk, could laugh. But I insisted "White and black are the same." I rubbed the skin on my forearm as if that was proof of it.

"If I can marry the white woman? Ah, I don't know. I don't marry black. I say why make. I say I don't like."

"But why?"

"Why make I can like to marry the white woman? One, I can like to have him in my life. Two, in the day when I have to see my mother I can have to tell to give my mother so because then when I move in Dakar. I can live in the village in Dakar. The place where they can call Tunger at that time I can learn. So I can come Conakry here to take my mother the village. In this time they can tell him to leave the compound house building in Freetown to come here. The best they can have to leave him in the building there. But they can have to tell him let him leave the village. So, some of lorry when my father can have. They can have to take the lorry to leave him like that."

There wasn't a third reason and I never asked again why Karamba wanted the kind of wife he did.

I saw Karamba every night. It felt like something that had to be done, like watering the garden. When I heard that there was to be an important soccer game between Guinea and Morocco I invited Karamba over to watch it on my color TV. I put all the stuff I usually let lay on the dresser into the top drawer: the loose bills; my passport and embassy badge; my wallet. The security officer, in his initial orientation, had advised against bringing Guineans into the house. There had been many armed robberies of State Department homes, especially since the influx of refugees. Still, the guy slept in a building with no walls and worked all night making sandwiches, it would be cruel not to let him watch a football game.

But when Karamba came over we couldn't find the game. The one Guinean TV station was consistently unreliable. Instead of the match Karamba watched a movie as I

did the little bits of work that get done on Sunday. He watched TV as though he had entered it. As I was looking up my lengthy return address to put on a package of indigo cloth for my aunt, Karamba asked, "Is there dust in America?"

I looked at the TV to see what had inspired such a question. It looked like the scene was in a prison yard and Richard Gere was a prisoner. "Dust?"

"Yes. Is there dust in America?"

I thought about it. "Yes."

"But in the country. Not in the town?"

"That's right. We keep our dust in the countryside where we can visit it if we want to."

"What?"

"No dirt. No dust in America."

And later, when there was a shot from high above a golf course, Karamba noted, "Lot of grass carpet in America."

"Right, I said, looking over his shoulder at the green with the sand trap and the pond carved out of it with as much art as was ever mustered in Arizona. "Right. In America we have grass carpet instead of dust."

"You have?"

I thought about it. I had inherited a lawn. It came with the house like the front door did. I had never considered myself as the owner of a lawn, but yes. "Yes."

I was moving glasses from the dish drainer to the cabinet when the movie got to the part with guns. Karamba asked, "What do you call this gun," pointing to the screen at a gun whose bullets were longer than cigarettes.

"I don't know," I answered, thinking he didn't know either, but he informed me that it was what they called an AA gun, Anti-Aircraft. Bruce Willis was aiming it by means of a laptop computer. He used it first to shoot off the arm of a man and then to kill the man and finally to blow up the man's station wagon.

"You have seen guns like that?" I said, impressed as any non-gun user would be.

"Yes," he said the same way I had said "yes" about my lawn.

"In Sierra Leone?"

"Yes."

I tried to think of what they would use a gun like that for in Sierra Leone. But then I remembered hearing of ECOMOG planes that had accidentally bombed a section of Freetown where the people were out dancing, celebrating the ECOMOG forces' victory and hoping for rice. Of course you would want to shoot at planes in such a place.

And then when Richard Gere was jumping out of a helicopter with a gun so large that I assumed it was a thing swollen by Hollywood, Karamba offered its name as well.

"You know that gun?" I asked in shock.

"Yes," and the ease of his response led me to the next question.

"Have you ever fired a gun?"

"Yes, of course."

"That gun?" It was so big that Gere was not even carrying it as he ran across a roof. Instead, he had his own military gun bearer, running along beside.

"Yes, I shoot this gun."

In the movie this gun, too, was used to blow up a car, this time a red minivan. Karamba had told me the week before that his brother had died in the recent fighting. I couldn't tell if his blasé recital of this news was due to war weariness, or a larger definition of "brother" than I was used to. I even entertained the possibility that what I heard was not what he meant. But what else could he have meant? I looked at the back of Karamba's shaved head. He was sitting in my chair but I didn't know him.

"Karamba, were you in the army in Sierra Leone?"

"Me? No."

"But many young men like you are in the army, right?" I figured there were two choices for a young Sierra Leonian man: You could be in the army or you could be with the rebels. Many were both, I had heard.

"Yes, plenty."

"So why weren't you in the army?"

"I no like the work."

"Killing people?"

"Yes."

But I never asked the question, the one that comes after the question, "Have you ever fired a gun?" and the response "Yes."

The movie was dubbed in French so Karamba could understand nothing of what was being said. Still, he understood all of the movie. Thus the global success of Hollywood: It is an Esperanto of moving pictures. In any money-making Hollywood movie, language is superfluous. My own French, created by a six week crash course in Washington D.C., was good enough to watch dubbed American movies with but not pure French films. In French films if you got behind in the conversation you were lost.

After the movie was over Karamba stayed. His rapt expression did not change when the world weather report came on, and continued into a history show in which professors discussed something that happened a thousand years ago in Turkey. Though I didn't have any idea what I was going to do with the rest of my Sunday, I knew I wanted to do it alone. There was something about the way Karamba sat in the big chair in front of the TV that told me he felt no sense of obligation to leave me alone. In fact, he probably felt obliged to stay with me, a man with an aunt in Ohio and one friend, him. I moved from one piece of furniture to another, inventing things to do. It was an activity that would have communicated to most Americans, I am busy, please leave. But Karamba blithely watched the round table discussion about Turkey a thousand years ago. It could have been a French film.

I finally, after 45 minutes of building frustration, turned to my guest and said, "Tomorrow I will help you with the phone call. OK? Tomorrow we can call the woman? The one you said was going to marry you?"

"You can meet me here to call?" He didn't sound as surprised as I expected him to be. It was as though he had been waiting for me to offer for two months, knowing better than I that I would offer.

"No, we can call from the phone booth. I'll meet you at the Coke stand. You have a card, right?"

"To phone? Yes, I have." And while he was still sitting down I shook his hand and told him that I would see him then. I didn't even walk him down to the street. When I am in a foreign country I always assume people aren't rude, they are just foreign. I hoped Karamba could see from that same perspective.

When you are going to call a possible wife you have never met it is best to get her just before she goes to bed. With the six hour difference that meant we would have to call from the middle of the Guinean night. I had never been very good with phones. I couldn't remember more than two phone numbers at a time and on the phone I was significantly less charming than in person. I needed to see a person to know what to say. I forced Karamba to come watch me drink whiskey as we strategised.

I would start the conversation and if things went well I would pass the phone to Karamba. We worked on his English. I told him to say "I am 20 years old," rather than "At this time I can have 20." I told him to describe himself as a cook in a restaurant. "If she asks you anything she will ask you what you do. If you say 'I'm a cook in a restaurant in downtown Conakry' she is bound to be impressed."

And what was I going to say? I looked at the proposed groom. Karamba was handsome. His eyelashes were graceful. He looked like he might not be done growing. He was a respectable young man whose smile burst onto his face. I would tell the woman on the phone that I had known Karamba for two months, that he was a close friend, my closest friend in Conakry. He was a trustworthy young man who was serious about marriage. Me? I was with the State Department. That sounded better than being an auditor. Or did auditor sound more honest?

The phone card Karamba showed me was good for 150 units. I needed to know how long that gave us. Karamba went out to find a phone card boy who could tell us how long we had to arrange the marriage. I was already halfway through my second double. Karamba came back with a boy who looked at the card, asked if it was new and told us "four minutes." I wasn't wearing a watch, I never did in Africa, but the phone card boy told me the units would tick down and at the end there would be a beeping. "Four minutes? How much did this cost you?" I asked Karamba, knowing how much he made a month.

In the little green phone booth the phone card boy and I stood face to face while he inserted the card and dialed the number. He handed me the receiver. "It's ringing," I said to Karamba, hopefully. Me, I hoped it would ring forever.

But after three rings the machine kicked in. An answering machine. I had forgotten about those. A few months away from the US and already I was forgetting its technology. "It's a machine," I informed Karamba. The message was anonymous, it only gave the number, no name, no music. In between the two beeps I had to decide what to

do. We had already used 20 units just listening to the brief message. And then the long beep came and I talked.

"Hi, this is Neil Kaub." As usual when talking to strangers' phone machines my voice came out deeper, more serious. "We haven't met, actually, and actually I'm calling from Guinea. That's the Guinea in Africa. Uh, I should say who this message is for. This is a message for Tess Blankenbaker." I read the name off the slip of paper even though I had it memorized. "I hope this is Ms. Blankenbaker's phone because this call is costing a whole lot. I'm actually calling on behalf of a friend of mine. A good friend who is standing right here but since he is not from the United States he is a little shy about just calling you out of the blue. I'm helping him." The units were ticking down, not one by one but in blocks of ten. I still hadn't made my plea. "This sounds funny, I know, but Karamba, my friend, really wants to marry you. We are calling to see how you feel about that. I mean, you should have gotten a letter that he sent. I think he put fifteen dollars in it so I don't know if it got there. Maybe I'll just put him on the line so you can hear his voice." The sentence "He has graceful eyelashes" came into my mouth but I stopped it, saying instead, "He is a nice guy. Handsome, reliable."

I passed the phone to Karamba as though it was a jar I couldn't open. I whispered for him to introduce himself but he just said "Hello? Hello?" Finally he said "Tess?" and hearing nothing, hung up. We had 30 units left. Karamba looked at me as though I had tricked him. He must have thought I was talking to the air, using up his phone credit just for fun. I explained, "Karamba, she wasn't home." This didn't improve his expression so I continued, "But there was a machine that takes messages. A tape recorder. It recorded

what we said and Tess will hear it in the morning or when she gets home." It occurred to me that I hadn't left a number for her to call. I always did that with message machines. I'm not very good with phones. "Karamba, this was a bad idea. Forget it, there is no way. This isn't going to work. I have no idea why I thought, why I offered...Bad idea, Karamba, I'm sorry. You can't just call a woman and ask her to marry you. It doesn't work that way in America."

He looked straight at me for a change and said, "You want to make me like fool person?" before he started back to the shack where he would make sandwiches until dawn.

I followed him. It seemed to me that if he was already hurt this would be a good time to kill the whole white wife idea. I sat up on the bench under the refugee tarp and told him how bad things had gone. "If someone called me and left a message like that..." I shook my head as I tried to imagine. "I'd call the police, maybe. For sure I would never call back. A guy on another continent I'd never met before. Unlikely."

Karamba was splitting thin loafs of bread, spreading mayonnaise on them with a wooden spatula. I had ordered a sandwich once. It had made me sick. "Karamba, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have gotten your hopes up. This is never going to work. There is no hope."

Karamba leaned over so that I could hear him over the blaring of the little transistor radio. "Hey, Kaub," he called me by my last name because he couldn't pronounce my first name, "There is always hope. God is great. It is God who decides.

Today I am poor and I have no wife, but tomorrow..." and instead of finishing the sentence he smiled.

When my contract was done I didn't tell anyone on the corner I was leaving. Not the barman or Karamba. Saying good-bye always took days and involved presents and promises. Better just to slip off the continent.

In the airport in Paris and then again in New York I was surprised at the number of single white women. At least I assumed they were single. They were alone. They were beautiful: well dressed, educated, clean. They had briefcases and computers and cell phones that they talked on while they walked in almost high heels. I could see why Karamba would want one of these. I envisioned him with each one.

And black women, too. I didn't think Karamba cared about color. What he wanted was an American. Even a French woman. Karamba had just wanted something else. He wanted to be doing exactly what I was doing, leaving my life behind with the help of an airplane and an American passport.

At home in my cold apartment I did what I usually do after changing continents, I watched TV for days straight, me on one side of the bed and bags of chips on the other. I thought of Karamba, especially, when the phone numbers came on the screen, the phone numbers late at night accompanied by young women. I never called them so I don't know if they were for sex or just talking.

I plugged her address into the map search on the internet. The street where she lived was there, in Rochester. I did a search for her name and found her at the Fulbright

grantees page. She had photographed Baga rituals on the coast of Guinea. Probably she had given her address to someone who then sold it to Karamba. Plenty of people had asked me for my address while I was in Guinea. I hadn't even given it to Karamba. I didn't like the thought of him showing up and wanting to stay with me the rest of his life. From the web page I couldn't tell if Karamba's possible wife was married. American women do so little to give off their marital status. "Ms." is probably the most revealing of American inventions.

Rochester wasn't as ugly as I thought it would be. The snow was new and hadn't gotten dirty yet. I found a flower store downtown and sat in my car with the heater running, thinking and watching the house until the smell of roses almost made me sick. I knew what I was doing was right because I felt like I was being filmed. I felt like I was acting out a movie. If not one I had already seen then one I would soon see. After all, she had already gotten a letter and a phone call, the next step was this visit.

The house was big and near the university. It was obviously the kind students shared so they could afford the rent. A four bedroom house with at least one person in each bedroom, that's what it looked like to me. I imagined Karamba happy in it. "God is great," I whispered to myself.

When a young, brown-skinned woman with tightly braided hair walked by my car and into the house I knew it was Tess. I opened my car door as she was closing her front door. I was shaking as I introduced myself on the porch. I sat down on the couch as she found a vase. Her fingertips were hennaed, I noticed, as she put the flowers down on the coffee table. She was getting her Ph.D. in anthropology. It was more complicated than

that but I understood it as a Ph.D. in anthropology. We talked about Guinea. She showed me her photographs. I thought maybe I recognized some of the people in them. I asked her if she wanted to go get something to eat. Over Chinese we talked of all the ways that Africa was better than the States, how there were no strangers there, the way there were in America. I repeated something Eleanor Roosevelt had said about Africa being poor but America being poor in spirit. Tess told me the story of how her car broke down in a village on the coast and she ended up staying there three months. She ended up doing most of her photography there. Tess told me that she knew, no matter what else happened, that village would always be there to accept her as a daughter.

I flew back up to Rochester for Thanksgiving and had turkey with Tess and her housemates. She came to Washington for Christmas and stayed at my apartment. After New Year's, when she had to go back to school, I called her every night. We laughed about how dumb I was on the phone, but even if I had nothing to say, I called her.

Soumah Dies

I walked out of the room with the dead bodies happy. The women found a wall and cried into it. The men talked about the price of perfume and a mat. I stood between them and looked from one group to the other: the women with their backs to me and their heads covered and the men in a circle, in business suits or kaftans, talking with the little old man who worked at the morgue about where to buy perfume.

It was the middle of Ramadan so everyone was hungry and thirsty. And on top of that now they were crying. Our department left the office as soon as we heard Soumah was dead. He was our *Planton*. Some of the general directors--Mr. Camara from Training, Mr. Bah from Statistics, and Mr. Diallo from Banking Supervision--had come along, offering to drive us in their four-by-fours. I went in the car with the secretaries. One of them said twice as we drove that people didn't die of TB anymore. Her husband was a doctor. Everyone agreed, TB wasn't deadly.

If I hadn't looked out of my office when I heard other doors being locked at 8:30 in the morning I probably wouldn't have been invited. They forget about me, the only white person at the bank. I'm easy to forget about, in my office working rather than visiting, making the rounds like everyone else. Still, I had known Soumah. He brought me bread and yogurt those mornings when I didn't have time to eat at home. He watered

my rubber plant and once went out to buy me a plastic bucket to put take-out food in. I liked the plastic bucket of the Vice-Governor's secretary across the hall and asked Soumah if he could get me one like it. I gave him 1,000 Guinean Francs but he never did find the right kind with the clip-on top. It's not like you could just go to the store for things. There were no stores, really, only people carrying goods. A market based on traveling salesmen.

Soumah was like a shirt, worn out but well ironed. He sat unmoving at a table under a light at the end of the hall until someone asked him to do an errand. Sometimes a whole day would go by without anyone asking. In the mornings he greeted me in Creole, "How da body?" And I would say "Fine. Fine." And then he would switch to French and ask me how I was in that language but now he was dead and I had no idea what that meant but I wanted to find out so I asked "Can I come?" when the department started out to the morgue.

"Can I come?" I asked, trying to look as somber as the women trailing down the hall. Some of them had already started crying. The morgue was on the coast road and when we got out of the Range Rovers I realized how long it had been since I had seen the water. And there my apartment was, just a few blocks away. On the peninsula you could never be more than a few blocks away from the Atlantic. I thanked the dead man for getting me out-of-doors. There was a tree growing right next to where the small waves broke and in it were maybe five pure white cattle egrets. The sun, still low, was already strong so we stood closely together in the shade of one flamboyant while waiting for the man who worked in the morgue.

I was the last to go in. The building and the dividers for the stalls and the tables were all cement block, but the roof was corrugated tin and there was a space between the roof and walls where the air could come in. That was the extent of the ventilation. To get to the body we walked by another corpse wrapped in a sheet with a faint plaid pattern on it. Soumah, too, was wrapped in a cloth but not his head. I saw immediately that it was him.

It must have been the movies I had seen that made me want to nod my head and say, "Yeah, that's him alright." But we weren't there to identify Soumah. I don't know why everyone had to go in and see him, one at a time. We were just looking, I guess. Soumah was smaller but not gone. That's what I felt. It made me think death doesn't make us disappear, it just diminishes us. There was something slightly white about his chin. Was that a new beard, or ice or some kind of powder? There was no smell, and no flies, and this was the tropics. I would have stood there a long time, I would have touched him if the Director of Training hadn't been right behind me. He had taken on the job of usher and he indicated it was time to go.

It was Soumah alright. I had known him alive and now I knew him dead. To see the body we had all left our jobs at the bank. I walked out of the morgue with exactly the feeling of an elementary school field trip. Leucetius talks about the great joy of standing on the shore and watching a ship sink. Seeing Soumah dead was a little like that but there was something else. I saw him, his head unwrapped so we could see it, and I knew what was going to happen to me. I had never seen a dead person in person and I was 35. The first time I saw sex in person I must have been 10. I had to wait 25 more years after

that to see death. Mine wasn't so much happiness for still being alive, as getting it, what alive meant.

The men were discussing the price of perfume. The old man, who was even littler than the dead Soumah, had to tell the Banking Supervisor three times that perfume could be purchased only in the market. The confusion wasn't unusual but the funeral lent it urgency. There were two minivans parked inside the gates of the morgue that we would rent as hearses.

When the women turned away from the wall we went to visit the home of the dead man. But no one knew exactly where it was. There was one janitor who knew but he was in another car. In the congested, narrow streets of the poor part of the city our convoy slowed and broke up. We stopped many times to ask strangers where Soumah's house was. They all knew where he lived but all gave different directions. In the car someone thought to ask if TB was contagious. The wife of the doctor thought it was but no one was sure.

"Isn't there a medicine for TB?" asked a woman I had seen in the Director General's office but who didn't work there.

"Yes. His wife came by the bank to ask for money for medicine. She told me they would buy him the medicine," answered the secretary squashing me against the door. I was sitting on her white bazan bou-bou and she kept trying to yank it out from under me.

"Did you give her the money?"

"Of course."

"So he must not have taken it."

"Or maybe he was not well. He was sick in other ways as well."

"Was he? He looked so tired all the time."

"His wife is very young, is she not?"

"She is and they have four young children. What will they do now?"

"It's the man in the other car that knows where the house is. What's his name, the janitor? Titi?" asked the secretary who had cried the most, a woman with a limp.

"Get out and ask at that mosque where the family lives."

By the time we arrived the small plot of dirt outside the Soumah compound was ready for us. Chairs and benches had been borrowed or rented to accommodate the visitors who would perhaps stay all day. All the men sat in a row across from me and I sat at the end of the row of women. When anyone arrived to share in the grieving they shook each of our hands in turn, whispering greetings that spilled over from one person to the next. Mr. Bah explained to a man in a hat who we were, how we were from the Central Bank and what the bank would do for him. Mr. Bah talked to the man as though he were a child and, indeed, the man kept his head down in reverence. It was promised that later in the day the Vice-Governor himself would come to visit and that the bank would take care of all the funeral arrangements. I figured I could get my work done in the afternoon when the rest of the department came back to pray at the mosque. I wasn't sure they'd let me in and I didn't want to threaten the ritual by asking.

It was only when a woman came out of the house and shook our hands that we were made to understand that the man in the hat was just a visitor. He was not a member

of the Soumah family. A young boy passing in the street was instructed to go get Soumah's older brother. We sat and waited in a silence not at all matched by the street behind us. Naturally, those passing by stopped to examine us. Some even asked for money but we were saving our money for the family of the bereaved. Sweat was bleeding through my shirt, as it always did away from air conditioning.

When the relative came Mr. Bah started in on the same speech, only a little more practiced, but the older brother didn't know French or Peul and the boy this time went to find someone who could translate into Creole. The secretary next to me asked the one next to her if Soumah's family was Sierra Leonian. That very day the rebels had taken Freetown and refugees were arriving on the peninsula in boats. Mr. Bah leaned over in his chair and made a crack about Mr. Diallo being able to speak Creole. It was an insult wrapped in a joke and it started the usual routine about how all Diallos were slaves and all Bahs were pickpockets. The woman next to me turned her head and spit into the street. It was Ramadan and good Muslims weren't swallowing anything. She was a good spitter, using the gap between her top front teeth for compression.

Two weeks later I got sick, coughing. I took two hours off midday to go to the American Embassy. The TB test is a shot but a small one and it doesn't go deeper than the skin. I even watched as the little bump of interdermal fluid swelled in my forearm. The nurse, an older Irish woman from Texas, told me not to press on it. The fluid needed to stay in there for a few days, undisturbed, before she would look at it again.

If I had to go to the Embassy I always tried to be there around lunch because at their canteen you could get food that was as close to anything American as possible in

West Africa. There was a TV up in one corner that played CNN nonstop, and they had a drinking fountain that you could drink the water from. I always took the table next to the air-conditioning unit. The day I got my test I had a lasagna that was almost real. I ate with a Marine and a foreign national, and talked briefly about where I was from. The Marine had little to say about Sacramento and I had nothing to say about South Carolina so we watched the weather reporter standing in front of a map of the US.

Three days later the bump was gone but in its place was an itchy smear as though red ink had leaked on me and I had tried to wash it off. Because I didn't know the correct answer to the TB test I wasn't totally concerned by this sign but I had the vague notion that medical tests were always best when they came out blank. The nurse looked at my arm and then looked closer. She said "Humm," like nice teachers sometimes do when you give the wrong answer.

I said "It itches" and she nodded her head as though she knew.

"Do I have TB?" I asked, and the tears in my voice surprised me.

"Well, we'll just have to take an X-ray and see. But the test is often accurate. It looks like yes, you might have TB."

"Am I going to die?" I thought of myself lying still next to Soumah, looking up at the bottom of the corrugated tin roof. I thought of myself much smaller.

The nurse's hair was still red, even though she was old. And it wasn't tame. It burst forth from all around her face and when I asked her "Am I going to die?" she said

"No."

Report from Sévere

Rumor was, the Sévere Air Force Bar served the cheapest beer in the fifth region. Same beer as every other bar, the only beer in Mali--Castel--but with a subsidy for the armed forces. Castel came in a big bottle, brown or green, and offered the slight aftertaste of formaldehyde. Peace Corps volunteers, they told us during training, pulled in what a Malian judge made, and most of us in the Fifth Region spent it on alcohol and essence. That's what they call gas in French, *essence*, and that's what we called it.

Sévere was a collection of unpainted cement buildings at a crossroads. West was Mopti on the Niger, east was the Dogon region, north was the Sahara and south, nine hours by bush taxi, was Bamako. There were no Peace Corps volunteers placed in Sévere--too urban--but I was house sitting there for some vacationing Lutheran missionaries who didn't trust the guardian to feed their cat. I had two weeks to luxuriate in their VCR and porcelain toilet. Just before they got into their white Land Rover the missionaries asked what I wanted from The Canary Islands and told me not to use the phone. They told me I could help myself to the Kool-Aid, though, and I did. I drank so much lime my shit changed color.

My own adobe in a village sixty clicks to the north had just washed away in the first and only storm of the rainy season. I had watched all day from my roof as the storm

approached. The white clouds dwarfed the sky and rode over the desert on a layer of broiling red dust. I could smell the rain even from ten kilometers away but that didn't mean anything. Every other bank of clouds that passed over smelled of water but brought only dust. It was so hot the raindrops evaporated on their way down. Normally I wouldn't care about weather patterns but in Mali I was supposed to be planting trees. The Peace Corps plopped me down in the Sahel with specific instructions to stop the desert's move south.

In the middle of the night, when I heard the raindrops actually hitting the dirt of my village, I jumped out of bed and ran outside to celebrate. But out there it felt like the raindrops were carrying rocks. The earth was being strafed. I ran for shelter but it didn't take long for the rain to get into the little flat-topped adobe my village had built for me as a goodwill gesture. In the dark I could hear big chunks of mud falling off the ceiling, splashing into the floor. I lay in bed hoping I wouldn't be clobbered. My alternatives to laying there would have been to run outside or to attempt lighting the lamp in the deluge while dodging the roof. But the roof missed me and when the morning came I got a nice view of it from my muddy bed.

Many of the houses of the village had been washed away. My nursery, where I had been coaxing life into Maringa Olifera and tamarinds, was flat, the seedlings broken. That morning was the first time I sincerely shook my fist at the sky. For months I had been praying for rain, the whole village had been praying for rain together, the kids had been banging tin cans to call for rain and this was what we got: Rain West African style.

The missionaries' cement structure would serve me well while the village made the mud bricks for my new roof. I bought the eucalyptus trunks with my own money. That was the problem with the first roof, they told me, not enough support. Termites had eaten the beams. This time we would coat the wood with essence.

The missionaries had nothing on their video shelf but Fred Astaire and World War II documentaries and it was after the second time watching *The Gay Divorce* that I decided to go find the Sévere Air Force Bar. I had that song, *The Continental*, in my head as I rode down the one paved highway of Mali on my Peace Corps issue Yamaha 250. *You can kiss while you're dancing, the Continental...*

The air strip was clearly visible from the road and there was a plane on it, a Russian jet laid out on its belly, leaning over so that the tip of one wing was touching the ground. I supposed the Air Force had no way, actually, to get into the air. There was nothing in that air in the fifth region. That was something that struck me sometimes, looking up into the sky, no vapor trails. At night the satellites were apparent, moving against the fixed stars, but in the day there was nothing man-made overhead.

At the entrance to the base was a large portrait of the president flanked by limp flags. The president of Mali happened to be a general, I knew that much about the military and its relationship to power. As to the caliber of its soldiers, in the latest war, a boarder skirmish with Burkina Faso, the only casualties had been caused by the sinking of an amphibious vehicle. It just sunk on its own, nobody hit it.

There was a gate into the air force base, the kind of place a guard should have asked for identification but I just rode my moto on through. I knew which building was the bar because of the mural of nightlife on the exterior wall. That, and there was no flag. All the other buildings had little Malian flags, like the Italian flag, only backwards.

In the courtyard of the bar were cement tables with Chinese mock-ups of Coca-Cola umbrellas for shade. "Coca-Coola," they read. The five or six men drinking at the tables had that slightly guilty air about them that you get when you have a Muslim with a bottle of gin. Mali was 90% Muslim and 100% animist, was the joke we told. No one was in uniform. At one table a man had his head down. He might have been passed out or just sleeping. His was a white head, balding on top but I couldn't see his face.

I went to the bar and ordered a beer in French, then sat down at a table against the wall and pulled a notebook out of my goat bag. I had been writing in Mali, first just my Fulfuldi lessons but then, strangely, a little poetry and some of the things I noticed. Some PCVs learned to play guitar during their two years, some guys just dug their wells and me, I took to writing.

The waiter, a thin guy with an unhappy expression, brought a clear glass and a green bottle to the table and opened it softly, leaving the cap sitting on the lip. That was against the flies. The coaster that came with the glass, likewise, was to put on top of the glass, not under it. But I never used a glass, more sanitary to drink right out of the bottle. The beer was cold. The Air Force probably got all the electricity they wanted. Cheap and cold, I would have to tell the other volunteers about this.

I began writing about a new development in my work. My village was peopled by goat and cattle herders who didn't have much sympathy for the trees I tried to plant. They drew water for animals but not for plants. A tree to them was temporary, fodder. So I had to try another tactic.

I sold the elders on fences. Living thorn bush fences. They would keep the cattle in or out and at the same time fix the soil and cool down the corral. The extra, trimmed stuff could be used to build other fences and bushes grew much more quickly than trees. We'd see the results before my departure. Brilliant.

This is what I was writing about when a white man walked up and stretched out his hand as far as it would go towards me. He said "America, Russia, friends now, yes?" I hesitated to take his hand because it had come out so quickly. I couldn't digest his words. Where were the Americans, where were the Russians and why were they friends?

The man with the hand aimed at me had a strange body. I might not have noticed if he weren't wearing shorts and a thin T-shirt that had been white once. His torso was action figure-like while his legs were thin and showed no sign of calf. All his muscle had migrated north. I, the recently trained forester, looked at this body and thought of grafting. Mr. Universe grafted onto Ghandi. I looked over to where I had seen the man passed out earlier, to find he was no longer there. This must be the man, excited to have revived in a bar with another white guy, an American.

I shook his hand.

The man sat down next to me much closer than was called for by the length of the cement bench. His shorts made me uncomfortable. Only school boys wore shorts in Mali. Foreigners didn't wear them unless they hadn't heard about malaria.

"America, no?" he asked.

"Yes." I said and then added, "Right," because he was grinning so large. We were easy to pick out. I could tell a Frenchman from half a kilometer, a German from ten yards.

I didn't say anything after that. I didn't know why the interaction should exist at all. I closed my notebook on the Bic, and ran my finger over a chip in the green beer bottle's lip.

The man in shorts shot his hand out again and grabbed the bottle, poured some of its contents into the glass and invited me to drink. He maybe thought I didn't know how to work a bottle. I took a drink. The beer was warming up.

"Russia, America, friends, yes?"

"Yes."

With this reassurance he picked up the bottle and clinked it against the glass but then set the bottle down again. "Drink," he said. The Berlin wall had fallen the year before and clearly this guy was still excited about it. Or perhaps he had just gotten the news. Mail travels slowly in West Africa. At his prompting, I took another swallow of beer.

A pause built up between us so that finally I had to say something. I couldn't bear not speaking to the man who had sat down with so much purpose. "Are you Russian?" I asked, lamely.

"Yes. Right."

Now we were getting somewhere. He asked me what I was doing in Mali which was a question I got a lot. Many Malians assumed I was a criminal serving time in their country. Otherwise how to explain the absence of family, the leaving of the promised land. What I was doing in Mali was a question I asked myself a lot.

"I'm in the Peace Corps. I'm planting trees."

"Corps de la Paix," he said.

"Oui," my lips pressed against each other and pulled back in a kind of, that's my life in a nutshell, I'm not too proud of it but not ashamed by any means, kind of look.

"In Sévere you plant trees?"

"No. No, not in Sévere. In Konna. North. Small village."

"So, you plant trees for how long?" Was he asking about the length of my stay so far or the duration of my contract?

"Nine months," I responded. That's how long I had been in the country.

"That's a long time" he said, smiling hard. I shrugged.

"A long time for a young man. How many years do you have?"

His accent and grammar seemed to be improving as we spoke. And he kept asking me questions. I answered them but became more and more uncomfortable as they got more personal and complex. I answered, "24; Acacia Albida and eucaliptus; I was a

student; liberal arts; California; No, not Hollywood; Capitola; I speak a little Fulfuldi; No; I don't know; I'm not sure; First time.”

And then there was a break in the questioning where we both looked away and acted like we were not sitting next to anyone. Two flies were locked together afloat in my beer, moving around the circumference of the glass by virtue of their wings. I took a drink out of the bottle.

One encountered some strange white people in West Africa. Mostly French left over from colonization, but here and there I ran into a Japanese teenager studying drumming, an art collector from Crete who traded CD players for the ancient carved doors of granaries, or a tourist on her way to Tombouctou on a donkey. In the capital, Bamako, there was a neighborhood called Little Moscow filled with advisors from the days the superpowers played Risk on the dark continent and Mali was Red.

It occurred to me that this particular Russian might be using me to practice his English. Perhaps he was grilling me because he had just had a lesson on question formation. There were no English teacher PCVs in Mali but some of us did tutoring on the side. I was just going to ask him if he was studying English and wanted a tutor when he gestured to the notebook and asked, “What are you writing?”

“Oh...” I didn’t know how to describe it “just my thoughts. I write down what happens, what I see.”

He asked, “Can I?” reaching towards the book.

I handed it to him figuring he was just looking for conversation and the book was the most interesting thing on the table. The school supplies in Mali fell apart instantly so

I had spent some extra money on a big, hardbound book that was meant to be used as a hotel register. It had cost more than a week's worth of essence. The Russian looked at both covers, flipped through the pages and began reading aloud, very aloud.

"We took off late for Bandiagara. I rode behind Alimou who stopped twice when his chain fell off. I thought, 'how strange that you can put a bunch of objects together and they move.' The world is full of our little Frankensteins. Mike and Monica were over at Nick's. He has lost weight since stage and she has gained it. I must be the only guy who has gained weight over here. I don't know how, on steamed millet three times a day."

He pronounced each word with the same emphasis as though he couldn't see where the goods were. And though it made me uncomfortable to have a stranger reading my personal writing aloud in a bar full of strangers, I thought he found an especially good place in the journal. "The world is full of our little Franksteins," that's a pretty neat thought.

The Russian closed the book, and said "Don't write." Violence looked like it could come out from behind the smile he said it with. He still had my journal. "Soldat," he cried and all the drinkers suddenly looked alive. The man who had brought me my beer came quickly out of the bar, but now, in addition to his unhappy look, he carried a rifle.

I realized I wasn't going to be able to finish my beer. "No writing here," said the Russian, just in case I had misunderstood. He was still smiling, though, and I expected him to say, "Russia, America, friends, yes?" in parting. Instead he returned my journal

and with a thrust of his chin indicated that I was to leave. I stuffed the book, now pregnant with implications of spying, into its goat bag while the soldier walked me to my motorcycle. He stood and watched as I rode through the gate, though the gatehouse was still empty. The soldier was wearing flip-flops that had been repaired where the plastic strap had broken. His rifle I couldn't identify.

Looking for Wife Number Three

Globalization is happening all over the world. It doesn't just mean another Taco Bell in another former communist country, even American private detectives are alert to the potential of foreign markets. Actually, It was my wife, Kathy, who suggested I advertise in some of the more ethnic newspapers in New York. They've got them in French, Chinese, Spanish and even Hindi. These little papers have an impressive circulation, plus, who is going to go checking through an Indian paper to see if the advertisers all have their licenses in order? I wrote the copy myself to reflect my strengths and not use too many letters:

Hues Detective Services
Missing pers.
Covert surv.
Marital invest.

So it was no surprise when Mr. Kante, an African businessman, walked into my office one morning with a missing, covert and marital all rolled into one.

I told him to take a seat and tell me his story. For twenty minutes I asked questions and took notes, piecing together this client's particular brand of trouble. But globalization has its stumbling blocks, not the least of which is cultural misunderstanding. *Seven-Up* erected signs all over China which, when translated, said

“Up yours.” And this Mr. Kante demanded some creative translation himself. He spoke good English, but he said things in the language I had never imagined possible. I pulled back on the investigation to circle in again, get a better angle on the case.

“So, what do you think of America?” I asked him, taking a sip of cold coffee out of the paper cup on my desk. It wasn’t a necessary question but I always try to mix in small talk with the grim details of betrayal; something to relax the client.

“Big buildings. Everyone in a hurry. Time is money.” I waited for something more but the roundish man in the chair across from me shrugged as if there were nothing else to say. I wondered, his comment about time and money, was that an observation about America or about my small talk? If it was a general observation about the United States, I wondered what time was in his country; what could time be if not money?

I looked down at my jumble of notes. There were logistical questions to be asked and American realities to explain but I was stuck on this multiple wife angle. I needed to get my mind around the whole concept. So I asked straight out, “What’s it like, having three wives?”

“One wife, one problem, three wife three problem.”

This guy was succinct as a sphinx. I wasn’t going to get the flavor of his lifestyle this way. *Three problems*, he had said, and the third was the one he wanted me to solve. It wouldn’t be the first time I got paid to tinker with wife trouble but this was different: This Joe--I looked at my notes--this Mr. Kante, had come all the way across the Pacific chasing after a goose when he had others just sitting in the coop.

I studied the man before me. Loose fitting silver suit. White dress shirt. Tie of equal length and width. Hair cut so short it wouldn't need to be dried after a shower. A bit of gray on top as though someone had ashed a cigar up there and smudged it around. Gold rimmed glasses resting comfortably on a wide nose. Nothing special when taken part by part but taking in the whole picture, there was a certain authority to the man across from me. Here was a man comfortable with being served. Having three wives must do that to a guy.

"But how does it work? If I am going to be able to help you I've got to know more. Give me the rough outline, the big picture. What's the schedule, for example?"

Mr. Kante discovered that his chair leaned back. He rocked back and forth, trying out the full range of the chair. When he felt himself tipping back too far his hands shot out to grab the desk. He had good reflexes for an old man with a fat tie. I leaned forward. "Do you see them all every day?"

"The first wife on Saturday, then to wife number two on Monday, wife number three on Wednesday." He twirled his hands in a gesture that meant *travelling* in basketball. "Then repeat. A day of rest on Friday."

I gasped, *A day of rest*. Would that be enough? A night of rest, is more like it. "You got Viagra in Africa?" I joked.

Kante smiled as though he pitied my ignorance. "Yes, of course. We had it first. African Viagra." Kante's laugh was surprisingly spry. "But you haven't heard the stories of how Abacha died?"

I shook my head.

“Lots of Russian prostitutes, lots of Viagra. No wives.”

I wrote the name down. “This Abacha, was he a relation?”

“He was the ruler of Nigeria. I am Guinean.”

“Okay, I’m getting the picture now but tell me this, if three wives is three problems then wouldn’t it be smarter just to stick to the one wife?”

“If you have one what do you do when she becomes pregnant?” Mr. Kante gave me some time to think about this. I tried to think of what I did when Kathy was pregnant with Michael. We took those classes on how to breath but then they cut the kid out the easy way and we didn’t have to breath together at all.

Kante tried again, “You need a second wife for when the first is with child.”

“Okay I can see that. That explains the first two but why number three?”

“The third? For when the second is pregnant. But I didn’t want to marry her. It was family. They insisted. If you have money they expect wives, too. A capable man must have wives. Four at least.”

“Four?”

“My family has one more picked out for me.”

“Your parents pick them out?”

“I picked the first. After that others selected for me.”

“But you didn’t want them all so why not say “no”?”

“Say ‘no’? You cannot say ‘no.’ You can say ‘yes’ and then do nothing but you cannot do that forever.”

Each of Kante's answers was spawning a litter of new questions. We were going nowhere fast in reverse. "Well here's what I don't get: If this third wife of yours isn't working out, why not just leave her be and settle for the two you got, or, if your family insists, then get a replacement. They could pick you out another, couldn't they? Is it a question of money? Does the wedding cost a lot of money or something?" This final question would give me some insight into Mr. Kante's financial situation, help me fix a price for my services.

"For a wife you only need to give a basket of kolas to the parents."

"Colas?" I went back to taking notes.

"It's a kind of nut. You don't have them. Red or white. You chew them."

"So why not just marry another? Get some of these nuts, some of this Cola, and find another pretty girl?"

Mr. Kante didn't answer, he didn't rock in his chair, and he didn't shrug. He stared at his hands in his lap. There was a simple silver ring on one finger, I noticed. Not a wedding ring. I didn't even know if they had wedding rings in Africa. But before I got that question off the runway there was this little matter of motive. Perhaps Kante hadn't understood. His English seemed dammed good. No accent or anything, but you never knew, when working in between cultures, what was actually getting through--I could say "coleslaw" and he could interpret "Cole Porter." I tried again, "This Kandia, what was so special about her that you would follow her all the way to New York?"

I looked at my notes--more doodling than anything else but the client didn't have to know that. Seeing me taking notes and referring to them was reassuring for those

seeking my services. Kante didn't like my question, that was for sure. He hadn't moved since I asked it. He looked as though he could stay still like that all afternoon. Was it love or revenge that motivated him? Humiliation or desperation? Such things weren't in my usual line of questioning but this case was different. This was more than just a little snooping around, this was international treaties and stuff.

"Do you have any idea why your third wife, Kandia, decided to flee? Did you give her some reason to leave? Was she in some kind of trouble? And of all the places in the world why does your wife come here, to New York? That's a long way from home. Forgive my being forward but in my line of business information is the currency of the realm. It's what you're paying me to get and without it I'm no more use to you than a blind mute."

Mr. Kante took a deep breath and looked up from the table. He suddenly looked weary. He looked around the room as though he didn't know how he got to his chair. His eyes rested on my two trophies on the windowsill, one for high school football and the more recent one for marksmanship.

"After we marry for a year my wife still not pregnant. My family told her to get with child or else they find a replacement for her; she is out. Each month after that, or at least four times in the year after, she said she was pregnant but every time she lost the child. My family began to suspect she was lying. I couldn't believe it. Why would Kandia lie to me? She is a small woman. A frail woman. When she got pregnant again she insisted I send her to America where they would be sure to take very good care of the pregnancy. My sister threaten to kill her if she continued to be a barren wife. She needed

to come America for her own life and have a child. I spent much of money to send Kandia here. The visa, six thousand dollars, the tickets three thousand. The hospital.... I don't know. Much more. Now I don't know if she went to hospital."

"So you send your wife to America to have a baby and never hear from her again. But why was it so important that she have a baby in the first place? Why would your sister care so much that she would threaten Kandia? Is she worried about the family genes or something?"

"I have ten children by my other wives."

"Ten, wow." For a guy with so many wives and so many kids Mr. Kante seemed awful particular about a few strays.

"My father had twenty-five. Twenty five who lived."

"And you know your wife is in New York because..."

"My friend saw her here, dancing at a club."

"You have a friend who just happened to see your runaway wife in a New York club? That's quite a coincidence."

"Small world," he insisted.

"How would she survive here for six months on her own?"

"As I said, I sent her many thousands of dollars. That was before I found out she had sold the house."

"The house that you bought for her?"

"Right."

"Each wife has her own house?"

“That’s right.” I wrote this down in my notes. My fee increased by \$100 a day.

“It doesn’t work very well if they all live in the same house. It causes...complications.”

I pictured this guy getting off work, putting on his hat, looking at the calendar in his car and trying to remember the directions to house number two. Wife number two. Or maybe he didn’t have to remember directions. Maybe he had a chauffeur. I’d find that out later.

I wanted to cool down his hopes of actually retrieving his wife. Some people assumed that my per diem was some kind of guarantee. I did the leg work but there wasn’t always a prize at the end. Or if there was, it wasn’t always the one the client expected. For me the streets are like a big piñata and sometimes some ugly stuff can fall out.

“America is a big country, Mr. Kante. Your wife, if she actually was in New York, could easily have left by now. And even if I do happen to find her with the thin leads we have...What do we do then? You can’t force her to go back with you. In this country a woman has the right to leave her husband, especially if her husband has a couple other wives. It’s a free country.”

“A free country, yes, I have heard, but there are exceptions, no? In any case, I have thought of everything.” Mr. Kante took a folder out of his briefcase and slid it over to me. It contained some documents in a language other than English.

“What’s it say?”

“It says Kandia's mother is very sick. She will die soon. It says please come home to greet mother before she dies. Come home to take care of the funeral.”

It's not a good idea to call your clients liars so I didn't ask if it was true. Seeing how desperate Mr. Kante was to be reunited with his third wife I figured the illness was a fabrication. Fortunately it's not my job to turn the world honest. "She will read this and go back with you?"

Mr. Kante leaned back and smiled. "She has no choice."

I looked through the photos in the folder. A young girl in fancy clothes. Perhaps African prom pictures. "Who is this?"

"That's Kandia, my third wife, the woman I want you to find."

"I'll need some more recent photos, something I can use to identify her."

"That is how she looks. Those were taken at our wedding, just two years ago. And that one was taken recently." Mr. Kante pointed to a photo of a girl who not only could have been his daughter, she could have been mine.

"How old is this wife of yours?"

Mr. Kante shrugged, "Sixteen, seventeen, like that."

"Holy cow."

Later that evening, I told the guys at *The Rush Inn* about how in Africa you could have more than one wife. I didn't tell them anything about the case. Didn't even tell them I had been hired by an African man to find his runaway wife who happened to be a juvenile. I looked forward to telling the story someday, but for the time being I said I had seen a show on African customs on the Discovery channel.

The gang found the topic a worthy of pursuit. Someone brought up the Mormons and how they had so many doors on their houses so they could escape when the police came to count wives. One Mormon, said Frank, had just recently been in the news for having four wives. He was serving jail time for that crime.

Thom said we in American can have four wives but just not all at the same time. Thom was on his second. I thought about it. It didn't seem as good, serially. Four wives, all at the same time, that was better. The idea was exciting me right there at the table. I found myself looking around the bar for women. Any that might be around. I saw one in a booth with a cocktail and imagined her married to me and sitting in her own house, just waiting for her two nights. Then I found another woman, over-dressed for *The Rush Inn*. She could be the second. I could see that she would spend her time napping, mostly, when I wasn't around. Tomorrow I would drive to her place. But where would I keep my clothes? Did one divide them evenly between the houses? I'd have to ask Mr. Kante that the next time we met. I looked around the bar for my third wife. That was it, though; aside from those two wives, the place was all guys.

"Can you imagine?" one of the guys said.

"What if it were legal here, would you have more than one?"

"Why the hell not?"

But that was my question exactly. *Why the hell not?* If they got to do it in Africa why not us? Who ever said we couldn't have four wives at the same time? Why did we Americans ever give up the right to that?

“America was founded on monogamy,” said Thom. “Puritans, the Bill of Rights and all that. Never was the right to have a bunch of wives.”

“But I mean before that. How the hell did men ever let that one go. I can understand the right to vote and all and equal pay but...” And my mind went back to that picture of four different wives in four different houses just watching TV, doing their nails, whatever, waiting for their turn with me.

“Goddam American man lucky if he gets it once a week.”

“Gets what, supper?” Laughter.

“That’s all you get.” Laughter.

“I wish I got supper.” Laughter.

“Goddam.” Silence. We reached for our beers.

After having a few I decided to go down to the club where Mr. Kante said his friend had spotted the third wife. I called my first wife to tell her I’d be late. I had to follow a lead. A new case. Potential money. She said I could stay out until May if it meant we might ever use a credit card again.

The place was called Zambezi. Didn’t look like more than a door in a wall. No sign, no lights, no bouncer. I knocked, not sure I had the right address. Opening the door I found myself face to face with a large, dusty silver Christmas tree with a couple branches torn off, hanging lame. This wouldn’t have been odd if it hadn’t been July. The place had a whole set of such decorations hanging from the ceiling, as well as a disco ball and four Chinese lanterns. Two little fans pointed down at the dance floor, a space about

the size of a Cadillac, but they were inactive. The little club was totally silent, and dark as it was at the bar, I didn't notice the people in it until I stood in the doorway for a full minute.

I sat down on one of the swiveling bar stools. The bartender's eyes looked up at me but he didn't move. He held a cloth over his nose. Likewise, the woman two stools to my left leaned her head into a hand holding a white cloth. In front of her was a drink green on the bottom and white on the top. Nothing but the bartender's eyes had moved since I arrived and I got the feeling I could have left and not caused a stir. I asked for a beer. The bartender moved. I nodded to the woman on my left and she nodded back. This rush of activity in the bar seemed to set off an alarm, for a man with his hand in a cast popped out of the music booth to introduce himself.

"I'm Ernest," he said, avidly shaking my right hand with his left hand. After a few pleasantries he went back into his booth and started up the sound-system.

Over the loudspeakers he announced, "Dr. Steve Hues is here tonight, welcome Dr. Steve. Dr. Steve. Dr. Steve." I had never heard my name so many times in a row. I didn't like it. I don't know where he got the doctor part. Funny thing was, there was no one in the place but the woman with the green drink. "This song is for Mr. Steve." It was something African, or maybe Caribbean. Lots of drums at the start. As soon as the music started Earnest came out and sat next to me.

"Steve, I'm thirsty," he said, pointing to my beer.

When I didn't comment he helped me: "Buy me a drink, I'm thirsty." I looked to the bartender to see if this was some kind of joke the DJ played on white guys, but the bartender was napping.

"Look," I said loudly over the music, "I'm not going to buy you a beer. If you want a beer why don't you buy it yourself?" Goddam employees leeching off the customers, no wonder the place was empty.

Earnest wasn't going away and I began to suspect it was in just such a situation he had earned his cast. He put his lips close to my ear and gave me a lecture on how rude I was. He said, in Africa, a man with means, a capable man, is happy to share his wealth. Yelling a little louder, he said my refusal to buy him a beer was tantamount to spitting on him. I was about to tell him we weren't in Africa and give him an excuse for another cast when the woman intervened. She spoke to him in a language other than English. They yelled at each other for a while, yelled as though they were family. Finally she brushed him off with a flick of her wrist and a sound like a tire going flat. Earnest retreated to his booth, where, mid-song, he pulled the needle off the record and turned off the sound system.

"Thanks," I nodded to the woman, lifting my beer in her direction.

"Don't mention it," she said, and put her nose back in her cloth.

After a few minutes and the rest of my beer my nerves unclenched. "Is this place always this empty?" I asked the woman with the two-colored drink. The question was about fifty-seven on my list of questions for the night but there are queries that serve to

introduce other queries. In my profession it wasn't so important where you started out as where you ended up.

"It is early, the people will come. Wait until midnight. At three the place will be so full you won't be able to move. Do you want a Kleenex while you wait?" She pulled a little plastic package of tissues from her purse on the bar. "There is medicine in them. For a cold."

Medicine? In Kleenex? She passed me the whole package and I read the label. It was in many languages. Said there was eucalyptus in it.

"Try, one," she urged.

"I don't have a cold."

"It doesn't matter, try one." And so I did and the three of us sat there for a moment with these tissues in common. Only Earnest, fuming in his booth did not have a Kleenex over his nose. It was nice, the eucalyptus scent.

"Nice. Thank you." I handed back her package. I had the photo of cute little Kandia in my shirt pocket. I could show it to the woman with the cold but I needed to gain her confidence first.

"Are you from Africa," I asked her and when she looked at me kind of funny I added, "I mean, recently."

She nodded.

"Mostly Africans come to this place?"

She nodded.

“Have you seen this woman here ever?” I said, sliding the photo of Kandia over to her. She took the photo and looked at it but not for long. She handed it to the bartender and they had a conversation in a language I couldn’t understand.

“I have not seen her, but I haven’t been here in a while. I have been sick. But the photo was taken here. Amadou says it may have been taken last night. You see the Christmas decoration in the photo. It is that one over there.” She pointed from the photo to the snowflake chain hanging from the ceiling in a sagging arc.

I looked at the photo and then at the decorations. She was right; the photo was taken in the Zambezi.

“But what makes the bartender think it was taken last night? Did he see the girl?

No, he was not here last night. He was sick. But if you look at the back of the photo, there is a date and even a time, see.” She pointed to the little black print on the flip side of the photo. 07-05-02.

They were right, she had been here last night. Stranger and stranger. How could Mr. Kante have gotten this photo so quickly? How could he have it and not know that his wife had been here just last night? If Mr. Kante did know where his wife was, then why would he hire me to find her? I ordered another beer.

In the end it didn’t matter, the where and why of it. The good news was that I was hot on Kandia’s trail. If I waited another few hours I could probably hand her the letter and have the most financially successful day of my career. That’s the way of it, when you’re in this line of work, you have a year of drought and then, all of a sudden, the fish are biting so fast you can’t keep the worms on the line.

I looked over at my neighbor. Her hair was combed back so that it looked like one of those new, aerodynamic bicycling helmets. Her copper eyebrows were penciled in. With the Kleenex covering her nose and mouth you wouldn't think this was the kind of woman to carry an aura of beauty, but somehow she did. Somehow she managed to look royal, on her barstool under the dusty red lantern.

"Where you come from, can a man have more than one wife?"

"Sometimes. Most, no. Only older men with money."

"But it doesn't work the other way around? Women don't have more than one?"

"No."

"What about you? You married?"

To answer this question my neighbor removed her Kleenex and gave me a big smile. "Me? You want to know if I have a husband? Why would you want such information?"

"Oh...Not because... Well, it's just different, you know. In America..."

"Women are not married?"

"No, no, no, they are. Some of them are, but not to one husband. Not all of them at once."

"My name is Susan," said my neighbor as she moved over one stool to sit next to me, "and I'm not married." Her hand was limp in mine as we shook but then she squeezed hard, twice.

At this point a couple coming in the door triggered Earnest to turn on the disco ball and the sound system. He spoke in the mike in a language I didn't understand but I

did catch the word *doctor* repeated three times. Earnest was welcoming the newcomers, trying to endear himself into a beer.

“That’s not her,” said Susan, meaning the woman walking in wasn’t Kandia.

I could see that myself. The woman and the man were older and larger.

The song played and the colored lights hidden in the corners of the room flashed but nobody danced. Sitting on a little stool shaped like a pillbox hat Earnest was happily chatting with the new arrivals. Susan sucked the last of the green liquid through her straw.

“You want another drink?” I offered.

“No thank you. Another night. I’m sick.” She said this close to me, so she didn’t have to yell. Maybe she had a sore throat.

I waited for her to go but she didn’t so I asked, “What’s the song saying, do you understand it?”

The song? She listened and smiled. “It is the man saying to the woman, help me sleep. He says, the day has been long and now I want to sleep so visit my bed and help me sleep. Do you like the song”? I could smell Susan’s makeup as she leaned towards me.

“Yeah, it’s nice. You know.” I moved a little to the beat to show I liked it.

“Maybe you come back and we will dance to this song, you and me. But tonight I must go.”

She swiveled and stood on her platform tennis shoes.

A thought flashed into my mind. “Hey, can you read this? Tell me what it says?”

I handed her the letter from Mr. Kante. The letter to bring his wife back.

Susan brought the letter behind the bar to where the light was better, then she came back to report its contents. “It says you are with the US Government. It says you will freeze her money and arrest her if she does not leave the country in three days.”

“Oh. It doesn’t say anything about a dieing mother?”

“No.”

Somehow, this didn’t upset me. The case was twisting and turning, trying to throw me like a bucking bronco, but I wasn’t about to let go.

Susan, for her part, didn’t seem repulsed by me as a customs agent. She kissed me on the cheek and said something I didn’t understand. I assumed she meant good-bye because she turned and walked away.

People were coming in to the Zambezi more frequently now. The smoke was beginning to swirl around the inactive fans. Two women were dancing in one corner, doing something like a rumba. I had taken rumba lessons, once, at the insistence of my mother. I was the only white guy in the club but no one seemed to mind. No one was giving me any reason to leave. Even Earnest didn’t seem to hold a grudge. Every once in a while I’d hear my name, “Dr. Steve,” at the beginning of a song.

The bartender pointed to my beer and raised his eyebrows. When he came back with a new one I asked, “Do you speak English?”

“Small small,” he said, measuring about an inch of air between his thumb and index finger.

“Do you have wives?”

“No, man.” He looked disgusted.

“But you could have wives, if you wanted?”

“No, man, I’m an American.”

“Yeah, but in Africa you could?” The bartender just shook his head as he loaded a tray with two beers and a tonic.

About an hour later I was learning to dance the *Ventilateur*, a Senegalese dance involving the slow lifting of dresses, when Kante’s third wife walked in. She wore a simple black dress and platform shoes that added six inches to her height. She was beautiful, beautiful enough to make a guy with two wives in the hand reach out across the Atlantic Ocean to get the third one in the bush. Beautiful enough to make a guy hire a detective to make her come back. Beautiful enough to make a detective forget all about his job, and his licenses, the one for marriage and the one for crime, which was revoked anyway.

The third wife squeezed thought the dance floor to a corner of the club where she was warmly greeted, with men and women kissing her on both cheeks. Before long she had a cigarette and an orange soda. I thought I’d let her get comfortable before approaching her with the bad news. It wasn’t everyday you found out your mother was dieing. My dance partner noticed how much attention I wasn’t paying her and kneed me in the thigh.

“You want to dance with her? You want me to ask her?”

“No, I was just thinking.”

“Ah, thinking. That’s the trouble with men. Too much thinking.”

The music changed and Earnest came over the sound system. “Ladies and gentleman, Aisha has arrived. The lovely Aisha who makes the night bright with her smile. This song goes out to you, Aisha, who else but Fela, the chief priest of Afro-Beat. God rest his soul. Everybody get up and dance to Fela Kuti and the Africa 70.”

Everyone sitting down got up to move to the music and I found myself not so much dancing as being jostled like a puppet in a closet full of puppets. I was trying to squeeze my way to the edge of the dancing when I heard her yell in my ear a distinct,

“I’m not going back.”

I asked “What?”

“I’m not going back.” Somehow Mrs. Kante had been tipped off to my errand.

“How did you know I was...”

I worked my way around so I could face her as she moved to the music.

“Everyone in the bar knows you are working for Kante.”

I looked around to see if everyone was watching us but if they knew about me they weren’t letting on. Perhaps that was why people kept buying me beers. I just figured it was a friendly place. I had so many invitations to drink that night that there were still three unopened beers on the bar waiting for my attention. So Mrs. Kante was ready for me. That didn’t change what I came to say. “You’re Mother’s sick. I’m sorry. Kante wanted you to know. You should go home.” I handed her the letter and waited for the news to sink in.

She crumpled the letter in one hand and, without looking at it, let it fall to the dance floor, where I had no hope of recovering it.

“Hey, lady, that was an important letter. Kante went to a lot of trouble to...”

“How do you know if my mother’s sick? Do you even know my mother’s name. This is just another of his stupid...” Mrs. Kante was a real live wire, ready for blood. If I wanted to tame this kitty, I’d have to change tactics and fast.

“Mrs. Kante, your husband told me to tell you...”

“He’s an idiot” she spit out, “And you...” She looked as though she were going to spit on my name too, but then looking at me up and down, she softened. “you have nice eyes. What’s your name? You want to dance with me?”

“Steve. I thought we were dancing.”

She shook her head as she slid her hands around on my shoulder blade and pulled close to me so that my body could feel what her dress concealed. “Call me Aisha, Steve. No one calls me Mrs. Kante, not even Kante.”

She spoke with less venom now, as though losing her resolve, as though she knew she was caught. “I don’t want to go back to that place. You can explain to Kante, can’t you? It is a sad place, Steve. Why should I go back? You won’t make me go back, will you?” She looked up at me with eyes more persuasive than a whole dictionary full of the right words.

I could think of all sorts of reasons to tell her to go back home. There was tradition to think of, her mother and family, there was the financial aspect of the situation to think of, mine and hers. There was the difficulty of making a life far away from

Guinea. Maybe it was the slow groove of the music, the saxophone playing over the African drums that caused me to let the problem rest a while. Let Mrs. Kante feel the safe haven of my strong American arms for just one song. And me, what did I feel? Looking down at this young, lost wife I couldn't tell which I wanted more, to read a bedtime story to her or to get into bed with her. And then there was the five thousand dollar bonus Kante had promised me if I got her back.

“But how will you support yourself here?” I finally said

“You'll support me, won't you?”

“Me? I have a wife and son. I...”

But Aisha was laughing, making fun of me. She was holding her head back and laughing. She knew exactly the conflicting cords she played in my heart, in the heart of every man she met. Hers was a little girl's laugh, full of glee and taunting. Her laugh brought me back to my senses, though I returned to them unwillingly, like a man going back to his wife after tasting the possibility of more. After all, this was a teenager I was dealing with, and a runaway.

“And your marriage? You can't just ignore the man who married you. Through better and worse, as the saying goes. And he loves you, needs you.”

“Ha! You have no idea. Love!”

“Why else would your husband come all the way across the ocean to get you back. You tested him and he showed you the true quality of his love. You might not believe it but you didn't see him in my office this morning. He said he didn't know what to do without you. He said his other two wives were nothing without you.”

“And his mistress, did he mention her?” Jesus, he had a mistress, too? Where did Kante get off taking so much of the world’s resources for himself? “You Americans are so troublesome. First force us to come here and now you want to force us back. Which is it you want?” She looked up at me with angry eyes. “Do you want us here or there? You want to put me in a slave ship back to Africa now.” She beat her head gently against my chest, in time to the music, as though this were all part of the dance.

“Is that why you left him, because he has a mistress? Would he come half way around the world to find his mistress? It’s you he needs Aisha. I won’t force you to do anything, I just want to do what’s best for you and your family. You belong at home, a young woman like you. You don’t know how harsh the world can be. You don’t understand, New York looks big and bright and wonderful like a Christmas tree but the underbelly of this tree doesn’t hold presents, it’s full of drugs and bullets and minimum wage jobs. Go home Aisha, you’ve had your fun in New York, now go back to New Guinea and take care of your mother.” The paternal sternness came easy to me, I could feel the girl in my arms swaying.

“Do you understand what he is saying,” Aisha asked, listening to the song. “Fela says ‘Water no get enemy.’ He says ‘Water has no enemy: You don’t fight him unless you want to die.’ Do you know Fela Kuti? He is my hero. A man not afraid to tell the truth. There aren’t many like him. The greatest musician in all of West Africa. He fought against corruption, died in that battle. Once, he married 27 wives at one time. It was to show the old traditions were still strong. The police destroyed his club, and his

home because he spoke the truth about the Nigerian ruler. They put him in jail dozens of times and finally killed him, blaming it on AIDS.”

“27 wives? I thought a man could only have four.”

“But then he divorced them all. He said ‘No man can own the vagina of a woman.’” It surprised me to hear such vulgar language from such a beautiful girl. It was like hearing a new Lamborghini backfire.

After each lyric Aisha whispered the translation to me. “He says you wash your child in water.” “He says, if your head is hot the water will cool it.” “He says if you have thirst you drink water.”

“Is that what you are trying to do, Aisha, fight the water, go against the flow? He is right, you know, you can’t make an enemy of water. In America we say, ‘you can lead a horse to water but you can’t make him drink.’”

“Yes, Steve, yes. You are right. Of course, I will go back to Africa. What a fool I have been. I will go back with Kante. You tell him to come meet me here tomorrow. I will be waiting for him.”

“What about tonight, what will you do?”

“Please, just let me have one last night alone in America.”

And then the song ended and the dance floor cleared out but for me and Aisha embracing under a big red Santa, hanging on to each other as though we had created a neutral country where no law or custom could hurt us.

I remembered what Kante said, that you couldn’t say *no* in Africa. All you could do was say *yes* and mean *no*. Is that what Aisha had done? It was a masterful bit of

international negotiation. She made everyone happy: I would get my money, Kante would get the promise of his wife and Aisha got to continue as she pleased. I signed her treaty, adding my own *yes* to the bottom line just to keep the peace.

As I drove home through the urban nightscape each widow seemed to reflect upon my night's adventure. Just another night on the streets for Steve Hues. I'd learned a couple new dances, made a few new friends, fallen in and out of love during one song about water by some Nigerian I'd never heard of. And finally, just a little bit, put the world back together again, just one more piece of the puzzle back in place. I should have been pleased, but all I could think about was Aisha, either wandering the streets of New York or sitting alone in her big house, waiting her turn with her husband.

The streets like trenches between the city blocks, the street lights blurred by weariness, I drove off the island, to my home in the outer reaches of the city. This big world, what difference did putting right one misplaced wife make in any of it? The globe's spinning made me dizzy, made the passing cars look like shooting stars. All I could see clearly was Aisha's face. I had to pull myself together. Think about the money, I told myself. But even five big ones couldn't erase the fact that kept filtering back in my head: Kante would be at the Zambezi tomorrow night, and Aisha probably wouldn't be, and where would I be? Searching for her again? Drinking at the Rush Inn with the same crew or learning the words to a song from another continent? That was the thing about globalization, once you saw the other side of the mountain, it was harder to go home again. There was a whole big world out there with new tastes and new rhythms. The music in the club still sang in my body and the smell of tobacco, alcohol and sweet

perfume followed me home like a lonely dog. I took a shower, kissed my sleeping son's forehead, and slipped into bed next to my only wife.

Good Help

In the bedroom, just after he switched off the light Bill said, “You’re fired.” The phrase had been floating around in him all day and finally came out as he walked blindly the few steps from the light switch to bed. He stopped in his path, having heard the words, and tried them out again, this time a little louder--“You are fired.”

That morning, while Bill was ironing in the room with the washer/dryer, he had found the tie. He had been ironing his Hawaiian shirt when he noticed, getting it ready for the Fourth of July party. The tie was drooping out of the closed dryer door like the tongue from a dead animal. A silk tie. His favorite. Half the tie was in the dryer and the other half reached, in a wrinkled way, down into the pile of clean clothes on the floor.

This wasn’t the first of Susu’s misadventures in washing. She initially insisted he buy her a washboard and two large buckets even though the apartment came equipped with a washer/dryer. Susu insisted that the washing machines were inferior. “Maybe in America they work,” she told Bill, “but in Africa the dirt is strong. Too strong.” But then when she pounded two of Bill’s favorite shirts into rags he forbade her to use the washboard.

But Susu didn’t understand the machines. A pink dishtowel turned Bill’s whole herd of white socks rose. Bill himself couldn’t remember if it was hot water for whites or colors and for some reason the small European units didn’t have instructions inside the

lid the way American washers did. So Susu and Bill had agreed to wash everything in cold. And Bill begged Susu, "Before you dry anything, ask me." But here she had dried his favorite tie.

Bill loved ties. He appreciated them as the only way to get any color, or any floral pattern onto his body. They were a strip of beauty amongst the otherwise mundane male costume. And Bill admired the tie's lack of function: It did not cover any part of the body that would otherwise be exposed, nor did it keep one warm.

Prior to that morning this particular tie had been especially rigid. It had hung from his neck as though spun from fine threads of metal. It was gold, primarily, but with surprising blues and reds: shiny blue anchors and red squash blossoms.

He had bought it in Rome, on the *Via Del Corso*. Rome, the only place on the globe where his ex-wife's happiness had overlapped with his own. And though they vacationed there at every opportunity it hadn't been enough. He first saw the tie in the window as he walked by a small shop. The woman who sold it to him was charmed by how much he liked it. He had gone back to the *pensione* where his wife was napping and shown it to her. He tried it on, took it off, carefully draped it over the bed frame, and made love.

Though Bill knew the tie could never be worn again he had to try ironing it. Because the silk had shrunk the lining no longer fit and the fabric creased. That, and the point of the tie was no longer sharp; it bent under and the two lengths leading up to the point were unequal. Bill tied the once-glorious tie, laughed a stabbed laugh at his reflection in the mirror, and dropped the limp strip of cloth to the floor

The Fourth of July party that year was at the Marines' House. The Ambassador would be giving his informal farewell speech. He had put in his two years in this, a hardship post, and would now be moving on to a little republic next to Russia which was near enough Italy to have potential. To fulfill his part in the pot-luck Bill stopped at the dip in the road where the stream crossed and where the women sold fried plantains. He bargained half-heartedly--they saw the Land Rover he drove up in--for a half kilo of freshly fried plantain chips: the long variety that were so hard to find. All the American parties were pot-luck. *What ever happened to hosting a party*, Bill wondered as he drove, *of taking care of guests?*

Before they allowed him to drive in to the Marines' House, security men in white uniforms inspected Bill's Rover for bombs. One man looked at the engine while another used a mirror on a long pole to check under the chasis. Such concern made Bill feel important. He always missed such ceremonies when he was back at the home office.

The compound was surrounded by high walls topped with razor wire. In that way it was like every American compound. The Marines, all six of them, were lounging around the pool, oiling their muscles and laughing about some party that Bill had not been invited to. The muscled men and well defended perimeter brought to mind an action movie. Bill had not seen the Rambo movie but he knew the formula. In such a movie the Marines' House would be attacked at any moment. Ninjas would snake their way down the long mango cords hanging over the walls. Bill would be blown to bits in the first two seconds of the battle. He prepared himself.

Bill had struggled not to be early to the party, pacing away in front of his door the minutes after three, but still he was one of the first to arrive. The Embassy nurse was there talking with the head of Peace Corps. They would be sharing inappropriate gossip about some poor volunteer who had lost her mind and been evacuated to Stuttgart. The current Fulbrighters were joking with two drivers standing by some government Land Rovers. The Fulbrighters always made a point of mixing with both the staff and the mission personnel, showing off their ability with the natives and the native languages. Still, they were happy to pick up their mail at the embassy, get their malaria medicine free from the government and have the security of knowing the Marines would come get them if things ever got bad.

Bill put his sack of chips down between a potato salad and a hot plate of wieners. He bought a beer from the bar; with the Beck's can in hand he would look less lost. From the patio he could see a group of mission children watching cartoons in the house.

The Ninjas were late so Bill bought a second beer and made small talk with those that came near him. He watched as his boss arrived with his wife Carol and their kids. As the only USAID people at the party they would have to interact. Bill waved as his boss approached. He had long hair woven in a braid that gave the impression that he was laid back.

“Hiya Bill, happy Fourth.”

“Happy Independence Day, Henderson. I never know if I care more about the Fourth in or out of the States.”

“Did you go in today? I thought I saw your car.”

Bill was embarrassed that he had nothing better to do on a holiday than go to work. “Yeah. I wanted to check over the Kankan evaluation before it went out, and also I wanted to check my e-mail but the server was down again.”

“How did it look, the Kankan report?” Henderson looked around the grounds as he asked the question, indicating he really didn’t care about a response, but Bill was glad to have such a familiar topic to fill the time.

“You’ve seen it. I think it’s a little harsh on AID. Same old story. It’s easy for these guys that are used to Asia to come in here and underestimate the difficulty of working in West Africa. The reservoir was a failure, you can’t argue with that, but the problem of increased gold mining couldn’t have been foreseen, the mercury making the water poison.”

It was the old company joke: Question, *How many USAID employees does it take to screw in a light bulb?* Answer, *They don’t change the light bulb, they just write reports assigning blame for the failed light project, and request further funding.*

“It would have been foreseen,” said Henderson, “if Tom had spent more time at site before making his proposal.”

“You know why he didn’t. His plate’s too full. He can’t be everywhere in the country at once. We can’t be expected to fund and oversee five major construction projects on our budget. That’s what Washington doesn’t get. They keep thinking we’re Malaysia down here. As long as we are here in the developing world and Washington is there in the developed world we’re going to have this problem.” Bill had this tendency to get too serious too quickly. It was as though he was always making speeches. The

quality bothered him especially when with superiors who might think he was trying to sound more conscientious than he actually was.

“Next time we’ll put you on it, Bill.”

Bill’s Democracy in Action program was currently USAID’s star accomplishment. It had been a coup to get the government controlled airwaves to give equal coverage to the four opposition parties. What everyone knew, and no one said was that the equal air time wouldn’t make a whit of difference except to give the international observers evidence of a fair election. The President would proclaim victory in spite of the vote count, all the opposition candidates would be imprisoned or run out of the country, and the international observers would hold their tongues to keep the country out of civil war.

Carol, the wife of the head of USAID joined them. She literally joined them by taking both their arms in hers. She wore a large African dress--a boubou--in deep indigo and wide-rimmed sunglasses that made her look like a star in seclusion.

“How are Josh and Nicole,” Bill asked her. He made a point to ask Carol about her kids. It so obviously pleased her. He memorized their birthdays as well.

“They are immersed in dinosaurs. They spend all day drawing exotic brands of extinct reptile. If I call one a brontosaurus they roll their eyes and yell, ‘That’s a trichiadoractor,’ or some such thing. Just on the way here Josh asked if there were ever dinosaurs in the Almamy district.”

“I told him there still were. They are called Moussa Traore.” Henderson was making a political joke.

“Did you tell them that the islands are the tip of an extinct volcano?” asked Bill.

“Are they, the islands just off shore? I didn’t know that.”

“Yes, if you look at them on a map it’s clear that they are in the shape of a ring. It’s the tip of the volcanic cone sticking up out of the water.”

Henderson unhooked his arm and excused himself to get some *hors d’oeuvres*. His absence relieved Bill, who suspected Henderson of undervaluing his wife. Bill counted the times his boss had made apologies for his wife. There was the comment about eating too many brownies, and then the point about childbirth changing a woman.

“And how are you Bill?” asked Carol, “Past your dinosaur phase, I suppose.”

“Oh yeah. I haven’t drawn a dinosaur in years. Actually, I’m in my servant phase. I’m having a little trouble with my maid.” He hadn’t planned on bringing his personal life to the party but Carol was the kind of woman who insisted a conversation *do* something. She wasn’t going to let him get away with talking shop.

“You and me both. What’s the problem? She’s not stealing from you is she?”

“No. I don’t think so.” There was that mini-tape recorder that he couldn’t find. “You know, I didn’t want a maid in the first place. Of course I never had a maid in the States but I really couldn’t get by here without help. Just bargaining for tomatoes would take me an hour. Really! An hour to get the tomatoes. And the apartment gets so dirty, even when no one’s in it. So I hired Susu. You’ve met her. Chris’ wife recommended her. Susu is related to their cook somehow.”

“So what’s the problem?”

“I feel bad even having a maid. You know? Everyone says you’re doing the country a favor, putting money into the hands of the people, but I can’t stop feeling guilty

about having a maid, never mind that she can't do her job." This didn't feel like the true problem so Bill tried again. "And then, well, it just feels strange having her in the house. She only works part-time but when she is there, the three days a week she is there, I feel put out. It feels more like her apartment than mine. She really makes herself comfortable. "

The head of the American Cultural Center gravitated to their conversation. She wanted to tell them about her second maid, the one who ran off with startup money for a cloth dying enterprise. "It was maybe three hundred dollars. It was my good deed for the year. The funny thing is she would have made much more than that if she had just stayed and gone through with the business."

Others joined in with their own stories. Somehow it was a fun topic for discussion. Maids were a common problem. "You have to be firm with the help," said Elaine, the Chief Consular Officer famous for denying Guineans visas. She lived just above Bill in the white apartment tower but they had never done more than exchange hellos. "I know it sounds terrible but look at the way Guineans treat the help. If you don't yell at them for every little thing they do wrong they are going to walk all over you. Hell, yell at them when they do something right." Bill felt this remark must have been directed at him; his yelling deficiency was blaring.

"And if your maid isn't working out, fire her."

"Fire her?" asked Bill.

"I fired my first maid," offered Carol.

“You fired...I didn’t know Kadiatou was your second maid.” Bill was clearly too innocent on the topic.

“She’s my third. The first one couldn’t cook, couldn’t even get the rocks out of the rice, and the second one was making passes at my husband.”

“How did you fire them, just say ‘you’re fired?’”

“Yeah. Give them a month’s severance pay and all is forgotten.”

The Public Affairs Officer had a better idea, “Actually, I asked a Guinean about the best way to fire. He said it’s best to lie. He said I should say that a relative is moving in, a cousin from America, who is going to do the cooking and cleaning. That’s how they do it in Guinea so no one loses face.”

“I’m not sure I could lie,” said Bill .

“Then fire her outright. She works for *you*. You have no obligation to her.”

Everyone agreed. There was a kind of firing frenzy in the group that made Bill wish he could invite them over for drinks and a firing.

The ambassador arrived and the firing squad broke up to help themselves to the food. The plantain chips were a big hit. The rest of the evening was speeches and gossip about how the new ambassador, a woman, would run the place. The Marines eventually got dressed and showed off some of their synchronized tricks. Someone’s kid had smuggled firecrackers into the country and got permission to ignite the string of small explosions.

The next day, the fifth of July, when Bill came home from work, Susu was with a friend out on the balcony roasting peanuts. Susu's roast peanuts were her best assets. Bill went to get the tie and a month's severance pay.

When Bill was first introduced to his maid he thought her name was Susie Charmant. It took him two weeks to figure out that her first name was actually Susu. And then he found out her last name was Sherman. It was just that he couldn't understand her accent. She could read and write a bit thanks to some missionaries who thought she should be able to read the Bible, so he took to writing up shopping lists and instructions.

The first act Susu had performed in her capacity as maid was to lose her set of keys to the front door. The regional security officer suggested Bill change the whole series of locks on both the external steel door and normal wooden one. If Bill had taken this expense out of Susu's salary she wouldn't have been paid in the five months she had worked for him. Susu said she was sorry. She told Bill that the police had robbed her and taken the keys and everything else in her house, which may or may not have been true.

"Good afternoon, Arata," Susu said when he came out on the balcony. She always called Bill by his last name. "Good afternoon, Arata" echoed the friend. Susu was squatting over a shallow basket, tossing peanuts to take the skins off. On her leg a long scar from a broken bone shone in the sun; she had told him the story involving the young soldier. Susu wasn't young. She had escaped Liberia to start a new life in Sierra Leone and then escaped Sierra Leone when the trouble started there. She ended up in

Guinea, a francophone country. The whole point of hiring her was that she spoke English, Bill's only language.

"Susu, you washed and dried my tie."

"Yes, I wash the clothes. But I leave on the floor when the rice done and you tell me to go at five Thursday always tell go at five so I go."

"Susu, you don't wash ties in the washing machine. You don't wash ties, period. You shouldn't have washed my tie."

"If I wash it..."

"Yes, you wash it. It was a very expensive tie and you ruined it." In spite of himself Bill threw the tie down on the ground. He grabbed the wad of bills in his pocket and imagined throwing that as well.

"If I wash it it because you tell it dirty. It in the dirty pile. Usual I no wash no cravat. This I know. It not normal. Tailor can fix."

"No, Susu, it's ruined. Tailor can't fix it. You ruined it. Do you understand that?"

"I know very fine tailor." Susu turned to her friend and began to explain the argument in pidgin. Bill watched them a while, waiting for an opening in which to defend himself. The two women made surprised clicking sounds that made Bill feel ridiculous. He was outnumbered here, on his own balcony. He looked over the balcony at the pool. It was high tide and the blue rectangle of pool was surrounded by the muddy Atlantic. The pool always looked to Bill like a piece of ocean that had been cut out and polished. The two squatting women went on talking in their high tone.

He liked going swimming at high tide because of the sound of the small waves and because the water kept the kids from coming up to the fence and begging. At low tide they tread through the mud and reached their arms between the metal rails and bougainvillea for change. Bougainvillea in three colors. The guards chased the kids away but they always came back.

Bill turned back to the chatting women. "Susu, my aunt is coming to stay with me." Bill shouldn't have paused there; in order to tell a lie well one must clothe it heavily. But after that first bit of lying Bill had to collect himself.

"Super!" said Susu clapping her hands together. She often expressed her worry that Bill spent too much time alone. "When she come? I have to buy rice and meat. If you like I can make egg salad." Bill had taught Susu how to make an egg salad sandwich. It was his only recipe.

Bill tried to regain the momentum. "Uh, no...she is going to be cooking. My aunt is a very good cook. She is coming here to cook."

"Eh! Arata," cried Susu, the "eh" a sung, high note. "How can she cook in Guinea? Can she cook African food? Does she know where the meat is fresh fresh? Many people in the marche. Does she know who bad and who good? Does she know to keep her money safe keepin' in lapa?" Susu reached a hand over to her friend's lapa and made as if to steal the coins bunched up in the cloth. The two women laughed and grappled for the coins. When they stopped Susu continued her lesson. "In America she know cooking but not here. When she arrive? We will have a big feast."

Bill didn't even consider pressing the capability of his imaginary aunt. Instead he was already puzzling over how he would make her disappear. Or should he ask someone to act the part of his aunt?

"Uh, I'm not sure exactly when she's coming...I"

"Eh! Arata. You not sure? You be sure. You want leave family waiting at the airport?" Susu turned to inform her friend of this new incompetence on the part of the man from America. Over their chatter Bill pasted a few phrases: "It's not that I don't know. I know, I just forgot. It's written somewhere. She's not coming for a while." But the two women didn't pay attention.

"I'm going to go swimming," Bill announced.

"Okay Arata. If the tie no good you can give to me." Susu held her hand out to take the tie but waited for a sign of approval from her boss. Though Bill didn't want Susu to have his tie he couldn't think of why he would keep it.

In the pool he swam ten laps of breast stroke, ten crawl and ten back stroke. As they did every evening, ribbons of white cattle herons flew down the peninsula. From a distance they looked like elegant ballerinas. If there was no one in the pool they would land around it and drink from the clear water. Bill worried that the chlorine might poison them.

If he dived to the bottom of the pool and held his breath he could look up through the water at the herons circling down, but just before landing they would see him, even in the depths, and pull up. Then they flew past the President's Palace, past the squat

American Embassy, and out over the shallow Atlantic to the ancient volcano that was now just a ring of islands.

The Big Fight

In the end, no one wanted to go with Bill to the fight. The four colleagues at USAID who invited him all opted out one by one, the last one, Sekou, calling just hours before they were to rendezvous: “Family just dropped in from up country, man, can’t make it tonight.”

“Can’t you bring them?” suggested Bill, concerned at the thought of not going to the boxing match when he had told so many, even a friend back in the States, that he was going to sit front row at the biggest sporting event in Guinean history. “It’s like the Rumble in the Jungle—Ali vs. Frazer—but this time it’s an African vs. an American.” But Sekou explained that his visitors included women and children and he couldn’t possibly bring them to a boxing match.

“They’re good tickets, man,” continued Sekou, “I got them from the President’s brother himself. You got to use them. It’ll be great. Surely you can find someone to go with you? What about Aaron?” This was their boss at USAID, and Bill wasn’t at ease with him even at work. Besides, Aaron had a family of his own, never hesitating to congratulate Bill on his lack of one. “You’ve got way too much time on your hands,” Aaron suggested, after reviewing Bill’s micro-loans project analysis. What he really meant was, if Bill had a family, as he should, he wouldn’t have the luxury of such

thorough work. Never mind that Aaron had a maid and a nanny and that he and his wife frequently skipped off to Paris for romantic weekends.

“Sekou, Americans don’t ask their boss out to a boxing match three hours before it’s supposed to begin.” Bill tried out the invitation to show how ridiculous it would sound “Hey, boss, want to go to a fight tonight?”

“Don’t tell me about Americans, man, I spent three years at BU. I know all about Americans. This is about Bill McClish, not about some American custom.”

Sekou had gotten an Atlas Grant from USAID to get an advanced degree in epidemiology, then had come back to Guinea and worked with Bill on the AIDS projects, including the radio drama that had become so popular. This debate about culture was one of the rituals of their friendship as was Sekou’s dissatisfaction with Bill’s social life.

“You have to go, Bill. You can’t spend two years in Guinea and not taste her culture.” Sekou made it a point to invite Bill to any important Muslim holidays and family feasts. The one time Sekou persuaded Bill to go out on the town they went to a karaoke club where the power went out while Bill sang *Should I Stay or Should I Go*, and for two hours while the MC fiddled with the generator, the two friends sat in the quiet, dark night sipping cokes and saying little.

Sekou insisted, “I’ll have my driver bring the boxing tickets to you. Where are you, at work or home?”

Bill said he was at home, then hurried there.

What to wear to a fight? If the seats were as good as Sekou promised, Bill might be on TV. It wasn’t hard to be a star in Guinea; the guests at a big event always got as

much attention at the event itself. Bill had been on the news and in the State Propoganda magazine, *Horoya*, almost weekly since his arrival, most recently for his work with the elections. He liked watching himself on TV, and even video taped the news when he had warning enough of his appearance. Bill flirted with the idea of sending a copy of his compiled appearances out as a kind of Christmas card. *Here I am in front of the dam in Kankan, and this is me meeting officially with the Minister of Information.* The lights of the cameras at such meetings were blinding and added to the heat of the stuffy government offices. Bill chose one of his expensive Hawaiian shirts, red with big red hibiscus flowers overlapping. He wore long pants as protection from mosquitoes and because only school boys wore shorts in Guinea.

Bill decided not to take his Land Rover to the stadium. The Jeep attracted attention. Anywhere he parked it there would be children asking for protection money, especially at night. And then there were the checkpoints. Come midnight the military would block the main roads, stopping all cars and asking for papers. These men saw an American in a fancy car and feasted. Bill's diplomatic plates and passport meant only that he could afford bigger bribes. They told you at the embassy to call the Marine on duty if there were any problems, but Bill had heard the stories of drunk soldiers jabbing their rifles at embassy staff who reached for the phone.

Bill looked for a slow cab driven by an old man. He felt that old men were more ethical. The young men saw that you were white and tripled their prices. You never got down to the honest rate no matter how much you objected. The old men had lived through

colonization, through de Gaulle's offer and Toure's "No." They seemed too weary to fight over a few extra cents. And if they didn't haggle, Bill always gave them a little extra, just to show that money came for doing the job well, not from demanding it. These were the same values he hoped his civic education program instilled. How many times had he pointed out to Americans that their behavior while in West Africa would be the best education about democratic ideals.

"Stade 12 Octobre, sil vou plait," he said to the driver of the yellow Peugeot 504.

"Hey! Il est fort, Bea Diallo!" offered the driver, referring to the night's event. They headed east down the peninsula, out of town. Posters for the fight hung from every streetlight. The photo showed the boxer smiling like a toothpaste model but with his fists up, gloved and ready to strike. The fight was billed as *The President's Cup*. It was convenient advertising for the country's second-ever elections, due in two months.

No way the president loses that fight, thought Bill as the taxi honked its way through a street-soccer game. The international observers would be arriving in a couple weeks, but when the president fixed his victory the American Ambassador would back the results in the name of regional stability.

The cab took the south coast road over Fidel Castro Bridge past the university. That's where the riots would be during the elections. Mission personnel had already been warned to stay out of the area. This was how Bill liked to be in Conakry, moving, being driven, anonymous in the back of a cab.

As usual at dusk, a streamer of bats traversed the sky, flying from the mangroves to the south into the city where they ate mangos, squeaking in the trees like rusty wheels.

This time of evening the smell of a thousand charcoal fires filled the air. Rice and sauce simmered in every house.

Bill had spent about two thousand dollars of aid money advertising the benefits of using the big blue natural gas bottles dispensed in local supermarkets. It was difficult to get the locals to use gas, even though it would easily save a hundred trees a day. The old ways were hard to change and locals had an unwarranted fear of propane exploding. Bill couldn't even convert his own maid, Susu, who preferred cooking on the balcony with a small barbecue, to using the gas stove in the kitchen.

Bill had to walk the final two blocks to the stadium, the road too dense with traffic to proceed by taxi. Young boys darted through the streets selling plastic baggies of peanuts or homemade hibiscus juice to stranded drivers. A crowd gathered at an even distance between the posted policemen at the stadium grounds' main entrance. Behind the police stood two old Soviet armored personnel carriers. They reminded Bill of the story about the gift of snow plows the USSR had sent to the country during the Cold War. For a while Bill stood among the passive crowd, the only white man in sight, not understanding whether all the people were waiting to get in or just waiting. Had the fight been delayed? From over a cluster of distant Flamboyant trees, he could see the strong banks of stadium lights and the cloud of insects they illuminated.

Bill showed a young man standing next to him his ticket and asked in French if he could go in, but the man did not know French. Bill tried English and the man told him, "Yes, you should go." So all those in the crowd were simply watching the people with tickets walk in? Bill walked by the grim policemen expecting to be stopped but they just

kept staring at the crowd. At the turnstile there was no one to take his ticket. The path from the street to the stadium was dark but for the oil lamps set up on the small wooden tables where women sold popcorn, batteries and ice. The men Bill passed all held small portable radios to their ears, listening to the fights. There were fights scheduled throughout the day, culminating with the main event. When the grand finale would be was anyone's guess.

From a distance it appeared there were three busy entrances to the stadium itself, each with a mass of people waiting to get in. Bill took his place at the tail of the crowd in front of the first gate and stood there five minutes before realizing he was getting nowhere. He decided to take a walk around to see if there was a better entrance, but a clot of people clogged each entrance.

Bill stopped at a good distance, just at the edge of the light, to decipher the action. It was like trying to untie a knot visually. Each member of the crowd seemed to have his own individual vector. Some people were waving tickets, demanding to get in. Those whose job it was to take tickets or keep people out were likewise yelling back at the crowd, demanding order or yelling that there was no room, Bill couldn't tell which. They were pushing out against the crowd and would have lost in their tug-of-war if they did not have the support of all the spectators who had already been admitted to the fight and were standing, packed on the stairway up. There seemed to be no empty space to move into.

Maybe the problem was that most of the crowd didn't have tickets. Many at the gates were pushing and jumping and diving to get in—they showed no tickets—and they more often than not trampled their own kind. Others of this crowd outside the stadium,

like Bill, seemed to think better of being at the hub of the struggle and stood back watching, waiting for order.

Men in various stages of uniform paraded about or sat where they could. The blue uniforms were the city police, those in green uniforms were the military and those with Bea Diallo t-shirts were event employees. But none of these uniformed men worked in concert with the others. They were indifferent mercenaries, quickly losing interest in any action, be it beating back a stampede or helping a man through the gate. Bill watched a pair in riot gear walking behind him hand in hand, chatting and eating peanuts. The US military had made much of a special training session for Guinea's army, what with the incursions from Liberia and Sierra Leone, but what could you do in a week and with only ten trainers? Each Guinean who participated received a special medal and got his name read on the evening news.

At the two most distant entrances the uniformed men and those admitted had managed to close the large iron gate to the stairs. Thus, the action at the far entrances was limited to yelling and what jabbing and grabbing could be fit between the bars, but at the first entrance, the one closest to Bill, the gate was still in contention. For a while the mass pushing into the stadium--the larger mass--had the iron gate slowly opening, but the gate was hinged on the outside so that the masses had to draw it outward, into a crowd which yearned to move inwards. Each time the gate inched open, the excited crowd pushed forward even harder, and the inch would be lost. The uniformed men and any others already inside would then use that momentum to close the gate but in so doing

men were crushed. Even beyond the gate there were no empty spaces for anything to move into and so, gate closed or open, there was just dense crowd.

It surprised Bill that the uniformed men seemed moved by the pleading of the crushed. He watched as one man whose arm became pinned in the gate pleaded with a policeman to let him out. But the policeman had no power to let him out. It was the sum total of every pushing that had the man's arm in the gate. Still, the policeman yelled out orders, and these orders inspired some others in the area to begin yelling. The yelling caught on like an oath that everyone could believe in, and there seemed to be some agreement among the chaos. One uniformed man, with some effort, pulled off his belt and began to whip, as well as he could while completely mired in people, the man in front of him. This by some complex, invisible mechanism led to the trapped man's arm being spared. But just as soon as that man fell out of the struggle, another was there at the gate, squeezing his body into the fulcrum of conflict, trying to get in.

Bill walked along the outer edge of light and asphalt to see if maybe a ticket taking process had developed at the other entrances. Why weren't those with tickets being let in? Was it because the people without tickets tried to rush in every time order was imposed? Even those inside the iron gate didn't seem able to pass up the stairs. The stadium must have been as dense with people as the entryways. The promoters probably sold every seat twice. That's probably why there were so many people upset. At least Bill hadn't purchased his tickets. For these poor people, the price of a ticket was probably a week's work.

At the second entrance, after a particularly good speech by an old man with a white beard, there was an attempt to open the gate and let him through. But opening the gate incensed many around him and they began to pull the old man back. Those inside tugged at one of the old man's arms, and those outside tugged at the other. Others, concerned more about the man's health than whether he was in or out, grabbed his torso. The gate, meanwhile, having been opened for one, was wrestled further open by the many. Sensing a new opening, those on the periphery of the crowds at the other entrances peeled off and rushed to the middle entrance where their new force began to push the gate closed.

Bill wondered if there was some other entrance. One that was controlled, one that served a more privileged group. A VIP entrance. After all, his were very good tickets. Tickets for announced invitees. None of these people, the pushing and screaming crushed, were announced on the radio as the honored guests. These people must be fighting for a place in the pit. A standing room only crowd. Bill couldn't imagine his colleagues in this environment. Sekou would be inside, laughing and ordering snacks.

"Son of a bitch," Bill muttered as he turned full circle looking for hope. He vowed that if Sekou ever came to visit him in the States he would make him navigate some complicated and culture-embedded task. But what would be the equivalent? Applying for citizenship? The job interview? Marriage. If Sekou ever married an American Bill would not help. But then Bill's help wouldn't help, anyway. Was this some sort of trap? Did all the foreign nationals at USAID who had invited him know what a mob scene the fight would be? Had they set him up?

If there was another entrance it would be on the other side of the stadium and to get there he would have to traverse a quarter-mile stretch of darkness where the huge banks of elevated lights were eclipsed by the narrower curve of the high elliptical stadium. Bill paused. Everyone at work and everyone at the embassy knew he was coming to this match. He could not come this far and not get in. “Fight of the Century,” he had chided the people at the embassy who had better things to do on a Friday night.

Bill took a few steps towards the entrance, almost joining the dispersed edge of the crowd. Perhaps a white person with a ticket would carry some weight that no one else here could muster. He had experienced it before, like the time he boarded the boat to the islands. When some in that crowd found out he wanted to cross, they carved a path for him and made sure he had the best seat on the boat. And they hadn’t even asked for a tip.

From nearby Bill heard the word “American,” and then, when he didn’t respond, it came a little louder. Someone was calling to him. Two young men came up beside him, one wearing a Bob Marley t-shirt and the other Tupac. They were short and very dark so Bill assumed they were from the forest region.

“American,” the one with Tupac said for the third time, a smile on his face.

But was the word a question or a statement of identity? “Yes,” Bill ventured.

“America very good,” Tupac said. He wore a bandana just like Tupac in the picture, but the two looked nothing alike.

Bill was afraid this chit-chat might be leading up to some favor so he kept his attention forward, on the melee at the gate.

“Africa very difficult,” said Tupac, motioning to the struggle.

“Yep.”

“Very difficult,” piped in Bob Marley, making a tut-tut sound. All three were in agreement, then. At the gate, the men in green and blue uniforms were wielding their sticks and belts with greater freedom. They had lost patience with all the story telling. Whole sections of the crowd fled in front of them like a cloud of hungry mosquitoes dispersed by a night wind.

“Bea Diallo is very good. Ehh!” exclaimed Tupac, pumping his arm to indicate great strength.

“You think he’ll beat the American?” asked Bill.

This was too much English for the young man. “*Si je pense que Bea va gagner?*”

“Right.”

“Heeey! Only God can know.”

“Is Bea Diallo fighting now?” Bill asked, but realized, after asking, what a ridiculous question it was. How would these two know, as excluded and in the dark as he.

“Bea Diallo, yes. It is big, big fight. Uh, what is your name?”

Bill turned to the man in the Tupac shirt and offered his hand. “My name is Bill McClish. Bill.”

“Bill Clinton,” the African said. It was such a common reaction to his name in Guinea that Bill had come up with a little routine around it, a ritual that made his interactions easier. “Yeah, he’s my brother,” said Bill, and then, after catching the

surprise on the faces of the two young men, Bill laughed and slapped one of them on the shoulder explaining that it was a joke.

“And your names?” Bill was amused that these two seemed to have arrived simply to watch the people go in and out of the stadium. Like the crowd outside the outer gates, they seemed to want only to be near the event. It struck Bill that in Washington he would never be able to converse with black men on the streets.

“I am called Alpha,” said Tupac. The other said his name was Jean.

They all shook hands, then watched as an army man beat his way through the crowd. This helmeted man seemed sincere, his baton swinging as if to scare away begging dogs. No one stood in his way.

“Where place in America?” Alpha asked, just as the mass of fleeing people surged around them and an innocent policeman, backing up, yelling at the people pushing against him, fell like a domino right onto Bill.

“*Attention!*” yelled the policeman, pulling himself up by Bill’s shirt, ready to berate his stumbling block. But then he saw that Bill was white. The only white person in the crowd. The policeman apologized. The crowd surged back to its original form as soon as the clubbing stopped, but the policeman stayed next to Bill. He was dressed in blue and though the Texaco cap pulled down to his eyes was comical, the little machine gun slung over his shoulder gave the man authority. Jean and Alpha were gone.

In French the policeman asked, “You want to go in, you have a ticket? Let me see your ticket.”

Bill pulled one of the tickets out of his pocket and handed it over. The policeman examined it closely, so closely, it seemed to Bill, that he must be illiterate. "You can get in with this ticket," the policeman announced, smiling, and Bill was relieved. He would see the fight after all. Knowing how events went in Guinea, with all the speeches and pomp, the big match probably hadn't even started yet.

"You wait here, I will go see," ordered the policeman. Bill watched him until he disappeared in the dense pack of humanity around the gates.

From the stadium, music and spotlights erupted. The light show reinvigorated the struggles at the gates. A few strong young men scaled the iron gates and found toe holds enough on the exterior of the stadium to climb into the second level. Inside, on the stairs, a large man with a Bea t-shirt yelled with his whole face. The agony on his face reminded Bill of a close-up from *The Battleship Potemkin*. They will be here pushing and pulling until the match is over, thought Bill. They will stay a long time, trying to get their money back. Bill imagined them returning home thirty bucks poorer, with nothing to show for it but another hardship to add to the litany.

And where was Bill's policeman? At least ten minutes had passed since the man with the machine gun had walked towards the gate. How would it work? Bill hoped he wouldn't have to go through one of the three gates, even with a police escort. Not only would it be dangerous to get closer to that melee, it would be embarrassing to be the white man ushered in. Would they pull at his clothes and yell that it wasn't fair? He did have a ticket, though, a good one. Bill hoped for a hidden VIP entrance.

The light show ended. It was probably all for the best, this delay; perhaps for once Bill wouldn't be early. He wasn't certain how long fights lasted, it wasn't really his thing, boxing, but he knew they went more than five rounds. More than seven, even. He ran through versions of the story he would tell at work. He smiled, imagining sitting next to Aaron at the canteen Monday. Bill looked down at his Hawaiian shirt. Would there be blood to wash out?

The realization that he had been robbed came to Bill first as just the slightest twitch in his neck. He shook his head and made excuses for the policeman's tardiness. It was Africa, things took longer. Bill vowed to wait ten more minutes, but only managed five before giving up. How stupid could he be? He might as well have given the cop fifty bucks to go buy him a ticket. And there was no recourse, of course. Bill fingered the second ticket in his pocket, and imagined sitting down next to the policeman. But of course the policeman probably sold the ticket, needing the money more than the entertainment. It was an easy mugging, thought Bill. A mercy robbery. No threat, no knife in his belly, or black eye. And what did he expect, standing there, impossibly rich, among the world's poorest. He was like a pile of gold sitting unguarded on the asphalt. But of course he *was* guarded, his citizenship kept him safe and the marines at the embassy and all the other marines in the world whose job it was to protect him. If things got really bad the Americans would all fly away or board destroyers as they had in Sierra Leone.

Bill walked back the way he had come, past the small oil lamps illuminating tables of snacks and Chinese batteries. The crowd on the street was still there, standing

quiet and still, looking towards the stadium as though watching a movie projected onto the dark sky. It wasn't hard to get a taxi home; a whole fleet of little Peugeots, all hand painted yellow, waited to transport spectators.

"No lights?" Bill objected as they drove over the bridge, so the driver turned the headlights on.

At home Bill found it was only eight. He made himself some mint tea, drank it, and feeling it was not enough, made a tequila sunrise. On TV, the sole Guinean station, the President gave a long speech. The same speech he always gave, about the hard work needed to improve the country but also about the potential riches. He mentioned bauxite, gold and lumber, but the most important resources were the citizens, the people of Guinea. Bea Diallo was an example of the strength of the country, said the president. Everyone had to work as hard as Bea Diallo had. Bill chuckled to himself and then said to the TV, as he poured some more tequila into his orange juice, "Never mind that Bea lives in Belgium, has a Belgian passport and a Belgian trainer."

The American boxer seemed tired even as the fight began. The announcer said something about the scheduled opponent not being able to make it. They had switched Americans at the last moment. Bill wondered where they got this guy. Was he jet lagged? Bea wore red shorts and the American wore white. Both men were muscular, and big. The difference seemed to be in attitude. Bea was cheerful, even exuding good will towards the man he punched, while the American was dour, cowed perhaps, by the crowd in the stadium with their drums and chants in strange languages.

In the second round the announcer became excited but Bill couldn't see why. The two men were facing each other, prancing around the ring. Every few seconds one would go in for a punch but these attacks lacked conviction. Bill knew how badly Guinea needed a victory but in spite of himself he urged on the American.

In the third round Bea came out determined and jabbed a couple times at the American, and even though the punches didn't land square to the face, the American seemed impressed. He backed off, turned away from his opponent and ran to a corner. The stadium occupants were on their feet, cheering. Bea came at the American who now crouched, crowded into the corner. The American defended his head with his arms so Bea landed a couple blows to the gut. The American spun away to jog around the ropes and when Bea caught him a third time, the American put up his hands. He gave up.

"Oh, come on!" Bill yelled at his countryman. Why would an American take a fall? Where had they found this guy? Bill imagined himself doing just as well: prancing about the arena a round, jabbing once or twice at his opponent and then throwing up his gloved fists before any blood could be spilled. Not a bad way to make a living. The American, in his corner, looked more pleased in defeat than he had while on the canvass. "Bogus bullshit!"

Bill went up close to the TV to better hear the excited announcer was. He gave nothing but praise for Bea, when anyone could see that the American was not a serious opponent. The announcer could hardly be heard over the crowd at the stadium. The police formed a human shield around the boxing ring so that the President could get in to present the three-foot tall trophy. Bill looked for his policeman but no one on camera

wore a Texaco cap. Bea jumped up and down with his arms in the air. When given the microphone he yelled that his victory was for Guinea.

Bill went out to his balcony, the one facing south and the Central Mosque. A hum of jubilation rippled out from the stadium. In the streets below him people clustered around radios congratulated each other, shaking hands and laughing. Cars drove fast on the coast road honking their horns, the passengers hanging out the windows yelling, making their fingers into little signs of victory.

Mercy Ship

They were two white women with crosses on chains around their necks sitting at a low table under the rubber tree of the Djoliba. I don't know if they stood out more because they were white or because they were quicker. They talked, gesticulated, looked around and thought at about twice the speed the rest of us. I sat at my table trying to hear what language they were speaking and trying to look at them when they weren't looking at me.

Young, white, tall Christians. One of them in a white dress, the kind of dress one might imagine wearing in Africa while shopping, in the developed world, for a trip to Africa. Poor girl thought she was going to be amongst elephants and here she was with us. Her friend wore long, khaki shorts with an absurd number of empty pockets. Long, yes, but not long enough. I looked around to see if the other men saw what I saw: knees. But the other bar patrons weren't quick enough to see; they still hadn't looked up from their beers.

Ever since reading Boccaccio in tenth grade I had had a thing for nuns and women wearing Christian paraphernalia. I read Boccaccio's *Decameron* because I was pretty sure no one else had. The kinds of stories we tell to get our minds off the plague. Those were the stories I needed. With my allowance I bought a big, hardbound edition with illustrations from the years just before the depression, when his stories of sexual

plunder must have seemed quotidian. Boccaccio had done a lot for me and now he was about to give me the gumption to join the young American ladies with crosses.

I deciphered from the way these women laughed without reserve, and from the way they didn't move their lips when they talked that they must be American. I said, "Do you mind if I join you," my green Beck's can in my left hand so I could shake their hands without getting them cold. Back in civilization I would never be so bold as to insert myself into someone else's table but here in Conakry white people were rare enough to allow for intimacy. There were maybe 200 white people in the capital and I could recognize the long-term ones even as they drove by behind their chauffeurs and tinted windows. These two were new. I told them I sold diamonds and dragged my substantial cast iron chair across the patio.

Aisha the waitress automatically brought me a coaster when she saw I was now under the rubber tree. She had given the two women coasters as well but they had mistakenly placed them under their glasses. Due to this error their glasses already had a bit of debris in them, but I didn't say anything.

The woman in shorts wore a delicate gold cross with a well defined Christ pinned to it and her friend wore a thick silver cross. It was Christ-free and looked like the kind of thing one might pick up in Santa Fe. It had a hole drilled through the top where the chain went. I wanted to weigh the cross in my palm to see if it was solid or hollow. If solid I wanted to hold it in my mouth while still hanging around her neck.

They were nurses on the Mercy Ship. I had never heard of the Mercy Ship so they got to explain it to me, as they must have a hundred times, but in that great

American way these girls didn't seem tired of their own stories, even though they had been living with them all their lives. They were the kind of talkers who didn't need much prompting. They spoke in paragraphs rather than sentences, and paused only long enough to inhale. While they were going like that I got time to watch their crosses. They might have noticed. I think they liked it. Their vessel was a floating hospital making its way down the west coast of Africa, taking its time, docking at capitals here and there for a few months of do-gooding.

Crosses clinging between the collar bones, resting against the white skin of nurses. If it were Boccaccio I would take a fishing pirogue out to the Mercy Ship under cover of night, climb the anchor chain and pirate the nurses' quarters of all its innocence. Each story in *The Decameron* has a precis that goes something like this: MASETTO DA LAMPORECCHIO PRETENDS TO BE DEAF AND DUMB IN ORDER TO BECOME A GARDENER TO A CONVENT OF NUNS, WHERE ALL THE WOMEN EAGERLY LIE WITH HIM. If I were in *The Decameron* the boat would leave while I was on it, going from port to port, a stowaway taken captive, holed up in the nurses' cabins, a one man harem, an ivory tower of mercy in the wounded world, a perfect catalyst to transform mercy into pleasure. As it was I got an invitation to visit the ship the following Saturday.

The nurses left me at their table, their glasses still half full. I loved that. I ordered two more Becks, one at a time for myself and enjoyed the residue of the nurses' company. They had just come from Dakar, they told me. They had been on the ship four months, they said. They used the word "only" to modify "four months." Of course I

asked how much the job paid but they weren't in it for the money. In fact, they scolded me, they had to pay for their own transportation and rent. Airfare to Africa wasn't cheap. All they got out of the trip was a world with less glaucoma.

The two nurses had names, Isobel and Linda, and homes. They told me where they were from down to the smallest detail of state and city. They even managed to tell me what their parents did. They complimented Conakry as though it were mine, some house I had bought and refurbished. I told them it was nothing but they didn't believe me. Conakry, a city only a nurse could love and then only if living offshore.

When I asked them if the experience lived up to their expectations they had both nodded their heads so vigorously I had to look away. For a moment their clean resolve made me take a look at what I was doing for humanity. Then I remembered, I didn't want to do anything for humanity. Maybe hide in it but no more.

At dusk in the Djoliba all the little birds that had been sleeping in the rubber tree awoke and sang, the mosquitoes came out, and the proprietor, a bald man who had survived colonialism and then his liberator's prison camp, made a slow trip to the radio to turn up the nightly news.

The Anastasis a.k.a. Mercy Ship was tied up and gleaming between a small fleet of rusting Greek fishing boats and a North Korean freighter being loaded with hardwood. The Anastasis had been a cruise ship in the fifties. It was a good-looking ship, the kind of sleek, sharp two smoke stacked boat you could imagine taking rich people from island to tiny island in the Caribbean, everyone concentrating on not spilling their martinis.

Walking up the ramp into the reception area I couldn't help but think of that paradigm of cruise ships, the *Love Boat*. It must have been the first thought of every American who boarded, or perhaps those of a younger generation were transported to the set of *The Titanic*.

Isobel and her simple, thick, silver cross met me at the reception area. She looked especially tasty outside of the bar. Here the smashing success of the morning tropical sun seemed matched by Isobel's own vivacity. Her smile worked much better than the coffee I had just taken. Isobel had on a simple white T-shirt and shorts and a large bandage over one knee--a war wound from a soccer game against some of the local street kids. We joked about the local football pitches which were actually streets, and then Isobel started guiding me through her ship. "So this is where you live," I said, looking at a model of the Anastasis in the ship's reception hall. "We all should have models of our houses in our living rooms. Giving directions to the loo would be so much easier."

As Isobel walked me through what had been the first class dinning hall I hummed the theme from the *Love Boat*. She got the joke. She turned to me smiling and said, "It is a kind of *Love Boat*," eyes wide with sincerity. I said "Really?" and popped my eyebrows like Groucho Marx but she didn't defend herself. I stopped humming and thought of how the Greeks had three different words for love. It made things less ambiguous. We walked through the tight, pipe-laced places of the engine room, and past a pool whose water was strictly for drinking, moving quickly as though Isobel had ten of these things to do that day. I wondered if she went to bars intentionally trying to pick up

men like me to deposit on board. Perhaps she would lock me up in a galley and I would end up shoveling coal all the way down the Gold Coast.

The strange thing was, on my whole tour I never saw any patients. There were no Guineans being wheeled about the deck to take in the slightly polluted but cooler sea air, no Guineans hobbling up the narrow stairs on crutches, no one anywhere in head bandages, nothing to make it look like a hospital at all besides all the perfectly healthy people reading Bibles on the shady side of the boat.

As we walked by them, Isobel explained how we couldn't go into the recovery room or the operating room because it would take me too much work to get "cleaned up." I was relieved, never having been good at blood or any hint of impermanence, but I examined Isobel to see if she was insulting me under cover of her cheerful tone. Not a chance.

Climbing up to the bridge Isobel told me how often the ship had to be painted. She called it a full time job just keeping the rust at bay. Her voice droned in the bored, prerecorded tone of a museum guide. I took revenge by focusing on things other than those she pointed to, the backs of her knees, for example. I could feel the little rise there, where muscle traversed the joint. To the tongue it would feel like mango.

An evil fantasy crept into my mind as we climbed. Perhaps this was an evangelical mission merely posing as a hospital ship. 800 surgeries while in Conakry, was the number Isobel had ball-parked for me without my prompting. Hair lips and cleft pallets mostly, and eye problems. "Eighty percent of the worlds' blindness is curable," she told me standing in the wheel room. As we gave this impressive thought its due

respect I mused that if you were a true Christian you would have to say that all the world's blindness was curable. Otherwise why give out the title All Mighty? But I didn't say anything; this wasn't a Christian Science ship, after all. The Christian Scientists, if anything, would have a Mercy Sub whose mission it would be to sink the hospital ship in the deep waters off Boston.

My evil suspicion was not waylaid by the seven-minute video the two of us sat through in the mahogany-lined hall that must have once been used for waltzing. We sat right next to each other in the kind of canvas chairs directors use. I thought of taking her hand but then I didn't want her to confuse my eros for agape. In the video the president of the Mercy Ships (there were four boats, one for every poor part of the world) stressed the fundamental need of introducing Africans to God's love. There was an evangelical team on board equipped with cars and motorcycles that went out to take care of the spirit before any body was administered to. The surgery ward, I suspected, was probably full of bibles, or worse, Cliff's Notes to the Bible. As a hospital ship, I found out, they were given free berth by the Guinean government and free gas by some Scandinavian oil company. The Scandinavians, I remembered, were the only group meeting the pledged point seven percent of GDP to poor nations.

Isobel showed me her cabin. I had planned, or rather envisioned myself, entering her bedroom, hopping onto her bed and bouncing to test its firmness, but her bed turned out to be the top bunk and I didn't think I could get up there casually. She shared the tight space with three other women. That meant that there would be no way for us to get it on without involving everyone. That would be appropriately Baccaccioesque. I asked

about her cabin mates and though she didn't have photos she informed me that one was a grandmother. My place, then.

The final stop on the tour was a room with before and after photos. Recently they had removed their biggest tumor ever. "Six pounds," Isobel reported proudly. I tried not to imagine a football of flesh hanging off someone's body where it didn't belong. Around the photos of supposed patients were gifts given by the governments and people served. There was the ubiquitous woven cloth, wood carvings and musical instruments. A veritable museum of thanks hung about the photos of ugliness transformed into beauty. I felt faint. Always having been susceptible to sea sickness, being on a boat and looking at photos of kids having eye operations wasn't a good idea. I could feel the diaspora of blood from my head. I asked if we could go out on deck to get some air.

Isobel led me to the children's play area where some blond six year olds were making too much noise. She continued to give me the lowdown on the boat, and as my nausea increased, I wondered how to turn her off. There were whole families on board and so, necessarily, a school. Was there a button on her back? Some people had been living on the ship for half a decade. Or a cord slowly retracting into her head? Some people on board were actually on vacation from their day jobs: a holiday with the poor. Isobel catalogued the presidents and royalty who had visited the ship. Or did one just have to hope she was on the cheap local batteries? There were four hundred people on board and no vacancies for volunteering until well into the next decade.

Feeling as though I might be sick I moved over to the railing. It was cool in my hand, thick with white paint that Isobel herself might have applied. Beyond the

breakwater was The Atlantic, but here in Conakry the Atlantic never looked oceanesque. On its best days it looked like a dull lake and usually I thought of it as a trashy puddle where water collected in the rainy season and then, what with the extraordinary humidity, never dried up. A man in a pirogue was fishing right against the hull of the Mercy Ship, pulling tiny fish out of his net which would be dried and pounded into a sort of sea salt. Where are the boys diving for coins, I wondered. And where had I seen that? Not in Africa, surely. Isobel asked me if I was alright. It was the first time she had shown concern for me all day. I told her I had better get back on dry land. "Too much mercy for one day," I said.

When I asked Isobel if she wanted to go out to dinner (she mentioned that the food wasn't too good and into that crack I inserted my invitation to the best restaurant in town) she said "OK." The "OK" was spoken in what I would call a "what the hell" voice which indicated more reserve than willingness but we could wrestle with that balance later. That was what it was like, we were about to wrestle, sizing each other up before that initial hold. She was going to try to witness to me and I was going to take her bra off and put her silver cross in my mouth to determine its density. "Eureka," I would yell.

The Korean place that became our regular dinner date had the best foreign food in town. "Foreign" in West Africa meaning not rice with leaf sauce. The restaurant had no name but we expats called it the "Cargo" because of the cargo containers that composed the hotel part of the restaurant. A steady stream of Korean sailors insured a wealthy clientele and kimchi travels well.

On our first date I answered the usual questions about being a diamond buyer:

"It's just like being a vegetable buyer but the carrots are smaller," "Antwerp" and "\$150,000". The great thing about having a job that others think is romantic is that the more you try to talk it down the more interesting it seems and you end up getting credit for being modest and exotic.

Sitting across a table from her for the two hours it took us to get through dinner I weighed her flaws. Her nose was blunter than I wanted. She talked excitedly with her mouth full of lobster or whatever else was in it. She referred to the toilet as the "powder room" as though she was going there to load the cannons, and said "my word" where anyone else would have said at least "my god." Still, I wanted her. It was exactly her flaws I wanted to be in bed with. A macle here and there gave a diamond personality, something for the cutter to work around.

An image came to me over hot fish soup of Isobel flinging her cross out her porthole into the oily sea. I wondered if really she didn't want to chuck the sacred life preserver and have some fun. It's the pretense of holiness that gives scandal its bite; she and I were poised perfectly for a good time. A good Christian no doubt, but my date was obviously flattered to be asked out by a rich man who spoke impeccable French, flattered to be desired by a man whose hands passed through trays of diamonds more often than through water. I imagined her writing about our date in a secret diary, a small book she kept under her pillow. After all, if one did not want adventure why join a ship that was slowly making its way down the West side of Africa?

I let my imagination pave the road into our night. I would invite her in to my apartment for a drink of something sweet but alcoholic. We would talk and our conversation would be like a mask hiding our intent until our intent blazed through and the rest would be pure Boccaccio. FRIAR RENALDO LIES WITH HIS GODCHILD'S MOTHER. THE HUSBAND FINDS HIM WITH HER, AND THEY MAKE HIM BELIEVE THAT THE FRIAR IS CHARMING AWAY THE CHILD'S WORMS.

She ordered the ice cream for dessert but then I corrected her. You could get all sorts of diseases from ice cream, surely they had instructed the crew. "What then?" she asked. Better just to skip dessert when in Africa. "Of course I do have some Haggen Daz in my freezer. It's safe. I had it shipped in from Europe." The frogs in the empty swimming pool started up again, their throaty mating calls crescendoing until the waiter ran out, clapped at them and told them in Korean to be quiet.

Isobel didn't want to have a drink at my place. She didn't even want to go to my place. She didn't even want to drive by it. She insisted with a smile on being taken back to the boat, making a weak excuse about the port closing at midnight but of course all things in Guinea are possible with a little bribe. On the dock, behind a stack of boxes she told me were medical supplies, she let me kiss her and tell her that she was beautiful, but only once. Still, when I asked her if she wanted to go out again Isobel seemed warm to the idea.

And so she was, in a way. We went out on Friday or Saturday nights, as often as I could persuade her. And then in turn, Every Sunday morning there was a sermon on deck under a canvas tarp which we attended. Isobel would hold my hand as the ill-educated

but enthusiastic minister made his point. We squeezed our grip now and then, Isobel to share with me which parts of the service were inspiring, and me simply to squeeze. She invited me to a Bible study group and I might have gone if I weren't working. I got so that I could call her roommates by name. When I came to pick Isobel up they would smile at me as though I were not the enemy. That worried me but it didn't mean they were winning. I was concentrating on Isobel. I concentrated on her as though there was something important there, something that I would be tested on later.

I found I needed her hand. I was addicted to it. I'd touch a glass, touch a tray of rough diamonds, even touch the remote with all those great rubber buttons and nothing, but when I touched Isobel, her lips with my lips or her hand with my hand, I wanted to keep touching her. I wanted to touch her more, and more of her.

As it was I was restricted to an area known as first base: the head. When I tried to stretch a single into a double I was thrown out. When I tried to steal I was thrown out. She balked and I didn't get the call. What was not to like about my desire? Ours was not at all the kind of tale a group of people hiding out from the plague would have delighted in reciting; Boccaccio it was not. AN ABBESS GETS OUT OF BED HASTILY IN THE DARK TO CATCH ONE OF HER NUNS WHO IS ACCUSED OF BEING WITH A LOVER IN BED. THE ABBESS HERSELF IS LYING WITH A PRIEST AND PUTS HIS BREECHES ON HER HEAD IN MISTAKE FOR HER VEIL. THE ACCUSED NUN SEES THEM AND POINTS THEM OUT TO THE ABBESS; SHE IS SET FREE AND ALLOWED TO BE WITH HER LOVER. Still, for two months I kept at it.

I liked how clean Isobel was. It was that that lingered with me. After a night with Isobel I wouldn't remember her face or what she wore, but I remembered a kind of grooming, or was it innocence? I couldn't tell. Perhaps it was because she managed to stay so American even in West Africa or perhaps it was her job, changing peoples' lives for nothing, or perhaps it was just the hours she spent cleaning her nails. In *Gulliver's Travels* Swift points out that even the greatest beauty is ugly if you get close enough to it, but the closer I got to Isobel the cleaner and more carefully arranged she appeared. I could feel Isobel leaving the human comedy I had so wanted to inhabit with her. She would have nothing of that, and stayed in her divine realm, as chaste as a Beatrice in paradise.

When it was time for the Anastasis to push south to its next port of operation, Cape Town, Isobel invited me to the bon voyage party. As a going away present I wanted to give her a copy of Boccaccio's *Decameron* but Conakry didn't have anything like a bookstore, not in French nor English. I would have given her my big illustrated version but it was still on the bookshelf at my parents' house. That bookshelf like a photo of a mind leaning against a wall lighting a cigarette, trying to look cool: Boccaccio next to Hammet next to something in Ancient Greek which I never did manage to decline, next to *Our Bodies Ourselves* which had been a gift from my first girlfriend--a Dear John present. Once a decade or so when I went home to visit my folks, I would pull a few books down just to open and close them. Like watering plants, that.

Instead of a book I decided to give Isobel a diamond. I had gotten my hands on some extremely cheap stones, what with the chaos in Sierra Leone. The middle man had been taken out, literally. Stones worth thousands were going for hundreds. The little country was hemorrhaging diamonds so fast the cartel couldn't keep track of them all. It was my job to keep the price up but every once in a while I took an under-the-table batch.

The night of the party we danced on deck under strings of colored lights that must have doubled as Christmas decorations. To their credit the band, composed entirely of crew members, avoided the usual repertoire of evangelical hymns. Besides the ministers and ambassadors who showed up at such functions the guests included the patients who had been healed on board. Many times during the evening Isobel was led away to receive someone's thanks. A couple times I saw her praying with patients she had aided. She would come back to me glowing, eyes wet with happiness.

I had this diamond to give her. I asked if there was someplace we could be alone and she said "no," sincerely. That was the thing about living on a boat with four hundred people, she said. At ten everyone not going to Cape Town was asked to go ashore. There was a lot to do in the morning, ropes to untie and such. Just before Isobel showed me off the boat I pulled her aside to the railing where I took her hand and opened it.

When I placed the uncut octahedron in her palm I realized there was something that went along with it: The question that usually accompanies the first diamond a man gives to a woman. I looked from her palm to her face hoping that she might agree without my asking, but instead she put the diamond in her breast pocket and took the cross from around her neck. As she passed the fine silver chain over my head she said "I

noticed how much you watched this. I felt that...almost that you were more interested in the cross than in me," and she tried to laugh but didn't manage.

I wanted to say something funny that would allow us both to laugh but the longer I took to find something funny to say the less likely humor became. Then she kissed my cheek and when she was still close enough for me to smell her she changed her mind and kissed my lips. Did she turn me around or did I turn away from her all by myself? I walked down the plank to the cement dock without anyone's help. Just in front of me a woman with a head bandage was walking slowly, with the aid of her large family. Without thinking about it I took the silver cross and put it in my mouth. On my tongue it seemed to grow larger. Its surfaces were beveled. The cross was hollow and as my saliva seeped into the two tiny holes for the chain the slight taste of salt and perfume gave way to that of nickel.

Bembeya

We were soft in Africa. The friendliness and the heat, the naps and the breaks for prayer, the thin clothes and the fever all siphoned down to a laxity of attitude. Dar es Salaam and Nairobi woke up the State Department. After those bombings we spent three billion ramping-up embassy security worldwide. I spent the worst part of a year in darkest Africa, moving from embassy to embassy, supervising the installation of additional barriers, perimeter walls, bollards, shatter resistant window film; you name it, we hardened it. Guinea was my last stop, after Mozambique, Uganda, Niger—where we had a slight coup—and Nigeria.

Not New Guinea, this Guinea is in West Africa. Guinea-Conakry, some call it, not to be confused with Guinea-Bissau to the north. Damn colonists had so much land they couldn't come up with original names. Called every place a New old place or Guinea something. Conakry, the capital of Guinea, the only part of the country that concerned me, juts out into the Atlantic like a landing strip of red rock. Slavers, who had a hard time finding ports on the mangrove-covered west coast of Africa, used the islands right off the peninsula to load up. Now there is almost no industry in the country, but it's of interest to the US due to its natural resources (bauxite, lumber and gold), its stability amidst wars in Liberia and Sierra Leone, and its seat on the UN Security Council.

The US embassy in Guinea is built right on the street with nothing but a thin, thirty-year-old cinderblock wall for protection. A truck bomb of the magnitude of the one used in Nairobi would have flattened the building, killing all 20 Americans and the many foreign nationals working inside. My plan to improve security included closing off the road to all but foot traffic and installing major barriers. But the French Embassy down the block got all hot about the closure. They didn't want to have to get out of their air-conditioned Renaults and walk two blocks just to protect some new world power. That was the worst thing about working in the former colonies, all the former colonists still hanging around. The local government, fat with French aid, sat on my proposal for weeks. It took the sale of four attack helicopters, plus some new money for AIDS, to change the government's mind. But then, when the work did get underway, the concrete failed. You could carve into the wall with a butter knife. Seems the Lebanese subcontractor, trying to save money, put in too much sand. Had to re-do the whole blockade. My stay in the tropics dragged on into the rainy season.

For the first two weeks I stayed at the Novotel at the very tip of the peninsula—the best hotel in the city with its round pool with no deep end. From my window I watched rusty cargo ships, registered in Liberia but carrying Cyrillic names, pass the old slave islands. As my stay stretched out into a month and then more, the Embassy decided it would be cheaper to put me up on the top floor of the newest apartment building in town, a short walk from work. An Italian coffee buyer and I had the whole six-story building to ourselves. Apparently, no one else in the city could afford the rent. From my balcony I had a good view north of the storms coming in off the Atlantic--lightning

storms blowing a cold wind in front of them that sent everyone on the street running for shelter. Between the Embassy and my apartment was a bar called the Bembeya.

It wasn't your typical State Department haunt. If he had known I frequented a local dive on one of the seedier streets in Conakry, the security officer would have had a fit. That was part of the problem, though: The US embassies weren't hard enough, but they also weren't soft enough. No one who worked at the embassy knew the word on the street, none of them even walked on the street. Too hot and too dirty but if you don't know hot and dirty, how are you going to know Africa? Most everyone in the American mission to Guinea lived in a walled compound in the suburbs known as "Little America," where they served hotdogs and popcorn at the family movie every Friday night. Better to keep an ear out for rumors, spread some money around to poor people who have nothing else to do all day but listen to young men brag about their exploits, better to make friends in dark places. And besides, where Americans gather together, even behind walls and barbed wire, they make good targets.

The Bembeya was the darkest bar I'd ever seen. A perfect place for a white man to hide. Most of the light came from passing cars, their headlights spilling through the rope cords in the doorway and through the bars on the window. A rectangle of headlight would pass slowly over the walls, revealing a framed poster of the 1974 world cup champions, a box of the local condom--Prudence--and a list of drink prices: All the hard stuff cost the same and beer cost more. The only source of light inside the Bembeya came from a bulb hung in a green cylinder. Barely visible, it floated above the bar. When the power failed you didn't even notice the light going out; it was only the

overhead fans slowing to a stop and the refrigerator's silence that signaled it. The power failed every night.

The bar was on the corner known as Wall Street. It was where the money changers stood with bags of currency. No one trusted the banks in Guinea so financial transactions took place on the streets. It would be impossible to trace a large influx of foreign currency on Wall Street unless you had a few friends in the money changer trade. That was mostly what I watched from the bar; cars drove up, sometimes nice ones, and the money changers hurried to the open windows. When I first started going to the Bambeya money changers asked me if I wanted to change dollars. I never told them my nationality but they pegged me instantly. "American! Change dollars!" They crowded around me, flashing calculators with exchange rates punched in. But after a month everyone on the corner knew me, knew I wasn't there for business. Even the prostitutes left me alone after a while.

Most evenings, I was the first, and often enough the only customer in the bar. The night life in the capital started after midnight, and I never stayed up to meet it. There wasn't much to do most days while my security plan slogged through the ministry, but I still went to work like everyone else. Early in the evening, Guineans popped into the Bambeya just to see if anything was up, or to use the toilet. Ibro, the bar man, didn't like to see me drink alone so he sat with me after opening my beer and leaving the cap on, loosely.

Our conversation started out with him asking me a few times how I was. It was never enough to just say *how are you* in Africa, you had to ask multiple times. So I

complied, and asked Ibro a few times. After we confirmed that we were both fine, Ibro launched into his despair. The first time I went into the bar, because of Ibro's slight build, I assumed he was just a boy. It wasn't until I heard his troubles that I understood he was at least my age. He worked from seven in the morning to midnight and brought home forty bucks a month. He had two kids and a wife who sold oranges door to door. He had a hard time feeding his family. "Fifteen years the president has been in power," Ibro complained "and look, nothing works. Things are only getting worse. And in the Capital." This was the music I drank my beer to.

Right after his despair Ibro would tell me his plans. If he got some money he would run a table like the one outside the bar where an old man in a wool cap sold smokes and candy. If he had even more money than that Ibro would buy a taxi and pull in a day what he now made in a month. But if Ibro had all the money in the world he would open a cinema. That was the plan that Ibro could really flesh out. He had it all imagined down to the seats and air conditioners. Ibro's problem was he was poor and had all the time in the world to think about it.

He left me when the prostitutes came over. When I first started going to the Bembeya they spent a lot of time on me. They followed me in, my white skin like a beacon. Never alone, the ladies moved in pairs or packs that surrounded me. The first time I came into the bar I sat down on one of the low, padded benches at a table. That was before I felt the cockroaches crawling on them and before I learned that a prostitute could pin you in on the benches. That first night, as soon as I came in, one woman sat down next to me and one across from me. The one next to me said "You mind?" as she

put her hand on my thigh, halfway between my knee and hip. She asked "You like me?" And when I ignored her and her hand she said, "Are you angry with me?" and squeezed my thigh.

When a car drove by its light shone on her dress in a soft damp way, the way velvet looks. Brown, maybe. Her breasts, I could tell from the brief shadows, were small and naked under the dress. The one across from me said nothing and kept her head down as though she was sleeping or drunk.

"My name is Fifi. Buy me a beer?" said the one in velvet.

"No." It was the first thing I had said to her. She wanted to know why I wouldn't buy her a beer. I told her I was mean. She doubted me. I told her again I was mean and added that I was married. She said that was normal.

"Where is your wife?"

"She is at home."

"At home in America?"

"Yes."

"That's normal."

"Is she white or black?"

"Actually, she is neither. She is Thai."

"That's normal."

"Yeah. Everything's normal."

Someone at the bar laughed and the prostitute tried a new tactic, "You need an African wife. You are a long way from America." She noticed me looking out the

window to the street where a number of women swarmed around a pack of Korean sailors. "You like her?" she asked, thinking I was admiring one of the flirting women.

"She's beautiful," I offered, of the young woman with long braids.

"But she is so black. You like them black?" Fifi placed her forearm against mine to compare skin color but the Bembeya was so dark you couldn't see any difference. I wanted to tell her they were all black to me but that would sound too interested. Then Fifi ran out of the bar, yelling to a sailor she knew, grabbing onto his arm just as he ducked into the Tropicana.

The clubs in that area and the bars are the closest to the port. The sailors come ashore and change their money into the weak local currency. The prostitutes come to change their bodies into money. The girls get into the clubs free and make the rounds all night, stopping in at the Bembeya for the rare mark there and for the cheap beer. The prostitutes know more about the type of people who frequent port than any port authority. They not only told me about the latest ship that came in, they would freely describe the sexual idiosyncrasies of each nationality. They complained about the Koreans who liked to pinch and the Russians who cried, but there wasn't much selection, most nights.

The Bembeya was the kind of place I never went to in the States; it didn't exist there. It was a dive in a diving country. Ibro explained to me once, when I asked about the name, that the club used to host the best band in all of West Africa: Bembeya Jazz National. That was in the glory days when Guinea could still taste the promise and pride of independence. There used to be dancing in the streets outside the Bembeya, Ibro remembered. He told me that right where I was sitting a man named Sekou Diabate had

played a guitar that inspired the nation to dance. But he died in a car crash in Dakar and now the Bambeya was silent except for a couple guys who couldn't afford to get drunk who chatted by the door.

The local beer came in big bottles and it was a rare night that I drank more than two. I was never a drinker in the States, I never saw the attraction. But one night at the Bambeya I lost count. I was enjoying the feeling that with each bottle I belonged more. It was as if I was sending down roots there, on the bar stool under the fan in West Africa. It was my last night in the bar and in the country. The outer wall at the US Embassy was finally done. That morning we had changed all the glass windows of the embassy into five-inch Plexiglas. We were ready for the attack. I felt confident we would endure, even here, surrounded in a foreign country. Ibro came over now and then to talk to me. We complained about his country's version of democracy. I didn't tell him I was flying out on Sabina the next morning.

It was a busy night. The country had just held its second election and for a week no one dared leave their homes. But now life was back to normal: The opposition candidates were in jail and the ransacked markets were selling vegetables again. People were anxious to spend their money and the liquor flowed freely.

Ibro came over with my first beer and after our greetings showed me his finger. They had inked it when he voted to insure he couldn't vote twice. But the ink had washed right off with soap. Ibro said he knew lots of people who had voted many times but of course they were all of a certain group. "The president's family," he called them. "The President has been in power seventeen years and look at the county. No electricity,

the roads are bad, in the rainy season all the buildings collapse. And in the capital! Let another man try. He couldn't do worse."

I looked out the window with him and nodded my head. A wind blew through the big trees next to a sagging, boarded-up shop left over from the French. A storm was blowing in. "You know the problem here Ibro, the French. How long did they run this country? Thirty years? More? And what did they do? One of the ten poorest countries in the world. If you had been a British colony or an American colony..."

A man at the counter demanded whiskey loudly and Ibro told me to hang on. I had a theory about the French--they were attracted to ugliness. That's probably why they had ruined Guinea. How else could one explain all their ugly actors and musicians. How to explain the success of so many men with hideous noses: Belmondo, Gainsbourg, Depardieu, Besson. In American hands Conakry would be looking like Houston in a matter of years. The Bambeya would franchise.

The materialistic women--that's what Ibro called them--were out in their newest, tightest clothes that night but when they came into the Bambeya they ignored me. They flirted with other men at the bar or talked amongst themselves in local languages. One guy at the bar right under the green lamp grabbed a girl's wrists and wouldn't let go. She turned this way and that way and tried karate chopping his arm but he refused to release her. Finally, she slapped him across the face. The sound startled us all and we waited for what would follow. The man with the woman in his hand laughed and then the woman laughed, too. She sat on the man's lap and asked him to buy her a beer.

When that group left Ibro came back to keep me company and we made our usual comments about the women who came to the bar. "Eh!" he said, "they push too hard." And I said, "I don't like prostitutes." The sentence sounded foreign out of my mouth; in America I never would have bothered with the statement. He said I was right and he grabbed his crotch saying, "I keep this for home. These women, they are not clean. Plus, they are all thieves." He made a quick gesture with his hands ripping at his pockets.

After another beer I didn't feel drunk, just...weighty. Still, I had enough wits about me to know that one doesn't need to feel drunk to be drunk. I thought, so this is why people drink, it feels...better.

I was leaning back against the bar, daring to balance my stool on two legs, looking out the door at the old man who sold cigarettes. I passed him on the way to work in the morning and on the way home and always he sat there in his wool cap, only getting up to pray or change money. He was a perfect source, doing nothing all day every day but watching traffic. I was thinking I should take his picture, wondering if I had to ask him, when a couple of girls walked in. From the light outside I could see that one of them was wearing a tank top with a short skirt and the other one was Fifi. She was wearing a long narrow dress, white with blue stripes down one side that gave it a sporting look. They walked right by me even though I was facing them. I swear I could still feel it where she put her hand on my thigh that first night. Or maybe what I felt was the hundred-dollar-bill in my pocket.

My plan was to hand it to Ibro when I left that night. It would be my final act before flying back to DC. My bags were all packed and waiting by the door. I'd pass the

Franklin while shaking hands and Ibro wouldn't know he had more than the thousand Guinean Francs that the beers cost until I was gone. A hundred dollars would be enough to buy that table he wanted. If he was a good businessman he might be able to save up enough for a taxi and then his cinema. Or not, but a hundred dollars was a hundred dollars, if nothing else. It was my own little foreign aid project. I called Ibro over to order one more and to tell him to bring two to the girls. I thought he might object to my aberrant behavior but he didn't miss a beat; he was a seasoned bartender.

The girls approached to tap their beers against mine. Pulling up on the stools to the right and left of mine, the girls seemed happy to have company. Fifi said to the whole bar, "Same father, same mother," meaning we were like siblings. It was Fifi in the long dress and Fatou in the skirt, with her hand in my hair. She said she liked it. She said it was soft. But she thought my beard needed cutting. She grabbed it in her fingers where she thought it should be cut. I wondered how drunk they knew I was. I took a drink from my beer, forgetting that the cap was still on, loosely. Beer spilled on my shirt but no one laughed at me. Fifi said it was normal and I wondered what she meant by that. She always said that. She tried to brush the beer off my shirt but that just made the beer soak in. She left her hand on my chest and it was there, with one woman's hand in my hair and another woman's hand on my chest that I knew I better get this over with as soon as I could and get back home.

"I don't really know how to say this," I said, and "I don't know if this is rude or culturally insensitive, I mean, if this is something you normally do, but there is something I have to ask..."

"Yes," Fifi helped, seeing I did not know how to proceed.

"What is it like, being circumcised?" A car passed by and I could see that Fifi was wearing a kind of white powder on her face. It looked like chalk dust.

"I mean, you are circumcised, right?"

They must have thought that the question meant "are you clean?" but that is not what I meant. I wanted to know what it meant when all the women in a country were circumcised, when more than half the people were walking around without something. Sometimes, at the Embassy, when an African woman talked to me, I lost track of the words. All I could think about was the ceremony and the blade and at such a young age. It was common practice in West Africa, even though some of the aid organizations were fighting against the tradition. Female circumcision. Genital mutilation. I could say the words but couldn't picture it. I could only imagine what it would mean to me. It was a big deal. An important, uncalculated factor in the whole equation. The best part, gone.

"Does it hurt?" I asked and then added some more questions. "Do you feel anything, I mean when you do it?" "How did they do it?" "What does it look like?"

Fifi said, "You want to see?"

It was exactly what I wanted. I swallowed my spit, looked straight into Fifi's brown eyes and nodded my head. She called Ibro over and said something in a local language. Ibro got a Prudence out of the box and put it down on the bar.

"Oh, no, I don't think..." I looked at the condom "That won't be necessary. I don't want to...I just want to see."

"You never know," said Fifi. I had seen the same phrase painted on the back of the local taxis. Fifi took me by the hand to lead me out the door, Fatou following. I really didn't want to go out into the wet street where everyone on the corner, all the money changers under umbrellas and the old man selling cigarettes under a tree, could see me so I pulled out of Fifi's grasp and said "Wait a second, where are we going?"

"We are going to bed," said Fifi, easily.

"But I just want to see. I don't want to..."

"You can't see here."

She was right. The bar was dark. I usually carried a little flashlight in a pouch on my belt but it was packed in my carry-on. I looked at the green cylinder of light. It illuminated a beer-sized circle on the bar. God damn it, I wasn't leaving the country before I found out this one thing. "Ibro," I asked, "Is there a light in the toilet?"

Even though this was a bar where I drank beer I had never been to the toilet. I held it in until I got home. I was surprised to find, when Ibro turned on the bulb, that there was no toilet, only a hole in the floor, but the next moment I was surprised that I had expected more. The walls of the bathroom were thick, blood red, as if a layer of paint was thrown on them every day. There was no place for Fifi to sit or lie down, that was the problem. Still, she went right in, stood over the hole and motioned for me to come in. I must have hesitated, because she grabbed my arm and pulled. As she closed the door and faced me I wondered about money. I had been fleeced more than once in taxis and restaurants, when I hadn't established a price at the outset. A strong smell of

ammonia rose from the hole in the floor. That, mixed with the damp heat urged me to back out.

But then Fifi pulled down the zipper on the side of her long dress and I was entranced. Everything she did I was breathing to. When she unzipped her dress I inhaled, when she pulled the straps off her shoulders I exhaled. When she pulled the dress down, careful not to let it touch the floor, I inhaled. When she stood there with her dress in one hand, her black body in a black bra and panties I didn't breath at all. I leaned back against the door. In the light I noticed for the first time that her hair was a wig. It didn't matter, that's not what I wanted to know. She handed me her dress and pulled the panties down to her knees where she stepped out of them. The small lace panties caught between the heel of her pump and her heel. She placed a hand on my shoulder to keep her balance as she untangled them. I noticed that the skin on her heel was dry and cracking.

Someone knocked on the door and I said suddenly, loudly and in English, "Yes, there is someone in here." Fifi put one of her feet up above her head against the wall. She was very flexible. But I couldn't look. Instead I was looking at Fifi's face, powdered with white. Fifi looked into my eyes and said, "You want to see?"

I did. And it was then, when I moved my eyes down from her eyes to her sex, and bent over to see, that everything went black.

A blue-green light as though the sun from under the ocean. I had no pants on and there was a crowd around the bar, where I reclined, on my back. Ibro's voice was near my ear,

“You blacked out. Maybe too hot in there.” I sat up. My head felt light. The news of my consciousness pulsed through the bar and made it’s way out to the street. “Where are my pants?”

“They got wet. One leg fell into the hole. Your foot stuck in there. It took three of us to get you out.”

I felt a sudden urge to vomit. How many beers were in me? What happened in the bathroom? “Fifi?”

“She’s gone. She is not a good woman. You shouldn’t go with her. If you need a woman...”

“No. I know. I have no intention of *going* with her. I’d just like to get my pants and go. Please, Ibro, bring me my pants.”

“I washed them and now they are drying. The meat man is drying them.”

The meat man grilled skewers of beef and goat on a little wood stove outside the bar. I had never tried his food; the raw meat sat in the sun all day covered only by a page of newspaper. Now the meat man was cooking my pants.

“It doesn’t matter. They don’t have to be dry. I just need to go. I have to get out of here.”

“But your shoe was very dirty. I gave it to a shoe shine boy. He’s very good at cleaning shoes. Don’t worry I’ll take care of everything. You just sit here and wait. I’ll bring you a beer.”

“Forget about them. I have other shoes. I just need to put on my pants and leave.”

Ibro wanted to give me his shoes for the walk home. He wanted to walk me, saying it was dangerous to walk at night, and besides, it was raining. Then he insisted I take a taxi. I was afraid he wasn't going to let go of me. The street seemed electrified by my presence once more, just like it was the first time I found the Bembeya. People called out my name or said "Hey, boss man." I didn't know what they wanted. I had stirred things up. I took my pants from the man holding them above the coals and got in the taxi for the two blocks to my apartment.

I forgot all about the hundred for Ibro until I was in the shower, scrubbing my leg with a loofa. I couldn't go back to the bar, now, though. I knew that. The whole of Wall Street would have heard about my misadventure. I would be known forever as the man who had taken a hooker into the toilet of the Bembeya. I didn't want to have to explain why. Even Ibro would probably not believe me if I explained. And I was relieved I hadn't given him the money because it would have made it more difficult to leave, or at least, having left, I would have thought more about Guinea and one little life there. As it was, taking all my belongings with me, I would have no investment in the country, no debts. But of course, checking my jeans, the money was gone.

The American Apartment

After *Abs of Steel* and *Aerobics with Soul* her video shelf went like this: *The Paper*, *Dave*, *Rain Man*, *The Fisher King*, *Map of the Human Heart*, *His Girl Friday*, *Singing in the Rain*... Lying on top of these videos, all in their original boxes, was Jane Fonda's *Lower Body Solution*. That was what I watched first, as I ate a bowl of ramen, my first night house-sitting at Elaine's.

The video lasted longer than the noodles so I set the bowl down and just sat there on the couch, watching. The air conditioner was blasting right on me, and my skin puckered into goose bumps, the first I'd experienced in three years. A mosquito that must have come in with me through the front doors managed to find my bare ankle but was too cold to eat. For a while, watching the exercise video, I thought I'd let the insect live, but then I changed my mind, remembering malaria.

The Lower Body Solution wasn't what I expected. Jane Fonda didn't even sweat until the show was half over. Opening for her was a room full of people doing a "low impact workout" with the aid of little plastic steps. When Fonda came on she yelled over her workout about different ways to "burn stored fat." Stored fat, I thought, the world could use more of that. If only there could be some sort of exchange between Africa and

America, all the people working in one country to lose weight and so many on this continent trying to gain it.

Did Elaine watch the video as I did, from the couch, with her feet up on the coffee table, or did she get a towel and some water, as Fonda suggested, and "enjoy" herself? I got up to look at a framed photo of Elaine. What does that mean, to have a photo of yourself at your own desk? Why not just have a mirror? The photo was taken on a beach but from above, from a dune maybe. Elaine wore a green sweater that looked great next to her nut-brown hair. The whole scene had an East Coast, autumny air to it. I'd never seen Elaine wear a sweater at the embassy. Of course the tropics don't call for sweaters. The only place I'd ever been cold in Guinea was the Ambassador's office, air-conditioned as it was, for three-piece suits. In the photo Elaine looked thinner and in love, maybe with the photographer. It looked like she might have done the Jane Fonda video in those days.

I was house sitting at Elaine's because her two cats, Franklin and Eleanor, couldn't take care of themselves. Elaine's colleagues at the embassy probably had houses of their own, so she asked me, the ex-Peace Corps guy who might enjoy a couple weeks of lifestyle upgrade: air conditioning; a stove with four burners; cable TV; and rarest of all, some privacy. I didn't know much about Elaine before she asked me to housesit. She had a reputation for being tough. She had uncovered and broken up the corruption in the visa section, and since then it had been almost impossible to get to America, with a bribe or without one. Before she arrived in Guinea it was well known

that all you needed to get to the States was \$3,000. I think maybe she felt sorry for me because I told her about getting robbed at site.

But I didn't tell the story for sympathy. None of the Americans listening understood that, I think. It was one of those expat conversations where each member of the group ups the ante. Someone starts out complaining about a long bus trip in Mexico and by the last story someone else is describing a trans-Siberian bus trip that lasted an entire winter.

This particular conversation took place on the roof of the USAID building, at one of the TGIF parties that all American mission employees are supposed to attend. Somebody described the old shoe tying scam used by robbers in Senegal. The lesson—never let a stranger tie your shoes in Dakar. Elaine, an enchilada on her plate, told the story of being held up at gun point on a Rajastani train. As the two robbers ran off with all her traveler's checks and bags she yelled after them, "Photos," hoping that they would at least leave her undeveloped rolls of film. But the thieves must have thought she meant she had snapped their photos because they turned around and started shooting. After Elaine's story I told mine.

My last night in my village, Konna, after I had worked there for two years, they drugged me, I think. I had the strangest dreams, dreams where my body was carrion for circling crows. In the village I had heard stories about robbers using potent incense to drug their prey. I woke up with a headache and a strange smell about me and my big CD player was gone along with my Bunsen burner and my goat bag which held my big black journal—everything I owned. The thing was, though, I was glad. I had wanted give all

that stuff away, anyway, but couldn't. Getting robbed was the only way to distribute the goods without creating envy in the village. I think the elders understood this and arranged the plunder of my house the night before I left for the capital. And later I found my journal, the only thing I cared about, leaning against my well.

Elaine must have assumed I was fit to house sit because I worked for the U.S. Government. People think that if you work for the government, checks have been run on you: drug tests and loyalty oaths and all the diplomas in the right order. In truth, a lot of weird people get hired by the U.S. Government. Not that I'm not fit to house sit. I'm OK, but it's not just anyone you want in your apartment while you go to Ghana for two weeks to attend an emergency seminar on terrorism.

After I washed my bowl and put it on the dish drainer (it had been years since I used a dish drainer), I went back to the couch and watched Kevin Costner's *Robin Hood*. That's the Robin Hood where you see things from the arrow's point of view. The Americans here share their videos like little pieces of normality passed around, like rations to keep Yankees from turning into something else. The Peace Corps hadn't thought of that and we changed. The further away from the capital we were, the better we learned the languages and the harder it was to go to official American functions and not hoard the free peanuts. Most people at the embassy could tell you exactly what videos the other employees owned. The mission nurse had every episode of *Hill Street Blues* and though she never lent them out, she did have viewing parties.

Elaine's place wasn't well decorated. Like a dorm room it felt both cluttered and underused; more a place to store a life than live one. There was a poster, still wrapped in

plastic and leaning against a wall, of a Hawaiian beach. In her bedroom was a plaque in recognition of some work Elaine had done organizing a woman's basketball league in Kazakhstan. A Nimba--a ritual statue from the coastal region--was the only object actually from the country surrounding her apartment, and Elaine's was a cheap version the vendors sold outside the Novotel, soft light wood shellacked with shoe polish to make it look like mahogany. A basket of catalogs next to the couch was the obvious center of gravity in the apartment, the only place that held the imprint of Elaine's hands.

Elaine's bookshelf, next to her videos, was exactly as big as her video shelf. After a bunch of GRE prep books her books went like this: *The End of the Third World*, *The Handmaid's Tale*, *The Day America Told the Truth*, *Sophie's World*, *Siddhartha*, etc. We didn't have any books in common. I felt like I had sort of read *Siddhartha* because it had been assigned once, somewhere in my education, but I never read it, not personally.

My first Saturday house-sitting I read Elaine's paperback copy of *Siddhartha*. After a night of three videos the words felt like ice on my eyes. I read the first part on the couch, with a cat on my lap, and the second part sitting on the balcony overlooking the ocean and the islands. The tide was high and little kids played in the mangrove-gray water. Farther out, waist deep in the water, men threw their round nets for little fish that would be dried, crushed and used like salt.

Between pages 34 and 35 there was the punched stub of an Amtrak ticket dated November 1997 from Washington to New York. It was possible Elaine was there, on page 35, when she stopped reading. Most likely the train ticket stub was just stuck anywhere in the book. Maybe she never finished any of her books. They had healthy

spines; if she did read them she read them carefully. I packed Anna Karenin to read in Africa but before I could get to the end it was eaten by mice and mold. Rassmussen was the name on the ticket stuck into page 35. On that page Hesse writes, "The Buddha walked away and his look and half-smile remained imprinted on Siddhartha's memory forever." Was that a quote Elaine wanted to remember?

By the time I finished the book the Atlantic had slithered out to reveal mud shallows and the kids who had been playing in the tiny waves had moved to a nearby mango tree. They threw rocks through the leaves, hoping to knock down a green fruit. After watching them rip up the tree I couldn't help but yell down, in Peul, "Leave the fruit alone, you're hurting the tree." In Peul, "fruit" is "tree babies"-*Leki liddi*. The kids stared up at me, shocked, not by what I had said, probably, but that a white man standing on the balcony of the white marble apartment building had said it. Probably nobody had ever spoken down from those balconies before. After they got over the shock they went back to their particularly damaging version of harvesting.

I trained for three months as a forester and felt a certain loyalty to trees. When my two years as a volunteer were up I couldn't think of anything better to do with my life than extend. But then the Peace Corps couldn't find anything for me to do. The original plan--working with the Ministry of Tourism to set up an ecotourism project in the Dogon cliffs--fell through when the Minister himself fled the country with the startup grant we got from the Japanese. So there I was, just into my third year with nothing to do. In Conakry they needed a Peul speaker so I changed countries. The embassy gave me a job in the political department, translating the local papers into English and helping the

micro-loan guy out at sites around the city. There were three other newly ex-Peace Corps volunteers at the embassy. We came in handy because we knew the local languages and we were the only ones who had a clue how to interact with the foreign nationals. That's what they call the people who are from the country the embassy is in-- foreign nationals.

Down below her TV, in a cupboard where Elaine kept cards and games--Scrabble, backgammon, and Pictionary--there were four thick paperbacks stuffed way in the back, all best-sellers. I took Sydney Sheldon's *The Best Laid Plans* to bed with me. I wondered, had these paperbacks been out and Elaine had hidden them or did she always keep these four books stashed in the dark cupboard? It made me sad for her, just like the GRE prep books and the work-out videos made me sad.

Most volunteers who extend their contract to a third year move from the bush into the capital. The capital is the worst of both worlds. Rather than working with village elders, in the capital I worked with bureaucrats who only made as much money as they could steal. The kids who in the villages would work the rice fields, here were trying to get by polishing shoes. But there just weren't enough shoes. The capital was where villagers dreamed of coming to get rich but it was the only place in Guinea where the citizens could starve. It was like a gold rush with no gold. It was the only place a Guinean could feel like a stranger; Conakry, a little pocket of alienation carved out by France and sustained off the fumes of the first world. In Conakry I had one room in a compound with an insurance salesman who stole enough to own a Peugeot but who never once invited me to eat with his family.

In the village I never once cooked for myself. If I missed a meal with the family who took care of me they came to my house to make sure I was all right. The only way to get any privacy was to leave the village. I thought of my motorcycle helmet as my only private room. Villagers arrived at my own house and sat for hours without any business, and without uttering a word, just keeping me company. The only time I could get visitors out was on the rare occasions American women stopped by. At their arrival my village friends would clear out, assuming I was about to have sex. Then, when we came out they would ask us, "Did you wash?" The whole village smiled at me eagerly after such visits—they worried about my sex life.

When I first got to my village, a man on the street, a total stranger-- for everyone was a total stranger—approached me yelling. He insisted I come into his house, and when I refused out of fear for my life, he dragged me in. He showed me a sack, a nylon stuff sack for a sleeping bag, and yelled at me, then threw the sack down. He pulled a flashlight out from under the mat he slept on. He turned it around to show me every side of the plain, plastic flashlight, and continued yelling. I thought he would hit me but I managed to leave without harm. Six months later, after learning some Peul, I realized he was simply pointing out the gifts he had received from a former PCV. He was trying to show me how well he was loved, and was offended that I, the next Peace Corps Volunteer, had not visited him. So I started visiting him every night, hanging around his little fire for hours, sitting on a mat and looking up at the stars. He taught me vocabulary and revealed little bits of his magic. A blacksmith by birth, his job included performing

circumcisions and sewing up charms against snakebites. Right before I left, he carved me a Dogon granary lock and I gave him a sack of sugar and a sack of tea.

None of the framed photos around Elaine's apartment had a picture of her with a man her age. They were either pictures of babies, or of other couples, or of her alone. In two identical silver frames was the same fashion photo of a brunette with big breasts. This was the photo that was in the frames when you bought them, like the paper you get in new shoes, the paper you have to take out to put your feet in.

Elaine kept her music in the drawers under the TV: two drawers full of cassettes and only a handful of CDs. The music went like this: Eurithmics, Peter, Paul and Mary, Patsy Cline, Van Morrison, Grateful Dead, Anita Baker, Ladysmith Black Mombazo, etc. I pulled out the cassettes I hadn't listened to since high school and listened to them first. I couldn't believe she had Joan Armatrading. I fell in love the first time while listening to my mom's Joan Armatrading album, and Elaine's tapes brought back that rainy semester in college. Armatrading sings, "I am not in love, but I'm open for persuasion. East or west, where's the best for romancing?" The only jazz in Elaine's drawers was "best of" stuff or movie sound tracks. She was the type who wanted some jazz in her life but didn't know enough to get the key albums. I could help Elaine get cooler. I'd make her a copy of my well-worn Les McCann and Eddie Harris album, *Swiss Movement*. I'd introduce her to the great orchestras of West Africa—The Rail Band, Orchestra Baobab, and Bembeya Jazz National. I'd teach her my favorite dance step, the Ventilateur. Jane Fonda eat your aerobicized heart out

I danced with Africans but that was all. Even though I was offered women. In the village they considered sex a basic necessity, like food, and offered it up regularly. But I politely refused. I told them I was sleeping with Peace Corps Volunteers. And it wasn't because I didn't like the village women. The young ones, their breasts still unused for nursing, walking around like royalty. How they giggled at my smile. How they would chatter in their local languages, thinking I couldn't interpret the fascination with my soft hair, my blue eyes, my red-burnt skin. Of course I wanted them, but I had no idea what it meant to sleep with a village woman. Did it mean I would have to support that woman forever? Did it mean we were family? I knew it didn't mean what sex did in California, where I was fluent in the language of intimacy. In a land where polygamy and female circumcision were commonplace, what did I know of the ways of men and women?

Of course I knew plenty of volunteers who did try the local delights. Besides the obvious immediate gratification they claimed it was the best way to learn the language and culture. "You can't know a people until you get them into bed," Hector, my nearest team member once explained. But Hector was more than once asked for money by the woman he thought was in it for his body alone, and there was the time a whole clan came to his door demanding kola nuts, the symbol of marriage. In that case he had to summon me as a go-between.

It's not as if I was a particularly snoop house sitter. But when you are alone with someone's house for two weeks it is as though you are wearing her clothes, even if you didn't actually try on her clothes. None of Elaine's clothes would fit me, anyway. I

didn't open any of the transparent-blue Tupperware where Elaine kept her correspondence. I fed and played with her cats and I kept the air-conditioning on to keep the mold from growing on the walls, just as she instructed. I paid the maid. I never looked in the chest of drawers in the bedroom to find where her underwear was, though I assumed it was in the bottom drawer. Isn't that where it always is, bottom corresponding to under? Or do people put it in the top drawer because it's the first thing they put on? I sewed up a hole in her mosquito net even though it was there when I arrived. And I never did anything weird with her toothbrush. It was from Longs, standing up in a plastic cup under the mirror.

Longs. I had grown up next to one. I had always thought of it as a scummy place. Panhandlers hung out in front of the automatic doors before panhandling became illegal. No one ever seemed to be in there besides retired people who got lost on the way to the pharmacy in the back. Holding Elaine's amber toothbrush, baring my teeth in front of the mirror, I remembered how Longs had shopping carts. It wasn't even a grocery store and the shoppers used carts. I remembered the west end of Longs. It was dedicated to makeup, mostly, makeup whose scent managed to leak out of its sealed containers into the aisle. I remembered how it went, paper goods made way for toys which slowly faded into first aid, which led to makeup. I always assumed there was a natural pattern of organization going on, as though all of Longs were an ecosystem, but I never figured out the relation between film and alcohol.

In Elaine's freezer were two unopened bags of coffee beans, one Pete's and one Millstone. There were also four trays of ice (filtered and safe for drinking) and a bag of

sweetened, flaked coconut from Safeway. In Ziploc bags were stored popcorn and herbs. Of course there was no Safeway in all of Sub-Saharan Africa. The Americans who worked at the embassy, those with blue badges, got 5,000 pounds of food shipped free from the states every year. I only had a green badge and no fridge, anyway. In my neck of the peninsula, I lived on what everyone else did, rice and fish.

To make coffee Elaine had a bean grinder and a black Krups espresso maker. Neither looked like it had ever been used. It's one of the things I used to do back in San Jose, drink espresso. I would go down to a First Street cafe when I got tired of the TV and order a cappuccino or a machiatto, depending on what mood I was in. If I only had a dollar then I would order a shot of espresso.

In the Peace Corps I learned to drink tea. Three rounds in little glasses. I had even learned the high pour, which produced the all-important foamy head on the green tea. The first round was just plain strong, then for the second round add mint, and finally, when the tea is weakest, bring on the sugar. But why did Elaine have all this unopened coffee? She had told me not to eat anything that couldn't be replaced. I figured one transgression was necessary, especially since I hadn't taken sips from any of her bottles of alcohol. From the picture of her at her writing desk, Elaine looked like the type who wouldn't mind. She would probably even be surprised that I had not made myself more at home. That's what she said when she gave me the keys, "Make yourself at home." In the village, if someone said that it meant you could move in, forever. In the village there was no private property, and if you wanted to keep anything for yourself you had to hide it.

The way we had worked it out, I would be out of the apartment by the time she got back. I would leave in the morning after feeding Eleanor and Franklin their special mix of wet and dry food. But, Elaine was flying Air Afrique (we called it Air *Peut-etre*), and you could never tell when flights would be canceled. Sometimes they waited until they were full to take off. I figured I should stick around the place, just to make sure.

The afternoon Elaine was due back, after cleaning up, I put on Joan Armatrading, made myself an espresso with fresh ground frozen beans, and pulled down a GRE prep book to see how much math I had forgotten. After I figured out I had retained nothing past long division I just looked around at the furniture, smiling. I had done a little rearranging. I hung the Hawaii poster and next to it I put up a black and white Tuareg blanket I bought after an hour of bargaining in Mopti. When the doorbell rang it was a very good sign. It meant Elaine hoped that I might still be home. It meant she would rather have me turn the three bolts than fiddle with her own keys.

I opened the first wooden door and peered through the grate of the second metal door at a woman, luggage and a man. In person Elaine was smaller than I remembered. Still, at the door I instantly remembered why people referred to her as the Iron Lady. She stood with an determination that made up for her size. I remembered how she walked down the hall at work, as though she were working. I recognized the smart green suit she wore from the Spiegel catalog next to her toilet: \$135 with a special travel pocket. I resisted the urge to wrap my arms around her and press my fingers into the tense muscles of her back. She turned to the man next to her and told him he could go. He was either

an embassy driver or the customs expediter, I didn't know which, but he had been around Americans enough to know not to bother greeting me.

We were alone. I helped Elaine with her bags. She protested out of politeness but then, after I told her it was my pleasure, she acquiesced. "Mostly handouts, paper from the conference. Enough paper to sink a Destroyer," she joked as I lifted her heavy carry-on. In her voice I heard a mixture of exhaustion and joy: she was happy to be home with me.

"How was your trip," I asked

"Oh, the airport was a disaster, as usual. The damn customs lady insisted on opening my bags, but I wouldn't give her the keys. She started yelling in abominable French, even called over an armed guard. I just kept telling her who I was. Idiots working there don't even know a diplomatic passport when they see one. Or don't care. Don't they realize how important first impressions are? What's the UN Refugee Chairman going to think of Guinea when they start bouffing off him the minute he touches down?" Bouff, from the French verb meaning *to eat greedily* but in West Africa meaning *to take bribes*. Elaine flopped down on the couch but then popped up again calling out to her cats. "Frankie, Frankie baby... Oh, thanks for putting those away, Peter, but you don't have to do that. Just leave them."

It was obvious she would want the small bag on her writing desk and the larger bag on the dresser next to the bed. I could hear her cooing to her cats in the kitchen and opening the cupboard over the sink to get the cat food in its tiny cans. Not bad tasting, what she fed her pets. The cans even came with special plastic lids for refrigeration.

I unzipped her bag and started putting things away. The notes and binders could go, for now, beside the suitcase, on top of the chest of drawers. Later I would file them in some plastic milk crates she used for professional stuff. Next were her clothes, not folded very nicely, but of course they were dirty, why fold them? I managed to embrace the whole wad of dirty clothes and walk with them to the laundry room. That's when Elaine stepped out of the kitchen and saw me. She had been starting in on a "The cats look great," but then she stopped and watched me plunk her clothes on the floor and divide them into piles.

"What are you doing?" she asked and almost managed to sound amused.

"I'm dividing the whites from the colors."

She couldn't argue with that. On I went, selecting the right temperature of water and measuring the right quantity of soap. In the village, women washed my clothes on rocks by the river but they hit them so hard the fabric gave out in a month. I had nothing left from the States. I pulled out the knob that started the water and turned to find Elaine watching me, confused. I smiled as I passed her going back towards the bedroom. She hadn't moved since asking, "What are you doing?"

There were two small pouches still in her suitcase, one for toiletries and one for first aid. I took them into the bathroom. So she had duplicate toenail clippers. I had worried that perhaps she forgot them. But no, Elaine was not that type.

She came into the bathroom behind me and said, puzzled, off balance, but still nice, "Oh, that's okay. I can do that. Thank you so much, Peter. The cats look great. I can unpack that. Here."

She took her nail file out of my hand rather aggressively and put it in the green plastic cup which she had mail ordered out of a Tupperware catalog. \$12.50 for a set of four—pineapple yellow, sunset orange, island green, ocean blue. The green one she kept in the bathroom for her toothbrush and the others were in the kitchen with the other plastic stuff. But surely the nail file was not kept in the same cup as her toothbrush? There is no time difference between Ghana and Guinea but even so, travel between countries can be disorienting.

She took the whole toiletries kit out of my hand and started putting things where I hadn't pictured them. Neosporin? What was that doing in the toiletries? Didn't it belong in the drawer where the band aids were? I snapped out of it. There were many things about Elaine that I still didn't know but there would be time. I asked, "Can I make you something to drink? It sounds like you had a rough trip. You must be exhausted. I thought maybe instead of cooking tonight we could go out to dinner. I found this great place just up the block. It doesn't have a name. In fact, it may just be a kitchen and not a restaurant at all but they didn't seem to mind sharing their dinner." I laughed because Elaine wasn't responding. "There's some iced mint in the fridge I made, but if you would like the rose hip tea from Italy I could heat up some water."

"Oh, no, thanks Peter. That's really considerate of you, but I'm fine. And, actually, I don't much like tea."

We stood there facing each other in the bathroom. Her three kinds of shampoo and two bubble baths could be seen sitting on the tub behind her. Elaine was flustered. That was understandable; she had been traveling a long time. How could anyone manage

to leave a country every two years for their entire career and not lose her mind? How did Sate Department employees manage?

"The tea is for guests. I prefer coffee," she tried to explain.

"You don't drink coffee," I reminded her.

"Yes I do."

"Maybe you have coffee on hand for company. You have got it the wrong way around. You drink tea and have coffee for visitors."

"No, the coffee is for me. I love coffee. I have always drank coffee. Drunk? I have always had coffee."

Always? That was unlikely. After all, the bags of coffee beans in the freezer had been unopened before I sampled them. The coffee grinder was spotless when I arrived, clearly unused. If Elaine didn't like tea how would she explain the missing six bags of mint tea? I had assumed mint was her drink of preference. I pointed in the direction of the fridge, ready to remind Elaine of her habits but then decided to let it go.

"Oh. Okay, I guess I am confused. I just assumed because of...But if you don't want anything to drink, I'll just...I'll leave you alone."

"Okay, great. Thanks for everything, Peter. The cats, everything..." she looked around, "looks great." Her eyes stopped a moment on her hat hanging on the wall. It had been on the floor when she left for Ghana but I put a nail in the wall and hung it up. In the tropics you've got to take good care of your shade. A good hat is like a tree growing over you.

Elaine shook my hand and said something about when she would see me next. She asked about the keys and I pointed to the dish on her dresser. I went out to the couch and pulled a catalog from the basket, a pet supply catalog. This wasn't how I had pictured our reunion. I was rushing things, I knew. But Jesus, if I had learned one thing in the Peace Corps, it was to adjust the picture. That and sitting. I could sit on a couch like Elaine's for days and not get tired. In Africa I had learned not to run away from boredom. I'd give Elaine some time to settle in, some space alone in her space. American's expect that.

I heard the water in the tub and then the shower. Nothing like a nice hot shower after a trip, but why not take a bath instead? Use some of that bubble bath? If Elaine washed her hair with the daisy infused shampoo and rinsed with the eucalyptus conditioner, used Ivory soap, green deodorant, and then put on Temptation perfume, what would she smell like? I thought I heard humming from the shower—"Don't know when I'll be back again." There was a beautiful sunset on the other side of the sliding glass doors. Huge thunderheads to the north grew like corals and turned from yellow to red to purple while the horizon spun up to swallow the sun.

"Holy shit!" Elaine walked into the living room, wrapped in two big towels. "Jesus Christ, Peter! I thought you had gone. What are you still doing here?" She clutched the towel to her body and retreated into the door of the bedroom, as though she might have to barricade herself in.

"I thought you might like to go out for some palm wine," I said, getting up and likewise retreating towards the front door. "I know this great place, we could walk, if it doesn't rain."

"If it doesn't rain?"

"There is a storm coming up."

"Peter...Peter, this is weird. First you try to tell me I don't drink coffee and now you set up camp in my living room. I asked you to house-sit, not rent a room. I just got back from a two-week-long conference and I stayed in a rotten little hotel with brown water, and I am home now with my cats and...and I've got a lot of work to do..." She was brainstorming reasons to be alone but none that she listed was persuasive. After all, which is more restful, having to make dinner and eat it alone, or having a companion take you out to the only authentic palm wine hideout in Conakry?

Elaine stared at me crossly, but lost some of her resolve when she saw the sympathetic expression on my face. I was inviting her out on a date. Just like high school. She needed me more than she knew. My challenge was to help her admit it but I had taken a wrong turn and couldn't find the way back. An African would have approached her, slapped his hand in hers and clutched tight, laughing. All this would be a joke to cement a relationship. I'd slap her on the back and say her name loud, as if it were mine. But how long would Elaine let me hold her hand?

With a new breath and from lower down, Elaine said "Thank you for taking care of my cats but I'm here now so...Thanks." She looked at me, hoping I would get it. Her next step would be towards the phone. She would sick the Marines on me if I didn't

leave. But of course that wouldn't be necessary. I knew when she said "thanks" she meant "go away." I hadn't forgotten how English worked.

I thought of mentioning the paperbacks on top of the scrabble game. What about them? I had the urge to get a photo of us, one she could put on her desk, but I couldn't see a way to get there now. I had started off too suddenly. I certainly didn't want to frighten Elaine, or cause her alarm. She was looking a bit pale now. That had been the furthest thing from my mind when offering her some tea or to take her out, making her pale. When someone has decided you are strange it is almost impossible to change their mind. I learned that in the village. There I had settled upon being the white clown of the village, a sort of cheap entertainment. People would come over to my hut and stay all day for no other reason but to watch me look busy. They laughed and I learned to laugh with them, to accept my role.

"I'll go. I'm going," I surrendered. Even though I knew it was not what was best it was what she wanted. I turned around to go but then turned around again, "It's just that, being here, I thought, you might like...me...to..." I stopped because her eyebrows were descending like rain clouds over her eyes. "OK. I'll go. Just let me get my stuff." I had to take my shirts out of her closet, and my other clothes out of an empty drawer I happened across in her bureau. I stuffed my small duffle. I apologized all the way to the door. I said, "I don't know what I was thinking," And "It must be the malaria medication." I said, "I'm really not a weird person, one of those weird people. I really enjoyed house sitting. It's a nice place. If you ever need anyone again..." and I said, "Sorry."

It must have helped because at the door, when it was clear I was really going to leave her, Elaine looked comfortable in her bathrobe. She even remembered she had brought me a present from Ghana. She handed me a black plastic bag which I crinkled nervously on the elevator down. Maybe we could still be friends, in the coworker sense of the word. Maybe by tomorrow I could sit next to her in the cafeteria, and we could go about becoming a couple in the standard American fashion.

I carried the gift in its black plastic bag down past the two guards at the door, out the gates and on to the dirty street. There was no sidewalk to walk on. Wherever there was a sidewalk in the city the families came out to make it into a sitting room with a breeze. So pedestrians were forced into the road with the cars. I tried to flag down a minibus, always difficult as a white person, even if you knew the hand signals. The drivers couldn't believe anyone with money would want to pack into a minibus. There wasn't a taxi in sight. A cool wind, the wind that preceded rain, blew dust and trash into the air. A little barefoot boy walked up to me dragging a homemade kite behind him. It was just a plastic bag with a string tied to it. No hope of that ever flying. The boy looked up at me and said "Fote. Fote. Fote," It means "white person" in Susu. It was what people, especially children, usually said to me. I usually responded by saying back "Black person," but I wasn't eloquent at that moment. The kid held out his hand to me and asked for money. It was what strangers usually asked for.

I put my black plastic bag into his hands. He unpacked the present, a shirt. On it, in lime green neon, was written,

MY FRIEND WENT TO ACCRA AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS STUPID SHIRT

The little boy didn't even thank me. He looked at me, then at the shirt, three sizes too big for him, and then ran terrified, yelling "Mama, mama," his kite skipping in the dirt behind him.

Exit Visa

From her Land Rover, Chief Consular Officer Elaine Thomas assessed the line in front of the U.S. Embassy. Her engine idled to power the air conditioner and play the last notes of *Leaving on a Jet Plane*. It was the song she always listened to at the end of her posting. It was her escape theme music. The line in front of the embassy was probably the only straight line in all of Conakry, and Elaine smiled to think it was waiting for her. Elaine had developed a theory about the line over her two years at the embassy: The more colorfully dressed the visa applicants, the fewer the visas she handed out. The poorer the Guinean, the brighter the plumage, and the less likely she would give permission to visit the US. Today looked bad—very few somber suits or dresses—but today she didn't care. The song over, Elaine turned the key all the way towards her and made a dash through the heat.

Passing her co-workers at the metal detector Elaine cringed, anticipating their congratulations and jokes about her final day working in Guinea. Better not to speak of such things. Why tempt the gods? In Guinea it was the custom not to compliment newborn babies; instead it was appropriate to insult them, call them ugly to keep any greedy spirits away. That's why Elaine refused the typical going away bash on the roof of USAID. To proclaim, atop a building, with giddy energy, "I'm leaving Guinea" when

she had kept half the country from doing just that? Not wise. If she escaped it would be through stealth, not hubris. So today, for every happy salutation of “Last day, huh?”

Elaine mentally amended *Inshallah*.

She was doing a good job ducking the significance of the day, interviewing candidates at her desk, when Doua peeked in to her office to say “Chief, there is some kind of explosions in Ratoma. I must go collect my children.” Before Elaine could ask what her assistant meant by *explosions*, he rushed off, followed by two other local hires on her staff. Nothing over the intercom, though, and no Americans hurrying out of their offices. Elaine looked across the desk at the current candidate, Mrs. Sidibe, to see how the word *explosions* registered on her face. Mrs. Sidibe fiddled with her big gold bracelets, a tight smile on her face. Elaine could see the prepared answers scurrying behind Mrs. Sidibe’s eyes. It was an expression Elaine had faced for two years, one visa at a time.

“Explosions,” Elaine repeated out loud, lifting her eyebrows, trying to make light of the word. The applicant only widened her smile, revealing a gold filling on either side of her mouth. Elaine fanned herself with a manila folder until she realized it was Mrs. Sidibe’s file. I am the woman famous for swimming through the wettest part of the rainy season to get to work, Elaine reminded herself. I am the woman who cleaned up the corruption in this department. Explosions or not, I will get out of this country.

“Mrs. Elaine, is there a problem?” Mrs. Sidibe asked.

“No.” Startled, Elaine looked down at the file. “Everything seems to be in order.” Mrs. Sidibe had signed up for this interview three months ago and probably spent every

day since then preparing. She had paid her \$100 application fee through the downtown ECOBANK and presented all her required paperwork for the B1/B2 visa: Temporary Visitor to America. According to her form, Mrs. Sidibe wanted to attend the wedding of her uncle in New York, a man who worked in a club called...Elaine looked for the letter from the uncle or the letter from the owner of the club...*Zambezi*.

Explosions in Ratoma, Elaine knew, would most likely mean a military coup. The last coup, two years before Elaine arrived in Guinea, had been instigated from the Ratoma base when a few drunk generals realized they commanded all the artillery while the president lounged at the other end of the peninsula, in his palace. Ordinance arched over the city, most of it finding the intended target. The Grande Palace, a gift from the Chinese, burned to its frame, and the generals danced and drank for two days while the country hid. The American Embassy went into lock-down, and a destroyer was dispatched from Maryland. But then the president walked out of his basement, through the heat-warped steel frame of his palace, arose in his helicopter like a young phoenix, and had the hung-over generals beheaded. The Americans backed the Guinean president more vehemently than ever since the repressed coup, for Americans love a winner. The public, too, assumed their president had supernatural power, strong *gris-gris*, so no one predicted another coup. A coup was not part of Elaine's itinerary.

"Can I go to America now?" asked Sidibe.

"Uh, good question." Elaine tried to chuckle. "No, I think we have some more questions to go through." In the hall two employees casually discussed whether they would have to pick up their kids early from the American School due to the disturbance.

No one knew anything yet. In America Elaine would have turned on her TV at the slightest rumor of a disaster. But in Guinea the one TV station ignored bad news, and CNN ignored Africa.

Guinea was supposed to be the stable country, a keystone state holding the shaky heap of West African countries together. The president's motto: "Me or war." Liberia to the south lay prone, knocked down by war. Sierra Leone, a country now best known for its child amputees and amputators, had been saved first by the Nigerian peace keepers then by British paratroopers, then by UN blue helmets; there was no one next in the line of saviors. Guinea-Bissau, to the north, was so little that no one seemed to mind that its government had fled the country. If the domino that was Guinea fell, where would all the foreign governments and NGOs camp?

Let the world collapse behind me, Elaine prayed. A bad feeling had built in her since receiving the one way Air France ticket: Conakry-Charles de Gaulle-Ronald Reagan. Something about flying into two imperialists. It was de Gaulle, after all, who trashed Guinea after being asked to leave in '61. Elaine could feel it, this coup was being staged in her honor; they would close down the airport for two weeks, or better yet, shred the tarmac with troop transports. They would surround the embassy and wait for the boxed macaroni and cheese to run out. The DENIED stamp she wielded so well during her sojourn in West Africa would come back to frank her.

In the folder spread out like a hymnal in Elaine's hands were Mrs. Sidibe's passport, two color head shots, her OF-156 form, bank records, evidence of family, a house and a job--everything to prove she would return home after a short stay in the US.

But Elaine doubted it; that was her job. Her interviewees had to “overcome the presumption that all visa applicants are intending to immigrate” (section 214b of The Immigration and Nationality Act).

“It’s basically my job to interview people for a place on the lifeboat,” Elaine once explained to a friend in the States. If she plucked too many from doom then the lifeboat would sink. The trick was this: to be saved, you had to appear as though you didn’t need to be saved. And now these explosions; Guinea was sabotaging her own lifeboat.

The bank receipt claimed Mrs. Sidibe had US \$5,000 in savings. A tidy sum by Guinean standards. The Bank statement looked authentic, but Elaine knew that there were many Sidibes working at ECOBANK and a relation, no matter how remote, could accomplish anything in this country. \$5,000 was an awfully round number, the kind of number that could be imagined more easily than earned. Mrs. Sidibe’s children were certainly no anchor to the country. More likely they were a motive for fleeing. The mother, rather than coming back after the approved three months, would disappear into the unchecked population of America and work until she could bring her children to that promised land. She would tuck them into a state-side bed where they could dream the American dream. It was what Elaine would do, were she a mother in one of the poorest countries in the world.

“Are you pregnant, Mrs. Sidibe?” Elaine asked nonchalantly, while turning a page of the application. The loose, purple tie-dye of Sidibe’s traditional gown—a *boubou*—would conceal any signs of pregnancy even into the second trimester. Women who came to the interview in traditional garb were generally either very rich—so rich

they didn't have to prove their modernity--or pregnant. If they could get into the end zone of America and have a child, they had won. A child born on American soil could hold that beautiful blue passport and with it could surely transform all family members into Americans. Have a baby in Germany or France and they were still just Africans. But have a baby in America and the helicopter would hoist them off the top of the embassy, leaving behind everyone waving a green passport.

"Pregnant? No."

"You have relatives in Senegal?"

"Yes." This was a question Sidibe hadn't been prepped for, and her smile dulled as she calculated its relevance. Elaine knew that Senegal was the easier departure. Senegal was still the jewel in the crown of the former French colonies, and even the US government treated Senegalese with a respect that just wasn't seen in Guinea. You couldn't immigrate from Guinea; for that you had to travel to Dakar. It didn't matter, then, whether Elaine stamped DENIED on Mrs. Sidibe's OF-156, she would find other ways to get to her uncle's wedding.

Mrs. Sidibe reached into the folds of her boubou, heeding the call of her Nokia. "I'm sorry, you can't take that during..." But before Elaine could stop her, the interviewee was engaged in conversation.

"Âllo? Oui. Oh Non. Mon Dieu! C'est Grave? Sure? Ay ay ay! Attends-moi, j'arrive." Elaine watched the expression on Sidibe's face enlarge in alarm until, without excusing herself, she hurried away, leaving her files behind, the Nokia still fixed to her ear.

“We’re not done with the interview, Mrs...”

Mrs. Sidibe looked back as she went, “I must go. There is a grave problem. *Urgence.*”

“But your application, Mrs. Sidibe, to reschedule will be...” There was no stopping the hefty woman who hurried down the long hall with, yes, a slightly pregnant waddle. Elaine followed her to Dexter, the Marine in the observation booth. Dexter, code name *Texan*, was on entrance duty, behind the thick yellow-tinted Plexiglas, like an exotic fish in a roadside aquarium.

Elaine stooped a bit to speak directly into the disc-shaped vent in the center of the Plexiglas. “Dex, what’s going on out there? My team’s all running away.”

“Well,” Dexter spoke through a microphone with a bashful grin like a pupil who didn’t have the answer. The Marines were wonderful that way; for all their muscle and weapons training they were so bashful. “The *merde* has not hit the fan yet Ms. Thomas, but it may be moving in that direction.”

“Okay, well, you call me when you hear the *merde* hit, all right?”

“Oh, yes Ms. Thomas, I’ll keep you informed. You’ll be the first to know.”

From the other side of the building, the cafeteria crew moved quickly toward them, chattering of rumors and escape routes to each other and into to their cell phones. Elaine instinctively felt for the cell phone on her belt, but she had no one to warn and no one on the ground to gather intelligence. Everyone she knew in Guinea was in the building.

“Nonessential personnel,” Dexter explained, as the cafeteria crew passed. He clicked the door open for them as the crew slid their blue badges through a slit in his window. The cafeteria had been a mess since the Liberian chef jumped ship on her temporary visa to the US. She was the only one who could cook both the local rice and sauce dishes that the foreign nationals demanded and the spaghetti or hamburgers the Americans needed. Every time an American found the lasagna unrecognizable, Elaine heard about it and that DENIED stamp got a little easier to wield. You couldn’t even trust your own cook to return from a vacation to see the Statue of Liberty.

Peter, ex-Peace Corps, a young aide she avoided since the house-sitting incident, walked by on his way to the political section. Lately he dressed only in brightly-colored, patchwork clothes like quilts and tried to hook up every embassy worker with his tailor. “Peter, do you know what’s going on? Have you heard anything about a coup?”

“You know the best way to tell if things are bad?” he said, stopping.

Elaine shook her head, peeved that Peter was calm enough to play his knowledge out slowly, but careful not to scare off the young man by yelling at him.

“Look out on the street.” He pointed through two glass doors, the metal turnstile and the guardhouse to the pedestrian traffic.

“What am I supposed to be looking for here, Peter? I don’t have time for a lesson, I have a whole room full of visa applicants...”

“Do you? Don’t you notice? Where are the vendors, the spreads of masks and wooden statues, the dark glasses man? Where is the table selling cigarettes? They all packed up.” It was true. Even with the new, stricter security measures in place, a horde

of roving salesmen always clustered outside the embassy to tap the wealth that traveled in and out its doors. He turned to face her. "You want to know what's going on in the capital, you ask the street vendors. They all packed up an hour ago."

Like rats leaving a sinking lifeboat, thought Elaine. "You don't seem too concerned, though, Peter."

"*Que sera sera, Allah's will*," he said, throwing up a hand and grinning.

Elaine leaned down to the vent in the Plexiglas. "Too long with the natives," explained Dexter through his microphone.

"The waiting room? Dex, anyone in there?"

The Marine turned to his small black and white monitor and switched the channel to the external waiting area where interviewees queued up. "One guy with a drum." Just two hours ago there had been thirty applicants waiting for an interview.

"You call me if things get..."

"You'll be the first to know what we know."

Back in the office Elaine stamped DENIED on Mrs. Sidibe, then asked the guard to let in the next candidate. She paged through the folders on her desk, briefly happy that her replacement would have to reschedule all these interviews, but then displeased that this, her last day at work in the Guinean Embassy, couldn't have been more productive. It was all she wanted, to be able to work without trouble. All about her that seemed heroic, what she was famous for amongst her colleagues, was just the desire to show up to work at nine and get a certain amount done by lunch, to finish something by the end of the day. What did West Africa hate about that?

Her renown was great in Conakry, but the citizens, instead of asking for her autograph, asked for a visa. At restaurants she got the best service, and then the waiter asked, "Can you help my brother who is trying to get a visa to America to see his sick son?" Even her Guinean colleagues and the elite she met at state affairs asked for visa favors, eventually. And she always said *no*; all of Guinea knew her as the *iron lady*. "You're too hard," the Guineans would say, grinning as though this was an indication of some amusing personality disorder. Moving out past the walls and guards that protected her, Elaine felt the whole city turn towards her.

Yaya Dioubate entered, playing a short burst on the drum, hitting it so hard and fast with his fingers that even the ambassador upstairs behind his extra-thick walls must have heard. He wore orange and blue patterned matching pants and shirt. Elaine held her hands first to her ears and then out in opposition to the playing. "Please!" she yelled. "Too loud. No music during the interview." Elaine found herself yelling this last sentence even though the musician had ceased playing. "This is not an audition," she scolded in English and then, when that got a questioning stare she tried to say it in French, but *audition* was not standard interview terminology. She settled for saying, "*Pas de musique, s'il vous plaît.*"

"Ah, I just wanted to show you what I will offer your country," said Yaya in French. "Thank you so much for giving me a visa. I am so happy to go to America. Some people told me I would not succeed without a bribe or a powerful *gris-gris*, but I told them all, no, this is an American. She knows hard work. She lives by the rules. I will show her my ability. I will let my music speak for me."

“Mr. Dioubate, you have not been offered a visa yet, you must first...” Elaine tried to staunch the drummer’s exuberance, but when he moved forward and grabbed her hand for a firm shake she stopped. His palm was so calloused with thick, yellow skin as to be hoof-like. The deep cracks there seemed to be filled with tar. The drummer noticed Elaine’s expression and slapped his hand. “Like bark, these hands. Ha ha! I pick up fire and don’t feel it. But don’t worry, if you study with me we will begin with the *djun-djun bah* or *cri*. Your beautiful hands will stay soft. So soft. Like a baby.” He rubbed her palms, marveling at them. “You must never have lifted a tool to prepare food or to farm. I will teach you the *cri*. You know the *cri*? It’s a hollow log you hit with sticks. I am very good with the *cri*. The best in Conakry.” He let go of her hand and took two pencils from the desk with which to demonstrate.

“I’m surprised the guard let you in here with that,” said Elaine, pointing to the large drum.

Yaya smiled proudly. “The guard? He said no, but I sang his family song. I am his *griot*. He cannot say no to his *griot*. Still, he checked it very carefully.” Yaya let the pencils go mid-rhythm and picked up the drum, slapping it on the side to demonstrate its innocence.

Elaine explained to him that despite his scheduled appointment time, events were such that she could see him now. “It is your lucky day,” Elaine told him. Actually, it wasn’t. An entire Guinean dance company on a cultural tour of the States had just last week dispersed into Seattle, killing any chance of further artistic-type visas. Usually Elaine would offer this grim news immediately and move on to the next applicant, but

today there was no next applicant and Elaine didn't want to leave work early if it meant driving through a revolution. She needed a task to hide behind and think.

"You stayed for your interview when all the other visa applicants left? Why didn't you leave like everyone else?"

"I want to go to America."

"You are not worried that...about what might be happening? That there might be a coup?"

"Ha! A coup. Impossible. No one would oppose Dear Uncle." This, one of the many endearing terms used by his people. The president painted himself as a man of the people, a rice farmer. During the elections he bragged of not having a villa in France, or Switzerland, like other African leaders. Yaya continued his reasoning, "Besides, Guinea is not organized enough to have a coup."

"But the explosions?"

"Did you hear any? I heard nothing. There are so many rumors in Guinea. This may have started as a child farting and by the time the story reached downtown it was a coup. Don't believe anything unless you see it." Yaya touched his eyelid and then pointed at her. He thought a moment then shrugged. "If there are bombs going off it is an accident. The soldiers lit a fire to cook a pig and the base caught on fire. My father was in the military. He fought with the French in the First World War. He told me the military now, they are all idiots."

This was an explanation of the explosions that might let her leave. Yaya shrugged off her worried look and reminded her of his application. "It is my dream to go

to America.” *Me, too*, she thought. She looked at his file. A dance studio in Berkeley vouched for his legitimacy as a musician and promised to take care of him during his three months in the Bay Area.

“Will you be working while you are in the United States Mr. Dioubate?”

“Yes, playing and teaching. In America there are many people who want to learn what I can teach them. They are just discovering the *Djembe* there, the rhythms of Guinea. Guinea is the origin of the *Djembe*. They know Senegalese rhythms, but they do not understand that the *Djembe* is from Guinea. Guinea is the mother of all West African music and of all her rivers. The *djun-djun bah* is from Guinea.” He struck his solid chest to sound the origin of his music.

“But this is not a work visa you are applying for, Mr. Dioubate.”

“No? No. I will teach but not for money, just to show my skills. To invite students to my home in Guinea.”

“You live with your family in the suburb of Madina?” Madina was the crowded area around the main market. No American dared enter the maze-like public market for it was rumored to be full of pick-pockets and kidnappers.

“Yes, but I am a musician with the great Mamady Koita. He is my uncle. I play with his ballet. The Americans stay at his compound in Matoto. Right now he has thirteen Belgians studying there. They eat rice and sauce, sleep and dance there, all at his compound. They enjoy living like Africans. Mamady’s wife even teaches them how to wash clothes like in Africa. They go down to the stream and hit rocks. This is very good

business, with the foreigners happy to learn what we know and the Guineans happy to be paid Euros. Win, win,” said the musician in English.

Looking over his application, Elaine saw that Yaya was scheduled to leave Sunday. They would be on the same flight if she gave him a visa, but it usually took two weeks between the interview and the actual approval. He would miss his invitation window. She looked up at Yaya and for the first time noticed that the bright orange lines on his clothes were in the shape of cell phones.

“Win, win,” repeated Elaine, carefully, as though the possibility had never occurred to her before.

Yaya was right, the explosions were a mistake, not outbursts of political ambition. A transport truck had backed into a case of munitions and the storage facility went off, sending bombs through the base and into the nearby neighborhood, including a Christian school. No accurate numbers came from the government, but the embassy estimated around fifty on the base and at the school died. There would be no public admission of guilt or misconduct by the military, no investigation or reparations for lost life or property. The US ambassador’s suggestion would be a special exchange between the nations’ ammunitions storage experts. By the morning of the day she was to leave, Elaine had contributed a thousand dollar donation to a fund set up by American Mission employees. She saw it as blood money. It was little to pay for her freedom.

Elaine called the embassy three times Saturday to make sure the driver and the expeditor would escort her to the airport. The Air France flights were known to leave

early, on occasion. And you never knew when you would encounter a road block, set up by an enterprising military unit or some bored boys hoping to finagle spare change. With the base disaster, the country was more jittery than usual. Elaine wanted to get to the airport five hours early.

The eve of her departure was sleepless. Mefloquine, the big yellow pill Elaine took every Saturday to ward off malaria, brought with it vivid dreams and minor hallucinations. Until she switched to drinking orange juice, she often saw her dead mother's face in her Sunday coffee. How much of American foreign policy in the tropics was a side-effect of malaria prophylaxis, Elaine often wondered. Tonight Elaine heard repeated honking outside the apartment and was sure it was robbers rushing to beat the deadline of her departure. She heard them repeating her name, yelling it through the neighborhood. They called "cast down your hair," but she clung to it, pressing it over her ears. Even the waves of the gentle Atlantic, usually so comforting when the air conditioner's powerful engine took breaks, were now coming for her. The breakers built as though ascending the stairs.

The next afternoon, as the three of them—driver, expediter and American--headed down the south edge of the peninsula in a white Range Rover flying the American flag, Elaine insisted on picking up a friend.

"We can't pick up passengers, Mrs. Elaine," protested the driver. "It's against the law."

"The law? It's not against the law, it's just a rule."

"It's against the rules, Mrs. Elaine, no can do."

“Look, this is the last five miles I will ever travel in Guinea and I’m just asking that it include one stop. That’s what I need, okay? I know you guys take passengers all the time. I know all sorts of things about you, George. So make this stop.”

“Madina is out of our way. It will make us late.”

“We’re five hours early.”

“I don’t know this place.”

“So we’ll ask someone.” When Elaine had made Yaya’s visa contingent on his accompanying her, he had written simply, “Yaya Dioubate,” in gangly block letters. And he told her he lived next to the Lebanese shawarma place.

In Elaine’s exit scheme, Yaya played the double role of hostage and peace offering. “See,” she would respond to any inquisition, I have given Yaya a visa. I took pity upon him, even though it meant breaking the rules.” Or, looked at slightly differently, if anything went wrong with Elaine’s scheduled departure, it went wrong for the Guinean as well. As for Yaya, he didn’t miss a beat when Elaine told him he could go to Berkeley, but only if they went through the airport together. He probably thought it was common practice, that Americans personally escorted each visa out of the country.

It was not hard to find Yaya’s house—it was where the band played. Drummers stood in a circle around dancers who leapt into the air then bent low to the dusty road. Yaya sat in a newly tailored brown polyester suit, in a chair larger than any of the others. The people in the crowd approached him one by one to grasp his hand or slap money into it. The driver honked his way through the crowd, and Elaine unrolled her window half-way to yell, “Hurry, Yaya, we will be late.”

Yaya came up to her window, “Ah! You are here. Come join us. There is plenty of time, the people want to honor you.” He pointed to the chair he had been sitting in “It is for you.”

“Oh. Thanks. That’s very nice but no, Yaya. I want to get to the airport. There is a lot of paperwork to do and I’d feel better...”

“This is the American boss,” yelled Yaya, as he reached in the window for her hand and lifted it in victory. The crowd yelled and clapped, the drummers started up.

“Yaya!” Elaine looked out at the revelry in the street and smiled in spite of the urgency she felt. “I can’t celebrate, I have a plane to catch.” She searched the crowd for some impetus to get them to the airport. “Time is money.” She yelled out the window. It was a phrase she saw painted on many of the local taxis.

“She says time is money,” Yaya repeated for the crowd, and they cheered as he hurriedly got in and, with the insistence of the driver, fastened his seat belt.

“Do you have your passport?” Elaine asked as the car pushed through the celebration.

Yaya’s face was blank for a moment. “Passport!” he yelled, turning around in his seat.

Looking down at Conakry, Elaine expected to see rust. Rust, the color of the laterite and the color the rainy season brought to all human-made structures. But the peninsula was green: Papaya trees growing from trash heaps and collapsing roofs, bearing fruit all year round; the tallest of trees, the kapoks with their roots like rocket fins jutting out from the

trunk; the mangos and rubber trees that grew into giant clouds of greenery like an ever-expanding supernova. Elaine took the color as hopeful, super-human. Perhaps the vegetation would win. All the suffering below would be overgrown by vines and forgotten. She felt a generosity towards the peninsula as it merged with the horizon. How could she not love that poorest of countries for letting her leave?

And leaving was so easy: The pleasant check-in woman in a blue pill box hat who wished her a pleasant journey; the customs man who paged slowly through her diplomatic passport, in awe; the metal-detector worker who wanted to know if she had any Guinean Francs. By that point in the process she was so confident as to reply, "No, I have only credit cards," gloating that soon she would be able to use them again. And then she was inside the plane, a cool, smooth plastic country of its own. Then, all sign of a populated world was gone, and it was just green mangroves and light brown ocean until the sun set over Senegal.

She would be in Charles de Gaulle by morning; she believed it now. She could imagine the dawn still of that airport. The perfume and scarf huts locked up, the Africans stumbling from sleep to find themselves in a day colder than any night in the tropics. She would stay in Paris four shopping days. She would walk the Place Saint Germain collecting chic boutique bags heavy with the latest fashions.

As dinner was served, Elaine could feel Yaya beside her, watching her technique with the dinner tray. Elaine moved slowly, never looking over to smile or acknowledge his need for a guide, but letting him see every motion clearly and pausing between peeling the aluminum off the salmon and tearing an incision in the joined paper tubes of

salt and pepper. Elaine ate every bit of food as did her shadow, and after the stewardess happily retrieved their trays—in effect approving their effort—Elaine could feel the satisfaction of the man whose elbows rested next to hers; the satisfaction of navigating a new culture.

As the captain dimmed the lights and the TVs descended from the ceiling, Elaine stared out the window into her own thoughts. It was one of the reasons she had joined the State Department, the forced march of diplomacy. Like being in the army but with better pay. She dug foxholes in every foreign country, not with shovels, but with shipments of breakfast cereal from the US, Bud Light, and a satellite dish. Yaya snored beside her, covered in four thin airplane blankets.

Six hours later, as the plane descended toward the earth, Elaine turned to her aisle partner. “Are you going to return to Guinea?”

Dioubate reached into the pouch on his belt for his return ticket. “Yes, I’ll show you.” But she wasn’t looking for proof. She wanted to know the truth.

“I know you have the ticket. They wouldn’t have let you out of the country without a return, but the truth is, Mr. Dioubate, that the round trip costs the same as a one way and about a fifth of our temporary visas go permanent. Tell me really, are you going to return to Guinea?” She wanted him to say *no*. She wanted to always see Yaya Dioubate living in America, teaching his big drum, buying a big car, and a big house, inhabiting the first world because she let him in.

“No, I could not stay in America. I only wish to stay for three months, to establish business connections. I will go back to Conakry and build a music camp, a place where people from all over the world can come to learn what we know.”

It is his official answer, Elaine thought, grinning politely while looking into Dioubate’s sincere expression. “I’m not the Chief of Consular Affairs anymore, you know, you don’t have to impress me. I gave you the visa. I can’t take it back.” She pointed at his pouch and then pulled back, realizing she was pointing at his crotch. She wanted to tell him, *stay. Don’t come back, I give you permission*, but she was still in the Foreign Service, even between postings. In a week she would begin her intensive Spanish classes.

Dioubate chuckled. “You are not the visa lady anymore, I know. Guinea will miss you. You worked very hard for us. You know what they said about you. They said you need a husband. You had no man so you act like a man.” Dioubate clapped his hard hand on to his fist to demonstrate. “I said to them, ‘No, she is an American. She does her job. She follows the rules and does not give out favors.’ I said, ‘that is why America is strong. America does not take gifts or care if you are family.’ Americans work very hard.”

Elaine turned away. She felt regret creeping in, regret about the terms of the bargain that got her out of Guinea. In Costa Rica she would start over, anonymous. That was what made the job bearable, the leaving of it every two years, erasing as she went, each country.

It's all about quotas, she thought of explaining to Yaya, *I don't choose how many, just who*. But he had no need of her defense; to Yaya she was a hero.

Dioubate leaned over Elaine's lap towards the window. "Is this Paris? It is beautiful." The blue light of dawn turned blond as they watched. The sun, lower than the plane, cast long shadows off the orderly pairs of trees lining a silent road. The yellow fields below them, all the same size, passed in perfect squares. "Is the landing dangerous?" he asked, worried by their fast descent.

Elaine took his thick hand in hers. "No, landing is easy."