

# **My Country, Africa:** **Autobiography of the** **Black Pasionaria**



**Andrée Blouin**

# My Country, Africa

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# My Country, Africa

Autobiography of the  
Black Pasionaria

Andrée Blouin  
in collaboration with  
Jean MacKellar



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# Contents

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*Foreword by Adom Getachew and Thomas Meaney*

## Part I

- 1 From the Village to the Orphanage
- 2 Years of Misery, a Week of Happiness
- 3 Coming of Age Brings New Terrors
- 4 Flight to a New Life
- 5 Hard Days Precede First Love
- 6 Africa Unfolds, My Life Takes a Turn
- 7 My Rita and My Father
- 8 Grueling Enterprises and Tragedy
- 9 A Funeral and a Marriage
- 10 Europe and My Great Love

- 11 Siguri, Land of Gold and Thirst
- 12 Little Joséphine, My Own Maman

## Part II

- 13 Destiny Calls, My Political Work Begins
- 14 Healing the Breach between African Brothers
- 15 An Invitation to Help the Congo's Women
- 16 A Perilous Campaign in the Brush
- 17 Ominous Developments Surround Lumumba
- 18 Expulsion on the Eve of Independence
- 19 The Protocol and the Escape
- 20 The Congo Catastrophe
- 21 Betrayal Everywhere
- 22 Lumumba's Downfall and Ruin
- 23 My Africa, My Joséphine

*Epilogue* by Eve Blouin

*Index*



# Foreword

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“The Black Pasionaria”; “The Muse of Lumumba”; “Africa’s Woman of Mystery”; “The Woman Behind Lumumba”; the “Most Dangerous Woman in Africa”: these are among the ways newspapers around the world in the 1960s introduced their readers to Andrée Blouin. Born in 1921 in Oubangui-Chari (now the Central African Republic), Blouin was raised in an orphanage for mixed-race children before she escaped at seventeen years old. Starting in her twenties, she would go on to have four children with three different European men. She credited her politicization to the death in 1946 of her two-year-old son René, after he was denied quinine tablets by the local colonial administration in Bangui on the grounds that he was not white. Over the next four decades, she lent her gifts of political organizing and oratory to causes such as the independence referendum in Guinea and the nationalist mobilization in the Congo. When Patrice Lumumba formed the first and short-lived post-independence government in Kinshasa in 1960, she took on the official post as chief of protocol in his cabinet. Blouin

became such a fixture of Lumumba's inner circle that journalists dubbed them "team Lumum-Blouin."

From Blouin's perch in Lumumba's government—she worked out of the former office of the father of her first child—she was at the center of the drama of African decolonization. The Congo was among seventeen African nations that achieved independence in 1960, "the year of Africa." It was in the Congo where the meaning of this independence was tested just as soon as it was granted. Only weeks after the transfer of power from Belgium, the Katanga province in the south of the country seceded with the support of Belgian military advisors and the Union Minière du Haut-Katanga, a mining company with concession rights in the region. Lumumba's appeal for international assistance—which the Eisenhower administration pointedly rebuffed—resulted in the first deployment of United Nations troops on the African continent. Frustrated by the UN's tepid response, Lumumba requested Soviet aid, which ignited an already inflamed Cold War proxy conflict. Just seven months after independence, in January 1961, Lumumba would be assassinated by political adversaries with the blessing of Washington.

As the Congo became the epicenter of the Cold War in Africa, Blouin acted as a go-between for the new leaders on the continent. She not only sealed rifts between them, softened vanities, and had the latest information, but she did it all in a fragmented Africa, which in many respects remains as disconnected as it was in Blouin's time. (There are still no direct flights between Bangui and Conakry.) The various monikers Blouin was assigned—the "Black Pasionaria," the "Red Mata Hari," the "Eva Perón of Central Africa"—drew on a wide range of exemplary political women to suggest that her unofficial political power was far-reaching, nefarious, and unknowable. One of the cruel advantages of her place as a woman in the

violent upheaval in the new states was that her experiences as a mother and lover brought her into closer contact with colonial realities that stunted the lives of those around her, both colonizer and colonized alike.

After Lumumba's assassination, Blouin went into exile with her family. Following a period in Algiers, then the "world capital of revolution," she lived in Paris until her death in 1986. When asked during a brief visit to London in 1961 what her "particular role in African Affairs was" and whether she planned to return to the Congo, she replied, "Out of Africa I have no title, no specific role ... I am just an ardent, passionate, fervent nationalist—ready to go anywhere and do anything for Africa at any time." Blouin's insistence on an African nationalism captured in the title of this memoir, *My Country, Africa*, refuses a delimitation of her political commitment to one territorially bounded state. She is in this way a conduit of the most expansive version of Pan-Africanism. "Everything that was of Africa became my passion," Blouin writes. This feeling for the peoples and land of Africa bears no traces of arid agitprop, and is delivered in her highly sensory and psychologically acute depictions of the people and scenes she witnessed.

Blouin's insistence that she was an African nationalist also serves as a rejoinder to the recurring preoccupation with her biracial identity. Almost all the press coverage noted that Blouin was "half-French, half-African," as if the exoticism of her background should have been reflected in a more compromised politics. Yet she insisted that political choices supersede stories of origins and lineage. Naturally, one of the persistent subjects of *My Country, Africa* is the way racialized hierarchies and exclusions produced a particularly contradictory position for *métisse* women like Blouin. Never able to claim the full benefits of French citizenship nor completely inhabit an African identity centered on blackness, Blouin operated as both an

insider and an outsider within the political circles of African decolonization. The depth of her political commitment to African nationalism—and her novelistic ability to tell the story of how she came to it and how she sustained it—make *My Country, Africa* a book unlike any other in the annals of decolonization.

For all her work toward the cause of African liberation and unification, Blouin was also a clear-eyed critic of its limitations. As a daughter who admired her war-hero colonial father's dedication to France, she was on guard against the more imitative side of the decolonization process, especially the temptation simply to replace the colonial ruling caste with a native one. Not even Lumumba, the most charismatic anticolonial leader in Africa, is spared Blouin's critical eye. She thought he often moved too slowly, tried to please too many divergent factions, and spent too much time outside the Congo while enemy forces gathered at home. Her portrait of Lumumba, like all of the portraits in this book, is full of imaginative sympathy but also a cool-headed assessment of his room for political maneuver. One of her more provocative suggestions about African independence is that it might have been more secure if more of it had been won through war.

In her epilogue to this republication of *My Country, Africa*, Blouin's daughter Eve notes that her mother wished to write her autobiography soon after she left the Congo. Yet even in her effort to tell her life story on her own terms, she faced a number of impediments. The present edition was only possible because Eve recovered the rights to this text, initially published in English in 1983 and long since out of print.

As the editors of Southern Questions series at Verso Books, it is our honor to republish *My Country, Africa*. Blouin's memoir is one of the

reasons the series is dedicated to making more accessible first-hand accounts of the transformations in the age of decolonization and its aftermath. It is a chance not only to widen our understanding of the figures involved in the collapse of formal European imperialism, but to approach more closely the reality and meaning of this great historical upheaval through its participants' own perspectives. Blouin's life story is itself a map of African national liberation. As she moves through different decolonizing territories, in a story that never heeds colonial boundaries, she appears effortlessly to bring the private and intimate to bear on the public and political, in a book that extends the dimension of emancipation well beyond many accounts in our own time. The memoir benefits not least from Blouin's prose, which rarely dissimulates, seizes on details, and allows us to relive moments and conversations that she has preserved as if with future historians in mind. To read *My Country, Africa* is to be reminded of the heady sense of promise and possibility that still makes the years of decolonization combust like exhilarating flares in a long night of reaction and retrenchment.

Adom Getachew and Thomas Meaney

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# Part I

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# 1

## From the Village to the Orphanage

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As punishment for the crime of being born of a white father and a black mother I spent my early years in a prison for children. This prison was the orphanage for girls of mixed blood at Brazzaville in the French Congo. The time was the dark years of colonialism in Africa.

At the orphanage, where we lived behind windows with thick bars, my companions and I were taught an abiding sense of shame and guilt for our parentage. All of us had been born out of wedlock, but that was not the worst of it. We were the issue of a white man's weakness for a black woman, and that was unpardonable. Because of this "sin," as the nuns who ran the orphanage called it, we, the product of this sin, were in need of great purification. This the nuns were willing to supply.

We girls were led to believe that by accepting their system of calculated humiliations and cruelties we could partially—although never entirely—expiate the offense which our lives represented. For fourteen years I lived in a regime of daily penance as the nuns sought to redress "the wickedness of my father and the primitive nature of my mother."

That girls such as I were given opportunity to atone for our existence was considered one more proof of the white man's charity as he scourged the black man's land.

It was while I was still in the orphanage-prison that I first identified with the struggle for freedom of my black countrymen. Like them I was beaten with the *chicotte*, a whip made of ox sinews. Like them I was the victim of injustices of which I hardly knew the name but against which my blood never ceased to rebel. For many years, however, I did not participate in the African struggle for self-determination. I could not overcome the resignation taught me by the nuns. I bowed my head, I held my tongue, I shut myself up in the dreary passiveness of the other women of my race.

Only when I had been married—ironically, twice to white men—did I find the equilibrium and courage to become active in the cause of my people. Only then was I able to transcend my black and white inheritance and become more than the stereotype of each. To become, simply, a woman, a human being. It was then that I opted to give my life to the struggle of the blacks. In this I was privileged to take part in the movement toward freedom of several African countries. I was to know some of the great leaders of Africa, and because of my passion for our cause, I was to be associated in their work.

Within these pages I want to set down an account of my youth and the events that formed me for my work in that still unfinished struggle. I have always said that my political work was my own option, but perhaps I flatter myself. Really, there was no choice. My fate and that of the Africa I so ardently love have been intertwined from the beginning. And where there is love there is no option but to serve. This is the story of an African woman who, branded by the misery of her own youth and inflamed by the injustices



that she saw everywhere, finally could bow her head and hold her tongue no longer.

I was born December 16, 1921, at Bessou, a little village on the Oubangui River in the French colony of Oubangui-Chari, which today is foolishly known as the Central African Empire. My mother, Joséphine Wouassimba, of the Banziri people in the Kouango region, was then fourteen years old. Her father, the fierce and powerful chief Zoumague, possessed many wives. But his favorite was Joséphine's mother, who was renowned for her beauty and character. She was the daughter of an important family of fishermen in the eastern region of the Belgian Congo.

My father, Pierre Gerbillat, was a short, light-haired Frenchman with a faraway look in his eye and an iron will. He had an enormous capacity for work and was dedicated to the prospect of building his fortune in the still unknown jungles of the dark continent. The only son of a rich notary public in Lyon, he came to equatorial Africa in 1906 as an agent for the Société Interfina, a large import-export company. He was then twenty-six years old. After a few years he left the Interfina Company to try his luck on his own. First he hunted elephants for their ivory, but that proved a chancy business. Then, doubtless inspired by the fact that his father's clients had been chiefly the great silk industrialists of Lyon, he started a silkworm plantation. At Kimbé he put dozens of hectares of land into mulberry bushes. What he had not foreseen, however, was that the blacks in the area considered these caterpillars a gourmet delicacy. Within a short time his stock of silkworms was decimated and he had to abandon the project. Then he went into the transportation business, moving raw materials such as cotton, with a fleet of trucks. He also had a number of boats, which plied the Oubangui, a river of many rapids. This time he succeeded.

Even today, the story of my father and mother, while giving me much pain, astonishes me still. How did it happen that this forty-year-old man from an exceptionally bourgeois and traditional background should find himself captivated by a thirteen-year-old girl of a remote and primitive village? More astonishing still, perhaps, was that his fascination with this gay and delicate creature developed into an affection that was to endure for many years. Their liaison, crossing the barriers of a cruelly divided society, was to last my father's lifetime. While their situation was by no means unique in the colonial system, it seems to me that aspects of their relationship were.

Pierre Gerbillat was still with the Société Interfina at the time he met Joséphine Wouassimba. He had come to her village, which was about 200 kilometers from Bangui, as part of his rounds, selling articles that people needed, such as salt and cloth, and buying raw materials for his company. He also planned to hunt elephants while he was there, as game was plentiful in this verdant land through which an immense river, the Chari, flowed.

As there were no other forms of distraction in the village, the people honored this visiting white man with an evening of their traditional tam-tam music and dancing. In his seat as guest of honor, Pierre Gerbillat listened to the insistent beat of the African drums and watched the half-naked dancers stomping and leaping, their bodies gleaming, their faces joyous. Among these dancers were the *linguis*, girls specially chosen and trained, for whom the dance was a sacred rite. As he watched the *linguis* he became intrigued by the form and manner of a very young girl. She was small and slender with tiny, pointed breasts and hundreds of *perles* sewn through her hair. He found her beautiful. And when she smiled, I believe Pierre Gerbillat trembled, for his life was never the same after that.

Joséphine was a child then, it was true, and she remained, in many ways, a child all her life, but there was an artless femininity about her, a sensual joy in living that set her apart. Charmed, Pierre Gerbillat watched this girl, dancing to please him. The smile she turned upon him burst with radiance; it was a smile that proclaimed the beauty of Africa, the beauty of life.

Pierre Gerbillat could not take his eyes off her slender, animated form. Joséphine continued to dance and flash her radiant smile in his direction. Out of all the women in the village dancing for this white man, Joséphine knew how to make herself noticed. She knew how to make herself deeply desired.

Disconcerted, Pierre Gerbillat asked a companion, “Who is that girl?”

“She is the daughter of Zoumague, the village chief,” came the reply.

This did not simplify things, but Pierre Gerbillat had just made a decision. “I will take her as my wife,” he announced.

“Unfortunately, sir, that will not be possible. Félix Éboué, the governor of Kouango, has already spoken for her,” his companion answered. The situation was explained. The girl was too young to marry—she was only thirteen. Governor Éboué had agreed to wait until he returned from a leave in France before she became his bride. It was the custom at that time for an administrator to have an extended leave every two years. Félix Éboué was the first black man entrusted by the French with such a high position as the governorship of a province. His situation with the French administration was entirely unique.

During the succeeding days, the image of the young girl with the dazzling smile haunted Pierre Gerbillat. He continued to make inquiries about her. According to African tradition, a bride was obtained by offering the family a dowry that reflected the value of the girl to her husband, as

well as his financial status. “How big was the dowry,” Pierre Gerbillat asked, “that Governor Éboué offered for her?”

It was, he was assured, a handsome one.

Félix Éboué was already well known to Zoumague’s family. He had taken as his wife one of Joséphine’s aunts, by whom he had had two children. It was not uncommon for an administrator to have more than one African wife, even from the same family.

But Pierre Gerbillat was a determined man. He persisted where others might have given up. He was also, as a salaried representative of the Interfina Company, a wealthy one, by African standards. He opened discussions with the chief on the dowry of Joséphine. Finally, he offered to double that which Félix Éboué had offered. This represented not only an irresistible sum in terms of village life, but strong proof of the white man’s sincerity as well. At last the family yielded, and the marriage was arranged. In addition to this large dowry, Pierre Gerbillat was also obliged to present the many members of the family with gifts. For the women there were cooking pots, large enamel basins, and many meters of cotton cloth; and he agreed to give trousers to all the men. So taken with Joséphine was Pierre Gerbillat that he willingly acceded to all these demands.

On the day Joséphine was to be married, she was bathed several times, her body perfumed with the fragrant bark of a tree that is boiled, with its roots, into a highly prized, perfumed solution. Her body was rubbed with a peanut oil, almost red, which we call *n’goula*. This is one of the most frequently used beauty products of our women.

There was no ceremonial exchange of vows, as there is for a Western couple. The rituals of the occasion were those performed by the matrons, the most respected women of the village. They presided over the bathing and anointing of Joséphine and instructed her to be docile with her husband.

She was counseled to obey his every wish and to respond to these wishes not with words, but by inclining her head.

At last she was, to their satisfaction, ready. Solemnly the matrons walked her to the hut where Pierre Gerbillat was waiting for her. There they delivered her, with a few words, to the man who would make a woman of her.

The following morning, at the first cock's crow, the chief matron returned to the nuptial hut to ask for proof of the bride's virginity. She was shown the cloth that had been on their bed. Satisfied that the bride had been a virgin and now was no more, the matron stood before the hut and announced the news with a ululating call that sounded joyfully through the village. This meant that a celebration was in order and the work for the wedding feast could begin. It was time to cut the throats of the sheep, the cattle, and the pigs. One way or another, everyone in the village took part in the preparations. Since Gerbillat was such a personage, and the most prosperous colonial the villagers had seen, the feast was the most extravagant ever held.

Most of the day and the night, the people of the village ate and danced. Although she was supposed to play the part of the demure bride, watching the festivities from her place of honor with her husband, Joséphine constantly forgot herself and escaped from Gerbillat's side to dance with the others. She could not resist the rhythm of those insistent drums. Even at such a traditional occasion this child-woman manifested the charming spontaneity and willfulness that were to characterize her very special life.

Soon after the wedding, Pierre Gerbillat gave Joséphine a fine horse and she learned to ride. Sometimes she accompanied him on short trips to nearby villages. More than ever this young girl who was married to a white man gathered distinction in the eyes of her people.

My father was not disappointed in his bride. Although she was still a child, she was made to love, made to please. Pierre Gerbillat found her entrancing. She was so lively, so innocent, so young! She gave this colonial hunter and entrepreneur much pleasure.

Joséphine was of a heedless, happy-go-lucky nature; in the months that followed her marriage she hardly noticed that changes were taking place in her body, changes that signaled that she was to become a young mother. To her dismay, she began to vomit frequently.

While traveling in his work one day, Pierre Gerbillat had an accident with his car; the gasoline caught fire and his arm was deeply burned. The burn did not heal as it should have; it became infected and had to be treated. It was given to Joséphine to change the bandages for her husband. But when she removed the gauze pack, the sight of the suppurating, open wound turned her stomach and made her ill. This happened several times. One day my father, never a patient man, exasperated by her vomiting, hit her. Joséphine was unable to explain to him what the problem was, because she had no idea of her own condition.

Finally, Pierre Gerbillat realized that something was in fact wrong with this once gay girl. At Bessou, the nuns of the order of St. Joseph of Cluny had recently established the Mission of the Holy Family to which was attached a very simple clinic. He took Joséphine to be examined there. The sisters informed him that his young bride was to have a child. My father was astonished. It had not occurred to him that such a thing would happen with this frail girl, in the short time he had known her.

Pierre Gerbillat's relations with Joséphine then changed. He became more thoughtful of her and gave her good care. He often took her to the Holy Family Mission so that she could receive medical attention.

Joséphine was extremely fond of her full sister, Augustine Sounda. One of their great pleasures was to bathe together in a stream. My father enjoyed watching the two girls. Curious and amused, he would sit on the bank observing them as they splashed and played, the water running over their young black bodies. Joséphine touched her growing abdomen, more in wonder than concern with the phenomenon that was taking place within her.

Augustine had been taken as wife by the administrator of Kemo, whose name was Poujade. At the time he was away in France on his leave. From the bank, my father, referring to Joséphine's now obvious pregnancy, would call out teasingly, "Joséphine, it is clear, has her husband near her. But Augustine is all alone, her husband is gone." And the two girls would laugh with him. It was in a life of such simple pleasures that Joséphine awaited her child.

The nuns warned Pierre Gerbillat that Joséphine's delivery would be difficult, even dangerous for her, because she was so young and the baby was very large. Although her parents wanted Joséphine to remain with them in the village, Pierre Gerbillat insisted that she should be where she could get special care, if necessary. He feared that the delivery would not be successful for both mother and child if left to traditional practices. When her term drew near, he took Joséphine to the nuns and she stayed with them at the mission.

One night there was an extraordinary moon. As was the custom for such nights, the Africans held a tam-tam dance. Since her marriage, Joséphine had not been allowed to dance the sacred *lingui*. They had removed all the tiny *perles* and shaved her head, as she had lost her status as the village sacred dancer. Now, on this evening of extraordinary moonlight, when she could not resist the call of the tam-tam, she slipped away from the mission to dance.

In spite of the great weight in her abdomen she joined the other women of the village. For hours they sang and danced in large circles around the drums, and Joséphine, joyous with the rhythms of her people, danced with them. There she was taken with the first pains of childbirth. One might say I was called forth by the moon, and the African drums.

Joséphine's delivery at the mission was long and harrowing. Finally, at the moment when her child came into the world, she fainted. Thus, while answering ancestral rites, I was delivered, prophetically, into the hands of the European nuns; in this way I began my life.

My father was away at the time, making his rounds into the brush for the Interfina Company, with his merchandise on mules and horses. Each time he arrived in a village, he sent a foot messenger back to the mission to tell the nuns where he was so that he could be advised when the delivery took place. Thus they knew where to send him the word "it's a girl."

Since travel on water was quicker than through the brush, my father took a pirogue and returned on the river to the mission, where he found me. It was his idea to give me the name of Andrée. My mother wanted to call me Madeleine, so I was baptized with both names. However, my mother's people, instead of saying Madeleine, called me "Mandarin," a nickname that I have kept with them to this day.<sup>1</sup>

I was not given an African name, although my father had one. It was the custom of the village people to give a white man a name appropriate to something about his person. In my father's case, it pertained to his business. Among the articles that he sold were *kisi*, or little metal disks, so highly prized by the African women. They wore them strung together, hundreds and hundreds of them, around the hips and neck, jangling against their bare bodies as they walked, with great effect. The *kisi* were a form of wealth and the most beautiful women wore many strands of them in a maddening



voluptuosity. When the women asked to buy *kisi* from my father, he had not yet learned to speak the *sango* of our village, so he used a word from the dialect he spoke in the Congo. He would say, “*Kani-Kani*,” which meant, “There aren’t any, I have none.” So the people began to call him “Kisi-kani” and the name stuck. It made them laugh—they found it charming—and for them from then on, he was not Gerbillat but “Kisi-kani.”

Joséphine was so exhausted from the delivery that she could not be moved for some time; my father asked the nuns to keep her for two weeks, although most mothers went home sooner. Because she was so young and frail, she did not have milk for me. As was the custom among our people, my grandmother remained with my mother at the mission, cooking and caring for her. My grandmother was a very beautiful woman, extremely tall. She was given the name of “Mamiwata,” which means “the goddess of water,” because she was greatly respected and because she was from a family of fishers. She had the supernatural gift of clairvoyance and there were many extraordinary stories of predictions she made that came true. Was she chilled, I wonder, by what she foresaw in suffering ahead for her daughter and this new baby girl the color of *café-au-lait*?

At last, Joséphine was strong enough to travel and my father came and took the three of us home, on the pirogue, to our village in the Kouango.

When my father made my mother his wife in an African ceremony, he was actually engaged already to Henriette Poussart, a woman twenty years younger than himself who lived in Belgium. He had met her during one of his leaves in Europe. If my father had been free, I like to think that he would have legitimized me, although it was in fact rare for Europeans to legitimize the children of their black liaisons.

My father continued to make his rounds, selling and buying in the far, small villages of the country. My mother could not accompany him with her

young baby, so she stayed with her mother in the village. He provided the minimum necessary for Joséphine to live in the style of her people and she was content to wait for him to visit her when he could.

I am sure my father adored my mother. How could it have been otherwise with this charming, innocent child-wife, for whom he knew he was responsible? But in spite of all his affection for her, he was unable to fulfill his responsibilities toward Joséphine.

A year after my birth Henriette decided to come to Africa to be married. She arrived in December 1922 and the marriage was celebrated in Bangui. Still, Pierre Gerbillat could not forget Joséphine and he found many pretexts to come to the village where she lived. He built a house for her there so that he could live with her and me while he was making his trips. Certainly this was proof that he still cared for her.

Henriette knew about Joséphine, and about my birth. She accepted the fact that her husband had had a child, but she had no intention of being encumbered by my presence, and she and Joséphine detested one another. When Joséphine learned that her man had taken a white wife she was terribly wounded. As she was an entirely natural person, she expressed the way she felt fully. She made some terrible scenes with Henriette. Furiously she shouted at her, "Who are you, anyhow? You have no child, what are you to him? You have nothing. But I have this child, which I made with him. I am his real wife." She had other suggestions. "Why don't you leave? Why don't you go back where you came from? That would be better. You have no reason to stay here." These things, shouted in front of my father, were Joséphine's means of trying to prove to him that he belonged more to us than to this other woman. They were a pathetic form of blackmail, to try to convince him to stay with us in the village.

In Africa, mothers carry their babies in a sling on their backs, and thus I was content, head bobbing, my cheek against the shoulder of my mother or one of my aunts. Because a child is so loved in our country, I certainly had a happy infancy. I grew fat and strong, without any idea of the contradictions in which my life had been formed, contradictions that would shape for me a terrible future.

The hut that my father built for my mother was of straw, as was the custom, but because a white man was to live there, it was a bit more elegant than the common hut. In our country the villages are built close to the rivers. The house of the chief is the farthest from the river and all the others are built in a semicircle radiating out from it, so that the chief has a complete view through the center of the village toward the river.

Each morning our pirogues went out on the Chari to fish, and in the evening their catch was divided among the people by the chief. When it was time for the boats to return, my grandfather, Zoumague, who, as was the custom for a chief, was known by one name only, would take his place near the river. The catch was deposited before him and he then distributed the fish according to need, to everyone in the village, or people from the surrounding villages who presented themselves. No one paid. It was a truly socialistic sharing of the wealth. The pirogues belonged to the people of the village, but they were managed by the chief.

The ways of an African village are beautiful. It has a soul, an African village. In the forests there are wild fruit trees with more fruit than can be gathered, but there are also fruit trees that have been planted and cultivated, usually near the village. Not far away, game can be found. With the hunting, fishing, and crops, an African village is very rich in its resources. One never dies of hunger there. And the bounty is for everyone in the village, which lives as a community. It was there, in this atmosphere of sharing, that I grew

up. I think I must have been happy, madly happy; quite unaware of the specialness of my fate, I grew up with the other children. I took my first steps in the Kouango, land of my ancestors.

My father and Henriette prepared to go to France for their vacation, as was the custom. It was decided then that I should not be left in the village with my mother. My father learned that an orphanage for girls of mixed blood had recently opened its doors in Brazzaville. There, white men who did not know what to do with the offspring of their black liaisons were depositing their children. Just the thing for me. They could drop me off as they went through Brazzaville on the way to France. I was then barely three years old.

Preparations were made for our departure. We were to sail down the Oubangui River to the Congo. My father came to the village and, over my mother's anguished protests, took me away. Joséphine could not stop my father from doing this, but she could not accept it either. On the day the boat was to leave, dressed in her most beautiful *pagne*, she came to the wharf to try to find us. All is noisy confusion before the departure of a river steamer and it must have been difficult for her, a small, slender woman of seventeen years, trying to push her way through the crowd. Cotton was being loaded onto the boat, and blacks stripped to the waist and carrying the great white bales jostled her. Porters shouted at her to move aside. Desperately Joséphine searched everywhere for us, like a lioness, still fighting for her child.

Suddenly she saw my father and Henriette on the ship. They were standing on the upper bridge, which was reserved for whites. Joséphine knew that she could not set foot there, although it was her daughter they were taking away. What a scene she made then! With all her might she

shouted up at Henriette, “That’s *my* daughter you’re stealing, mine! Give her back to me. You’re a thief, a thief! You can’t have my child!”

It was Henriette whom she blamed, not my father. She loved my father too much to think that he could do wrong. Her wrath was focused on the white woman who had taken first her man and now her child. Poor black woman, there was nothing she could do to alter the course of events; she had no rights over her own little daughter.

The siren drowned Joséphine’s voice, and the boat slid away from the wharf, leaving in its wake a woman in tears. Thus my mother disappeared from my life before I was old enough to store away the memory of her face. I was too young, then, to keep the sweet warmth of her tenderness for later comfort.

The existence of the orphanage in Brazzaville was proof that the racism on which colonialism was built had failed. It was necessary, of course, to conceal this failure. The cover-up, the façade with which this was done, was known as *charity*. In truth, the orphanage served as a kind of waste bin for the waste products of this black-and-white society: the children of mixed blood who fit nowhere. I did not have my father’s name, so when I was registered there I was given a number, number twenty-two. Twenty-one other girls had been abandoned there before me.

The institution in which I was to spend the next fourteen long years was run by the sisters of the Order of Saint Joseph of Cluny. It was also referred to by the people of Brazzaville as “The Convent.” In addition to the girls of mixed blood, there were several dozen girls whose parents were both black. However, these girls were kept apart from us. They were lodged in a building 200 meters from ours. Most of these black girls belonged to the

Mucongo and Lari peoples. They, in turn, were separated from the Lingalas of the northern Congo.

Our first lesson from the sisters, thus, was one of racial discrimination. We girls of mixed blood, the *métisses*, were taught that we were to have absolutely nothing to do with the black girls. As for white people, we were taught that they were a superior and infallible race. The orphanage had little contact with them except through what was respectfully known as “The Charitable Committee of Good Works.”

For its food supplies the institution depended almost entirely on gifts from the Portuguese businessmen of Brazzaville. Their donations consisted of white beans and split peas that contained weevils, salted fish that had been crushed or damaged, unmarketable smoked meat, *chikwang*, and manioc.<sup>2</sup> The generous merchants also gave us sardines and corned beef in cans that were swollen like putrefied fish. When the cans were opened, a powerful, nauseating spray shot forth.

The building in which we girls of mixed blood were lodged was made of clay bricks, which had been crudely baked and so melted when it rained. The roof was of corrugated iron. There were a dozen large rooms in this immense building, including an infirmary and a gloomy parlor called the Saint Mary and Saint Joseph room, where marriages were arranged. The three dormitories were rigorously divided into age groups: one for the small girls, where I first slept; one for the girls up to the age of puberty; and one for the older girls, in the middle of which was a bedroom for three guardian nuns. There was also a classroom big enough for the sixty-five girls, which we were one day to have, but there were very few benches or desks and almost no books. The largest room was used for sewing. An important part of our instruction was sewing and embroidery, as our work was the chief source of revenue for this community of nuns.

In the dining hall we sat at long rows of bare wooden tables. There, twice a day, we ate with our fingers the vile food that was given to us. The sister who supervised us was enthroned on a sort of pulpit from which she could see everything, like the guard of a chain gang. It was her duty to see that we did not talk during meals; the silence was broken only by the occasional sound of a ladle touching enamel dishes. Silently we entered the hall and stood at our places, our eyes fixed on the nun until she gave the ritual clap, the signal that we could be seated. After chanting a grace in which we thanked God for his protection and for what we were about to eat, we were at last free to gulp down—if we could—the nauseating food on our plates. However it often made us ill and we vomited what we ate. Hunger was a constant companion, pinching our insides so cruelly that we filled ourselves with water to cheat it.

The nun who surveyed us of course did not eat our contaminated food. Like the other sisters she ate in the nun's dining hall, which was a hundred meters away from ours. Tormentingly delicious odors came to us from their building and we tried to imagine the wonderful foods that made up their meals, which we had never tasted.

We each slept in an iron bed, on a bare mattress, rolled up in a single coverlet. There was no mosquito netting. Every night we were devoured not only by mosquitoes but by the bedbugs that swarmed in our beds.

Twice a year, I remember, these infested iron beds were stacked on top of one another in the big courtyard of the orphanage and a great fire of straw was lit under them. This fire gave us much joy. The crackling flames not only warmed our hearts but promised us a good sleep for a week or two. Soon after that, the bedbugs, which were hidden in the cracks of the clay walls, would be back to bite us again.

At the end of the courtyard was a little garden where sorrel, sweet potatoes, and manioc grew. The earth there was enriched with a natural fertilizer, as I well knew, for each morning we dug holes there and emptied the fifteen toilet receptacles of the orphanage.

The grounds were enclosed by walls three meters high, bristling with the shards of bottles. We girls never doubted for a moment that those walls were not to keep trespassers out, but to keep us in. Life beyond those detestable walls, we thought, must be marvelous. We dreamed of the day when somehow, by some unimaginable stroke of good luck, we would be set free. At times when the nuns were not around, my friends and I would climb the guava trees that grew over the wall and greedily watch what was happening in the street below. We called it “The Street of Paradise.”

Our instruction in the orphanage, besides embroidery and such sewing as darning and mending, was mainly catechism and the liturgical chants in Latin, which we learned by sound, without understanding a word. Day after day we embroidered the linens, we chanted the masses, and gave thanks for the vile food set before us without any happiness or hope. In our muslin uniforms we were brown-skinned, well-oiled robots, docile, disciplined, totally submissive. What else could we be, abandoned as we were, without an official identity under the most ignoble laws? Who had given us any consideration until then? Who cared if we lived or died? The only reality in our lives was our hunger. It obsessed us.

Discipline in the orphanage was as severe as that of a penitentiary. The slightest fault was punished with a whipping. But even this, sometimes, was considered insufficient.

I was only four years old when I experienced the full cruelty of a nun’s chastisement. It was provoked by this incident. I was playing in the recreation courtyard with Gaston, a young boy of mixed blood, of my own



age. He was the only boy admitted to this institution for girls, because he was the son of one of the African servants. We had been playing our childish games for some time when I was taken with one of nature's calls, and, as small African children do, I began removing my panties, which buttoned in back, to take care of it on the spot. When my panties got tangled around my legs, Gaston tried to help me. One of the guardian nuns witnessed this and rushed over to us. She slapped each of us hard, shouting, "You have committed a terrible sin!"

Sin. Every day I heard that word without knowing what it meant. At last, I was getting an idea of what sin was.

As a punishment, Gaston and I were made to kneel for one hour at the foot of St Joseph's statue, in the heat of the midday sun, our hands on our heads. But that was only the beginning. Then the nuns shut us up in the woodyard, which was inhabited by enormous dark rats. We were terrified; never have I suffered more. It was not until night that they came to release us and send us to bed without supper. Still our penance had not ended.

The next morning at the six o'clock Mass, Gaston and I were made to kneel on the flagstones in the center of the chapel, objects of shame before the rest of the institution. After the service, we had to make the stations of the cross, also on our knees. Our sin, we were told, was a mortal one, and the penalty was hell. To make sure we understood what was ahead for us, we were shown a picture of hell. In this picture, angels delivered sinners to Satan, who pushed them into flames filled with serpents. The angels were white, Satan was black.

Desperately I pled with the Mother Superior, begging her with all my might to believe in our innocence. At the end I actually fainted with terror. I had been condemned to the flames for getting my legs caught in my panties. And poor Gaston, who had only wished to help me untangle them! I tried to

comfort him by telling him that he would probably only be sent to purgatory, since the fault was mostly mine.

It was four years later that my eyes were opened to the fact that black people suffered because they were black. Until then I had thought that the suffering that was the lot of my companions and myself was special to ourselves. It was due to the fact that we were illegitimate, that we were of mixed blood, and that we had been consigned to the convent. Outside, on the other side of those iron gates, I felt sure, was a world of freedom and happiness. The people who passed on our Street of Paradise could fill their stomachs with good food and feast their eyes on the faces of the ones they loved every day.

It was on my eighth birthday that the shocking truth about the black people outside our walls came to me. I shall never forget how it happened, at exactly five o'clock in the afternoon. Already that morning there had been something strange in the air. I had sensed a feverishness among the nuns, although they ceased whispering and put on severe faces whenever one of us girls came near. Then, at the hour of vespers we were walking, as was our custom, two by two, toward the chapel. Suddenly the quiet was broken by a long scream.

Many years have passed since then but I can still remember how that scream pierced the warm air and made us shiver. Only an inhuman suffering could have wrenched it from a human throat. A moment later, other cries, equally terrible, were raised. Not one, but a number of men were sharing the same dreadful fate. I thought my heart would stop beating.

To reach the chapel we had to cross a central walk that ended at the great portal of the orphanage, a wrought iron gate always kept closed with a chain and an enormous padlock. Through the bars of the gate at the far end

of the walk we could see into the street. There, chained to one another, their wrists tied behind their backs, men were being driven by black guards, wielding *chicottes*.

Hardly twenty meters separated us from this pitiful procession. We could see long trickles of blood streaking the prisoners' black skin. The wretches seemed to be naked. In a terrified reflex of my training, I crossed myself and asked God to have pity on them.

The nuns hurried us on, pushing us into the chapel, where a harmonium was already thundering as for a high Mass. This was a calculated attempt to drown out the cries now coming regularly from the street. It failed, however, and the desperate, piercing shrieks continued, sounding over the liturgical chants in a din that seemed all the more unbearable.

The prisoners continued to stream past our high walls by the dozens, by the hundreds. Louder than the canticles, the terrible chorus of their cries, answered by the abuse of their chain-gang guards, filled our ears. Following the men were their wailing mothers, wives, and children. At times we could make out the words which the prisoners shouted over and over, like a litany: "We want to be French citizens ... We want to be French citizens!"

What evil, we asked ourselves, did these simple words contain? Why were those who used them so cruelly treated?

Nanette, one of my best friends, and older than I, slipped out of the chapel without being observed by any of the nuns. I followed her and we ran through the clumps of bushes in the garden to the gate. There we stood, gripping the bars, transfixed, watching the forbidden spectacle on the other side.

In spite of the fact that they were being whipped, the prisoners continued to shout their demands. These men, I thought, were of the same race as our mothers. How brave they were to continue, in spite of the lashes

that rained on their bloody backs! I had never seen such courage before. It stirred me with a passion to be equally strong. In my admiration I yearned to be one of them; I wanted to break through the bars of that cursed gate, to join that dreadful procession and help them carry their chains. I did not understand what they were asking for, but since they were willing to suffer for it, I felt sure they must be right.

I was weeping with rage when I felt a hand grip my shoulder. A nun who had noticed our absence had come looking for us. Hurriedly she led us back to the chapel. I knew that after the evening service I would not escape being punished for my misbehavior. And when I received the ten prescribed blows of the *chicotte*, I held back my tears and my cries. With all the force of my soul I wanted to be like the brave blacks I had seen earlier, who wanted to be French citizens.

The nuns realized that the girls had been badly shaken by what we had seen and heard that afternoon. They decided to make an effort to reassure us. At the evening meal in the dining hall, which was lugubriously lighted by storm lamps, Mother Thèrèse gave us an official explanation of the events of the day. Far from convincing me, her reasons for the chaining and whipping of the men only added to my conviction that right must be on the prisoners' side.

“You see, my children,” Mother Thèrèse said, piously folding her hands to underline the morality of the lesson she was about to give us, “these miserable Mucongo and Lari rebels have taken it into their heads to become French citizens.” The word “rebels” sounded strange to me; it did not seem to apply to what I had seen.

“They want to have the same rights as Europeans.” Mother Thèrèse paused to let the awfulness of this idea sink in. “They are committing a terrible sin of pride. Such mad ambition will lead them straight to hell. They

have been inspired by the devil.” Here, Mother Therèse crossed herself as a sign that we were to do the same. “Let us pray to God to pardon them and to protect us.”

After three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, we were sent to our dormitory, two by two, with strict orders not to speak again of the revolt. But I could not forget the feelings of passion that those bloodied black prisoners had stirred in me, as they filed past our barred gate.

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## 2

# Years of Misery, a Week of Happiness

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When I think of my childhood in the orphanage, it seems to me that it was lived within a great earthenware pot, blackened by the smoke of a wood fire. A heavy cover enclosed us; we were trapped helplessly, with no way out.

We never ceased to be hungry. What was pompously referred to as supper was usually a little manioc with *chikwang* and salt. On Sundays and feast days we were each given half of one sardine as a special treat. I always tried to get the tail of the sardine, if possible. On my plate of chipped enamel, I would flatten it gently, with love, stretching the oily flesh to give it the form, the illusion of being a whole fish. Then, joining my hands and closing my eyes, with all my might I would ask God to make a miracle for me as he did for Christ by transforming this half a sardine into a whole one. My stomach rumbled with hunger; I was so starved that I wanted to throw myself on that poor half a sardine, to devour it in a second. But no, it was absolutely necessary to keep my eyes closed and to pray with all my heart. Each time I opened my eyes I believed that this once I would

find a whole sardine on my plate. But miracles were not to be performed for me and I was never to find a whole sardine.

A girl named Marie who had recently arrived at the orphanage told me that her father once gave her a whole can of sardines to eat for her birthday. I never believed anything Marie said after that. How was it possible for any person on earth to have a whole can of sardines for herself alone? From then on, I knew that Marie was a liar. For I knew the truth, and the truth was that a whole sardine was not for the likes of us. Even today when I see a whole sardine on my plate, I am astonished. All the splendid meals I've had during my later years have never served to erase the pain that I associate with one whole sardine.

It was little Jesus, not Père Noël, we were told, who brought us a present at Christmas. Our presents were small things, like a needle or a rope of colored embroidery thread. When we were given a needle, we were expected to keep that needle the whole year. The needle was the essential tool of our instruction, our work. It was more important to us even than our meager portion of manioc. To lose one's needle was a serious offense. The nuns would smack your fingers hard and you were not given another one. If your needle broke, you took the part with the eye and sharpened the rough end on a hard stone until it was pointed enough to use again. Sometimes girls had to work with a needle that was tiny—not more than a centimeter long.

Once I lost my needle, and for the rest of the year I had to sew with a lemon tree thorn. Lemon wood is tough, and the thorn long and slender. After the bark has been removed and the wood has dried, it can be made into an acceptable needle by piercing it near the thick end with a red-hot real needle. The girl who had a real needle had a fortune, for the other girls would pay for the use of it with *bon points*. Africans are clever at making

do with substitutes. With use, and sometimes a little oil, the thorn developed a patina and was smooth enough to glide through the coarse linens and simple fabrics that most of our work involved. Mending was our main job. We mended the priests' and nuns' socks and did large-pattern embroidery work. We were not sewing fine fabrics like crepe de chine. For fine embroidery it was necessary to use a real needle, even if we had to borrow it.

After working so long with my improvised lemon thorn, my wish, for the Christmas of that year, was to receive a new needle. I made many rosaries and novenas and did everything I could to be good enough to deserve a needle of my very own from little Jesus. A crèche scene was installed in our classroom, and there, on Christmas morning, we prayed. When we opened our eyes, we found our presents. But alas, I did not find the needle for which I had tried so hard to be worthy. That was a terrible Christmas for me, without a needle.

The nights at the orphanage were dreadful. Night, it seemed to me, was like a great bird of prey that came and covered us, horrifyingly, with its black plumage. In my narrow iron bed, I rolled up in my coverlet, head and all, trying to escape the mosquitoes and to forget that night was outside. A hungry child never really sleeps. All night long I was aware of my hunger, listening to the sad, heavy sounds within my body. Occasionally an owl would screech, hauntingly, adding to my anguish, destroying my last threads of courage, for this inoffensive bird, we had been told, came from hell, and its cries were synonymous with bad omens. Hearing its fearful voice confirmed what I already knew: that tomorrow, again, would be a terrible day.

Mother Elizabeth was one of the nuns whom I met at the orphanage, the very one who delivered me into this world. But she left when I was about



six years old. The sisters wore habits of navy blue, made of a voluminous, floating cotton fabric; we found it beautiful as they walked. Their severe faces were outlined with a small white starched frame, from which a black veil fell over their shoulders. They must have had frightful lives before they joined the order. What else would make them savage small children as they did? Why else would they pinch a little girl's skin, twist it and yank, so that a piece came off in their fingers?

March was the worst time of the year for us, because it was then that the Sisters of Saint Joseph de Cluny held a retreat. The orphanage was plunged into constant prayer and meditation, and we made the stations of the cross constantly before March 19, which was the feast of Saint Joseph. No games or childish fun was permitted all month long; we were committed to unending rites to atone for our sins in the hope that, after millions of years in purgatory, we would be permitted to go to heaven.

To reinforce our understanding of these ideas we were shown large paintings of heaven, purgatory, and hell. Heaven was presented as a garden among the clouds, where God sat, surrounded by nuns and priests. This gave some of us the idea to become nuns ourselves, in the hope of getting to heaven faster. We became so terrified about our sins that our bodies actually shook at the nuns' warnings and predictions. At night we suffered dreadful nightmares, sometimes screaming with fear.

My God, how I dreaded the month of March! I was afraid, afraid! The nuns threatened us constantly and kept us in a state of crawling submissiveness. We were unable to say a word against them. We were afraid of life and afraid of death. Our lives were already hideous, but they prepared even worse things ahead for us. In March, from the moment we rose in the morning until we went to bed at night, we were subjected to this dreadful ritual—"the retreat." But in spite of their resources in teaching us

religion, I remained unconvinced. There were too many contradictions between its principles and the way we girls were treated.

I dreamed constantly of my enchanted days in the village of my ancestors. Faint memories of my happiness there—days of playing naked in the sun, nights of sleeping close against my mother on the mat—still haunted me. When life in the orphanage seemed unbearable, when I was longing to die, I would go to the window of our dormitory and there, alone, stare out at the trees in our compound. An enormous spreading avocado in the center of the court I privately named “The Tree of Freedom.”

As I stood there at the window, the odor of the wall’s clay bricks, softened by the rain, reminded me of the forests and glades where I took my first steps. I breathed in this scent deeply. It was delicate, full of nostalgia for me. I almost remembered the blackened clay pots of our meals, the smoke curling upward from the evening fires. I became obsessed by the odor of this gray clay. I returned to it again and again—it took possession of my whole frail body.

One day, on a mad impulse, I put my lips to the cool moist brick. The clay was soft as it had partly disintegrated in the rain, and now it melted in my mouth. My stomach, as usual, was empty and was racked with pains of hunger. I let the clay run like milk down my throat. My stomach accepted this strange offering with a rumble. Again I tasted the clay, and soon was sucking at the brick like a child at the breast of its mother. It was delicious, and perfectly smooth, without a single grain of sand to make the feast disagreeable.

After that, I stopped eating almost entirely the vile food of the dining hall. I left the rotten bits of fish or meat on my plate and waited for the

moment when I could return to the dormitory window and there, alone, fill my stomach with my secret new sustenance.

When there was no rain and the bricks hardened. I brought some water in a little white enamel basin and gently moistened one of the bricks. When it was thoroughly wet, I brought my lips to it and abandoned myself to my pleasure. But while my eyes were lost in a dream, my ears were still alert, for I knew very well that I must not be discovered in this act.

One day, however, I could not resist sharing my secret with my friend, Nanette. I told her of my discovery and showed her what I did. She tasted the clay and, finding it marvelous, she too became addicted. When everyone else was asleep at night, she and I would get up and go hungrily to our window and there carry out our unsanctified rite.

One night, Cecile, who was a well-known stool pigeon, awakened and saw us at the window. She came stealthily to see what we were doing and caught us standing there, sucking at the clay. The next morning, of course, she tattled on us and we were called to the office of the Mother Superior's assistant, Sister Gonzaga. Her eyes flashed in horror when she learned what we had done.

“What is the matter with you Andrée! And you, Nanette! You are a disgrace to the orphanage! How could you do such a thing? Eating such filth, how disgusting!” Words failed her. She twitched her robes and her long rosaries rattled.

She turned to me, whom she knew was the leader in the affair. “Andrée, for some time your thinness and paleness have been a source of concern to us. No wonder you look like a ghost. We never dreamed you were capable of such folly. Now you'll see!”

Sister Gonzaga took us straight to the Mother Superior who was equally appalled and furious. I knew by her face that the worst possible

punishments were ahead for us.

“Mother,” I begged, “whatever else, please don’t deprive me of the clay. I need it. When I don’t have enough to eat, it fills me up, and comforts me.” I burst into tears and threw myself at her feet. “Please don’t whip me, Mother, I didn’t mean to do anything wrong.”

My entreaties were useless. I was whipped and then carried, half-fainting, to the infirmary. The nurse who examined me there was alarmed at my condition. My stomach was hard as a rock. A doctor was called immediately.

“She must be taken at once to the Pasteur Institute,” he said. This was the most prestigious medical facility in Brazzaville. There several doctors leaned over my thin body, pressed my stomach, pulled down my lower eyelids to look at the whites of my eyes and spoke of my health as if it were something that mattered.

“If only I had known about this,” I thought. “I would have done something a long time ago.”

The doctors looked grave. They diagnosed imminent peritonitis and chronic anemia. In addition, a stool analysis revealed many parasites, and a blood test showed malaria.

Because my case was so serious, the institute made a report on it to the French administration. This resulted in a request for a report on the health of all the girls at the orphanage. Such charitable institutions were cited as examples of the beneficent effect of colonialism on the native population, and the orphanage could not be allowed to appear in a bad light. The French were becoming increasingly sensitive to criticism of their colonial policies.

The nuns were told that each girl was to bring a stool specimen to the Pasteur Institute for analysis. This announcement created great excitement.

Immediately there was a scramble among the girls to find a suitable container. The kind of tin can in which tomatoes and other vegetables are preserved was considered ideal. The can was rigorously scrubbed, all the rust removed to make it impeccable for this extraordinary commission. On the appointed day, we girls were marshaled into groups of ten. Then, each girl holding her precious container covered with a piece of paper on which her name was written, we marched proudly across town to the Pasteur Institute.

At the laboratory, the technician asked us, "Would you like to see what is living in your intestines?"

Never before had any of us looked into a microscope. Now we took turns putting our eyes to the lens to look at the smears on the slides. We were fascinated and petrified by what we saw. On a brilliantly lit field, dozens of dreadful-looking creatures writhed and struggled with each other. There were round worms and flat worms, and the worm that will crawl after you on the ground. There was the *ver solitaire*, and besides the worms, many other nightmarish, flagellating, oozing forms. Even the laboratory personnel were appalled and wondered that we weren't dead.

After the girls recovered from the first shock of what they had seen, they made a competition of their parasite count. "Oh, I have much more than you. But Claudine has the most of all!"

We were given vermifuge medicine, and after these treatments began to take on more weight. But our eyes were often yellow with jaundice and many of us were still very anemic.

I was kept at the hospital for blacks for a week and given many purgatives and irrigations in order to get rid of the clay packed in my intestines. The food there was not much different from what we had at the

orphanage—salted fish and manioc—but it was of a better quality, and to my delight, I was allowed much more of it.

Because of the deplorable condition in which the girls were found, the doctors came to inspect the orphanage for mosquito-breeding pools of water, and to see that certain rudimentary elements of hygiene were enforced. French officials questioned us girls about the schooling we received, and how we were treated. When they asked me, I was forthright in telling them how often we were whipped and how little we were fed. My answers got back to the nuns who professed to be wounded by my treachery. If they had found me a difficult child before, they now saw me as a troublemaker of worrisome potential.

Until then, the nuns had been free to abandon themselves to their impulses in dealing with us. A child who complained about her treatment was only whipped more. The black mothers could do nothing, and the nuns knew there was little to fear from the white fathers, who, in placing the child in the convent's care, showed that the child's happiness and well-being was of little concern to him. Guilt-ridden and indebted to the nuns for relieving them of a social nuisance, these men were not in a position to protest about the treatment of their children, if indeed the idea ever occurred to them. The nuns had no one to account to for their actions except the authorities in the French administration. With my childish illness, unwittingly, I had touched the very point on which they were most vulnerable.

Several weeks after making my deposition to the officials, I was called before Mother Gonzaga, who had always been very severe with me. After pointing out that what I had told the officials had brought difficulties to the orphanage, she informed me that I was a wretched ingrate.

“How could you say such things, after all we have done for you?” she demanded.

She did not really expect an answer. Since our meals had improved slightly and punishments had been less harsh, I did not want to lose what we had, so I listened in silence.

“My daughter,” Mother Gonzaga said, “the trouble with you is that you are the victim of pride. It will land you in hell. Truly, I pity you.” She lifted her head higher, as if to put more distance between us.

“You don’t seem to understand that it is more difficult for us to keep you than for you to stay with us. It is only because of the generosity of our holy order that we endure it. You should thank God on your knees for bringing you, a child of sin, into this temple of purification.”

I had thought quite a bit about this sin which was laid to us for being born of mixed blood. It seemed to me that since we had not asked to be born and since we had nothing to say about the mixing of our blood, the blame for the sin of it, if it were a sin, should be laid on the proper doorstep.

“I don’t see why we should have to be subjected to penances all our lives for what our parents did,” I said with spirit.

Mother Gonzaga gasped. “You are a shameless rebel, my child. What is the matter with you? Why can’t you be docile and good like the other girls?”

I considered this. I *was* more mutinous than the others, more quick to be angry about the injustices in our situation. Could it be because I had a stronger sense of my own honor and dignity? Or was it because I was more unhappy?

“The other girls,” I said slowly, “at least have the comfort of visits from their black relatives. But since I’ve been here, I have had visits from no one.

Perhaps I have less reason to be good.”

“What you have more of,” said Mother Gonzaga quickly, “is the wickedness of your father and the primitive nature of your mother.”

How it pricked me to hear my mother spoken of in this way! “I have no reason to be ashamed of my mother,” I said, tears coming to my eyes.

Seeing this, Mother Gonzaga decided to adopt a more subtle approach. “You are not a wicked girl, Andrée. You have a good heart, and this can save you, if only you will stifle your pride and learn to live with the reality of the life that has been given to you.”

What was the reality of our life, as she saw it? That we, the children of a night of love in a hut, should pay for that sin for the rest of our lives. That because the woman was black, the embrace was shameful and the love impure. Therefore, it was normal for us to be torn from our mothers, to be herded into orphanages, to be humiliated into resignation and obedience, and to expect nothing more of life than to become a house servant for whites.

In spite of the negative tone of the lecture that Mother Gonzaga had given me, there was to be an unexpected result. She had, in fact, heard my words, and not long afterward it was announced that my father and his wife were coming to see me. For the first time since they had put me in the orphanage five years earlier, I was to have a visit!

For this occasion, the nuns dressed me in my Sunday best. Our wardrobes consisted of two dresses: one for every day, a patched and pieced affair, usually a hand-me-down from another boarder who had outgrown it, and another dress for Sundays and feast days. For my father’s visit—and this was most unusual—I was given a pair of shoes to wear. Ordinarily we went barefoot, which, we were told, would help us “to avoid the sin of



pride.” These shoes pinched my feet horribly but I wore them without complaint for I took them as a sign of rehabilitation.

The visit, which lasted about half an hour, took place in the presence of the Mother Superior, who kept a tight rein on the whole interview. She did not leave us alone together for an instant. When I spoke, timidly, in answer to the few questions my father put to me, she fixed her eyes on me warningly. In fact, to make sure that I said nothing untoward, she stationed herself next to me, and while she and my father were talking, continually caressed my hair. This was a strange new sensation for me.

But even more strange were the things she said about me. I almost thought she was speaking of someone else. In honeyed tones, smiling as if I were one of her favorites, as if the entire convent found me a jewel, she averred that I was a good girl, pious, obedient, and charitable. In short, a model of Christian virtues. Now that my father was there, miraculously, I was no longer the bad seed of the orphanage.

My father touched my shoulder and expressed concern about my extreme thinness. The Mother Superior hastened to reassure him about this. It was only due to my growth and the approach of puberty.

“Children of mixed blood,” she said with a conspiratorial air, “are particularly precocious, you know.”

Throughout their exchanges I remained stiffly silent, although my heart was beating hard. I wanted desperately to throw myself into my father’s arms and tell him the truth about our existence there—that it was the bad treatment and rotten food that made us skin and bones. But the Mother Superior’s eyes were fixed on me. I knew I could not, and the few words I said were evasive. To keep from revealing my desire and my fear, I kept my eyes lowered.

My father realized I was hiding something but he was unable to ask me what it was. To keep him from probing, the Mother Superior adopted a confidential tone. “You see how Andrée is! Such an introverted child. She never will tell one anything.”

When I heard this, I felt desperate. I wanted so much to confide in this father whom I did not know, but who, I believed, in spite of everything, cared for me. But it was impossible to speak.

With a few more polite exchanges the visit came to a close. I dutifully kissed the cheeks of the two strangers who were before me, and they left. There was only one consolation to this dreadful event. Before leaving, my father said that my mother would come to see me.

I hardly dared trust the comfort that this promise brought to my aching heart. I was soon to be nine years old, and I still did not know my black mother toward whom my thoughts were constantly turning. Was it true that she would come? Would I, at last, see the face that haunted my nights, the face that I imagined in the shadows, leaning over my little iron bed?

While white relatives were given the honors of the Saint Joseph and Saint Mary Parlor, visits with black relatives were quite unsupervised. They took place on a bench under a palm tree in the courtyard. It was of no concern to the nuns what the girls told their black mothers. Complaining to them was quite useless.

I often watched, with a stealthy greed, when one of the other girls received a visit from her black mother. Stationed at a window, unable to tear myself away from the sight, I noticed every detail. How they embraced when they met. How the mother took her daughter on her lap, and held her. What a feeling that must be! Usually, after their greetings, the mother would open a cloth, spread it on the ground and take out something to eat.

My stomach grinding with hunger, I stared as the mother smiled and talked while her daughter ate. Would such happiness ever be mine?

One evening, three months later, Mother Thèrese called me. “Andrée! Come here at once.” I thought, what is it this time? Now what am I going to be whipped for?

But the nun’s voice sounded different from usual as she said, “You have a visitor.”

My heart beat fast. “A visitor? Who is it?”

“Your mother.”

“My ... *mother*?” My legs began to tremble so that I feared they would not support me.

“Yes, she’s waiting for you. Come.”

But I couldn’t move. I thought I would make *pipi* on the spot. Mother Thèrese had to take my hand and lead me. My frail body shaking with emotion, I let myself be led out to the courtyard. Please, God, I prayed, let her be alone. If she were in a group of visitors I feared I might not recognize her.

Twilight was falling. There was only one woman, not much taller than I, there, under the palm tree. She was smiling and she seemed to me the most beautiful woman in the world. Her arms stretched toward me.

Released from my terror, I flew to her. “Maman! My maman!”

With a cry of joy she swept me into her embrace. She hugged me close, close. For many moments we just held one another, she laughing, I sobbing with happiness. My face buried in her breast, I no longer felt like an orphan. I had my mother to touch and love.

After a time, finally, we were able to talk. She spoke to me in Sango. I couldn’t understand. It astonished her to find that I could speak nothing but

French. So, as best she could, she spoke to me in French, but it was not her tongue. For me, however, talking was of no importance. I was so overcome by my feelings that just to look at her for hours would have been enough for me.

“Your father has been kind,” she said. Searching for the words in French she went on. “He paid for my boat trip, so I could come to see you. And he asked the police commissioner to give me a *laissez-passer*. I have permission to stay for one week.”

“Only one week, Maman?” I was stricken. After five long years alone, five years without my mother’s tenderness, I was to have only one short week of her? Why was my happiness to be so brief? I began to cry again. As best she could, she comforted me.

Night fell quickly. The nuns insisted that my mother leave, as I had to appear in the dining hall for the evening meal. But she would return early the next morning, she promised, as she kissed me goodbye.

The other girls were astonished to learn of my visit. After all this time it was a great surprise to them to learn that I too possessed a real mother. They were eager to hear what happened between us in the courtyard. When dinner was over and we had escaped from the nuns, they plied me with questions. What was my mother like? Was she young? What had she said? Had I told her how they whipped us? I gave my friends the best account I could, but to tell the truth I could not really picture my mother except as a kind of dream. In the evening shadows, paralyzed by my feelings, I had not really made out the features of my black mother. All night long I turned in my bed, thinking of her smile. That smile for which I have never, anywhere, found an equal.

Her appearance the next morning, in the sunlight, overwhelmed me. She was so young, so beautiful! From the windows where I had often watched,

now my companions, tender or envious, watched me as I ran with pride and joy to the bench where my mother was waiting for me.

She had dressed that day with all the coquetry in the world, to win her daughter's heart. Like other women of that period, she wore a camisole top, and on her head was a silk kerchief, embroidered with little flowers. Her skirt was red and fringed with a lace that was sparkling white. Enormous green and yellow bracelets hung on her slim arms. She wore a necklace of the same colors, and dangling earrings. The whole effect was a bit gaudy, accustomed as I was to our sober attire in the convent, but I soon forgot this and was looking only at her face. I had never seen an expression so sweet.

She had powdered herself abundantly, up to the base of her throat, as was the custom after bathing in our country. It was considered very chic, very *évolué*, to have a collar of talcum powder, there, and in the creases of one's arms, everywhere one might perspire. One of my first impressions of my mother was of a heavenly fragrance. My sense of her was impregnated with the wonder of this.

“You smell so good, Maman,” I murmured, in my awe.

“It's my powder,” she laughed. “Do you like it? Tomorrow I'll bring you some.”

On her feet my mother wore slippers made by the Aoussa shoemakers of her country. These sandals with wooden heels were called *mapapa*. They clacked when the women walked; it was one of the affectations of our people. To my delight, my mother had brought a smaller pair of these slippers for me. I put them on at once; at last my feet were shod in something of their very own.

My mother was completely natural and spontaneous with me. She did exactly what came into her head. She played with me as if I were her doll.

“Your hair is light brown, like your father’s,” she pronounced with great pride, and she began to undo my long braids. Shaking them out, she combed my hair so that it fell in waves over my back. Next, she took off my clothes. She wanted to look at my body, to touch it, she wanted to know me completely.

I didn’t have on any panties, she found, to her dismay. “Why are you like this, without panties?” she complained. “You should wear panties. And your dress is full of patches. Why? The daughter of Pierre Gerbillat should not be dressed like this.”

Some of the girls were watching us from the windows, and when they saw what my mother was doing they were scandalized. “Oh, my God,” they gasped. “She’s taking the clothes off her daughter.”

I didn’t want her to do it. I was holding my arms over my body because it was strictly forbidden to take your clothes off with other people looking. I tried to hide myself inside my chemise. But laughing gaily, my mother insisted on removing everything and studying my small brown body. She played with my hair, arranging it over my bare shoulders and back, according to her taste. Turning me this way and that, she admired the effect that it made. Finally, to my relief, she dressed me again.

My mother had brought to the convent, balanced on her head, a large basin filled with *gari*, a coarse meal that is ground from baked manioc. It is a staple of the African diet. Mixed with water it is eaten as a paste, with a bit of salt during the meal, or with sugar as a dessert. It was a joy to me to have food that I could share with my friends, food brought by my mother on the boat, all the way from Bangui to Brazzaville. Now we could fill our stomachs together, and this would be my treat. It was the first time.

During those long, happy hours in the courtyard, my mother never stopped kissing me and smoothing my cheeks. Sometimes she spoke to me

in Sango, the language of my ancestors, sometimes in Lingala, the most common language in the Congo. She told me how proud she was of me, the child of a white man, her only child. She was touching in her love for my father, whose name she wore tattooed on her forearm as a part of the marriage ritual of our people. Although she had never aspired to being legally wed to her white man, my mother had wanted this tattoo.

The chic with which my mother dressed made an impression on the other girls. Later they said to me, “Oh, your mother is so elegant, Andrée. She dresses with such coquetry.” Not only was her visit a social promotion for me, proving that I was not alone, but my mother’s own person drew the respect and attention of my friends. Suddenly I had something that I had never known.

The next day, although such vanities were forbidden us, she brought me some of her talcum powder in a little piece of paper, enough to share with a friend. The brand was *Chère Amie*. Even now I can remember exactly how it smelled, and the sense of wonder it produced.

Each morning she returned, in spite of the remonstrances of the Mother Superior. The nuns were vexed by the continued presence of this woman whom they didn’t even know, and who created a distinct agitation in the school.

“It’s only for a week,” I begged, when the Mother Superior lectured me on the effect that these visits were having on the other girls. But since it was my father who had arranged for my mother’s trip there was no way that her visits could be denied.

The days passed. My mother and I spent long moments sitting side by side on the bench, arms linked, holding one another. During the silences we often simply exchanged looks of tenderness. I basked in my mother’s smile. The radiance of life was in that smile. In it, one perceived life as a state of

pleasure. I was astonished by this. After the sour, suspicious faces of the nuns, here was another expression entirely, one that proclaimed happiness as a natural state of being.

When my mother laughed—which was often—her teeth were sparkling white, and the timbre of her voice was that of a very young woman, gay and clear. It was the voice of a woman who was happy to find her daughter, and at the same time, of a light-hearted woman, one who did not have great cares in her life. In spite of the fact that my father had abandoned her and deprived her of her child, Joséphine expressed no resentment toward him. She spoke of him with a simplicity of affection that approached adoration. It was Henriette whom she detested and blamed for her heartaches. But for my father she seemed to feel only gratitude that he had given her the opportunity to come to Brazzaville and to show her love for me. What counted for her were her feelings for her child.

It was because Joséphine had created the row at the boatside that, until this visit, my father had refused her the right to see me. The police had actually been obliged to intervene on the dock and put Joséphine in her place. According to the whites' law, a black could not be permitted to "disturb the life of a European." When Gerbillat saw that this illiterate seventeen-year-old girl had no fear of him, a prominent white businessman, or of public opinion or the law, he knew she was capable of anything. He was afraid she might try to kidnap me from the orphanage. For this reason, her movements were closely watched by the Brazzaville police commissioner. If she had overstayed her visit or been irregular in any way, she would have been put in jail.

One sad day, our visit drew to a close. With many tears we parted. I was not to see my mother again for six long years.



After my father's appearance at the orphanage he showed a little more concern for me, and twice a year he sent a package of clothes. The dresses, as the nuns had asked him, were white, so I could wear them for the ceremonies on Corpus Christi day. I was pleased with my dresses; but unlike my companions, I was not permitted to wear the traditional crown of white roses in my hair, as a symbol of purity. This was because of the mortal sin that I had committed with little Gaston at the age of four.

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### 3

## Coming of Age Brings New Terrors

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I have often looked for reasons to forgive my father for placing me in the orphanage. I have tried to believe that, because he married a European woman, he had no alternative. Children like me had no place in a conventional European marriage, or even in European society. To put his conscience at ease, he may have felt that he had to do something, and the orphanage seemed the least-worst thing. There is no doubt in my mind that Henriette was behind the whole plot. She may have feared that as long as I was in the village my father would have an excuse to return there and spend time with Joséphine. Once I was safely down the river, her husband, who now had his own transport business in Bangui, would no longer make those disloyal sorties back into the brush. They could arrange their lives as they pleased, without being reminded of an unpleasant past. In yielding to this colonial psychology, my father also served to reinforce it, to perpetuate its evil.

The children of mixed blood were a shameful stigma to this society in which the lines for blacks and whites were so clear cut. That we existed at all was evidence of error in the ways of the infallible colonials. We

therefore had to be separated from this society. With this miserable orphanage for us mixed bloods, the colonialists provided a means of controlling a potentially dangerous idea: that black and white *could* mix. It was therefore imperative to keep us shamed and humiliated in order to quench any spirit among us that might seem ready to draw advantage from this carnal association of black and white.

The nuns, then, were given the job of modeling our minds as well as lodging our young bodies. We were to be taught total resignation and submissiveness, so that we would not in any way upset the precarious balance of the white man's ship on the already roiling waters of black discontent. It was necessary, however, that the institution preserve the air of a charitable spirit. Thus, the orphanage was to accomplish two purposes: while serving to perpetuate a racist society, it was also to be proof of the colonials' humanity.

The orphanage had no interest in giving its charges a real education. Basically we were formed to serve the whites on weekdays and to glorify the Catholic Church on Sundays. To those ends we were taught just enough French and manners not to offend those whom we would serve.

There was hardly anything of an academic nature in our instruction; certainly not enough to earn a certificate of primary education. The nuns showed no concern as to whether or not a child was bright or interested in learning. What little reading and writing they taught us was mostly to enable us to learn our catechism. But even that, we learned by rote, without an understanding of the ideas it contained. The few stories and vague ideas about the world that we picked up were based on religion. We learned Latin songs by heart, but we did not learn Latin as a language.

Sewing was the one skill in which we excelled. We learned to sew marvelously because it was a prime source of revenue for the Order. The

older girls did the most refined embroidery: sheets, pillowcases, tablecloths, and napkins. These were sold at religious fairs in Africa and in Europe by the mother house of St. Joseph of Cluny.

I became expert at making my own dresses when I was quite young. When my father came to visit me, he brought me two presents: a gold chain with my name on it (which was immediately put away to protect me from the sin of pride), and a large doll. It became my passion to make clothes for this doll, which I named Yasse. This means “little girl” in Sango, my mother’s tongue. Almost without help I began to design and cut out dresses for my doll, sewing and fitting them, although they let me play with her only twice a week. And if I wasn’t good, the privilege was revoked.

The doll was about eighteen inches tall and, of course, blond. A doll with black skin was unthinkable then. When tilted back, she closed her eyes as if sleeping and said, “Papa, Mama.” It made me terribly sad to hear my doll say, “Papa, Mama,” as if she had a right to parents, while I did not. I felt sure that it was my stepmother who picked out this poisoned present for me.

Although I could not take my doll to bed with me at night, or play with her when I wished, the fact that I possessed her was still something very special. The other girls envied me; they had nothing like the doll or like the chain with my name on it. But for me the two presents were a dreadful contradiction to the fact that I was so alone. I could not understand why my father had visited such cruelties on me.

Mother Germaine was a wicked woman. Sometimes she stole our needles, just to create a condition for which she could punish someone. She was odious—wickedness personified. When she pinched me, she didn’t just give me a tweak, but took a tiny piece of skin and twisted it harder and harder,

looking at me with such sadistic intensity that it was like a nail going into my heart. I couldn't invent the cruelties she concocted for us. Marie Creuset, a gentle girl, wet her bed. It was a sickness. She had to have two children before she was completely cured of it. Mother Germaine put a potato sack on Marie's bed, and during the night, of course, she wet it. The next day Marie was tied up in the sack stinking of *pipi*, with just her head sticking out, and they made her stand all day long thus, in front of the statue of Saint Joseph.

One day, Mother Germaine told me to write on the blackboard, "J'ai froi." In an excess of earnest effort, I pronounced it to myself, "fou-roi," and wrote it that way. Mother Germaine slapped me. I ran and hid under her desk. She seized the *chicotte* that was always at hand and whipped at me awkwardly for some moments. I was so frightened my bladder emptied. I had to remain on my knees there, with what I had done, in front of everyone. I was so ashamed. Even today, when a strong emotion grips me or when I am afraid, it produces that reaction in me, and I must run to the bathroom. This is Mother Germaine's legacy to me, to this day.

Another time she made me miserable with shame was when I had climbed up in a tree with some of my friends. Mother Germaine came and ordered us down at once. The others jumped to the ground, but I was clumsy. My dress caught on a branch, and I found myself swinging upside down, unable to free myself. Mother Germaine clapped her hands and called the others to see me. My body was quite naked for we were not lucky enough to have panties then. There I hung, with my bare behind exposed horribly for a long time while Mother Germaine and the others pointed at me and laughed.

Mother Germaine was not bad looking. She was tall and had strong, well-shaped eyebrows. Her lips were full. When she chose to, she had a

pleasant smile. But her habitual expression was one of discontent and cruelty. She said she was attached to us, but this attachment was that of a vulture to its prey. With us she seemed to revenge herself for something denied in her own life. She especially detested me, because she found in me a resistance that the other girls dared not show. When, as a punishment, she would demand, “Kneel!” I would not do so at once. She would slap me. Still I would not kneel. Two or three more times I accepted her slaps before I would slowly go down on my knees. Finally she would have her way. But I had the satisfaction of knowing I had resisted.

My father sent me a dress and shoes. Mother Germaine gave them to another girl, Madeleine, to wear, and Madeleine flounced about in them, teasingly, in front of me. Children can be cruel. At such times I would ask myself, “Why am I living on this earth?” I couldn’t understand why I was suffering so much. I knew that I invited some of my problems by my stubbornness, but I simply could not give myself up to living joyously and easily the way some of the girls did. I was a reflective child. More than the others, I spent time alone thinking. When I was by myself, off to one side, Mother Germaine would say, “Look at that *belle bêcheuse*, sitting there so proud, like a European lady.” And Mother Germaine would sit down and cross her ankles and put her hands in her lap, mimicking me, while everyone burst into laughter. “Let’s play Andrée!” became a game to torment me. I had done nothing—I was just sitting there thinking, and they thought I was trying to act like a great lady. “The daughter of Monsieur Gerbillat,” Mother Germaine would mock me. But who was Monsieur Gerbillat to me, when I was so terrified of this unknown father that I could not even look him in the face?

The second time my mother visited me at the orphanage was when she was on her way to Dahomey with her new husband, Joseph Mialou. They had been married in a church ceremony, as well as a civil one in Bangui. At that time my mother became a Catholic and was baptized, so that Joséphine became her real, Christian name.

For a black man, Joseph Mialou held an exceptionally high post in the administration. He worked directly under the mayor of Bangui. However, he was not from our country. He had been born in Dahomey, which was known then for its educated blacks. It was colonial policy to place a black who was in a position of responsibility far from his home. This made him easier to manage, less likely to become a leader, and as such, a threat to the establishment. At that time, men were trained in Dahomey and then sent to distant corners of the French empire as civil servants. Joseph had served a number of years at his post in Bangui and was now on his way home, on a year's leave, with his new wife.

I found my stepfather a man of stately beauty. He had had smallpox as a child, and it had left deep scars on his face, but he was tall and straight, a man of presence. He possessed great dignity and commanded the respect of all who knew him. I came to love him very much.

That Joseph was a rare man was proved by the fact that everywhere he was accorded special privileges. On the Congo's boats, blacks were obliged to travel and sleep on the bridge, as best they could. Because of his position, Joseph and his wife were given a first-class cabin. My mother, I confess, was not really in this category. She was a magnificent creature and very beautiful, but actually she was an uninhibited woman of the village and not at all what one thinks of as "quality." However, as the legal wife of a man in the higher echelons of the administration she was entitled to this privilege, which she could never have had otherwise. I was very proud to learn of this.

Even the nuns were impressed by Joseph Mialou and showed great interest in him. When he and my mother arrived at the orphanage, they went to the bench under the palm tree where black relatives waited for the girls. But the Mother Superior, after speaking with Joseph, became deferential and invited him to step into the Saint Joseph and Saint Mary room to chat. In spite of their highly developed prejudices, the nuns immediately showed unusual consideration for Joseph Mialou.

While my new stepfather was conversing with the Mother Superior about the church at Cotonou and other lofty subjects, my mother and I sat together, happy, on the bench under the palm tree. I was fourteen years old, and my breasts were beginning to develop. My mother spoke of the change she perceived in me and, marveling, gently touched my breasts. She was thrilled and delighted, to see the body of her child being transformed into that of a woman.

I dropped my eyes at her touch. I had been told that I must never touch my breasts for it was a mortal sin. In my heart I prayed that it would not be a sin for my mother.

“You are becoming a young woman,” she said. “Have you begun to have your periods?”

I gasped at her words, for I had not yet begun to menstruate, and only girls who were menstruating were supposed to know what a period was. Great efforts were made to keep us ignorant. As soon as a girl began to menstruate, she was moved out of the dormitory of the middle group into the dormitory of the older girls. She was no longer permitted to associate with the middle girls for fear her knowledge would contaminate them. The big girls had a special place in the laundry room where they washed their period napkins, and the younger girls were not allowed to enter there.



A distant cousin on my mother's side, Marie Louise, was then also in the orphanage. I had not told my mother how badly the nuns treated us for fear it would hurt her. But Marie Louise told her. "You see how thin Andrée is?" she pointed out. I was thin as a pin. "And Mother Germaine whips her constantly."

My mother was furious. She began to shout. She could be heard all over the school. "Where is she, that Mother Germaine? Where is she? Just let me get my hands on her!"

Mother Germaine came to see what the matter was. Fearlessly my mother hurled herself at the nun. "You're the one? You're whipping my child? I'll fix you, you barren woman! Whipping the children of other people, and you don't even know what it is to have a child! You aren't even a real mother!"

While Mother Germaine made scandalized and ineffectual responses, my mother prepared to fight. Still shouting, she pulled off her camisole top, so that her breasts were bare. Menacingly, she tightened her *sacatubu*, her long red skirt, secure around the waist. As was the custom of her people, my mother wore many strands of the little disks called *tsigida* around her waist. These were regarded as a form of wealth. The windows were crowded with girls who had come running at the sound of the commotion. When my mother took off her camisole the girls gasped at the sight. "Look at Andrée's mother! How many strands of *tsigida* she has! Oh, she is rich!"

Mother Germaine, who had had two operations on her knees, was totally unprepared for what my mother intended. Joséphine threw herself upon the nun, hitting her with her fists several times on the face and shoulders. She grabbed the nun's coif and ripped it off. She tore her gown. A few meters away, I nearly fainted.

The fracas did not go on very long. In the Saint Mary and Saint Joseph parlor the Mother Superior had become aware of the uproar, and she came hurrying out, followed by Joseph Mialou. It was he who pulled Joséphine off the tattered, humiliated nun.

“Oh, excuse her, excuse her!” my stepfather repeated dozens of times. “Oh, my good Mother, I beg your forgiveness, a thousand pardons!”

My mother was still shouting as she picked up her camisole and unhurriedly put it back on. “Starve our children, will you? And your husband doesn’t even give you a child of your own!”

Joseph Mialou couldn’t stop apologizing to the nuns, but he was unable to reproach Joséphine. Many men would have hit their wives to make their point, but Joseph was so civilized and so correct that all he could do was apologize to the nuns and drag Joséphine away.

The evening before this delicious scene took place, my mother had presented the Mother Superior with a jug of peanut oil and a little live kid. Such generous gestures were a part of the African mentality. But when my mother learned the truth about how we were treated, she changed her mind. She went to the Mother Superior and insisted that she give the little goat back.

The next day my mother came to visit me during class hours. She had no right to do this, as it was strictly forbidden. But since the nuns hadn’t called the police, she knew she had frightened them. Unrepentant when the Mother Superior threatened her, she had made her own threats. She said that she was going to inform Monsieur Gerbillat about everything, and that Monsieur Gerbillat, who was a very powerful man, as powerful as the governor, would fix them. So this morning she came, when she shouldn’t have, deliberately, defiantly, as a challenge. I was in my embroidery class when the nuns saw Joséphine seat herself, elaborately, under the palm tree,

to wait for me. The whole school knew my mother had attacked Mother Germaine. Not only the *métisse* girls but even the black girls in the other building had heard of the scandal. Although everyone found the affair thrilling, actually there were two positions on it. Some of the girls found it entirely justified and thought it a splendid act. But there were others who found it deplorable. As for me, I was already the black sheep of the orphanage, and now, because of my mother, I was in even deeper disgrace.

The nuns consulted among themselves and decided that it would be prudent not to admit to being baited. They called me from my sewing. “Your mother will be here only two more days. Fortunately. However, since she is here, you may go to be with her now.”

When they released me to her, my mother knew that she had won. Pressing her advantage, she informed the Mother Superior that she wanted to take me into town. Coolly, she said there were some things she wanted to buy for me. Although this was against all the principles of the orphanage, the Mother Superior, flabbergasted, actually consented. It was nothing less than a miracle. I was to walk in the streets alone, with my mother. This was my first trip outside the orphanage when I was not in a group of at least a dozen girls, closely chaperoned by a nun. I actually felt afraid in the street. Everything made me tremble and glance about.

My mother took me into a little shop owned by a Portuguese merchant. There she bought me a splendid colonial helmet. She was so proud that I was fair, so obsessed with having had the child of a white man, that she found it absolutely indispensable that I protect my face from the sun. The helmet had a little black band around the crown. In the cathedral on a recent Sunday, I had noticed several *évolués* and Portuguese wearing this kind of a helmet with a black band.<sup>1</sup> I knew that it was the latest thing, very chic. I immediately put on the helmet, which was incredibly light.

My mother also bought me two little napkins of the kind that the Portuguese fabricate to sell to African women for their periods. I had never seen such things. I didn't know what they were for. My mother said to me in Lingala, "Now that you have your little breasts, you are becoming a woman. One day you are going to have blood, there."

This worried me. I thought I was going to be wounded, which did not appeal to me at all. I liked my colonial helmet, but I really was not pleased that she had bought these pads of indigo blue cloth for me.

When we returned to the orphanage the other girls crowded around to learn the details of my incredible sortie. I was delighted to show them my magnificent helmet and the espadrilles that my mother had bought. The nuns, when they caught sight of my indigo squares, confiscated them at once, to forestall befouling questions.

It was on a Friday afternoon that this extraordinary shopping expedition took place. Two days later my mother and Joseph Mialou left. I begged them to take me with them to Dahomey. But there was no question of that. I could not even leave the orphanage to sleep with them, which would have made me very happy. It was my father who had deposited me with the nuns, like a lost article, and it was on his pleasure only that my fate depended.

Joseph was a deeply religious man. When possible, he would go to church three times a day. He was so inculcated with respect for the white man's law that it did not occur to him to go against my father's will. He saw how miserable I was in the orphanage, and this saddened him, but his advice was to take my troubles to God. It must be understood that at that time, in equatorial Africa, no one from any institution, Catholic or Protestant, would have admitted that they mistreated the children committed to them. Today things have changed, but then the feelings of blacks, and especially of children, were not a matter worthy of

consideration. We were little black creatures whom, at considerable nuisance to themselves, they were saving from sin. If possible, we were to be turned into nuns like themselves. Joseph understood this mentality very well. He even said he would be happy to have me become a nun.

“What!” my mother cried. “You want her to be one of those women? You want her to be like *them*?” The idea made her crazy. She began to heap abuse on him at the very thought. Joseph did not argue with Joséphine about this or anything else. It was easy to see that he adored her. Adored her smile, her vitality, her easy, natural ways. It made me happy to see her with a man who esteemed her so much, and who gave her a respected place in society. With him, I thought, her life would be easy and pleasant.

Joseph’s goodness won me at once. He too wanted to give me a present; he bought me several little religious pictures. These he gave to me with an expression of affection in his eyes. By the time he left I was deeply attached to him.

My newfound happiness, however, was to become an arm against me. Later, when I would fall asleep from hunger and weakness at evening prayers, which went on for an hour or two, I would be wakened with a slap and the new threat, “We’ll tell your stepfather!” Thus, Joseph’s piety and my love for him were to become one more means by which the nuns could torment me.

The Sunday after my mother’s visit I was permitted to wear my colonial helmet to Mass at the cathedral. Afterward the nuns led us on a promenade to the fields and woods just outside of Brazza. As usual, on this promenade, we were obliged to walk meekly, two by two. When we got to the top of a little hill, the nuns seated themselves together to enjoy the view and the fresh air, and we girls were released to run about and explore. We were so

starved that we could think of only one thing: immediately we began to look for wild fruits to eat.

If we could not find fruits, we would even eat *moupanzi*, the young red shoots of a certain kind of bush. Greedily we would tear them off and chew them, like goats. The flavor of these leaves was good, something like *oseilles*—sorrel berries—but they gave us dreadful diarrhea. We knew when we ate them that we would be sick, and have severe stomach cramps afterward, but still we ate them, just to fill ourselves for a little while.

On this day I was delighted to find, in a little clump of trees, a nest of *m'bololo*. This is a gummy fruit with a big seed. When ripe it is delicious, but when it is not entirely ripe the flesh is milky. I felt so lucky to have found this clump of *m'bololo*, I wanted to gather them all, every one, to share with my companions. I did not intend to leave one behind, and so I used my helmet as a basket in which to pile the fruit.

The nun's whistle sounded, everyone returned and obediently got into line, two by two, and here I came with my helmet full of *m'bololo*, happy as could be. I was quite unaware that the milk of the bruised fruit was leaking into my helmet. Mother Germaine saw it and began to shout at me.

My mother had left Brazza just that morning, which had made me very sad, but finding the *m'bololo* had comforted me and the prospect of sharing them with my companions was giving me pleasure. I couldn't imagine what the matter was now.

As soon as I came within range, Mother Germaine landed two good slaps on my cheeks, then heaped me with reproaches. "What an impossible girl you are! There's no one like you! You will clean up your helmet the minute you get back to the orphanage. You don't deserve to have a new helmet or shoes! What are we to do with such a dreadful child!"

We returned to the orphanage. My heart aching, I hastened to the laundry room. There I emptied all the wild fruit on the floor. In seconds they were gone the same girls who laughed when I got slapped now snatched up the fruit and began to devour them; there wasn't even one left for me. But that was the least of my concerns. The crown of my helmet contained a puddle of the gummy milk and the sides were stained. I tried to pour out the milky substance, to wipe it clean with my fingers. This did little good. Finally I held it under the tap to let the running water rinse it out. Within seconds my helmet with the black band had melted into a shapeless mush. It was not made of cork, as are the real colonial pith helmets it was just a junk imitation made for sale to the Africans. The material used was the fibrous pulp of sugar cane, molded and dried into the shape of a helmet, then covered with khaki cloth to look like the real thing. It would not have survived one hard tropical rain. There was a lesson to be learned from this disastrous parody of the white man's style. But as I squeezed the mushy lump in my hands I could think only of my grief.

A new arrival at the orphanage was a source of great interest to us, for she was speaking the language of her mother and her impressions of the great world outside were fresh. Greedily we talked to her, learned all we could from her about her village and the life she had known. I thought about those unknown villages, tried to imagine the rivers and forests she had seen. I had been too young to remember my trip down the Congo, too stricken with the loss of my mother to care for anything else. The majestic Congo, although not far from our compound, we saw only from the distance. I dreamt of those other rivers of the interior with longing.

I thought that in learning the African languages I could make mine the marvelous things that were denied to us in our life at the orphanage.

The Kikongo and Lingala languages are very different in construction, although they have some common words since the two ethnic groups have often mixed. In these languages memories were evoked that would otherwise have been lost in the French of the orphanage. Whatever came from outside the orphanage, from Africa, I sought. It was a world to which I belonged, but had been cut away. I felt I had to learn the contours of that life outside, and language was the means through which came my Africa. I groped for means to possess my heritage, to understand it, to make it mine. Everything that was of Africa became my passion.

The nuns hid Africa from us. They refused it and forbade it, almost as if it were something shameful. And the French they taught us was only enough to eke out a living as a seamstress for white ladies. We had no real access either to Africa or to France.

When I was fifteen years old, I still had not begun to menstruate. This, doubtless, was due to my poor health; I was always so hungry and weak. Holding so much pain inside of me may also have had something to do with it. Then too, having eaten clay when I was young had completely wrecked my insides.

I was long past the age of the other girls in the middle group but still I was kept in that dormitory. One day some blood was noticed in one of the four *tines* that served as toilets for the middle group of girls. This was reported to Mother Imelda, who assumed that, since I was the eldest, I must have begun my period. She called me to her and began, in the most circumspect way, to question me. Since it would be an error to give ideas to a girl who had not begun to menstruate, she talked in such a roundabout way that it baffled me. In fact, it made me nervous. Never before had a nun spoken to me with such regard for my person.



“My dear Andrée, it is quite natural, you know, to tell me, now that I am asking you, is it not so?—if you have observed anything unusual, that is, anything that you would like us to know about, since all we wish to do is to help you ...” For some minutes she talked in these sickening circumlocutions.

When I understood, finally, what she was referring to and what she was asking me, I saw it as the chance of my life. The girls of the middle dormitory were the most mistreated in the orphanage. It was they who had to do the most disagreeable work, like emptying the *tines*; it was they who were whipped the most and heaped with the most reproaches. The small girls could not do very heavy work, and the older girls were given a certain respect, they were treated less harshly. I had borne the treatment of the middle group for longer than most, I could not stand it anymore. Now I saw my opportunity.

“God have pity on me,” I thought. “I am going to tell a lie. I can’t stand any more of those whippings. I must get out of the middle group. Today is the day.”

The prospect of telling this outright lie increased my nervousness, and Mother Imelda saw it. “Don’t be afraid, dear child, just tell me what happened. Your friend, Adele, who is one of the older girls, will help you.”

I dropped my eyes and put on a big act. “I can’t talk about it to you,” I said. Then, when I was alone with Adele, I said, “It’s me.”

Adele told Mother Imelda, and such a fuss was made then! She got me a long, torn sheet of muslin and told me that I was to use this for a belt. Then she went pompously to get the two hygienic napkins that had been taken from me lest I think about them, and I was instructed in what to do. I was astonished at the amount of ritual involved in putting a little square fabric between one’s legs. But when I came out of the infirmary, I was so proud, I

looked at the other girls from the end of my nose. I had an entirely new status in the orphanage, I was over the hill of adolescence. I was at once assigned a bed in the dormitory of the big girls.

From then on, I knew the nuns would not scold and whip me systematically, and that my life would be easier. As a member of the older group, I could now give orders to the girls of the middle group as to a “boy” or servant. “Go fetch me that. Do such and such for me.” The middle girls did the same to the small girls and made them act as “boy.” We had our own hierarchy of power, even in our helplessness in that orphanage.

But I still hadn’t begun to menstruate, and when the time came for me to go into the laundry with the other girls to wash my linen I was seized with panic. I went to the statue of the Virgin Mary and I knelt in front of her and prayed, “Oh, please, blessed Virgin, make me indisposed. I beg of you, Oh please, please. I know I lied, but I had to, I couldn’t stand it in the middle group any longer. Please intercede for me and make me indisposed and I promise I’ll wear these blue pads for the rest of my life. If you’ll just make this miracle for me and make me indisposed.”

In addition to my fear of being found out, there was something else that troubled me deeply, and that was the way the girls in the older dormitory talked. The things they discussed—their breasts, their periods, their brassieres! Young girls were not allowed to know how a brassiere was made, and so the older girls were shut up in a special room when they made their brassieres. To speak of such terrible subjects, we middle girls had been told, was sinful. I was appalled at the number of sins these older girls were accumulating for themselves.

Perhaps, I reflected, it was not sinful for the older girls to speak of those vile things, only for middle girls. But then, since I had not yet begun to menstruate and was not yet legitimately an older girl, had I the right to hear

those things? Weren't those sins accumulating against me? My dilemma was dreadful.

Terrified, I prayed for the Virgin Mary to make me indisposed, not only to save me from being discovered in my lie but also to save me from God knew how many additional millions of years in purgatory, for hearing talk which I had no right to hear.

Torn, miserable, I said to my friend Adele, "I'm so scared. How long does this take?" She said, "Don't be afraid, it's only for three or four days."

In order to carry out my lie, I got some red clay—Brazzaville is built on red clay—and put a little of this on my blue squares when it was time for me to wash them in the laundry room. I would always leave a little trace on the cloth so when I hung it up someone would say to me, "Andrée, you haven't rinsed yours well enough."

I learned that this period was supposed to happen once a month, and acted out my role with aplomb. I even came to enjoy it. One could complain of cramps, I found, or a need to lie down. I regularly developed all the appropriate symptoms. It was marvelous, giving me such a sense of importance.

For six months I deceived everyone, and then one day it happened. I did get my period. But it was not at all what I had expected. I was terrified because it was not blood, as they had said it would be, but a horrible, chocolate-like paste with lumps in it. I had dreadful cramps. I cried and cried in my bed and finally they called a doctor for me. He said, "Why, the poor thing, it's her first time!"

What a scandal that made! I was obliged to admit that all those months I had faked it, I had not been menstruating. But the nuns could not do much to me then, because the doctor was involved. I admitted to him that the reason I lied was in order to get out of the middle dormitory where I had

been so badly treated. The nuns had already experienced the results of my attestation to the authorities before, and they knew I was dangerous. The doctor saw, in fact, that I was very anemic and in need of medical care, which he insisted be given to me. But it was more than a year before I was to have a normal period.

Mother Germaine never lost a chance to humiliate me, and the incident of the photograph at the waterfalls only served to exacerbate the violent feelings between us.

When our dresses were torn or became too short, they were mended with a fabric of another color—whatever was at hand. In this institution, which depended on charity, we learned to get by with very little. I was about sixteen when we were given the special treat of an excursion to Djoué to bathe at the waterfalls, about five kilometers outside Brazzaville. As we did not have bathing suits, we wore our *pagnes*, a long, simple garment that covered us modestly from neck to ankle. I had had my *pagne* for many years and it had become much too short for me, so I added a piece of new material near the face as a kind of yoke on top. I thought it looked very nice.

Monsignor Guichard, who was head of the entire mission, came to watch us in this great outing that was so special that it even included the black girls of the orphanage. He took a photograph of us while we were there. A week or so later, when Monsignor Guichard came to the orphanage for his regular, weekly visit, he brought with him his photograph of the occasion.

When Mother Germaine saw the photograph, she called me to her and, in front of all our sixty pupils, slapped me so hard she knocked me to the floor. As I lay there, stunned, she shouted, “You lewd, shameless girl! Ever since you were a small child your filthy little mind has been bent on vice.” I

understood absolutely nothing of what she was saying. She called several of the older girls to look at the photo, brandishing it about as if it were the worst thing imaginable. When they saw it, the girls began to exclaim, “Oh, oh! Look at Andrée!”

I was dragged to my knees. Mother Germaine was beside herself, she was a raging fury. “You did this horrible thing deliberately, you dirty little trollop!” she shouted, and she showed me the black-and-white photograph. It looked as though I had nothing on top.

“It’s my *pagne*,” I tried to explain. “It’s the light fabric.”

“Your *pagne*?” Mother Germaine continued to rave. “You were absolutely determined to show off your breasts.”

“It’s not true,” I wept.

“Go and get your *pagne*,” she commanded.

My legs would hardly carry me as I stumbled back to the dormitory. Some of the girls followed, laughing, taunting me. Cruelty breeds cruelty. In that harsh microcosm, acts of unkindness fed on one another. When I brought my *pagne*, the truth was at once clear. The colored fabric began just below the bosom. My breasts looked as though they were bare because of the wet, clinging, lighter top. Even Monsignor Guichard asked Mother Germaine why she was so harsh with me.

But the worst incident of all, in terms of its effect on me, took place the following Christmas. While she was on leave in France, Mother Germaine bought red belts for the girls of the orphanage. They were to be the presents that little Jesus gave us that year. When Christmas came, I was in the infirmary with a serious case of malaria. For several days I had been in a crisis with a temperature, off and on, of more than 40 degrees centigrade.

On Christmas Eve, as was the custom, the girls went to Midnight Mass at the cathedral in town. This was an event to which we all looked forward the whole year. Everyone wore white. A great basket of flowers was brought to the orphanage toward the end of our preparations, and we entwined these flowers into crowns, with tiny veils of organza, to go with our white dresses. I always participated in the *Fête de Dieu* with great hope and enthusiasm. It was such a beautiful occasion! The holy music, the incense, the crowds, the sense of expectancy at this celebration of our Lord's birth! For us it represented a new potential, another kind of life that might be lived in the marvelous freedom of the world outside. On this particular evening, of course, I could not go.

The infirmary was next to the room of the girls in the middle group. While they were at the Mass, I got up and saw that on each bed there was a red belt, waiting for their return. I went back to my bed and slept. Later I awoke, hearing them exclaim over their presents. At once I got up and looked around my bed, but there was no red belt for me. I was wild. With the little strength I had, in my fever, I pulled the cover off the bed and shook it on the floor. But there was no red belt. I must have screamed before I fainted.

The nuns were summoned. I had hurt my face in falling and was seriously injured. But even before I was injured, I felt as though I were dead. I felt death in my heart. Everyone had a red belt but me. Why? *Why?*

I was given an injection to revive me. When I came to, I could smell the awful odor of chloroform, and I saw three nuns in their voluminous dark habits standing by my bed. My face was scorched with fever and my head ached where I had hit the iron bed and the cement floor. I could not understand why little Jesus, if he were a good person whom I was supposed to love, was so mean to me. But deep inside I also knew that it was Mother

Germaine who was behind little Jesus, and that it was because of her that there was no red belt on my bed.

I looked up at these nuns who scared me so much, and I began to cry. Mother Germaine took my hand and smoothed it, saying, "You did not look in the right place, you must look under your pillow." I lifted the pillow, and there was a red belt, which of course had not been there before.

When I fainted the nuns saw that they had made a mistake, that what they had done was too serious and that I was really affected. They only gave me the red belt because they feared that I was going to die.

But I knew very well that they had played a trick on me, and that they had not intended for me to have a present like the other girls. They said to me, "It's yours! You see, you too have a red belt, you can wear it on your nightgown." But I could not bear the intent of their terrible deception and I never once wore my red belt.

Besides Christmas, there were two other events that gave a new purpose and a new breadth of emotion to the stupefying sadness of our days. The marriage of one of our girls was an occasion, but even this was not always happy for us. Often, we cried as we stitched our friend's trousseau, because she was leaving. The other event that gave us something to look forward to with pleasure was the town *kermesse*, or fair.

The *kermesse* was a great festival for the whole town of Brazzaville. It was the one secular event in which the orphanage took part. Both the whites and the Africans who had money to spend looked forward to it each year. There were games and stands with homemade articles and delicious-smelling foods for sale. Above all, there was a sense of excitement, of a rare and special event. For us girls it was a chance to taste of the *real life*, unpredictable and exhilarating, that went on outside our walls.

At the orphanage stand we sold the tablecloths, napkins, cushion covers, bed linens, and curtains that we had been embroidering all year. Because of the exquisite work that we were selling, our stand was the most admired of all. We worked behind the display tables, spreading out the articles and showing them to potential customers. We found it marvelous to mingle with the people of the town, to observe them, and speak with them, as never before. Although of course a nun was always present, watching closely, and this mingling was never allowed to go very far. The black girls of the orphanage were not permitted the privilege of speaking with the customers. Even in this great feast, the black girls were discriminated against by the nuns.

The *kermesse* began on a Saturday at noon, after we had spent the morning in setting up our stand and laying out our wares on it. Saturday afternoon was for whites only. After they had picked over what they wanted the blacks were admitted in the evening. Sunday was for everyone who had money to buy.

The climax of the *kermesse*, on Sunday evening, was a little show staged by the girls of the orphanage. It was a simple affair, a few dances, songs, and sketches based on European themes. Usually they were patriotic numbers saluting our ties with France. The show was held in our main hall. Even the mayor of Brazzaville attended. Also among those present were the town matrons, who became “patronesses” of the orphanage by giving some of their old clothes to the nuns for the girls, and the Portuguese merchants who donated our sickening food.

Part of the evening’s program was the presentation of prizes for sewing and embroidery. These prizes were very simple indeed: a little colored picture of Saint Joseph or the Virgin Mary. Still, they brought us great happiness. Sometimes we were even given one or two pieces of candy!



How spoiled we felt then! All year long we worked like slaves doing the most beautiful embroidery we could, in order to earn a piece of candy or a little printed religious picture.

I still remember with pleasure the little performances we put on at the *kermesse*, because it brought the girls' families to see them. We could look out from our stage and see the gathering of faces; it was like a great bouquet of human flowers. In front, of course, were the white patrons and patronesses, then the other white people, and in the back, the smiling black faces of the mothers with their brightly colored scarves tied upon their heads. We were so happy to have them there. The girls wrote letters weeks in advance to their mothers to make sure they would come. They wanted to be sure we would have their eyes and their smiles. Our joys in those days were so thin, it was a great occasion for us to have the mothers at our show.

Nanette, who was two or three years older than I, was my best friend. The thing I esteemed about her was that she was not at all *moucharde*, a tattle teller, like some of the girls who were always seeking to improve their own position with the nuns by telling a story about someone else. Nanette had very soft and smooth black hair, and golden-brown eyes. She seemed to be a girl without problems, with a kind and calm disposition. I could tell my sorrows to her, and when I cried, she consoled me. Her black family often came to visit her and I think this gave her strength. When they brought her fruit, she would share bites of it with me.

My First Communion, with several of the other girls, was to take place in the town cathedral. Since I had no shoes, Nanette lent me her espadrilles. When I tried them on, I found that there were holes on the side through which my small toes stuck out. Carefully I sewed patches of cloth over the holes, and then to conceal the patches, I applied a chalky paste used for

white shoes, called *blanco*. The first coat made them look better so I put on another and then another until the espadrilles became very stiff.

The cathedral was packed with people, the whites in the center section and the blacks on the sides; they were not permitted to sit together. We who were to make our First Communion were to walk down the main aisle before this great crowd, with our prayer books in our hands and our eyes cast down. For eight days I had already been looking down, because we were in retreat to prepare us for this event. Now, as we started down the big aisle, I lowered my eyes. To my horror I saw that the *blanco* had cracked and fallen off, and my patches had given way. Anyone could see that my shoes had holes in them. I was dreadfully humiliated. As I walked, I bent my knees and pulled my white dress down, trying to make the skirt hang lower so those sad shoes would not be seen.

The orphanage uniform was a very plain navy-blue dress with a belt of the same fabric, and a small white collar. We took one bath a week. One. The big girls were separated from the small girls for the baths, but even the big girls were prevented from seeing one another's bodies. The actual washing was done under one's *pagne*, by sponging ourselves out of a basin of water. The soap we used was made in a big pot at the orphanage out of palm oil, caustic soda, and indigo. It smelled terrible and gave us rashes. In each dormitory there was a girl who was responsible for the soap, which was rationed, like our needles. To be sure that nothing untoward happened during the bath, such as one girl seeing another girl's breasts, or touching ourselves too long in the soaping, a nun was stationed with us to watch and see that all was correct.

Of course, while walking to the cathedral in town, one might see a black woman with her breasts exposed, or nursing a child. But that was not the same as seeing the body of one of our friends. It was not until I was a

grown woman that I understood what all that fanatic modesty was about. At the time I was too stupid or innocent to understand what it was the nuns feared. I noticed, without grasping why, that whenever two girls were known to be by themselves, the nuns became agitated and began to search for them, as if something dreadful might happen. This happened to me, when I was with a friend, on several occasions. When one of the orphanage cats gave birth to a litter of kittens in the loft it gave me great pleasure to discover the nest. Fascinated by the babies, I would take Maria or Nanette with me to play with them, whenever we could. Abandoning ourselves to our fancies we would kiss and fondle the downy little ones. We pretended we were their godmothers; we baptized them, giving them names. Such were the childish inventions with which we relieved our days. At once a nun would come looking for us, to see what we were doing. It was only much, much later that I learned about girls loving each other. Yet the evidence was before me. I remember that on one or two occasions one of the girls made what must have been an overture to me by touching my breasts. She lifted them up with her two hands, saying in an admiring tone, "My goodness, Andrée, your breasts are so high and well shaped!"

Today I know it's unthinkable to be so innocent. Children of twelve already know about the life of the senses. But we, or at least I, did not know then what it was.

Once I had an experience with a man that was devastating to me for the wrong reason. I completely misinterpreted what had happened.

Behind the orphanage was a wild, overgrown area where monkeys played in the trees and scrub. Sometimes the monkeys came into our grounds and gathered the fruit that was too high in the trees for us to climb to. We had to watch these chattering creatures carelessly devouring the food for which we were starving.

One day, determined to get some of this fruit, I climbed high in one of the trees. There was a military installation next to the grounds, and there was always a man on guard outside its door. When the soldier there saw me looking down into the street, as I always did, yearning to know the life outside, he made an obscene gesture. He opened his fly and took out his penis.

I was badly shaken. When I came down from the tree the other girls asked me what I'd seen. I told them that the soldier had shown me the bread he had in his trousers. It was food, of course, which was always on my mind. His action seemed terrible to me because I thought he was teasing me. Why would this soldier mock my hunger? It was not until years later that I understood what I had seen.

The modesty that the nuns demanded of us put a hideous burden on a girl who was to be married. We were mystified by the example of one of the older girls, Denise. The day before her wedding she was sent to confess to the Father at the sacristy. When she came back she was crying. Her face was puffy and red. We were curious to know what had happened but she would not look at us. Mother Germaine took her aside and talked to her for a long time. She did not sleep with us that night, and she had no more contact with us. The next day she was married, and gone.

Later we learned that Mother Germaine had told her, "You must let your husband touch you and do what he wants to you." After all these years of terrified modesty, she was to let an unknown young man do things that were beyond our cruelest dreams of sin.

We had only the most fleeting knowledge of what boys were like from the ragging we received in the street on the way to Mass at the cathedral. We enjoyed the week of the Rosary because then we went to the cathedral every day. Only, it just happened that the week of the Rosary was in the

rainy season so we often arrived at the cathedral soaked to the skin. Still, it was worth it. We walked two by two, the *métisses* in the front of the procession, the black girls from the north behind them, and in the rear, the Bakongo girls. The nuns treated them worst of all, for they really could not bear the Bakongo girls.

The girls sat on the right side of the church, and the boys from the seminary on the left. If a girl turned her head in the direction of the boys, a nun at once hissed. But occasionally there would be an exchange of glances and afterward the girl would tell the others excitedly, “He did that!” screwing up one eye in a wink. “My God, what do you suppose that means!”

We had one expulsion from the orphanage, a girl named Anna. One of the younger children was dying of uremia at the hospital, so the nuns sent the older girls in relays to stay with this child, day and night. Anna was one of the girls designated by the Mother Superior for this bedside vigil. One day, Anna asked me a curious question. I was a dreamer; I was always doing odd things like making up poetry or inventing songs, so she came to ask me, “Do you know what it means: ‘Come, let’s make love’?”

I thought about that. The only love I knew about was the love of God and loving one’s neighbor as thyself. My interpretation was way off track. Then she confided in me that when she had gone to watch over the sick child, the hospital orderly, who was very handsome, had said those words to her. I had to admit I didn’t know what they meant when a handsome orderly said them.

The sick child finally died. A month later, Anna was missing. She had gone, on foot, with the orderly to Maya-Maya. Today that is where the airport of Brazzaville is, and does not seem so far away, but at that time it seemed an enormous distance. It was easy to find Anna by asking the

women who planted manioc and corn in the fields out there if they had seen a *métisse*. Anna was caught and brought back. She was whipped and isolated, and they cut her hair down to the skull. Two or three times a day they questioned her to make her confess what she had done while she was gone. They also questioned us, one by one, to find out what, if anything Anna had ever said to us. When I repeated her question to me, what a furor that made! What magic did those words contain, I wondered. Later it was explained that they meant “to make dirtiness,” which was what happened between a man and a woman. It was a mortal sin if one were not married, and repugnant to all good Christians.

Actually, Anna had done nothing except to run away with this young man, with whom she was madly in love. But she was sent off to Leopoldville to stay with the nuns of another order, so she would not contaminate us. I was about fourteen then. Many elements in Anna’s situation troubled me, and I thought about them for a long time.

The brave Lari and Mucongo prisoners who were led, wailing, past our orphanage walls on the eve of my eighth birthday were to effect important changes within our walls a few years later. Those men in chains were part of a historical process in which the colonized, everywhere, began to lay claim to the human rights that had been denied them for so long. The movement for improved conditions in the French colonies actually began in Indochina in the early 1930s. It spread to Madagascar, and then, contagiously, to the mainland of Africa, where it became increasingly strong.

In our so-called school, we did not study African history. We girls had no idea that the prisoners who chanted, “We want to be French citizens, we want to be French citizens!” were following the lead of another French

colony, Senegal, where, in 1915 under Blaise Diagne, citizenship had been granted to the people of the Four Communes. Actually, this citizenship did not give the Senegalese rights equal to the French in their country, but it did confer upon them special privileges. Those who received it were permitted to go to cafés and cinemas patronized by the whites, and they were entitled to wages that were a little higher than those in other areas, who remained simply French subjects. In return for this citizenship, with its military obligations, they also received tickets for certain food products during the war, and even the famous card for quinine, which was reserved exclusively for Europeans in other French colonies in Africa. The few privileges of this second-class citizenship, however, were quite beyond the imagination of the administrators in French equatorial Africa. Their answer to the people's demand for citizenship was the whip, the gun, and imprisonment. This colonial obstinacy was to make thousands of children orphans. Its grief extends to this day, a terrible page in the history of Africa.

Isolated in our ignorance, we girls knew nothing about current events. We were quite unaware of the rumbles of war in Europe, still less of how such a war might affect our anonymous lives.

Spain was already torn with civil strife. France was apprehensive about its future, suspecting the hostilities with Germany that were to begin in 1939. At the Ministry of Colonies, which regarded Africa as part of France's military reserves, it was suggested that giving citizenship to certain elements of the restless populations would be a means of insuring loyal cannon fodder for the front line if, as was expected, war should be declared.

With great fanfare in the press, it was announced in 1937 that relations between France and her colonies were being strengthened. Citizenship, of a kind, would generously be granted to that manageable hybrid, the person of mixed blood.

The nuns of the orphanage were informed that we girls were to receive this citizenship. The condition of this privilege, however, was that the name of the white father, particularly if he were a government official, be renounced. If the father were not in the government, a change or mutilation of the name might be tolerated.

It was in the dining hall one morning at our usual meager breakfast—a small serving of manioc with some salt—that Mother Gonzaga made the announcement to us. After first bidding us to be duly grateful, she explained the change in our civil state which was being made possible for us. We were told that we should decide on the name that we wanted our legal documents to bear.

The idea of being given a choice in something, especially in a matter as important as this, created great feeling among us girls, after having had no rights for so long. Some of my companions found the idea of a new name great fun, and made a fanciful game of it. But I couldn't laugh—I took the event very seriously. Far from comforting me, this improvement in my official status actually gave me great pain. It only served to remind me of how I had been torn away from my mother and deposited at the orphanage like a sort of lost article. I cried in my bed for a long time, more than ever wretchedly sad and humiliated.

Some of the girls decided to take their mother's name, but there were about a half a dozen of us who wanted, at whatever cost, to keep the name of our fathers. When the Mother Superior heard of this, she was extremely perturbed. She called us into her office and lectured us on the error of such a choice.

“You mustn't ask for such a thing, my children. To be granted French citizenship is already an enormous concession. You simply must not put into jeopardy your father's private life or work. Some of them are married



and have families. Think of the quarrels it might produce. Think of how their legitimate children might feel!”

Important concerns to us cast-offs, indeed!

Some of the others were persuaded, but I was not. I insisted that I would use my father’s name. For this, I was severely reprimanded and warned that my citizenship might not be granted.

At last, the memorable day came when we were to be registered as French citizens, with the name of our choice. For the occasion we were taken to the city hall. There, seated at a long table, wearing their most official expressions, were the members of the Civil Affairs Commission, the judge, the police commissioner, the mayor, and a registry clerk, Jacques Opangault, whom I was to meet again when he became the first chief of state of the ex-French Congo.

We were called, one by one, to stand before the commission and to state the name by which we wished to be known. When it was my turn, I announced in a voice that was strong, even defiant, that I would keep the name of my father. Then, as if ashamed of my concession, I dropped my voice and added “without the t.”

The mayor, who was presiding, frowned. There was a moment of silence as he looked hard at me. I waited, holding my breath.

I had always had a good relationship with Mother Elise, who was in charge of the orphanage infirmary. She let me help her in her work, which I enjoyed. It interested me to learn to care for the girls who had small accidents or became ill. From her I acquired some rudimentary ideas about hygiene and first aid. Now she spoke up for me.

“*Monsieur* the mayor,” she said, “This girl is in a particularly difficult situation. She was placed with us by her father, who lives in Oubangui-

Chari. Because her African family is so far away, she is unable to see them, as the other girls do. She is of a thoughtful nature; I would say she has suffered because of being without visits from her relatives. I believe that she should have special consideration. Besides," she pointed out encouragingly, "her father is not in the government." My body trembled as I watched the mayor's face. Abruptly he nodded, then signed.

Thus, in judgment #20 on September 11, 1937, French citizenship was awarded to Andrée Madeleine Gerbilla, without a "t." I was permitted to use my father's name, in a mutilated form. Six years later, my father, who was divorced, recognized me and authorized me to use my maiden name *with* a "t." But by then I was already married, and the mother of two children.

## 4

# Flight to a New Life

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It was not enough that the nuns controlled every aspect of our existence, from our ignorant, frightened minds as children to our prudish, submissive ways as adolescents. The nuns aspired to manage our futures even after we left the orphanage, through the simple device of arranging our marriages.

The evil of our mixed blood, it was easy to see, should not be allowed to do further damage to the fabric of the colonialist society by mingling with that of either the blacks or the whites. The female of mixed blood was seen as a particular threat to the order of the system. It would not be good for black men to have access to lighter-skinned women, it would make them uppity and harder to govern. If the white male had already proved vulnerable to the seductions of the black female, the *métisse* was even more dangerous to him. And what was to be done with the offspring of a white and a *métisse*? Why, one might not even be able to distinguish its having black blood. Clearly, such situations should not be allowed to develop.

The girls of mixed blood, then, should be married to men of mixed blood so that the confusion go no further. The problems of their special appearance, their special psychology, and their potentially dangerous

aspirations—after being blessed with a youth in the care of the mission and learning a little French, must be carefully contained.

One kilometer away from us was an orphanage for boys of mixed blood that was run by the Mission of the Fathers of the Holy Ghost. It was with someone from this pool of outcasts like ourselves that we should be united. When the Fathers of the Mission had a young man whom it seemed advisable to marry off, they proposed his name to the nuns, who found a suitable candidate for him among their older girls. When the couple had been agreed upon by both orders, the day was set for the young people to meet.

This event took place in the Parlor of Saint Joseph and Saint Mary. The straight chairs were set in a row and there was a white doily lying on the table in the middle of the room. The girl was seated on one side of the Mother Superior and the young man, scrubbed clean, his pants in pleats sharp as an accordion, on the other.

The Mother Superior asked a few questions of each of them: how many times a week they went to Mass or catechism, where their parents lived. Then, without further tiresome conversation, she stated the purpose of the occasion. To the girl, she said, “My daughter, this is your fiancé. Now that you are seventeen years old it is time for you to be married. This young man is a good Christian. It is up to you to be a good wife to him and a good mother to your family.”

To the young man, she offered the same genre of sound advice, then concluded, “Shall we set the marriage date three months from now?”

Usually, the young girl was so terrified by the event that she could hardly raise her eyes to look at this phenomenon, a young male, the man with whom the rest of her life was to be entwined. And avid though she was to stare at him—such an uncommon sight were young men in our lives—

she sometimes became engaged hardly knowing what her proposed husband looked like. If the girl was lucky, she might see her young man on two more occasions before they were wed, although always in the parlor, under the vigilant eye of the Mother Superior.

During the months that followed, preparations were made for the marriage; the older girls helped the betrothed to sew what was ostentatiously referred to as “the trousseau of the bride.” It was traditional that the young man should buy some cloth for his fiancée; from this she made an embroidered tablecloth and napkins. He also bought the fabric for her wedding dress, which she made herself. A small suitcase with some nightgowns, dishcloths, and sheets was considered a fine trousseau. The initials of the couple were elaborately embroidered on all the household linens, in imitation of the haughtiest bourgeois customs.

Uniting these two like aberrations of the species, however, did not provide all the necessary safeguards against their potential for disrupting the order of things. Their presence, as a couple, a kind of third species in this black and white society, tended to present questions without comfortable answers. Obviously, the best thing would be to keep all of this third species together and removed, for the most part, from the rest of the system.

This, it was decided, could be done by creating a special village for them. The French government had turned over a large piece of undeveloped land at some distance from Brazzaville to the Mission of the Fathers of the Holy Ghost. There, in the middle of a wasteland of tall coarse grass and a few trees, the fathers made a clearing and constructed, as a beginning, four small houses. The clearing was connected with the town by one lonely footpath. This place was known as the village of Saint Firmin, after Monsignor Firmin Guichard, whose diabolical plan it was to keep the

couples of mixed blood under the surveillance of the Catholic missions forever.

I was about ten years old when I first saw a marriage of this kind, arranged through the machinations of the holy orders. After the ceremony we girls were taken to see “the house of happiness” where the young couple was to live. It was an ugly brick building of two rooms and a roof of corrugated iron. I found the whole place repellent, and shuddered to think of those young people, sequestered in that solitude. Even when they had left the orphanages and were ready to found their own families, still they were not free.

I swore that this would not be my fate. I would choose my own husband and make a home only with love. In the years that followed I saw several more of these made-to-order marriages of the missions and each of them only served to strengthen my resolve. When we visited the village, the women looked miserable. They always had their eyes down in front of their husbands. Perhaps they looked at each other when we were not there, but it seemed to me that they were just enduring that wretched life.

One evening when I was fifteen years old, the Mother Superior called me to her. “A young man is asking to marry you,” she announced. “You should be very pleased. He has heard about you and has decided that it is you and no other that he wishes for his wife.”

“But Mother,” I answered, “I’m too young. I don’t want to be married.”

“You are quite right,” said the Mother Superior smoothly. “And that is why the arrangement is perfect. This young man is going to Chad as a veterinarian aid, but before he leaves, he wants to become engaged. You have only to promise to wait for him for four years. Then you will be nineteen, which will be quite suitable.”

I listened, appalled, as she spoke of this young man with the brilliant future, for whom I had only to wait and pray for four years. “You are very fortunate because this young man is of an exemplary character. It seems that he is a good worker and extremely pious. He goes to Mass faithfully, not only on Sundays but on days of the week, too. His name is Luc Pacoteaux,” she added, as if that should complete all I could possibly want to know about my future husband. Mother Superior’s tones, her gestures, had the final air of a business well concluded. At last, she paused for the meek “Yes, Mother” that was customary and would seal the affair.

“I am sorry, Mother, but my answer is no,” I said firmly. “I cannot become engaged to him.”

“What do you mean, ‘no’?” Mother Superior lifted her chin indignantly. “You have here an honorable offer of marriage. Of course you will accept it.”

“I do not want to become engaged to this man. I don’t want to become engaged at all.”

“My child, you know nothing about life. Such an opportunity may never come again. Think how you would feel if you were never to be married, never to have children. It would be abnormal!”

“Perhaps my life will be abnormal, but I cannot agree to this engagement.”

Mother Superior was extremely provoked by my attitude and made every effort to persuade me that I should accept. But I would not. I was to have a number of other offers of marriage during the succeeding years, which I rejected in the same way. I had seen how unhappy these forced unions were, and I resolved not to let the nuns bully me into one of them.

After all these years with the nuns I was convinced that they were the last to know or care where my real happiness lay. I had no idea what the future of a *métisse* like myself should be: no real image of what to hope for, or aspire to. But the methods of the nuns, from what I knew of them, should be no part of it.

I was determined to forge my own future, however good or bad that might turn out to be.

By 1938, my life with the nuns had become intolerable. At seventeen, more than ever I was of a proud, combative temperament. I was considered the rebel of the institution, the likely source of whatever disciplinary problems arose. The only fate in sight for me was an arranged marriage. I was afraid I might not be able to resist the nuns' intrigues indefinitely. Whatever the price, I decided, I must get away from the orphanage. I made plans to escape. I discussed my plans with my two best friends, Louisa and Madeleine, who were also unhappy enough, I thought, to make the break with me. Louisa was the oldest, she knew that she could not hold out against a forced marriage much longer and often cried in dread of this. Madeleine—she was number 19 at the orphanage and had been deposited there just shortly before me—I had really hated when we were younger. It was she who taunted me, wearing my father's dress and shoes. But later we made it up, and I knew that, like me, she wanted desperately to flee. The three of us agreed to make the unheard-of break together.

Mother Germaine, we learned, was to return to the mother house in Europe in two weeks. Even the prospect of relief offered by getting rid of her, the cause of so much of our misery, did not change our plans. We decided, in fact, to use her departure to help us in our escape, to profit by



the confusion that this extraordinary event would create. After all those years of grief under her, at last Mother Germaine would be useful to us.

Permission was given for all the girls to go to the train station and see Mother Germaine off. This was already a great concession and a change in our routine. We knew it was that day or never. It was impossible to escape during the night when everyone was asleep, as the windows of the bedrooms were barred and the bedroom doors were locked by the guardian nuns who hung the keys on a board in their room. The gate of the orphanage was kept heavily locked. We would have to go over the walls that had kept us prisoners so long.

The day of the departure was one of great turmoil and emotion. The girls were crying—it was weeping for the devil, but even a change for good can provoke a sense of malaise, loss—and wailing. “She’s leaving, she’s leaving!” Mother Germaine was embracing everyone. A very special atmosphere existed. Madeleine, Louisa, and I acted out our roles and wailed with the rest.

Profiting by the license and disorder of the day, as soon as we got back from the train station the three of us slipped out of the building and into the garden. We had already hidden the little bundles of personal things that we wanted to take with us among the branches of the thorny lemon trees. Twilight comes early and quickly in the tropics, and after seven o’clock it was already dark. In the garden I led the way, following paths that, after fourteen years, I knew all too well. I squeezed my friends’ hands hard; I knew by their trembling that they were frightened to death. We found our little bundles of possessions, as planned, but we could not go over the wall there because the police station, with officers on guard outside in little huts of straw, was directly on the other side. Behind the kitchen was a guava tree that leaned over the wall toward the Street of Paradise. Feeling for branches

in the eerie gloom, I climbed and they followed. We lowered ourselves onto the wall. The bottle shards along its top immediately cut our hands and feet. We began to bleed.

I looked down into the street for a good place to jump. There were no street lights or cars, so we had only to be sure that no one was walking past. It was totally black below and the wall seemed fearfully high. Behind us was the detested garden, before us the unknown.

Squatting there on the top of the wall, the broken glass slashing our feet, we steeled ourselves for the jump. Madeleine and Louisa began to cry.

“It’s too high,” Madeleine whimpered. “I’m scared. We can’t do it.”

“We’ll be killed,” sobbed Louisa. “I’m going back.”

I had no alternative. Ignoring their protests, I pushed Madeleine, then Louisa, and jumped after them. We landed on the hard dirt below without being too badly hurt. Limping and leaving bloody traces behind us, we took our first steps toward freedom at last.

Louisa had told us we could find shelter at the home of her cousin, Martha, who herself had been raised at the orphanage and married through the good offices of the Mother Superior. However, Martha and her husband had managed to escape being confined in Saint Firmin, and lived in a little house in the native village of Poto-Poto.

I did not think for a moment of turning to my father, whom I had not seen since his half-hour visit when I was eight years old. As a matter of form, and to salve their consciences, the nuns required that each girl write one carefully supervised letter a year to her white father. This I faithfully did. During my fourteen years in the orphanage, I had received one, perhaps two letters, in return. My ideas about life outside the orphanage therefore did not in any way involve my unknown father, who, I could only suppose,

would be furious at my running away. Since he had placed me there, mustn't he support its principles?

Martha received us with kindness, and that first night I slept not under a sheet but an immense, colorful African cloth. It seemed wonderful to me. At last I was to know my Africa! The next day, we had to remain in hiding, although we were longing to go out and see the world. We knew that the police, summoned by the Mother Superior, would be looking everywhere for us. To make a clean break with our past of submission and obedience, we cut our hair. My hair was very long, down to my hips, like a skirt. We didn't have a razor blade so we did the job with a piece of broken bottle, badly. The fashion then, according to the gravure magazines we had seen, was to wear one's hair short and combed straight back, behind one's ears. We shaved the back of our necks with broken glass, too. It was frightfully done, but it was proof of our freedom, an irrevocable step of defiance. For years we had worn our hair always in the same way, parted in the middle, the sides plastered down, and a flat chignon in back; it had been a torment to us. Now our hair looked terrible, raggedly short as it was, but at least we were no longer marked by its style as belonging to the orphanage.

All day we remained indoors; in the evening we could bear the confinement no longer. We went walking in the quarter, lit only by the flickering lights of the little cooking fires, or a kerosene lantern, where a family was gathered on a mat in the yard. Each hut was set off in its own yard with a tiny, rickety, imperialistic fence. Even in this poverty there was a high sense of "this is mine, poor as it is, let no one intrude on my poverty!" As the houses did not have kitchens, the cooking was done on wood fires outside. Around us we could hear people doing their chores, laughing and talking in the warm evening air. It was so different from the

orphanage, where everything was foreseen, regimented, stale, and sad! Here, we were seeing real life at last.

The sight of a *métisse* always aroused comment and questions; three *métisses* could not go unnoticed. The next day a group of police encircled Martha's house, and without bothering to ascertain if we would come out peaceably, broke down the door. We three girls were arrested and led off like criminals to the city hall of Brazzaville.

It was the mayor himself who questioned us. "I want the truth from you, my children. Why did you run away from the orphanage?"

The most important man in Brazzaville was calling us to account. Madeleine and Louisa were tongue-tied, shaking with fear. I had to answer for the three of us.

"Sir, we couldn't bear to stay there anymore. We were too unhappy." This was my chance. Unsparingly I described the torments, the humiliations that comprised our lives. I pointed out the ragged dresses we were wearing that, in fact, were a disgrace. I bared one shoulder and showed him the lashes from a whipping I had received earlier. "Worst of all," I pled, "they're always telling us that we will go to hell because we have inherited our father's sinfulness and our mother's primitive nature. How can we live in such misery?"

The mayor listened with an intent air. I brought out the ultimate proof of our desperation. "We are determined not to return to the orphanage, Sir. If you send us back ..." Here I paused for the full effect, "we have taken an oath. Each of us will kill herself."

A strange expression passed over the mayor's face. Later I was to learn that he had fathered a son by a black woman and had given this boy to the Fathers of the Holy Ghost to raise.

An hour later, the Father Superior of the Mission, looking stern, and the Mother Superior of the Convent, pale and furious, arrived at the city hall at the request of the mayor, to deliberate our case.

“I have decided that these girls are not to return to the orphanage,” the mayor informed them. “The problem is, they are still young. Where are they to go? Who can we have take care of them?”

For Madeleine and Louisa, the solution was not difficult as they had black relatives in Brazzaville to whom they could be entrusted. For me it was a problem, as I had no one. I waited for endless minutes in the anteroom while they discussed my case.

As I re-entered the mayor’s office I heard the Mother Superior, in silky tones of persuasion, say, “But Mister Mayor, Andrée cannot be removed from our boarding school. Her father, who is very interested in her, insists that we keep her.” After this last outrage she was not going to let me go, like that!

It was a drawn battle between two deeply antipathetic natures. Mother Superior was more experienced than I, and had her reputation to defend, but the cause was mine. I saw that to win it I would have to be very convincing indeed. The theatrics into which I threw myself had fourteen years of anguish behind them, to add to their effects.

“Oh, Mother,” I wept, “Listen to me! I beg you ... I’m young! I have a right to live! If you force me to return to the orphanage you are condemning me to death!” Tears streamed down my face, I wrung my hands. “The responsibility for my death will be yours!” To underline the effect I was achieving, I added solemnly, in spite of my sobs, “I have sworn it before, and I swear it again, now, before all of you, that if I am returned to that place, I will kill myself.” I was in fact prepared to do just that.

The mayor's face twitched with consternation. Again he asked me to leave his office, and again they conferred.

Finally, Madeleine, Louisa, and I were once more before our judges, awaiting the verdict.

“You will go to the homes of your relatives here in Brazzaville, as we discussed, Madeleine and Louisa. As for you, Andrée,” the mayor continued while the Mother Superior looked coldly on, “for the moment you will stay with Louisa's family. I am going to write to your father and tell him what has happened. We shall wait for his reply before we make a final decision on what to do with you. I will let you know when I have received his instructions.”

It was necessary to add a sweetener for the holy orders. “But now that you girls are to live on the outside, you must promise to go to Mass every Sunday, and to make confession and take communion.”

We agreed to this, hardly able to believe what had happened. Never before had we counted for anything. Now we had been heard by no less a personage than the mayor, the man whom other whites obeyed. We were not behind bars, we were not whipped, we were hardly reprimanded. Life outside was too extraordinary! Dazed, alternately laughing and crying with emotion, I went home with Louisa.

Life in Poto-Poto after the orphanage was a rebirth for me. At last I was to live something different from that hell. There was not enough oxygen in the air for me to cram into my lungs with my new freedom, this freedom that I had wrenched away for myself. With a passionate interest I examined everything around me. In the evening I walked the streets, looking at the little fires in the yards where the mamas were cooking the meal in their blackened pots. The odors from those pots were delicious. Each woman had

her own pot: that, to me, was freedom. There was a warmth, a human presence in the smoke of those little fires, those good foods being cooked, and in the voices of the people, at the close of day. For me, those sounds and smells were a concert of joy, the first real joy of my life, as a conscious being. Finally. I walked the blocks, looking into the little yards, listening to the talk, the laughter, overwhelmed by my feelings. To think that for fourteen years I had been dying of hunger while everyone else ate! I did not know what was in the pots, their contents sometimes were no doubt poor. Still, they boiled; over those fires something was being prepared for dinner. What simplicity, and yet what splendor. Yes, I have seen it—splendor in the poorest huts.

I threw myself into learning about African life. After fourteen years behind the walls with shards of glass, my vision of life was that all was fabulous. I looked at the huts of straw, at the houses made of flattened kerosene cans, and found them all wonderful. When I saw a house with a corrugated iron roof on it (although it was idiotic in that hot sun, it was considered very chic), I thought, “How well they must eat in that house!” When I saw a man riding a bicycle, I thought, “How marvelous life must be for him!”

A trip to the market of Poto-Poto was for me an extraordinary adventure. With my eyes I devoured all that I looked at; I wanted everything I saw. My stomach, as always, was raw with hunger. But I almost forgot it in looking at the bunches of bananas heaped up, piles of mangoes, guavas, or peanuts. Pineapples! I hadn’t known such marvels existed on earth. Even though I couldn’t have them, just to feast my eyes on them, just to know that those wonderful things were there: it was fabulous, fabulous, fabulous.

I watched people buying live chickens and dazzling slabs of meat. There were fish twenty times as big as a sardine! Piles of rice, millet, beans, dried red peppers, onions, garlic. Anyone could walk by and look at them, smell them, watch the mamas handle them and make their purchases. The Portuguese merchants' shops presented me with a delirium of new images: stacks of enamel cups and dishes, pots and basins. European articles: soap wrapped in green paper with the name Palmolive printed on it. Boxes of sugar, one of them opened to show the hard little cubes inside. Needles! Ten of them in a package of black paper. Pins! Razor blades! Scissors! All these things were astonishing to me in proportion to what I had known, my own hunger, my own need.

I particularly liked to watch the food vendors, and especially the mamas who prepared and sold *mikate*. This is what the French call a *beignet*, a banana fritter, and it is quite simply one of the most delicious things in the world. The patties were made the night before. Then early in the morning the women took their place on a street corner, and seated on a little three-legged stool in front of a boiling pot of oil, they fried the fritters, as they were needed, for passersby, all day long.

For a young girl to whom hunger was a way of life, the smell was maddening. Fascinated, without any hope of such a treat for myself, I would stand nearby, just to smell that wonderful smell and to watch the woman as she made her calm, methodical gestures. She would drop the fritter into the pot of oil, then retrieve it a moment later and lay it on a clean green leaf. With a few words she would hand the *mikate* to her customer and receive her payment, which she tucked into the fold of her *pagne*. I found this marvelous to watch. Once a kind mama beckoned me to her and gave me one to eat. I nearly swooned with pleasure.



How rich these people are, I thought. They have so much food, they even have enough left over, to sell. They can even give me a sample. For me it was a sign of opulence. I thought, “Now I can have the joy of living in the midst of all this! If I work, then I can become a part of such things, this too can be mine.”

It gave me the exhilarating hope that, with hard work I too could someday aspire to such a sumptuous life.

During the next month I tried to imagine what my father’s reaction to the news of my breakout would be. I considered the possibilities. He might order me to return to the orphanage, where I would of course be severely punished and soon forced into an arranged marriage ... unless I killed myself. It seemed more likely that he would merely send me a sharp reproof and then lapse into the silence that had been his custom for so long. He might simply ignore the whole matter, as he had ignored my letters for so many years! Why should I believe that it would be of any concern to him what became of me?

Thoughts of my mother tormented me. If I could stay out of the clutches of the nuns, could I get back to Bangui to see her, and Joseph? How? Or could I have her come to Brazza again? The last time I had seen her was when she and my stepfather were on their return trip from Dahomey. They had passed by Brazzaville going to Bangui, which was the normal route for travelers in those days. Then again I had had a few precious, stolen hours with them. My longing for her was like a physical pain. Knowing that Joseph would read the letter to her, I wrote her, telling her all.

Martha’s husband was there in the house where Louisa and I stayed. This gave me a strange and uncomfortable feeling. I had been taught to keep my eyes down in the presence of a man, and even to look at him, at

first, seemed a sin. Worse yet, this uncle of Louisa's by marriage was the kind of man who liked to joke and tease. He made personal remarks to us about our appearance and our shyness. We were covered with shame at having a man speak to us in what seemed a daring way, although now I see that what he said was quite innocent. At table we kept our eyes on our plates. To have him eating with us seemed monstrous. No one but the nuns and the other girls had ever seen me eat, and now I could hardly swallow. What one experiences depends on what one is used to. For me, to have a man at the table was terrible; I had been taught it should be terrible. But I confess that this soon wore off. I got used to the presence of a man; soon in fact, it seemed a natural thing.

The phonograph in Louisa's aunt's house hypnotized me. Tino Rossi was the great singing star then. Hour after hour we listened to his records. I remember that "Guitar of Love" was one of his songs. My God! We had no idea what he was singing about but we learned every song by heart. I stuffed myself with those songs. All day long I was turning the crank on the record player. Two times it broke. Africans are very clever at repairing things; they have to be. In every section of Poto-Poto someone had a sign in front of his hut, "Phonographs repaired," because the springs were always breaking. A new spring was made with the key that is found on the bottom of a can of corned beef, or better still, of sardines, which is generally longer. Louisa got me some sewing jobs and I worked furiously to save 2 francs to pay for the repair of the phonograph spring. The first money that I earned in my life was spent thus, on the repair of the phonograph. I simply had to have that music about love. Two francs seemed to me a huge sum. The next thing I bought was a handful of wild sorrel berries, to fight off my constant hunger. The berries did not relieve my hunger much, but the freedom of being able to buy something to eat—that was the thing. And then to eat the

sorrel berries while listening to those songs of love, about which I understood nothing, seemed to me sublime. Because such songs had been forbidden to us, we assumed we were committing a sin that later we would have to confess. Still, in the intoxication of our new freedom we could not resist that music of love.

In Brazzaville, the Bakongo lived on the plateau; the people of the north and the Lari lived on the plain. The administrators kept the peoples separate. It worked to their advantage to maintain a rivalry in the midst of which they reigned. At the orphanage it suited the nuns to perpetuate the same division between the Bakongo girls and the others.

Sunday afternoon in the Grande Place of Poto-Poto was a dazzling spectacle. In each corner of the square different ethnic groups vied with one another in dances. Many of the dancers were professionals, marvelously bedecked in blue, red, and white paint, *perles*, and fantastic costumes. The tam-tam drums were irresistible, their intricate, insistent rhythms drawing participants from the farthest corners of the town. Anyone who wished to join in the dances could, and many ordinary people did. Dressed in their brilliant Sunday *pagnes*, the excited crowds shouted and clapped as the dancers competed among themselves to see who could leap the highest, dance the strongest, win the most applause. The *kébé kébé* was in great evidence. The dancers wearing this voluminous costume, a skirt and cape of straw, looked like giant birds. Little children, frightened, ran screaming from them. When the *kébé kébé* danced, they twirled round and round like carousels, the straw flying out in great wheeling circles. The children trembled at the sight; they were told, “If you aren’t good, the *kébé kébé* will come to get you.”

In the gaudy throng there was also the griot, the minstrel whose stories and chants included recitations of many generations of names in the family lineages. And there was the merchant of worthless remedies who promised so much, and who made the passersby so happy to listen to him that we wanted to buy a bottle of his patent medicine in gratitude for the pleasure of hearing his words.

I went from one corner of the square to the other, greedy to see everything, everything! I watched with the ardent eyes of one who had been deprived of her Africa for fourteen years.

Everywhere there were set up the shaky little wooden tables on which the retail commerce of Africa takes place. Bravely trying to augment her husband's poor wages, an African mama will sell anything she can. She will buy a big basin of rice, then sell it in small lots, earning only a few centimes on the whole batch. She will buy cigarettes and sell them one by one from one of these shaky tables that might also offer a few cans of sardines, condensed milk, matches, or salt. On some tables charcoal is sold; there are five or six piles of charcoal, fastidiously divided and arranged in absolutely equal lots of eight or ten pieces each. Peanuts in perfectly arranged, symmetrical piles. If it were not for the efforts of the brave mamas to help their families, all Africa would have been dead a long time ago.

The dance spectacles were organized by the chief of the quarter, and the money that was thrown to the performers was shared with him. The chief of the quarter played an important role in the life of Poto-Poto. It was he who settled small disputes and punished errors in human behavior according to the social customs of the people. Serious crime was handled by the police, the white administration. But in the case of the theft of bananas or firewood or sandals—the small things people need—the chief would administer the punishment. Poverty was no excuse for stealing. It was punished severely.

The chief would condemn the offender to what seemed to us a dreadful penance. “You must walk through the quarter,” he would pronounce, “with what you have stolen on your head, for all to see.”

This was truly an ordeal because the offender, accompanied by a guard, would have to walk all the streets, followed by bands of children shouting at him. The mamas would come out of their houses to watch and to shout also—in our country the women are more vocal than the men—and the thief would be obliged to show his shame in front of all the people. Still, this was preferable to being turned over to the police, which would mean imprisonment for a month, just for stealing two or three bananas. In prison men were fed barely enough to keep them alive—rotten manioc, rice with husks on it—just enough to keep them from becoming a death statistic.

Preferring to submit to the chief’s sentence, the offender would “do the street” with what he had stolen on his head. As he walked, the children would follow, shouting “*Mouibi! Mouibi!*”—meaning “See the thief! See the thief!”—mocking him and giving free rein to all their prankishness. Everywhere the poor man went he gathered larger and larger troupes of shouting, tormenting children. He really suffered. Never again would he steal, that was certain. Usually he would have to disappear for several months afterward, to recover. He would live in a little hut on the sand in the middle of the Congo, or he would go to stay with a cousin in a distant village, to wait for people to forget. During his absence the children would have others to chase after and mock. Eventually he would feel less marked and he could return to Poto-Poto and take his place in the village again.

The chief was especially important in settling marital disputes.

Of course the decision was always in favor of the man. The law’s point of view is masculine, made for men. If a woman was angry because her husband chased other women, the chief would reproach her: “Look, you are

a married woman with children, you have to accept what he does even if it does not please you because he has the right to several wives.” The woman would at least have the satisfaction of having her problem heard, and her husband would be scolded too: “Look, you have to behave better. Just because you have the right to several women doesn’t mean you should mistreat the one you’ve got.”

In our part of Africa the women don’t let their husbands beat them as they do in some West African countries. Sometimes it even happens that it is the woman who beats the man. Another common occurrence was for the wife to assault a rival for her husband’s affections. The husband, furious, would then beat up his wife. The chief had to settle such problems, as people could not be permitted to disturb the lives of others. Usually the chief would make each party pay a fine. This fine went into a community fund that was used to buy the kegs of wine or beer for a community celebration when there was a death or a marriage. Everyone in the quarter was supposed to pay a small tax to the community fund for these affairs. The chief’s salary came from this fund, which he alone managed, so he lived well above the others.

Corruption is human, of course. Above all else, alcohol was welcomed. The chiefs adored a bottle of Pernod. And rum—especially the rum of St. James, not the white rum but the brown. It had a special quality, and besides it had that nice picture of a “negress” on the label. Even today it is still greatly appreciated in Africa. These gifts were taken to a chief of the quarter to escape punishment for a misdemeanor.

The chief was not elected by the people. He was placed in his position by the French government. Still, he was inevitably a man who had already been a chief in his tribe or region, a man with presence and the habit of authority. The administration, however, was careful not to install someone

who was too independent, who would not yield to the colonialist system. They did not want someone who would look for justice for his people from the whites. No. He was only to provide justice in terms of tribal customs; it was the white administration that decided the general terms of justice.

One morning I received a summons to city hall. The mayor had news for me. "I have a letter from your father," he said, in the formal tones of his office. "He has informed us what he wants you to do." I held my breath as he continued. "He wants you to return to Bangui."

"To Bangui?"

"Yes. He wants you to live with him there, in his home."

Live with my father? In his home? I stared at the mayor, unbelieving. Tears sprang to my eyes. During all those long years I had learned to think of myself as quite alone. It never occurred to me that my place might be with him. Or that I might turn to him in times of trouble. Now he wanted me with him. Even after my wickedness in running away from the orphanage! After all this time had he found that he cared for me?

The letter enclosed a ticket for me, the mayor said, for my passage on the river steamer. My mother—oh, happiness!—would be coming to get me.

A few days later, she arrived. Joyfully we threw ourselves into each other's arms. We were together again. And we were going home.

I had only the small bundle of belongings with which I had escaped from the orphanage. Gratefully, I embraced Louisa and her kind family and said goodbye to the first African home I had known.

The boat that my mother and I took was the *Batetela*, which plied between Bangui and Brazza, the same one that had brought her down.

Because it was owned by Monsieur Guichard, a friend of my father's, we did not have to sleep on the bridge, but were given a cabin. This was an exceptional privilege. There were two bunks, one, to my delight, over the other. But my feelings on this voyage were strong, and troubled. In the first place, I had never known anything but dry land, and now I was on this great river, the Congo, which seemed so romantic and frightening. It was three or four kilometers wide. In some places the currents were rough and dangerous, in others the water was calm. It all seemed extraordinary to me. Also, the voyage was marked by a kind of nostalgia because, although my life in Brazzaville had not been happy, I knew nothing else. The town, its cathedral, its streets, and its people were, for better or for worse, imprinted in me.

Now I was going to a new town, to my father's home. How would he receive me? What kind of life would I have with him? These thoughts made me very anxious. He had never paid any attention to me before. What would his attitude be toward me now? Since my past life had been so hard, I could only imagine that this new one would be, in its own way, equally hard. This was, for me, a terrible adventure.

The first thing I had to face was how he would treat me when I arrived. The European authorities of Brazza, as well as the nuns, had given me the impression that he would be furious with me. And since I had been whipped so often already, and lived in constant fear of whippings, I expected nothing better when I arrived. I had never experienced any tenderness from him; I could only believe that I was being taken to a whipping by my father. I was a prisoner on this boat, being delivered to him. In spite of the kind things my mother said of him, in spite of her conviction of his goodness and of my welfare with him, I was convinced that when I was handed over to this man



I would receive the whipping of my life. Really, I was terrified. I lived in terror of our meeting.

Our voyage lasted two weeks. At last, I was back in the country where I was born. I had been too young when I left to know my town, Bangui-la-coquette, admiring herself in the river that flowed at her feet. My new life was about to begin.

My father was not there to meet us as we pulled into the wharf, the same wharf where fourteen years earlier Joséphine had shouted at Henriette, “Thief! Thief! You can’t have my child!” In fact, he was not in Bangui at all. My mother learned that he had been held up in his work on the river. His boat had engine trouble; he would arrive two days later.

Henriette was away on a trip, in Belgium. My mother and I went to my father’s house to wait for his return. That night, wrapped in a *pagne*, I slept by my mother’s side, dreaming anxious dreams over this delay.

Some time earlier, my mother had left her husband, Joseph Mialou. I was devastated to learn of this, not only because I loved my stepfather, but because of the education I had received from the nuns. Marriage, I had been taught, lasted until one’s death. A couple stayed together, even if they were not happy. How could my mother leave a man who was so good to her? I was shocked. They were supposed to die, one at the side of the other, no matter what. During the succeeding weeks I was to do everything I could to reconcile these two beings, both of whom were so dear to me.

My father’s transport business had prospered. He had a fine house, one of the oldest in town, on the edge of the Oubangui. Before our door passed the town’s main street, with its interesting flow of passersby, and just beyond was the river with its piers and traffic of boats, large and small. Though large, the house was one story only, completely encircled by a deep

veranda. This was such a pleasant place to be that I spent most of my time there, watching the scene before me.

Rivers fascinate me, and I was enchanted by the mysterious Oubangui, which reaches deep into the earth, and along whose primitive shores a thick, sticky moss forms, at the foot of trees, a dangerous carpet. I longed to travel up its waters into the humid and vaporous forests of my ancestors. From this river I felt a call—it was like a summons in my blood—to learn the ways of my people, to draw closer to my Africa.

On the day my father was to arrive I stationed myself on the veranda and, my thoughts turbulent, waited for him. Whenever a white man came into view on a riverboat my heart pounded and I searched his face for a sign. I had been so young when he came to see me in the Saint Mary and Saint Joseph Parlor of the orphanage. And besides, overwhelmed as I was by the event, only a vague image had floated uncertainly before my eyes. I had not really registered the features of his face.

There was a whale boat coming down the Oubangui. My mother, who had joined me on the veranda, saw it. Pointing in the direction of the boat, she said with pride, “My daughter, there is your father.”

Together, she and I crossed the road and made our way to the pier where the boat was landing. There, I saw a white man, quite small, leap from the boat. His back was hunched and he strode with an air of fearlessness and great resolution. This was my father. Here was my destiny.

At the sight of me he stopped, as if astonished. My mother was laughing and pushing me, but my body was frozen. I was unable to move. My father came slowly, the last few steps. I could not see what was in his eyes: my own eyes were on the ground. Then I felt his strong hands upon me. He pulled me to him, and hugged me hard against his sweaty chest. “My little girl,” he said.

I burst into tears. He did not act angry. He did not act as though he were going to whip me. Would that come later? Or had he forgiven me?

“My little girl,” he said over and over. Drawing back, he searched my face intently. But he said nothing else. He had no way to express what he was feeling. It was my mother who did all the talking. It was she, lively and gay, who provided the words for the occasion.

“You see our daughter? Aren’t you proud, Gerbillat? Our little daughter has returned to us.”

I kept my head down. I could not raise my eyes to his. I did not know what to do or say. Around us, the men who worked for him were coming and going. They carried things, shouting; they wanted his attention.

As I stood there, speechless, my mother lifted my chin for him, stroked my cheeks. “You see how beautiful our daughter is? What do you think, Kisi Kani? She’s nice, isn’t she? Aren’t you happy she’s here with us now?”

But my father had work to do. Even at this moment, the most important in my whole young life, he could not remain with me long. “Go back to the house,” he said to us. “I’ll be with you later.” Then he returned to his men and began to issue orders.

For a moment my mother and I stood there watching him, and the activity on the boats clustered around the little pier. Some of them carried large fishing nets used in dragging the river. “All these things,” my mother said, smiling, “belong to your father.” Satisfaction was written across her face as she watched the many blacks who jumped to her man’s commands.

This encounter, so intense for me, and yet so limited in its realization, was to set the pattern of my relationship with my father. He did not whip me; he was not angry with me. But neither was he a father with whom I could talk. There were no questions that first day, no references to the

fourteen years lost between us, or to a ruined childhood. No expression of interest in why I had run away. A silence that seemed impossible to overcome installed itself between us. Always, to me, he seemed remote, preoccupied. I was afraid to approach him, afraid to speak, for fear I might displease him. Just to look him in the face made me tremble, it was something so new for me.

Still, he provided me with a happy memory that night. When he came home from working late, he found me asleep on a pillow in the living room, waiting for his return. “My dear,” he said, waking me, smiling to see me there. “You will be more comfortable in your own bed. You have a room of your own now.” Then he picked me up in his strong arms and carried me into my new bedroom. I had never had a room of my own before. He laid me in my bed, which seemed immense to me. I marveled at the delicious new sensation as I slid between the fresh, cool sheets. There was a mosquito net too, for Bangui was infested with mosquitoes. I slept at once, feeling safe and at peace.

The next two months were happy for me. While Henriette was visiting her parents in Liège, my mother brassily stayed with us. She was quite at ease in the house, giving orders to the “boy” from the end of her nose. My hardworking little papa was kind to me and seemed pleased to show me off to everyone. I convinced myself that, at the bottom of his heart, he had never really abandoned me. That in fact, he had suffered terribly because of our separation. He had never had another child and I felt sure that from afar—though admittedly very far indeed—he had never ceased to love me.

My father had three male servants, a cook; a *marmiton*—the cook’s young helper who tended the wood stove and prepared the vegetables; and a house “boy” who cleaned and served. Our meals consisted of traditional French dishes such as *boeuf bourguignon*, *cassoulet*, *choucroute*, *gigot*, or

*bifstek au poivre*. Never before had I tasted dishes prepared with herbs and spices. I had never tasted meats! Now they were there before me, cooked with onions, shallots, garlic, and wine. And to add to the astonishments of the table, colorful new vegetables: carrots, beets, green peas, and artichoke hearts that had been imported in jars from France. There was freshly baked bread, crusty on the outside, white and spongy within. It was extraordinary! Regularly, in heaping plenitude, roast chicken, squab, and duckling were set out. Our meals were happy occasions. My mother's laughter put my father in a good humor. I ate with delight and began to gain weight.

It was my mother who one day told my father how she had fought with Mother Germaine. This made him smile. He could believe the picture because he had already seen her attack Henriette several times. But when my mother went on to talk about how badly I had been treated at the orphanage, and how he should ask for reparations from the nuns, my father said nothing. His gaze became distant, and the silence that was impossible to cross was there again.

Each day after work, Joseph Mialou stopped by my father's house to see me, and spend a little time with me. He hugged me and talked to me, he called me his daughter. My father had begotten me, but I was much closer to Joseph in my feelings. Joseph had no reason to give me so much affection, but he did, spontaneously, with an African generosity of heart. I couldn't help but respond to the kindness he showed me. My father had brought me back to Bangui to live with him. That was true. But it was Joseph's passage after work each day that I waited for.

I begged my mother to go back to Joseph. He was very unhappy, I could see that. "Maman," I said, "you must act like a grown woman. You must

stay with your husband. You're lucky to have him, Maman. He's such a good man ...”

And so she returned to him. But it didn't last. This happened three times, and each time they would separate again.

I could not understand how my mother could leave such a wonderful man. Joseph was an extraordinary husband, from every point of view. Morally he deserved the greatest respect. He was so clean that he sparkled, he crackled. His body was as polished as if it had been scrubbed with a brick. He was always dressed in white, totally in white—white shirts and white colonial shorts. His garments rustled as he walked. His physical cleanliness, his moral integrity, were perfect. He even washed my mother's clothes, and cleaned their house. He could not bear dirt or disorder. And when he walked on the street, he was marvelous to look at, as straight and dignified as a statue.

As for my mother, well, she was spoiled. When I compare her with the other women of that time and place, I see that all her life she was spoiled. And spoiled children can be impossible. She never confided in me what went wrong between herself and Joseph Mialou. But later, when I became a mature woman, I saw the differences between them, differences that to them must have seemed irreconcilable.

Joséphine was an extremely beautiful woman, exceptionally beautiful, and she knew it. Joseph, I see now, was too serious for her. She needed someone less intellectual, less religious. He was a man of deep thoughts and feelings. He often served at the early morning Mass. Joséphine went to church from time to time, only because she thought it had a certain chic. She found it charming to appear at Sunday Mass in a fresh, new *pagne* for all to see, that was part of her style.

Joseph was from Dahomey; that of course created differences in background between them. But worst of all, he was a cultivated man, a man with an education, while Joséphine didn't have a centime's worth of education. She never learned to read or write, and didn't care to. She had her family, and that was enough for her.

Joséphine was irrepressibly sociable. With Joseph as her husband, she couldn't receive half the village in her house, as she liked to do. Her idea of a good time was to have the whole family come down the river in a pirogue and stay up all night laughing and joking; he wanted other things. He was an impediment to the way she liked to live; he put into question her whole style, as a traditional woman of the village.

Perhaps the most important part of their marital difficulties was that Joseph was much older than she, and in Africa, age is an important part of rank. Joseph had a sense of his position, and Joséphine had no ideas about position at all. She delighted in going, for instance, to Matanga-Matanga, where the funeral wakes lasted all night and everyone sang and danced, enjoying themselves until dawn. Joseph didn't care for that. He was devoted to his work, and to routine, which she despised. Joséphine had her own ideas about what made a person's standing and they had nothing to do with the life and ways of Joseph.

Joseph wanted his house to shine like glass. He didn't ask my mother to do the work; he asked nothing of her. He was glad to do it all himself. But she needed her disorder. She needed the atmosphere of a village, the noise, the confusion, the come-and-go, to feel herself alive. Joseph wanted the life of a devoted couple. My mother couldn't bear the closed-in, selfish life of just two. She wanted to share, continually, with all those whom she loved. It was essential to her. To cut her off from that was to cut her off from life. In this I believe I am like my mother. For me it is not just my family, but all

Africa. Everyone calls me “Maman,” and I am unable to refuse my African family anything.

Joseph Mialou was a rare black man. There are few men of his stature in any race. Even my father liked Joseph Mialou very much. Sometimes when Joseph came to visit my father, Joséphine was there. You can imagine how she played her little role as a woman in the middle then, between the two men. She acted it out to the hilt, giving them her marvelous smile, preening, teasing each in turn, then laughing uproariously. For all her naiveté, there was a certain guile to Joséphine’s femininity that men do not necessarily deplore. She was a rowdy, easy woman, wholehearted and naughty as a child. Of course they were fascinated by her. But it was all a show for Pierre Gerbillat, because beneath all else, it was he whom she loved.

It made me sad to see how sad Joseph Mialou was. “Maman,” I begged, “Why can’t you make him happy?”

“Oh, he’s much older than I,” she would shrug.

But then so was my father. With Pierre Gerbillat, however, age did not matter, although in many ways he was not at all Joseph’s equal. Joseph was a fine-looking man, tall and handsome. My father was short and round-shouldered, and, as he aged, fat. But to Joséphine, he was the father of her child, the man whose name was tattooed on her arm. He was her fate, and that was all there was to it. His presence had been sealed in her.

One day my father strode joyfully into the house, his arms full of bundles. Among them was a great bouquet of flowers that he put in a vase in the living room. With a sinking heart I understood that Henriette was about to arrive. My mother would have to leave. Our little paradise for three was at an end.



But the next day, when my father came home at noon, his face was torn with anguish. Alarmed, I ran to him and hugged him. “What is it, Papa? What is the matter? Are you ill?”

He shook his head. “It’s your stepmother’s airplane. We’ve been notified that it’s been lost en route. They don’t know where.”

Such feelings rushed through me then! For days I had been dreading the return of this woman who had been responsible for sending me away before. She was certain to come between my father and me now. There was no reason for me to want to set eyes on her, ever again. Still, at the expression on my father’s face, I tried to share his anxiety and grief.

We went through two long, terrible days of waiting for news. At last, it came. We learned that the airplane had crash-landed in a clearing near Berberati. All the crew and passengers were safe and sound. Henriette was on her way to Bangui and would be arriving soon.

My stepmother found me clinging to my father’s arm as if I would never let go. She made an effort to be generous to me in her first words.

“How pretty you are, Andrée,” she exclaimed. “You have grown up. Now you are a young lady.”

As for me, no clear memories remained of Henriette. During that terrible trip down the river to my fate in Brazzaville, I was only aware that I had lost my mother. It seemed to me that I had lost everything. Perhaps I was nicely dressed, but for me that didn’t count at all. I have the impression that she gave me no tenderness at all during the two weeks of our river voyage. When she came to visit the orphanage with my father, she was distant, her manner glacial. She was merely there.

Now that I was older, I could see her as a person. She was a tall woman, *élancée*, with light hair and a striking manner. There was an ardent

expression in her blue eyes. When her glance turned on me, I found it terrifying. Many years later, in Guinea, I was to meet her again. At that time I was to recognize that she was in fact a beautiful woman with a compelling presence. As an adolescent I noticed such things as her clothes, and the fact that she was considerably taller than my father. But then he was very rich.

Henriette soon brought sadness into the house where we had been so happy. A muffled discord settled among us. There were unexplained sighs, brooding looks. I heard Henriette crying at night, long conversations in their bedroom. I had no idea what these conversations were about, but I sensed that they involved me. They ate without speaking, without looking at one another. The atmosphere at the table was icy. Henriette's displeasure in my presence was so evident that my food stuck in my throat. After starving for all those years at the orphanage I had come to this good food, only to find that I could not swallow it.

I told my mother how miserable I was at meals, and sometimes she would prepare an African dish and bring it to the house for me. This I would devour in my room, with her, basking in her love and attention. Henriette was very unhappy with my father—she was, after all, twenty-two years younger than he—and this showed in many ways. She was not at all interested in the house, which was furnished in an offhand way with utilitarian chairs and tables that my father had acquired. Henriette made no effort to make the house attractive with curtains or pictures or things of her own. In no way did she make it hers. Young as I was, I observed this. I believe it was painful for Henriette to be there. Her problems with my father had been going on for years, but I did not know this and when I found myself in the middle of their unhappiness I assumed that it was I who was the cause.

Once my father spent the night sitting up in one of the four big, ugly armchairs in the living room. He looked very sad. That morning, as we were alone, I blurted out to him, “You always seem to be downhearted and *she* always has red eyes. I think it would have been better if she had died in the airplane crash.”

My father stared at me, but said nothing. He saw that I was just an ignorant child, that I did not mean to be cruel.

The servants heard my father and Henriette quarreling, and told Joséphine. She took a malicious delight in it. Since Henriette had never had a child, Joséphine was convinced that the marriage eventually would fail. In that whole sad house, only Joséphine was happy, because she saw a victory over her rival ahead.

Joséphine was extremely brassy with Henriette. She celebrated the misery in their marriage by coming to the house and looking triumphantly into Henriette’s eyes. She did not say anything impolite, but her presence alone, she knew, was an abomination to Henriette, and so she came to the house with a high-handed pleasure. As she walked in, quite at her ease, instead of greeting Henriette in French, Joséphine would say in an indifferent tone to her, “*M’balamo.*” This was the familiar form of greeting in her own tongue; it means “*je te salue.*”

Henriette would stiffly reply, “Bonjour,” then turn and flee to her room. My father would follow her and we would hear them talking in tense voices behind the closed door. Then he would return and, extending a note, would say to Joséphine, “Here’s some money. Now leave us. Go!”

Joséphine would take the money, tuck it into the waist of her colored skirt, and say, “No, I think I’ll stay and visit my daughter—our daughter—a little.” And she would comfortably ensconce herself in a chair. “By the way,” she would add, in a tone that was both mischievous and seductive at

the same time, “when is she,” with a motion of her head toward the bedroom, “going to take a powder?”

If Henriette had had children of her own, I believe that Joséphine’s position, and mine, would have been quite different. My father might have permitted Joséphine to keep me. But since he had no other child, Joséphine, and the child he had by her, took on a greater importance.

There was one occasion, when I was an infant, that Joséphine actually had a fight with Henriette, an exchange of slaps and scratches. Perhaps it was then that my father decided to put me in the orphanage, so that Joséphine would stay away from their house and leave them in peace. My father, it was clear, simply could not deal with Joséphine’s particular combination of insolence and charm, when she insisted on being around.

As for me, the joy had gone out of being with my father. I felt that it was I who was “*de trop.*” It was I who was making Henriette angry and my father unhappy. There were days of tension, of heavy silences.

The climax to this undefined malaise was dramatic. One of my father’s attempts to placate Henriette was to buy her a German shepherd puppy. He was magnificent, this gay young creature, black and tan, with floppy paws and a heart that asked only to love. We called him Bogey. Frolicking with him became my one distraction in this sad house.

One day the cook prepared a rabbit in mustard sauce for our lunch. That evening we saw Bogey trembling. He was seized with such convulsions that we knew he was seriously ill. My father took him to the veterinarian but within a few minutes he died.

Henriette was wild. She accused me of poisoning Bogey. She threw herself on her bed, sobbing that I had done it deliberately, I had destroyed the life of this creature who was so dear to her, out of jealousy.

I was stunned by her words. I was sick, myself, with grief. I could not imagine how anyone could take the life of such a lovable animal, which had harmed no one.

My father tried to comfort Henriette. Then he asked me, “What did you give Bogey to eat?”

The tears were streaming down my cheeks. My voice was choked as I said, “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

But I saw the look in his eyes. He believed her accusation. He believed that I had poisoned her dog.

My father instructed the veterinarian to make an autopsy of Bogey, which was done. It was found that he had died from peritonitis. The *marmiton* had given him the scraps from our plates at lunch. A rabbit bone had pierced his intestine.

When my father learned this, he came and took me in his arms and kissed me. But the evil had been done. To be accused of such a vile deed, above all to dear Bogey, was too cruel a hurt. It was the drop of water which made the vase spill over.

Within a few days I made my decision. When I found my father alone, I said to him, “Papa, everything that goes wrong in this house seems to be my fault. I know you two are quarreling, and it’s because of me.”

He denied this, half-heartedly. I knew it was true.

I had decided to offer to leave his home. I would show my love for him by removing my unwelcome presence. Then his wife would be happy and they would be at peace again. Still, was it not human for me to hope that if I made such an offer, my father would refuse to let me go? That, touched by my suggested sacrifice, my youth, and my pain, he would draw me closer than ever, and somehow resolve the problem in another way?

“I can’t bear for you to be unhappy because of me, Papa,” I said. “So I’ll leave. I know how to work. At the convent I learned how to embroider and sew. I can earn my own living by doing that. I’ll go back to Brazzaville and work.”

“To Brazzaville?” he asked, astonished.

“Yes. There will be more work for me there.”

“No, you can’t leave my care,” he replied gloomily, but without conviction. “You might get into trouble. There are all kinds of dangers for a young girl like you, alone, in Brazzaville. It’s too risky. I don’t want you to come to harm.”

“I’ll be alright, Papa,” I said, trying to believe it was true. “I’m sure I can take care of myself. I can’t stay here and continue to be the cause of your disagreements.”

He considered my words for some moments. “Very well,” he said, at last, with an air of great weariness, in which, however, I thought I detected a note of relief. “You may leave, if you wish.”

Then he added something totally unexpected, which was to hurt me for years to come. “But don’t count on me any more.”

Don’t count on me any more! What did he mean by that? What had changed his feelings toward me? Why was he cutting me off again? I was stupefied. Later I wept in pain and fury at being abandoned by him this second time. But at the moment I only tried to reassure him.

“I’m sure I’ll manage to find work, Papa. I’ll be strong, and work hard, like you.”

## 5

# Hard Days Precede First Love

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Dazed and saddened, but resolute, I soon left for Brazzaville. My mother went with me. This was a great comfort to me, of course. But I could not deny my feelings about her leaving Joseph. He was a rare man, and precious to me. I felt revolted by what my mother did to him. For a short time, he had been what I needed, a father whom I could love and trust. He owed me nothing, yet he accepted me as his daughter. In his goodness I found the repose of heart on which human affection is built.

My father paid for my boat ticket, and my mother's, but he did not give me one centime more. Like his silences, this cruel economy was one thing more I could not understand. My mother had with her several 100-franc bills, and with this money, by being extremely frugal, we were able to live for a little while. However, naive and flighty as Joséphine was, it was to be I, rather, who managed the money and looked after her.

I found a tiny house for us in noisy, crowded, colorful Poto-Poto. It had one tiny room and an entrance way, and cost 25 francs a month. Like most of the others there, it was made of a clay cement called "*banco*" reinforced by branches set as stakes into the ground. Sometimes these little houses

were whitened with lime, sometimes they were left the color of the red clay. Usually the roof was thatched. Some houses were covered with what was pompously known as “an iron roof,” which provided better protection from our heavy tropical rains. Rarely, however, were these roofs of real sheets of corrugated iron. More often they were of flattened gasoline cans, called *bidons*, which gave rise to the name of such quarters as *bidonvilles*.

There was no running water in the village of Poto-Poto, but each house had its own well. We had no bathroom, but behind the house was a little thatched enclosure with no roof, and there we took care of our private needs. To bathe, I stood on a plank over a hole into which the water drained. The sky was blue above, I was alone and enjoyed a refreshing scrub while the animated life of the quarter continued to flow around me.

Brazzaville was divided into two sections: the blacks lived in Poto-Poto, on the plain; the Europeans lived on the plateau, which, being higher, is cooler. Some of the older girls of the orphanage who made their living by sewing gave me the names of a few white ladies on the plateau who might need mending, sewing, or embroidery. With several addresses in hand, I went prospecting. It was necessary to go almost from house to house, which I found painful. Rarely was a door opened to me, even to ask what I wanted. When a white lady saw me entering her property, she would say to her “boy,” “Ask what she wants, that girl of mixed blood there.” And the “boy,” echoing the haughty tones of his mistress, would call out from the window, “You there, what is it you want?” It was by the window that we were questioned and given a refusal. If there was any work to be done, then we were sent to the rear to enter through the kitchen and servants’ rooms.

Many of the houses before which I stood, humbly presenting myself as a seamstress seeking work, were not as fine as the house in which I lived with my father. But that did not count now. I was willing to work hard, as I



had promised my father. But the contempt with which I was often sent away added a dimension to gaining my livelihood that my father could never have known. Each time I was scorned from the windows was to me like another lash of an invisible *chicotte*.

Still, when work is done well, the news spreads. One of my white ladies would tell another, “Say, I have a little *métisse* who doesn’t sew too badly.” Even if she said it with a patronizing disdain, the essential thing for me was that I gradually built up a clientele.

The sewing machine that I rented for my work often broke down, and I learned to pamper it and repair it myself. It was operated by a hand-turned crank. I could not afford a modern machine that ran by rocking the feet; that was far beyond my poor means. With one hand I turned the wheel, with the other I carefully guided, inch by inch, my cloth through the path of the needle. When a dress was finished, I earned only 2–2.5 francs. For a really special dress with flounces and special effects, I could charge 4 francs. The price included fitting four times, which required walking back and forth between my client’s house and mine, some five or six kilometers each way. It took me about a day and a half to make a dress. I often worked late into the night, by the light of a storm lantern or candle, to finish.

The furnishings of our little house were simple. A cord was strung up to hang our clothes on, or we folded them neatly in a pile. But I had so few things, it didn’t matter. My great luxury was my table, on which to do my sewing. Fortunately, the roof extended a meter or so beyond the entrance to the house, so by hanging a straw mat from it, I created the illusion of a second little room. It was much fresher here, where the air circulated, than inside, so this was where I placed my table and worked all day.

Our first bed was a canvas cot, which friends loaned to us. About a month later I got my own bed. A woman who respects herself begins with a

decent bed in her home; that is the first thing, I told myself. I had a carpenter construct for me a bed of very ordinary, unpainted wood. The night the bed was put in its place I could not stop looking at it. The blue cloth with which I covered it was of poor quality, but what did that matter? It was mine! To protect us from mosquitoes I hung a net over the bed, fashioning the wings of the net myself. That night I was so happy, gazing at my blue bed, with the gauzy mosquito net, that I let my candle burn a long time. For me, it was one of the most beautiful nights that one could have. With my first money, at last I was in my own bed!

Later, I bought muslin for sheets. I did not wash the fabric before I stitched it into sheets, as I wanted to enjoy them absolutely untouched in all their newness. To have something brand new, of my very own, was for me a marvelous experience.

There were not many people of mixed blood at that time, as there are now. The *métis* and the *métisses* were still a rarity, but they lived at Poto-Poto with the blacks, for the most part, in harmony. I felt that I was accepted by most of the people, although there was some jealousy of my fair skin among blacks of my own age. But one's relations are a reflection of one's attitude. My black companions saw that they had nothing to fear from me in regard to their husbands, who were of no interest to me at all, so there was no problem. The greatest rivalry was among the girls of mixed blood themselves. Our psychology was extremely complex, one might even say difficult. Inevitably, we were both one another's best allies and worst enemies.

To go to the plateau, where the whites for whom I worked lived, it was necessary to pass by a prison that was beside the hard clay road. This was a real trial for me and my female companions. The incarcerated men could

look out and see everyone who passed, it was their only contact with the outside life. They yelled obscenities at us, and made gestures that we understood were indecent and that we knew we should not see, even though we did not know what they meant. They yelled things at us in Lingala about our breasts, our buttocks. Those things, to our shame, we understood: we were mortified.

But we absolutely had to pass by the prison, as no other road existed. The surrounding land was a stagnant swamp, infested with frogs, toads, flies, mosquitoes, and enormous worms. It was always flooded. No matter how innocent a girl is, when she hears or sees something she doesn't understand, like those obscenities, they remain in her head—a repellent puzzle. My friends and I understood that these things were impure: we had been taught that we should avoid men because they were a source of impurity. This torment confirmed our fears that there was something in them that we should flee. We squeezed together, elbow to elbow, and walked quickly in a group, almost running. There had to be at least three of us to face such misery. Alone, it was impossible. In order to avoid this road at noon, I stayed at the home of the white woman for whom I was sewing, and rested in her yard in the shade of one of the big trees. If I was on the road alone, I would wait, as I neared the prison, until some other people came with whom I could walk.

Of course, even on the streets of Brazzaville, occasionally one received unwelcome comments from one or two men passing by. But that was nothing compared to a pack of men behind bars, howling things at us in our own language, making obscene gestures. It was because the men were behind bars that the scene took on such frightening proportions. For me, it was something like what I experienced when they showed us those terrible paintings of hell, at the orphanage. The men behind bars seemed more ugly

and dangerous than the men on the street. They were the damned, caged in with all their vices and sexual desires and sins. For me, the wickedness in their looks had a significance horrible beyond words.

When we reached the plateau, we had the propositions and advances of the white men to deal with. These were couched in less gross and insulting terms, but were nevertheless a trial to us. The encounters went something like this. When a white man saw a young *métisse*—and the *métisse* was considered a choice dish—he would tell his “boy,” “If you get her to come to me, I’ll give you two francs.” Thus the “boy” would have a stake in the situation. He would approach the *métisse* with a smile and say, “Come. my white man will give you a nice present. Would you like a new *bubu*?”

If the girl were me, the reply would be, “Imbecile, go look for your mother.” Or something equally rude. Then the “boy,” angered, would reply with something that really touched a *métisse*’s self-esteem like “white of Africa,” or “kwanga white.”<sup>1</sup> Expressions like “badly bleached” or “café-au-lait,” when used against us, hurt. They have given us many tears. The “boy” might say, “Umbua congo,” which means, “You will always stay in the Congo. You are a product of the Congo and you will never go elsewhere. Have no pretensions, just because of the white blood inside you, don’t think it will get you anything.” In Bakongo they would give us these dreaded insults.

Such incidents were commonplace in our lives, as we worked. And then, besides, we had also to deal with the husband of the white woman for whom we were sewing. Behind her back, he would try to pat our buttocks or brush against our breasts, which of course we had to conceal from his wife, because if she saw such a thing happen, we would be in serious trouble with all our white ladies.

When our work was finally done and we were free to go, we still had the long road, past the prison. All for 5 francs a week. The tension was constant, and we were always on the defense.

If possible, we tried to get enough sewing or mending to do that we could stay home for two or three days at a time. If we could get a big job, like a tablecloth to embroider, which would take a whole month, that was considered marvelous luck. One could earn 20 francs and avoid the long walk in the sun, and all those dreaded confrontations. Often, at the end of a day we would be close to fainting from exhaustion because we did not have money for a little food at noon.

During the rainy season I had to plan my time carefully, because in the Congo the rains are torrential. Usually, after falling in sheets for several hours, the rain would stop for a little while. Then, quickly, I had to rush about and do everything I needed to do before the rain began again. Many times, I arrived at my white lady's house doused, totally soaked, as if I had been in the river. And the worst of it was that she would not give me even a piece of rag with which to wipe myself dry. That was my problem, not hers. That I might work better if I were not soaked and shivering was not her concern. My health—what was that to her? They were so inhuman. And the odd thing was that when these white women first arrived in Africa, they were not like that. It was their contact with the other colonials that changed them. Within a week, they were different: I saw it happen. If a white person said, “Bonjour” politely to a black, the other whites would mock him. “Look!” he would be warned. “Those are dirty niggers and you had better let them know their place. If you don't, you'll be badly seen by the rest of the whites here.”

I didn't dare ask my white lady for anything. I had to hide from her, to beg her “boy” to give me a glass of faucet water. After walking six

kilometers in the hot sun, I hadn't the right even to that. If the "boy" passed near me, I would ask him in a whisper. For which I might or might not be insulted. I worked on my little stool in the corner, afraid, actually afraid. I sewed, that was all. I wasn't supposed to speak to the "boy."

The "boy, being human, would not risk his position for me. Because his job was more important than anything else, he quickly learned to protect his own interests by identifying them with the wishes of his master. One's work and livelihood is so fundamental; he had to think of himself, whatever his instinct to help me might be.

Most European women hated and feared the *métisses*. We were young, beautiful, fresh, and naive. The white women saw how the glances of their men lingered on us, and this terrified them. Many European men preferred to have a *métisse* as his mistress rather than a black woman, because she was esteemed a step closer to his own special level. Still, it was rare for a *métisse* to have the right to eat with her white man at his table. And when another European came to visit his house, she had to hide.

The contradictions between what we *métisses* were taught to believe and what we experienced as women, in our treatment by white men, could, if one dwelt upon them too long, drive us mad. Racism exists in two forms: the individual and the collective. Before it can be collective, it must first of all be individual. It begins within the individual, and it is there it must be rooted out first. When a group of individuals establishes racist rules in their own favor and has the means to enforce those rules, racism becomes collective. But then, behind that collective racism there is the individual's interpretation of those rules, which, in another twist, might be set aside for its own time and terms, as in sexual intercourse.

For yes, in spite of the segregation that the whites insisted on to maintain their power, there was no denying that white men were attracted to

black women. Indeed, the very fact that black women were forbidden made them more attractive. We women knew very well what the white men were thinking as they eyed us. In their glance was nothing of those self-righteous rules. There was lust. Furious lust. I will even go so far as to say that there are white men who loved our black women so well that they came to Africa, seeking out our continent to make their lives in our far land because there was something in those magnificent, half-naked black women's bodies that nourished a hunger that the white women, stuffed in their many layers of confining clothes, could never satisfy. For in Africa there is a vitality—an acceptance of simple joys, and an instinctive infatuation with life—that is not to be found elsewhere.

I can understand why the white man came to Africa, his eyes wide, his heart beating hard. But I do not understand why, after he saw us as we were in our great land, he treated us so badly.

My clientele continued to grow, and soon I had as much sewing as I could handle. But my mother was outraged to see me wasting my youth in hard work. She thought it a disgrace.

“Look at the other *métisse* girls,” she would say, “how happy they are! Their lives with their governors are *easy*.” We called an important white businessman at that time a “governor,” as a title of respect. I was withdrawing from life, as she saw it. She wanted me to burst into life. She saw a brilliant future for me, spoiled by a “governor” who would build a house several stories high for me. That, she thought, would be worthy of her daughter, the daughter of Gerbillat. I should be with someone rich, very rich. Only that would be suitable for her jewel.

For my mother, happiness was material ease. When she saw me drudging away over my dresses, far into the night, she made angry scenes.

“You’ll soon be wearing glasses,” she would scold. “You just wait and see. You are ruining your eyes with all this crying and sewing. What is the matter with you?”

She seemed almost to think that I was doing this just to annoy her. Our relations were painful; we hurt each other.

“Oh Maman,” I would sigh. “Leave me alone. It’s hard enough to do my work without you scolding me besides.”

Paying no attention, she would continue: “You could be one of the richest girls in Brazzaville. You could have everything you want, a nice house, even a “boy.” Why are you so perverse? What makes you so obstinate?”

I saved every centime I could, working by natural light until it was very dark before lighting my lantern. I had marvelous eyes then and could thread a needle by the light of the full moon, and often did. I bought kerosene for my lantern in a tiny can used for tomato paste. It was 50 centimes, so every drop was precious. And, do you know, the mama who sold me the kerosene would tap on the bottom of the can to make it curve inward, hollow, to save half a thimbleful of kerosene! I bought kerosene only when I had to work late, but that came to be almost every night. I would sit on a mat in the yard of my little “concession” to catch the very last glimmers of light, sewing and chatting with the mamas in their concessions nearby, until it was night. Then I would enter the house just to sleep, lighting my lantern for only a few seconds, and go to bed in total darkness, for there were no lights in the streets of Poto-Poto then.

Quarrels with my mother reached a climax one day when I refused, imperiously, the advances of one of the town’s top white businessmen. He sent his car and chauffeur to our little house with a big bottle of lavender toilet water. I shouted at the chauffeur and smashed the bottle. My mother,



who witnessed the scene, was horrified. There was no end to the reproaches she heaped on me about that. For days we were angry—then we made up. I continued to sew.

To escape these stupid disputes with my poor mother, I got her a little house of her own as soon as I could. The one across the lane from mine became free, and since I was already a tenant in the concession, they let me have the second one for 15 francs a month. This made a huge hole in my budget, but I had to get away from her naive anger at seeing me work. I don't blame her for her ideas, as that was the way she was raised. How could she have been otherwise? It was natural that she should want a good life for her daughter.

Joséphine, I confess, was of a very special nature. She was an unquenchable coquette. Appearance meant everything to her, and she was quite feckless about money. The important thing, to her, was to have a new *pagne* every Sunday—she found it unbearable to be seen in an old one. From the Portuguese peddlers in our quarter, she regularly bought the highly colored printed cotton cloth from which *pagnes* were made, and each Sunday she proudly sashayed out in her new *pagne*. During that period, she was so hard to live with, and I was so depressed, that I applied myself more than ever to working hard, in order to be able to give her what she wanted. Her *pagnes*, her foulards for the head, and espadrilles were important to her, according to the customs of her people. I wanted others to envy her; after all I was her only child. I worked like a slave so she would not feel that she was being cheated in her life, because I was not being kept by a wealthy “governor.” Always slender, I began to lose even more weight.

Although I wish it had not been so, one of my clients was Madame Dupuis, the wife of the director of the Department of Forests and Water. Their

property was some distance from town, on a lonely and difficult road through luxuriant vegetation. Madame Dupuis was an enormous woman of about sixty, a fanatic about her clothes and her appearance. She was always highly rouged, her eyebrows painted long and black, and her hair crimped, as for a ball.

I went to her home and she asked me to make her pajamas of canary yellow and black silk. To this I applied my very best efforts. However, each time I brought the finished pajamas to her, she changed her mind about the style and had me take them home to do over again. Flounces were replaced by pleats, her fancies for ties, frills, peplums, and swags replaced one another. Six extra times I made that long trip to her house in the woods, in a heat and humidity that made my clothes and hair stick with perspiration to my skin. Six times she mercilessly handed the pajamas back to me to do over. Finally, she was satisfied and asked me how much I wanted for my work.

In the meek manner with which I had learned to deal with these high-handed and temperamental women, I answered, "It will be 5 francs, Madame."

Madame Dupuis exploded. "Five francs!" she shrieked. "You're a thief! What are you thinking of!" She was red with rage. "Five francs! Why, I shall call the police!"

"But Madame," I replied in an even tone, "I've worked on this pajama for a week." I tried to speak calmly, I had suffered too much for those 5 francs to lose them now. "Every day I've walked a dozen kilometers and every day you have made some extravagant new change. Five francs, Madame, is not unfair. It's what you owe me."

"I'll have you thrown in prison!"

This was too much. Undone, I shouted that *she* was a thief, a thief of my time, and a painted old witch to boot. She screamed for her “boys” to throw me out. I resisted, adding a few more of my thoughts on her appearance and practices.

Then I broke away from her “boys” and began running down the beaten dirt road toward town. Madame Dupuis unleashed an enormous wolf-dog on me. I was terrified by its ferocious barking as it came after me. In my pell-mell flight, I tripped, and fell full length, hard, on my face. The dog was instantly upon me, tearing savagely at my dress. Fortunately, the “boys” of the house had run after the dog; they came to my aid and drove him off. My head was bleeding, my dress was in rags. I was crying so hard I could not get up for some minutes, in spite of the brotherly solicitude of the old chippie’s servants.

On top of the rest of the difficulties in my life, this seemed unbearable. Here I was, trying to earn my living honestly, and what did I get for it? As I walked slowly home, weeping, I thought of my mother’s reproaches. It was true that many of the young women I knew had found a much easier way to survive. As the “housekeeper” of an unmarried man, or the mistress of one who had his own family, these young women lived in comfort and relative security. Somehow the idea filled me with shame. Yet who, really, I had to ask myself, was the fool? Was it, in fact, possible for a young woman to be as proud as I, in a system designed to keep nonwhites on their knees?

Leopoldville, the capital of the Belgian Congo, was just across the Congo River from Brazzaville. One day, I went there for my work. On the street, I ran into an old friend from the orphanage, Jeanne. She was about to marry a man of mixed blood who was the captain of one of the riverboats.

Jeanne was disturbed at seeing me so discouraged and thin. “You can’t go on like this, Andrée,” she said solicitously. “You’re exhausted, you need

a rest. Why don't you come and spend a month with us on the boat? It will do you a lot of good."

Gratefully, I accepted. I was longing to get away from Brazzaville and the many humiliations I had experienced in the past year there. Although I had written my father our address when we were settled, I had never heard from him. But then, I hardly hoped that he would begin to write now. If I were to survive, I was somehow going to have to recover my energy and desire to work.

The boat on which we sailed a few days later was called the *Bolongo*. It was a single decker with first-and second-class cabins for Europeans. As the guest of the captain and Jeanne, I was given a little cabin on the bridge, although according to law only whites were normally permitted to have cabins. But I spent almost no time there. I wanted to immerse myself in the life of the river; the contact with the great outdoors would be the remedy that would cure me.

We sailed up the Congo River, entering its tributary, the Kwilu. The countryside had a primitive beauty. Papyrus bordering the banks stretched into infinity ahead of us, the reeds swaying gently in the sun. I spent hours on the boat's deck, watching these lush shores as they passed. After four days on this cruise, I was drunk with the beauty of my land. Life on board was uneventful, and my friends left me free to dream.

Just because I had suffered in the orphanage was no reason, I believed, not to compare well, in my appearance, with other women. I never believed that to be unclean or unkempt was a sign of virtue or humility, even if it is said that dirt is the water of the poor. I had the reputation of being coquettish, even proud. But that was not so; it was that I had consideration for my own person. Even when I was wearing clothes that were patched, I always arranged them to look their best. Our dresses were short then, just to

the knee. I was very slim, and still had a small bosom at that time. My hair, which had grown out, was brown and silky, worn behind the ears; the *guiche*, or side curl, did not come in until later. Often I wore a flower, like a rose, in my hair. It was an easy way to feel fresh and pretty. I wore a bright lipstick, red as poinsettias, called “Rouge Baiser.” We did not make up our eyes then, for our youth was enough.

It was one evening after dinner, on the deck of the *Bolongo*, that I began to talk with Roger Serruys. As usual, I was leaning against the rail, watching the darkened shores and the little fires of occasional passing villages. He came to my side and we became acquainted. I had seen him in the dining room, where I ate with the Europeans around a big table. There were fifteen of us passengers in all. Roger was tall and well-built, his strong face bronzed by the African sun. I found him handsome. Like the other men then, he was simply dressed in a short-sleeved white shirt, open at the neck, and light trousers. I had felt his eyes on me since the trip began. Deliberately I had ignored his insistent looks. Men often stared at me with insolence and desire. I had learned to keep my distance by adopting a manner that was haughty and cold toward them.

Now, however, my mood changed. I felt that I was living, at last. Everything delighted me: the savannas, the villages, the flat or rugged countryside, and even the way this man looked at me. I laughed, I was charming ... Why not? The woman who cannot indulge her desire to feel pleasing does not feel herself fully alive.

We spent the evening together, and the next day. Everything that we looked at seemed as new as if it had been created expressly for our pleasure. Roger’s presence brought me a turmoil that I had never before experienced. Everything I saw, heard, and felt was intensified for me—never had I felt life more keenly. In the evening, in my cabin, I found mysterious tears

rolling down my cheeks. I could not understand the strange sensations that were taking possession of me. This not uncommon experience, for which every woman waits with hope and joy, was for me unfathomable. Perhaps I was happy, I thought. I was troubled, tormented, finally, obsessed.

Roger, I learned in the long hours we spent together, for now we were inseparable, was of aristocratic birth, related to the Belgian royal family. He had been appointed the new director of the fabulous Belgian Kasai Company, which had vast holdings of every kind in the Congo. He was on his way to Banningville to take over this post for the first time.

Perhaps if I had not been so exalted by the beauty of the nature around me, and so free of all care on this island of ease, this smoothly churning boat, I could have better mastered my new feelings. Perhaps I could have tempered my passions with commonsense warnings on the realities of my life.

But I was of an ardent nature, and could do nothing by halves. I abandoned myself in the arms of my first love, this handsome, bronzed prince of the race that had so often hurt me. What was happening to us, we told ourselves, was extraordinary; what we felt was different from anything that ever existed before on earth.

The marvelous days succeeded one another. Together we looked at the white sand banks where the crocodiles slept in the sun. Before us were the fishermen's huts, at the foot of which were lined up their canoes. The air rang with bird calls and the cries of naked children who ran along the river's edge. Everyone greeted our passage with lifted hands and smiles. In Africa all is charming: the hospitality, the ever-spontaneous kindness.

While the boat continued on its way, down in the hull, the black passengers made shift as best they could. They had no protection against either sun or rain except by erecting little shelters from the mats they had

brought. I watched them as they crouched there during the hot days, or huddled against one another for warmth when it rained. But there were even greater hardships during their passage.

Occasionally the boat had to stop to take on the firewood that was its fuel, and then the men were called on to help carry this wood aboard. Naked to the waist, with a burlap sack to protect their shoulders, they tramped, bent under the heavy loads, up the gangplank. The boat stopped by night as well as by day.

One night, when these laborers had gone to fetch wood in the forest, a terrible cry rent the air. We ran out of our cabins; a man had been bitten by a serpent. When they carried him back onto the boat, he was already comatose. In spite of Roger's efforts to comfort me, I could not sleep any more that night. I was almost ashamed of my cabin, of my privileged existence, while my black brothers were outside, exposed to the dangers of the jungle. The *Bolongo* put off immediately, but it was many hours before we reached a post where the poor man could be cared for. By then he was dying; there was no more hope for him. I was shocked by this event. In spite of my happiness with Roger, I was depressed by it; I might even say that it marked me.

Roger and I made plans, quite simply, to live together. I was young, I was in love, I was eager to live!

Ten days later, we arrived, in the evening, at Banningville. There I received my first intimations of what life held for the mistress of mixed blood. Since the night before, Roger had seemed troubled. A certain sadness invaded us. An hour before we were to reach Banningville, Roger said, "I must talk with you."

I dreaded what he would say. But I had to hear how he would explain this unnamed malaise that had settled between us.

“We’ll soon be docking,” he said. “A committee of welcome will be there to meet me. The company officials.”

Already I understood what he meant.

“At the last little village where we stopped,” he said, and his tones were meant to reassure me, “I sent a telegram to Dima. The company’s seat is at Dima, about sixty kilometers inland, beyond Banningville. I told them I needed not one but two cars. The second car is for you, my dear.”

I felt as though I were sinking. Wrecked. Lost. “Are you ashamed of me, Roger?” I asked in a low, miserable voice.

“Come now,” he chided me gently. “What is this way of looking at things? For a couple of hours, I must be with the company officials. Then I’ll be with you again, in our new home.”

“I’m an embarrassment to you,” I accused him. “You’re ashamed to be seen with me.”

“If I were ashamed of you, I wouldn’t have asked you to live with me. To share my life at Dima.”

It was true that this had been his idea; it was he who proposed that I leave the boat to stay with him. The initiatives in making plans for our future had been taken by him. Although I, an ardent woman, shared fully in creating our romance.

“If my presence is damaging to your position in the company, then I don’t want to be there, Roger,” I said disconsolately. “I’ll go on. I’ll continue my voyage alone, as I had planned.” For a moment, I thought I was capable of sacrificing myself for my love’s wellbeing.



“There’s no question of that,” he said firmly. “I want you with me. Don’t you understand? I just don’t want to confront them, arriving at my new post ... in the first moments. Just this first meeting.”

When the boat drew near the wharf at Banningville, we could see several businessmen, obviously from the Kasai Company, waiting to welcome their new director. Roger turned to me and said in a discreet manner, “Will you go down and wait for me in the cabin? I’ll come down to say goodbye.”

I understood that it was more convenient for him to say goodbye to me out of sight than on the bridge.

So I waited for him obediently in the cabin. But when he came, I cried. I was wounded, frightened. Unable to voice my real fears, I clung to him. “I hate to be separated from you for this long trip through the jungle. And worse yet, at night. I’m afraid, Roger.”

“Don’t be afraid. I’ll ask that our car not go too fast, so that you can follow closely.”

As Roger went down the gangplank, he looked back at me, and he continued to look back as long as he could, as if to say, “I’m not abandoning you. I’ll see you in a little while. Please. I beg you.”

In the cabin I cried a lot. I told myself that I didn’t want to give Roger problems. I would prefer to continue on alone. But this, in fact, was impossible. I was so truly in love with this man that I couldn’t turn away. I could not stop my heart and go on with this trip. I thought: I’ll try my luck. I’ll follow this man, now that we’ve begun.

Soon afterward I left, in the second car, which Roger had arranged for me. In spite of myself, I was repeating my mother’s humiliating history.

Thus, a new life began for me. No longer the innocent, proud young girl I had been, I was now to learn, through love, the degrading existence of the African concubine.

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## 6

# Africa Unfolds, My Life Takes a Turn

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The road to Dima was frightening. It was little more than a trail of two tracks, full of potholes, frequently dipping into small streams through which the chauffeur had to drive carefully, to keep the motor turning. All around us was the exuberant foliage of the jungle. It was now full night, totally black. The headlights of the car burrowed through the menacing, dense trees and vines as through a living tunnel.

My usual curiosity and enthusiasm for the adventures that my Africa had to offer did not respond to the scene. I found no charm in it. I felt as though I were plunging into a trap. It was a trap of my own choice, of course, for although I had not sought it, I had agreed to it. I was to share the life of a man whom I had met less than two weeks earlier. And already—this car was proof of it—I was relegated to a second-class position. I was so young, so inexperienced. I had no idea how I should live. But the damage had already been done. There was nothing I could do but continue, recklessly, in pain and despair.

It was about eleven o'clock at night when we reached the town of Dima and found the section for residences of the Kasai Company officials. There,

Roger had posted a sentinel who was waiting with a flashlight to show us the way to Roger's house. When we arrived, Roger was on the front lawn, watching for me. He hurried to the car, opened the door, and took me in his arms. Then he pointed to the one-story house above, set among the big trees. "Here is your new home," he said. "Do you think you'll like it?"

A marvelous house, it seemed extraordinary to me. And I was consoled by the welcome Roger gave me. But I was still thinking, "What is waiting for me in this place where I must be careful not to meet anyone? How am I going to live my life, as a woman?"

Immediately Roger took me on a tour of the house, which the company had remodeled and repainted to make it fresh and modern for the new director. It was in the choicest position of all the fine Kasai Company residences, set high on a bluff, overlooking the Kasai River flowing not far in the distance. Before us, the bluff dropped down to the wharf where the boats landed. The house was spacious, with great bay windows. A large covered terrace almost surrounded the house, to protect the rooms from the heat of the sun.

"Tell me if there are some things you want changed," Roger said, "and I'll have them made." He took a piece of paper to make notes of what I would say. He wanted to satisfy my every desire. So together we walked through the rooms. The floor was of cement, for coolness, with rugs to make it livable, and the furniture was that of a traditional bourgeois European home, all imported from Belgium. There was electricity, but it was not available after nine o'clock or nine-thirty, so the lights were supplemented by *lampes à pression* everywhere.

I, with my caprices, had a few little ideas of my own about changes I wanted to make. I laughed and told Roger that I wanted to remodel the form of the opening between the living room and the dining room. Somewhere I

had seen this opening rounded, in an arch, which I found sumptuous, marvelous. I absolutely had to have this arch for us, in our new home.

“*Bon*. It will be done,” he promised.

After noting a few other little things that I thought I wanted, Roger presented his trusted manservant, Jean, to me. There was also a cook and a boy. From then on, I was to be in the middle, between Roger and the servants. “You must be the mistress of the house, now,” he said. I knew nothing about this, at seventeen, with the background I’d had. I simply had to throw myself into it.

In the succeeding days I was better able to appreciate Roger’s splendid home. Dima was a company town, built on the edge of the river, for the Europeans. The view was pleasant, and the air and climate were the best in the region. The African workers were less favored, some distance away, amid the swamps and mosquitoes. The Kasai Company of Belgium, like the Interfina of France, was an enormous enterprise that imported and exported whatever was profitable in Africa. It owned boats, mines, towns, and landing facilities. It had planted thousands of hectares of palmetto trees, which were cultivated for their nuts. At Dima, where the African headquarters were ensconced, every effort had been made to provide a handsome life for the whites who were committed to the company’s success.

The European quarter was magnificent with its fine lawns, and nothing like the African quarter, where there was no question of such things as flowers. We had an immense garden with ferns and dahlias; all around the house were flower beds, beautifully kept by our gardener. We also had a vegetable garden, with lettuce, radishes, and cabbages.

The company personnel soon became aware of my presence. Now that I understood Roger’s position, I wanted to be discreet, and not be seen with

him. But Roger said, “No, let’s take a stroll.” And often he took me on long walks among the company residences. Holding my hand, he very deliberately walked me up and down the avenues and *grandes allées*. Of course, the Belgians were at their windows and on their terraces, wild with indignation.

Every Friday a boat came in with all the special provisions that the company personnel imported for their pleasure. Roger said to me, “Before the boat arrives, a list of the supplies is sent ahead. Jean will give it to you, so you can see what is available. You decide what you want. Then I want you to go to get the things for us.” This was his way of imposing my presence on the community.

So, on that first Friday morning, there I was, among all those good, stout Belgian matrons, I who at seventeen weighed no more than a feather. Already I had seen the lists of hams, liquors, bottled water, perfume, and so on, and decided what I wished to order.

It was given to me to go first, before all of them. The other women had to wait while I made my selections. “It’s for Monsieur Serruys,” I said firmly.

“Oui, Madame. What does Madame wish?”

And so I chose, liberally, everything I wanted, as became my position.

One thing in particular that I remember I bought was a pair of silk slacks, which I had to make over, because I was so thin. I wore them when Roger and I went on our walks together. Sometimes I wore the shorts that I had made very brief. Right away, Roger bought me a sewing machine with a hand crank and its own carrying case. How proud I was! I had never had such a valuable present before. I could go into the stores and buy any fabrics I wanted. Roger spoiled me in this way. He adored watching me as I sewed. There was a big mirror before which I worked. I would get up to try

the dresses on, over and over, to make them fit perfectly. This interested him enormously. He loved to see this orphan evolving in her life, growing into her new role.

Occasionally I would go into the kitchen and make something for us to eat. It seemed so romantic for him to have a dish made with my own hands. I did the best I could to make our life pleasant. Our evenings were merry and companionable. Within the silly limits of our prescribed positions, we were happy.

However when the wives of other officials in the company were entertaining, the handsome bachelor director was bound to appear alone, and inevitably he was paired off with someone's daughter, sister, niece, or guest. Roger said he hated this, and on several occasions even rebelled and made a scene. But underneath, both he and I understood that this was the reality of our Africa, and we had to accept it with a certain resignation. It was already a very big thing that he, in his position, was living with me.

Although I never really adjusted to the second-class position that I occupied in Roger's life, I tried to be cheerful during the time we were together. It was ironic that after years of longing for freedom at the orphanage I found myself a prisoner again in this fine house, with its elegant rooms and servants. Furtiveness and dissemblance were not a part of my nature. I was of a sociable temperament, frank, curious, and vivacious. This sequestered life, cut off from the society of both whites and blacks, was not to my taste at all. Still, it was my option entirely, for I could have returned to my mother on the plain at Poto-Poto at any time.

Since I could not receive with Roger, he did not invite people to the house. He did not want to hurt me, so we kept to ourselves and made our lives together, alone. The style in which we passed our days was not only extremely comfortable, it also included the most elegant customs of

European society. When it was time for us to dine, Jean, Roger's trusted manservant, would change into an all-white outfit. His trousers, jacket, and shirt were impeccable, just out of the laundry, crackling fresh. And when he served us our aperitifs, or waited on us at the table, he wore white gloves. I had seen how some European women lived—the women I sewed for in Brazzaville, and others, at Bangui. But to me, to be served in a livery of white, with white gloves, was the summit.

I would say that our little life was more bourgeois than ardent. It was an outlet for our love life. For me, it was an apprenticeship in living, and for Roger it was convenient, a practical love affair. It was not meant to last a long time, that is sure.

Roger had not been long at his new post when it was decided that, to acquaint him with the company's holdings in the Congo, he should take a trip of several weeks through the Kasai and Kwilu districts. He wanted me to be with him on this trip.

I was eager to see more of my great continent, and our travels were to be, for me, another phase in my awakening to the injustices done to the black people in their own land. I was also glad of the chance to get away from Dima, where I found the restrictions of my relationship with Roger galling.

The Kasai Company had a lucrative relationship with the African people. For minimal sums it bought their raw products and services, and then it recovered even those small sums by selling the people articles for which they had acquired a taste while working for the white man. This is commonly known as "the civilizing process," and is particularly successful when associated with a culture that teaches shame for the people's original



tastes. Disseminating at the same time religious dictums about poverty and humility does not distract from this useful principle.

Thus, the African laborer learned to work hard all month to pay for the sugar, matches, cloth, beer, wine, and tobacco that he would not have wanted if he were not working for the white man. As for the Kasai Company, pillaging the copper, gold, tin, and forest resources of the continent not only cost them next to nothing in labor, but what little it did cost them they got back in profit on what they sold to that labor. Wherever there was a gathering of even one or two hundred people, there was money to be made, and the company's agents went deep into the brush to find such opportunities.

I was not to understand the odious system until much later. At the moment of our departure, I could think only of the adventure ahead. At last, I was to see some of the lands of which I had dreamed when, at the orphanage, I listened in awe to a new girl with a mysterious new tongue.



Our travels took us from Dima to Kikui, across the Kwilu region, by car. It was a well-organized trip, planned so that each night we would stop either in a town where the Kasai Company had quarters, or at a camp in the brush that was maintained for the purpose of white travelers. Roger and I drove, with our chauffeur, in a Land Rover, which was extremely comfortable. The truck with the cook and his helper and an interpreter who spoke all the necessary languages went ahead, with our provisions and camping equipment. When we arrived at our destination, everything would be prepared. Our beds would be set up with their mosquito netting and the evening meal would be ready for us. Sometimes, when there was a group of villages in one area to visit, as at Bulungu, we would make one place our

base for a week and Roger would go off each day to see the plantations and company stores, returning in the late afternoon. Often these stores were totally insignificant, but it was still necessary for the new general director to know of them, and to visit them once a year, so the company could decide whether the activity of the region should be expanded or reduced.

Driving on the rutted clay roads of Africa's interior was hard. We also had to cross, on long rafts, immense rivers, swollen with rains, where the currents were dangerous and strong. But we had the luxury of good foods. We even had a little refrigerator in the truck, run on gasoline. It was turned off while the truck was en route, then put to work again when the truck stopped for the night, so we had ice when we arrived. We also had ice in a large Thermos bottle that we carried with us.

Roger drank cognac and Perrier water. I drank no alcohol at all at that time. The Belgians liked their comfort and arranged to have it, wherever they installed themselves. Jean, Roger's personal *homme de confiance*, was there to serve us. Not in white, as he had been for our high life at Dima, but in a khaki *tenue* that was impeccable and perfect for the occasion. Roger enjoyed the trip. In excellent health, he had no problem at all with the climate. But then, this was not his first time in Africa.

These days were a marvelous experience for me. I was thrilled as we plunged through tunnels of feathery green, kilometers in length, formed by the plantations of palms. Elsewhere we crossed broad savannahs where swollen, denuded baobab trees stood like ancient elephants, gray sentinels of the flat lands. I marveled at the giant cones of termite mounds, laughed at traveling galaxies of chattering monkeys. Everything interested me. I never stopped asking questions, exclaiming, loving my beautiful land.

From time to time, I noticed, we passed long lines of men, almost naked, working on the roads to the rhythm of a tam-tam. They were overseen by blacks in government uniforms who carried the *chicotte*. At the sight of that cruel whip that I knew so well, my heart turned. Working beside these driven men were their wives and children, carrying baskets of stones and dirt. I was reminded of the prisoners outside our orphanage gates, who shouted for French citizenship while their wailing women and children followed behind. I was frightened and repelled at this new spectacle of misery. Who were these people, I wondered. I wanted to know their stories.

When we stopped to rest, I prepared a casual question about these people for Roger. Through him, I had come to understand better the colonials' attitude toward the people of Africa. Roger was not an unkind man but he accepted what he had been taught: that blacks, by their natures, were created to do the work for which the white man was not fit. Occasionally the blacks had to be reminded of this. It was the God-given order of things. On several occasions he and I had words that came perilously close to furious, total disagreement, although at that time I was not yet thinking in political terms of justice or rights, but only of pain. I saw these people as humans in whose pain my own early sufferings produced an answering echo.

To keep peace with my love, I had learned to dissemble a little. Now I said, carefully, "These files of workers we sometimes see by the roadside—they seem to be all of the same people."

"You are right," Roger smiled at the accuracy of my observation. "It's the Moupende people," he went on, unwittingly, at my soft beginning. "In 1933 the Moupendes staged an uprising against the Belgians. We put them down, made prisoners of them."

“But my dear, this is 1940!” I said.

“They were sentenced to forced labor for twenty to thirty years, angel. That’s the punishment for rebellion.”

“Forced labor, for so long!”

“Their work is useful, my love. They build our roads and railways.”

I was shaking with indignation; tears sprang to my eyes. Roger thought it was because of the *chicottes*, which he too had noticed in action. To distract me, he began to speak of the Moupende culture. He was knowledgeable about the different African peoples. This had been part of his training, and was one of the things that held me to him—that he could often tell me more about my own country than those who had been born there, Africa’s own children.

Roger told me that the Moupendes were a proud and savage people whose warriors had killed the first white administrator. At important ceremonies, it was said, they had drunk from his skull. During their uprising, they had fought for three years against the Belgians with their *sagaies* and lances. Without possessing a single firearm, they had resisted the whites for a long time.

To me these men were entirely admirable. In spite of their fate, they still held their heads high. They had a kind of ancient dignity, with their Egyptian style of headpiece—a large band across the forehead stuck with pins of coppered gold. Their hair, rolled with palm oil into long curls, fell to their shoulders. The women wore skirts of raffia, and their bodies, smeared with palm oil, shone in the sunlight. I found these people who were being treated like slaves a handsome, noble race.

The evening of that conversation with Roger, I was so upset that I made an excuse and went to bed without eating. Our trip went on, and I continued

asking Roger all kinds of questions. I wanted to know this burning, living Congo! When we passed through a village where there was a Belgian administrator, Roger would pay him a courtesy call. During the time he was thus occupied, I would go to the local prison. Where there were administrators, I found, there were bound to be prisons. It was behind their walls, I told myself, that I could learn the true history of my country.

If the guards in charge at these prisons were surprised to receive a visit from an eighteen-year-old woman of mixed blood who asked many questions, they were generally good-natured and ready to reply. As I had suspected, most of the crimes for which the inmates were serving time were offenses against the white man's authority. Other charges the whites were not interested in, as the blacks were expected to take care of those problems among themselves.

In the French Congo, the French government administered the affairs of the colony. In the Belgian Congo, the big companies that owned the land performed the administration on that land. It was like a feudal fiefdom.

"How do you keep your prisoners?" I asked the guard at one stop.

"They're chained together, by twos," he replied simply, smiling.

"With what?"

"Big chains on their ankles." And he showed me a set of these heavy, grinding iron pieces with vicious bolts that snapped shut.

I saw a problem in taking these off and on. "But what do they do," I asked, "when they must take care of their private needs?"

"Why, for that they go two by two," the guard said. He continued, "We never take the chains off. At night they sleep on a mat beside each other. And to eat, we give them one lunch pail for two."

But these were *human beings*! I told myself, these men of the great Congo, this land that was said to be so fabulous.

I pondered these things for hours. Roger, without a clue as to what was passing in my head, took these periods of reflection to be no more than idle female daydreams.

To tell the truth, Roger's pat explanations for the things that tormented me had begun to sound so false in my ears that my original awe for his learning was beginning to be replaced by a suspicion that, although he knew a lot of things, he did not care to perceive what was right before his own handsome nose and draw a humane conclusion from it. Given a problem involving the two races, he inevitably produced the colonialist's well-polished phrases about the wellbeing of the blacks being naturally in the hands of the whites, who knew what was best for all concerned.

Each place we stopped I learned something new to distress me. One day in Kwilu, I saw dozens of children passing with heavy baskets on their heads.

"What are they carrying?" I asked Roger.

"Palmetto nuts. The children have gathered them as their little contribution toward helping the Belgians back home."

The palmetto tree produces a nut about the size of a grape, which, except for its dimensions and the fact that it does not have a husk, is very much like a coconut. It has a hard shell and the meat within gives a reddish oil from which the most refined margarines and beauty creams of Europe are made. Cocoa butter, renowned for healing scars, comes from this little nut. Africans eat it readily, for it even tastes the same as the coconut.

The great Belgian companies had set out thousands and thousands of hectares of these valuable nut trees. Except in Dahomey, which was closer

to home and less expensive to exploit, the French did not work the land as did the Belgians. In the French Congo there were no comparable plantations. But the Belgians had only one colony, so they made the most of it. They cultivated the Congo as if it were their own backyard, fully. It gave them fabulous riches, and they profited by it and *enjoyed* it.

In the commercial harvesting, a man with a machete climbed, by means of a belt, to the top of the palmetto tree and chopped off the long stems bearing the clusters of nuts. Workers on the ground picked up these clusters and carried them on their backs to waiting trucks. Each time a cluster fell to the ground, some of the nuts broke off. The workers, hurrying from one tree to the next, did not pick up the scattered nuts. This was what the children were doing. While not worth gathering on a commercial scale, these nuts, when piled up, amounted to tons and tons.

World War II had begun in 1939, and Belgium was now occupied by the Germans. Its people were indeed suffering, but I was not entirely convinced by Roger's explanation of why the children were working. The first chance that I could, I went off into a palm grove to talk to some of these children.

"For whom are you gathering these nuts?" I asked one of them.

"For the Father Superior of our mission."

"How many kilos must you gather?"

"Fifteen kilos a week."

"What happens to those who fail to bring the full amount?"

I was talking to a boy of about twelve. He shuddered. "Oh, Madame, they are whipped so hard that the next week they don't make the same mistake."

The Church and the big companies had a snug arrangement in the colonies. The Church gave its benediction to the enterprises of these

companies, which in turn made occasional charitable gestures toward the Church. Permitting mission children to gather nuts left over from the harvest was an easy form of charity. The companies were able to buy back these nuts for less than it would have cost to recover them by their own workers. And selling these nuts harvested by child labor brought the missions handsome sums.

Our two months of travel drew to a close. When we returned home to Dima, I found that the archway that I wanted between our living room and our dining room had been constructed. I placed ferns there, and thought the effect was splendid. But I was unable to enjoy the house. I was physically exhausted by the trip, and deeply depressed by what I'd seen of the sufferings of my people. My feelings for Roger were now torn with doubts. More and more, the differences between us seemed evident to me. Besides, I was three months pregnant and beset with morning sickness. My nerves were miserably on edge.

One evening, Roger went to dinner at the home of friends in the company. I, of course, could not go with him. About eleven o'clock he returned, and came to me in the room where I was embroidering a sheet for my baby's layette.

"I have some friends with me," he said.

I looked at him. "What am I supposed to do—hide?" The old pain welled up inside me. "I'm not something to be hidden," I said stubbornly. "I refuse."

"I don't want you to feel bad," he said, "but I don't want you to make problems, either."

"Then don't bring them in the house."

But he did.



I was beside myself with feelings. I didn't know what to do. I went into the kitchen which the servants had cleaned and left. On a sideboard was an unopened bottle of Perrier. It would serve. I picked it up and hurled it as hard as I could at the floor in the far corner. The sound of the soda water bottle exploding on the cement was like a shot.

Of course, Roger thought that I had killed myself. He had never concealed the location of his gun, which I could have used at any time. He came running into the kitchen, his face drained with fear. We stood there, both of us trembling violently. When he saw that I was not dead, he was so relieved that he did not reproach me. He knew that I was in a terrible state of nerves with my pregnancy.

"Don't be upset," he said, putting his arms around me. "Go to bed quietly, I'll soon be there."

His friends had one drink and left.

Not long after that incident I told Roger I wanted to return to Brazzaville. I wanted to be with my mother while I waited for my child. Roger was supposed to go on another trip. I could not go with him; that was out of the question.

Roger said, "Why do you want to leave? If you don't feel like making the trip with me you can stay here in the house. The servants will do everything. You can just rest, and sew when you feel like it."

But I insisted that I wanted to be with my mother. And when he saw how sick I was, there in Dima, he thought it might be better for my health if I were with her. He saw how demoralized and sad I was.

And so it was agreed. I was to go back to Brazzaville for the next five months. And then just before I was to have the baby, he would come to get me. It was promised. Already we were preparing a room for the baby in our

home. It would be rose-colored if it were a daughter, but blue if it were a son. With Roger, I was making the conventional plans with which Europeans express their happiness as they wait for a child. For me it was the consecration of my dreams to have a child with a good father.

On May 5, 1940, Roger accompanied me from Dima to the riverboat landing at Banningville, for my trip down the river. The boat on which I was to travel was owned by the Kasai Company, of which Roger was the director. But the captain informed us that because I was not white he could not give me a cabin. He invoked the law. Roger was furious. His face was livid as he argued with the man. But the captain stood firm. Finally, it was Roger who backed down. He did not insist. Forced to do something for me—I was so frail and ill, with my baggage and my sewing machine—he found a tiny room that belonged to a Congolese mechanic. It was cramped and filthy, but at least it was not the open deck. He paid the mechanic to let me have the cabin, and arranged to have a clean hammock hung up for me there. Our feelings were exacerbated by the humiliation of this event. Amid tears and kisses, Roger and I parted.

Three miserable weeks later I arrived in Brazzaville and fell into my mother's arms. Only here, it seemed, was I safe from the pain of prejudice against my race.

# 7

## My Rita and My Father

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I told my mother at once that I was pregnant. I said shyly, “Maman, I am going to have a baby.” She was thrilled!

“A baby! Oh, my daughter! A baby! At last I will be happy!”

Joséphine had always feared, the way I shut myself off from men, that I would never have a child, which meant that she would never have a grandchild. The man with whom I had conceived this child made absolutely no difference at all to her. The thing was, she would have a marvelous baby to love and spoil.

Immediately, my mother told me to take off my clothes. Everything. She wanted to see my whole body, to have it entirely free, in the air. Tenderly, she stroked it, pressing my stomach, where the child was now alive. To fulfill an important African ritual, she hastened to the river for a handful of fine white sand. This she let fall like a gentle rain over my belly, which protruded just a little. Passively I stood there, accepting my mother’s loving ministrations, feeling connected through them with my ancestors.

Sand is a symbol of the earth on which the child is coming to live. Because the child’s nature is delicate, the sand is fine. It is white because of

the purity that should surround the child. Rice is thrown at a wedding, representing a wish for prosperity. A child is offered not prosperity, but the earth, as it is.

Early each morning after that, while I was still sleeping, my mother would come to me and slip off my nightgown. She would look at my stomach and touch it, as a doctor would, to see the progress of the child. Through her hands she gave the child strength and health and love. She wanted to transmit all that she had that was good to the child. She spoke to the child. Not to me, but to the child. There was a direct connection between the grandmother and the grandchild, the child in the body of her own child. “When you come, don’t hurt your mother,” she admonished the child. And she also spoke to me, to give me courage for childbirth. If I had been disagreeable with her the previous day, she would say nothing to me, but she would express her forgiveness as she talked to the child. “I understand how your mother feels,” she would say. Thus, even before it was born, my child became an intermediary between my mother and me, another link between us.

As my stomach grew big, my mother was so proud of it. She knew I would have a girl because my bulge came to a point. She used to say, “This is my rival; this is a little girl who will come.” In my later months she would command: “Lift your dress, I want to see the child move.” And she would watch the child moving in my belly with a kind of childish delight. “Look, look! It’s moving!” As if it were a marvelous toy.

My father’s reaction was another matter indeed. When he warned me about the risks of leaving his house, it had been just such a danger that he had foreseen. At that time, I had thought myself impervious to this common trap for a young woman on her own. I was concerned only with making my living, and was far too proud to involve myself with a man for whom I had

no feelings. Now, here I was, caught in this utterly banal situation. I knew he would be enormously displeased. Still, I had to tell him, my mother agreed. In fact, she insisted on it.

Knowing what his reaction would be, I was unable to write him a letter, as I could not find the right words to put down on paper. Since my mother was so happy with my pregnancy, I thought it would be best for her to be my emissary. Perhaps her enthusiasm would soften the news, win him to a forgiveness and understanding for me.

My mother left for Bangui. She returned a few weeks later with my father's answer, which cut me cruelly. "Go back to Brazzaville," he had said to her, "and tell Andrée I don't ever want to see her again. She can expect nothing from me now."

Why should these words, half expected, hurt me so? Nothing, really, had changed. I was already used to living without him, without his help or his love. But the irony of the situation—that I was only continuing the pattern that he had carelessly begun by creating my life—did not escape me. In his colonialist mind, with its watertight compartments for various pieces of truths, this probably never occurred to him. But on another level, as my quarrel with him not long before his death was to reveal, he knew, he knew.

My mother had with her 200 francs. "Your father gave me this money," she said. "Put it aside for the day when you have your child. Then you can buy some nice baby clothes, in memory of your father."

What a strange, almost maternal love my mother showed for this man who had been so harsh! Nothing, it seemed, could shake her belief in his fundamental goodness.

As the days crept by, I was increasingly depressed. To earn my living, I again sewed. Both my white lady customers and my black neighbors had

things to say about how my “vacation” had given me a big stomach but no visible husband. Furiously I ignored them, working again until late at night by the glimmer of my lantern.

Soon after my return to Brazzaville, I left the tiny house in which I had lived. Roger sent me money for a two-room apartment, which I found at the edge of Poto-Poto, in a building occupied by the Salvation Army. During those difficult months, the directors, Major and Mrs. Madison, were very kind to me. They saw that I was so young, and so sad. They helped me to bear my pregnancy with their small attentions; from time to time, they would give me some cookies or chocolates. They invited me to their services, not to try to convert me, but to distract me.

“I’m not very enthusiastic about religion,” I told them.

“That’s all right, my daughter,” Mrs. Madison would say. “Just come with us as our guest for the afternoon. You will see people, it will do you good.”

So I would go with them, and in fact, it made me feel better. They had a little car that they used in their work. Sometimes in the evening they would say, “Come, my little Andrée, let’s take a drive around town.” For me to ride in a car in Brazzaville was something very special. But particularly it was important to me as a sign of friendship.

Major and Mrs. Madison spoke Lingala perfectly. They had classes in the courtyard of our building for girls, teaching them to read and write in their own language. They also taught the girls religious songs in Lingala. This impressed me very much. I still know the psalms by heart in Latin because I was one of the solo singers in the cathedral on Sundays for the orphanage, but I never knew the meaning of what I sang. The Salvation Army girls also learned sewing and embroidery. To welcome my baby, they

began to knit booties and other things. I was very touched by this show of affection and support.

The rebel of the orphanage continued to rebel, now that she was outside, against the odious racism she found practiced around her. The movies were for whites only. One evening, four or five of us girls from the orphanage went to the Cinema Athenakis, the only movie house in town. At the ticket office we were refused tickets. We pushed our money at the cashier and went in anyhow. The police were called; we were instructed to leave, resisted, and were thrown out. But the following Saturday night we were back. I remember very well the slaps I got, with my big stomach, in front of the Cinema Athenakis, and I knew Madame Athenakis too; I sometimes worked for her. But it was not for myself that I made such scenes, it was for what I had in my stomach, for my unborn child. I felt it had to be done—we had to begin somewhere. Eventually, although it frightened the Europeans and they hated what it symbolized, we won. We were admitted to the theater.

In spite of the cost in personal humiliation to us, we had to make our presence felt. We had to make the whites admit that we could no longer be ignored. The shopkeepers' attitudes galled us. Most of them were Portuguese but they got their point of view from the French administration. When we entered a shop and asked for an article in French, they would answer in Lingala or Kikongo to humiliate us. It was a way of saying that although we had French citizenship, we had no real right to use the French language. When we persisted in speaking French they would make such remarks as, "This *malblanchie* [badly bleached woman] is trying to act as though she is an evolved person."

This was a challenge that I frequently rose to. It was unthinkable, for example, for an African to eat butter. Therefore, my heart beating hard, I would go into a shop and deliberately ask for it. “I would like 250 grams of butter, please.”

“Butter?” The shopkeeper would burst out laughing. “And how are you going to eat your butter?”

Stubbornly, I would continue to ask for butter, even though I sometimes hadn't a sou in my purse. I would hold my ground and insist. Finally, worn down, the shopkeeper would bring out the butter, cut it and weigh it for me. Then I would coolly say, “I don't want it after all,” and turn and leave. For us, that was a victory. We had refused intimidation. Even if we had not yet the means of a white, we had made it known that the old rules no longer held.

Because I have so often made derogatory remarks about the Portuguese shopkeepers, I would like to explain the special position that they held in the colonialist system, and at Brazzaville. Most of the Portuguese had been poor in their own country, and they arrived in Africa as sailors. They were illiterate, with no pretensions of any kind—the proletariat. On Africa's warm shores they saw they could have a better life than in Portugal. They took women of the country as their wives and lived with them in their villages, working to build up small shops and enterprises in the town. These poor people, who had failed elsewhere, who never asked themselves the why of things, found themselves under the French administration and they fell in with the system as it was, adopting all its prejudices.

Always very Catholic, the Portuguese continued to have relations with the Church and priests. As shopkeepers it seemed appropriate, occasionally, to make gifts to the mission, as a way of consolidating their position with the priests, who in turn were very close with the administration. Gifts of



foodstuffs worked in their favor. They gave the orphanage things like camel meal from Fort Lamy that was so tough that even when it was cooked for two days it was like the sole of your shoe. And sacks and sacks of beans. But the beans were full of little black worms that rose to the top when the beans were cooked. The pot would have a scum of three or four centimeters of worms—really, it was disgusting to see. The cook would skim off scoop after scoop but she could never get them all. Most of the time there were still worms in the beans when they were served. We were so hungry we couldn't take the time to separate them, so we ate them as they were.

The French, who came to the Congo for other reasons, looked down on the Portuguese as second rate because of their backgrounds and because they lived openly with their black wives. As whites, the Portuguese occupied a position between the French and the blacks, toward whom they acted with a disdain learned from the French. There was one remarkable difference about the Portuguese: they usually recognized their children. There were a number of half-Portuguese girls at the orphanage, whose fathers had deposited them there because it was considered the “thing to do.” However, when the families went away on vacation, they took their daughters with them. It was beautiful to see them leave together, and when these girls returned, we who did not have vacations or fathers heaped questions on them about what they had seen and where they had been. One of these girls was Marie, the one who told me that for her birthday she ate a whole can of sardines. I still remember her story with astonishment. At the time I was appalled by the enormity of her lie. To catch her, I had asked her how she did it. She said, “I take the sardine by the tail, and I put it in my mouth.” Her brazenness was beyond me. Here was a girl who had a father and still sinned shamelessly.

My working conditions took a turn for the better one day when I met on the street a friend of my father's, Hubert Balme. "Papa" Balme, as I had learned to call him in Bangui, worked for the Compagnie générale des transports en Afrique (CGTA) which operated a fleet of passenger boats on the Congo River. He had known me as a baby before I left for the orphanage, and as a young woman when I returned. He was an old bachelor, a very kind man, who took pleasure in doing little services for people. While I was at the orphanage he did something that we girls never forgot.

One special day, the nuns took us for a walk along the banks of the Congo, and Papa Balme invited us all aboard one of the CGTA boats for a refreshing drink of grenadine. Grenadine! That sweet, reddish-orange drink made from the juice of pomegranates. Two by two we approached the punch bowl, which had ice in it, and we were served. We didn't even know what it was, but we were ecstatic. Monsieur Balme often had such kind ideas.

"Good heavens, my child!" he said when he saw me. "How *are* you?" He meant of course, my pregnancy, which was now quite apparent. I was so tired and heavy. I told him that if his company needed to have the sheets of the first-class cabins mended, I would like to do the work.

Papa Balme agreed that this was a good idea. He proposed it to the head of the company, Monsieur Delorme. I had already done a lot of sewing for Madame Delorme, so this gave me a good recommendation.

It was a great relief to me when the CGTA gave me this work and I no longer had to go out, as before. Papa Balme even had the heavy bundles of sheets delivered to me by the company truck, and collected when they were ready. I could thus plan my days without having to endure the caprices and changes of mind of the European ladies. More than once I felt that they did those things because it amused them to control not only my work and my

time but my very hunger. For when I needed the work to eat, what, but accept, could I do?

If mending piles of torn sheets was dull, at least it was well-paid and steady. I gave it my best effort, for I have found that I get more pleasure from a task, however lowly, if I do it with love.

Occasionally I still sewed for some of my European women, making dresses and embroidering their lingerie; I also began to have a new kind of clientele, a number of “evolved” young black women who were on their way up and who were concerned with their appearance. Some of them were the “*belles de nuit*” who wanted beautiful clothes for the evenings. For them I made European-style dresses, but also African-style dresses with camisole tops. Sewing for them was quite different from sewing for a white woman for whom I had to walk back and forth across the city several times. An African woman would bring the fabric to my house, seat herself, and wait all day, trying it on when necessary, until it was finished.

Our great competition was the African tailor with his sewing machine run by the feet, which was much swifter than ours. These tailors would install their sewing tables in front of the Portuguese shops where the women bought their fabrics. The woman had only to take down from a hook the length of fabric that she wanted and these men were on the spot, ready to cut and sew it immediately. By the time she finished her marketing her *pagne* was done, she could fold it up, put it on top of her head, and leave. But for dresses that required a little more care, the women came to us. I did a lot of the finishing work by hand. We did not have patterns in those days; styles were not as precise as those we have today. Still, the dresses were pretty and flattering.

Each week I waited for a letter from Roger. It was my only joy. His communications were mundane, nothing of our original passion was

reflected in their ordinary news of his work and his days. Still, it was a bit of him that came to me, a presence in my solitude. I still loved the tall, bronzed man I had met on the deck of the *Bolongo*. In spite of his assurances that he continued to care for me I could not help but remember the invitations—the other women to whom he was introduced, women with whom he could be seen. I tried to put away an insistent premonition.

Two months before I was to give birth, the thing I had most feared happened. One day, on opening the newspaper *Le Courrier d’Afrique*, I saw a headline announcing Roger’s engagement to the daughter of the governor of Lusambo, a province of Kasai.

Because I had dreaded it, and known that it was eventually to be my fate, did not necessarily make the shock any less terrible when it came. In fact, I had tried during this separation to turn my heart away from Roger by reminding myself of how little he cared for the things that mattered to me most, how totally incompatible we were in the matter of our land’s greatest single drama—race. It did no good. Instead I found myself remembering our passionate hours together on our enchanted island, the *Bolongo*, and our good moments in Dima or Kwilu. Now I was wild with grief. I could not bear what I had so long feared.

Desperately I thought of the child now stirring in me, this child conceived in loving abandon. Did Roger still esteem me enough, had he enough of a sense of responsibility, to recognize this child?

Remembering my own terrible loss because of my father’s commitment to Henriette, I wrote Roger asking if he would be married before or after the birth of our child. This letter, which went on for page after feverish page, was an outpouring of everything in a betrayed woman’s heart—condemning him, forgiving him, ranging from the cruelties of the scorned to still ardent protests of love.

I reminded him of all I had suffered because my father had not recognized me—a story that I had poured out to him in Dima amid the delicious tears of lovers sharing their deepest feelings. Now I pled with him to give our baby his name.

In his answer, Roger promised that he would do so. “It is my child,” he wrote. “These questions are not necessary, my dear. Of course I will recognize it. That goes without saying.” He added, “I will never let you down.”

I was reassured somewhat, but not entirely. My premonitions remained. A month before my child was born, Roger was married. My child was not to have his name.

The pattern of my life was repeating itself: my father had not legitimized me because of a Belgian woman. Now it was a Belgian man who would not legitimize my own child.

Joséphine had no understanding of the grief and pain I suffered when Roger married. A stranger to her, he did not count at all. Her only thought was for my child, which she was sure would be beautiful like her own daughter. Nothing else in the world existed for her.

Roger wrote that he wished me to have the baby in Leopoldville. He would come for the delivery, he said. He was moving to Leopoldville himself, and it would be easier for him to visit me. I was glad not to have my baby in Brazzaville, where it would be at the hands of the same nuns who ran the orphanage. Their remarks about how I was carrying a child of sin infuriated me, I did not want to entrust to them the life of this treasure I was awaiting. Perhaps, also, I cherished a faint hope that someday, in spite of everything, Roger would claim his child. I knew stories of men who had relented years later. At any rate, it would be well to give my child the nationality of its father.

My hopes for my child's recognition were never to be realized, but my delivery in the Belgian Congo was to be prophetic of a later phase of my life. One day, there, I was to be deeply involved in the labor pangs and bloody birth of that country in its independence.

Roger was married a month before my child was born, but a month before that he came to see me. Yes, and to make love with me, passionately, although I was very big with child. In spite of everything, he still cared for me; I believe he adores me still. We had two whole days together. During that time he said not one word about his forthcoming marriage. His only concern seemed to be for the birth of our child. "When the time comes, and you go to the clinic, send word to me here," he said, putting an address into my hand.

The maternity clinic to which I was admitted was for Africans only. I paid extra in order to have a bed. Women who could not pay for a bed were delivered on a mat on the ground. By modern standards it was a terrible place. No care was provided for the mother either before or after the delivery, except if there were complications. Food was not provided—cooking was done by the relatives who accompanied the mother. Dozens of little wood fires burned on the ground just outside the dormitories. The smoke was everywhere; it was like a village. Each woman took care of her own bloody linens, washing them at the faucets in the passageways, so that the gutters through the rooms ran with bloody water.

Still, to be in a clinic at all was a privilege and an improvement over the usual conditions for an African mother and child. My mother was there with me. She cooked for me, and at night she spread her straw mat to sleep beside my bed. But she slept little, rising often to look at me and touch my stomach, to see if the child moved. She was a tender mother. Although I

was occasionally impatient with her ideas, she was always there, attentive and warm.

I sent word to Roger at the address he had given me, but he did not come. A friend of his, one of his colleagues in the Kasai Company, came instead. He was a tall man with a distinguished face, and he looked very out of place in the bedlam of this African maternity clinic. His manner was one of great courtesy.

“Roger is away,” he said, and his voice was kind. “He’s at Luxembourg.”

“I know,” I said. And I cried and cried.

He tried to console me. “It’s a marriage of honor, you know,” he said. “It was arranged by his family. Don’t be upset, my child.”

He gave me money from Roger that I didn’t want to accept, but I really had no choice. “Let me know when the baby is born,” he insisted. “I will come back again.”

On December 16, 1940, nineteen years to the day after my own birth, I was delivered of a fat, healthy girl. She was the image of her father, with hair of pale gold. At her first cry, I said to the nun who was acting as midwife, “Quick, give me the child! Give the child to me!”

The umbilical cord had not yet been cut, my child was still a part of my body when the startled nun, at my insistence, put her into my arms. I pressed her to me. “My daughter,” I swore to her aloud, my voice shaking with emotion, “You will not have the life I have had. No one, nothing on this earth can take you from me. You will be happy, my daughter, I swear it! Happy!”

My mother raised her arms and thanked heaven for the child. She was so proud to be a grandmother that she burst into song and sang the rest of

the day.

As for me, I was a mother. A mother! This child had been born of my flesh. I would be both mother and father to her. She was mine! In squeezing her fragile little body, I felt a kind of reckless pride that could brave all.

I sent my mother off to inform Roger's distinguished friend of the birth. Joséphine left, singing at the top of her lungs. That very evening he came. He thought my baby beautiful, and took a photo of her at once to send to Roger.

The kindness of this man made a great impression on me. In spite of the tumult of the place, with its terrible odors of blood and maternal milk, his courtesy was perfect. As he came toward me, he gave a dignified nod to each of the women in my dormitory. I thought, here is a man who has respect for his own person, because he shows respect for all of us here, in spite of the conditions in which he finds us. He was not afraid to come, three times, to see me, and to comfort me.



Soon after my baby was born, my mother gave her breast to her. This is our way of the grandmother's establishing a direct connection with the child. It is the grandmother who gives her breast first. There is no milk, of course, but the act is symbolic. Calmed and appeased, the child sleeps. As for me, I did the same thing with each of my three grandchildren. This is to present the child with the world beyond its mother, to give it to the earth, the family, the challenge in which it will live its life. One speaks to the new child through one's breast.

My mother went off into the brush and gathered a certain kind of leaves, which she inserted into her vagina to stimulate the glands of the ovaries and uterus in such a way that milk would be produced in her breasts. In this



way, a woman who has not conceived for many years can still produce milk. Joséphine was unable to find exactly the leaves she wanted, but she found others that provoked an opaque liquid in her breasts. And by giving her breast to the child the mammary glands were stimulated into secreting. This was her way of helping me when later I had to leave for several hours on my work, and could not feed my baby. It was also a way of making herself indispensable to the baby.

I was exhausted after the delivery. My little daughter was a big baby: 3 kilos, 950 grams. During the first days she cried and cried. I was so tired, I cried too. I said to my mother, “You want a child? Here, have it. Take this one.”

My mother said, “It’s your fault that she cries so much. I told you not to eat so many hot peppers when you were pregnant. I told you that you were going to make your baby cry.”

Whenever my mother and I had quarreled, I would deliberately eat four or five big, fat, hot peppers, just to annoy her. She would shout at me, “Your child is going to cry, you’ll see.” And she was right.

Finally, I could stay awake no longer. I said, “You take her, I have to sleep a little.” After that my mother stayed up with her night after night, without any sleep at all. If the baby made the slightest sound, just a tiny “Enh!” my mother would leap up from her mat beside my bed, and soothe her.

Although most of the African mothers left the clinic within a few days after their delivery, I was so thin and worn out that the nuns insisted that I stay nearly two weeks. I had had no contact with my father since I sent him word, through my mother, that I was pregnant. One day, while I was still resting there at the clinic, a woman in a nearby bed lent me her newspaper, *Le Courrier d’Afrique*. On the front page was a large photo of my father

and a dozen other white men. According to the story, they were Frenchmen who refused to accept Pétain's armistice. From London, de Gaulle had made his famous broadcast announcing that France would continue its struggle against the Germans. In his call to Frenchmen everywhere to rally around him, he had particularly asked Africa to help him save France. Responding to this *Appel*, my father and his group were leaving Oubangui-Chari to join the British forces in Kenya as volunteers. Pierre Gerbillat, a pioneer of French Equatorial Africa, was chief of the expedition.

Before he volunteered for the Free French Forces, my father was one of the most successful businessmen in central Africa. Those who worked for him considered him a hard-driving but good master. He shouted a lot, it was true, but he did not beat his men. He was good to those who worked well. From those who failed to do their work properly he deducted heavy fines from their wages. Until the war brought France to her knees, materialistic values had entirely ruled his life. Then, embittered by his divorce from Henriette and no doubt at a point in his life when a man asks himself what, in sum, it all adds up to, he heard de Gaulle's stirring appeal to Africa to save France in her hour of need. This ignited in my father a blaze of patriotism in which he expected to perish. This patriotism proved to be an exalted repudiation of all that his life had been until then, all the years spent in one design: to build his fortune. Before leaving Oubangui-Chari as a volunteer, he reduced himself to penury. He never expected to return, thinking the war would liberate him from life.

I returned to Brazzaville and sewed for the CGTA again. My mother helped me care for my baby when I had to be away. She nursed Rita to make her happy, gave her the bottle when it was necessary, and sang the songs of her village to her. When my baby fell asleep at her breast, still nursing, she gloated. All grandmothers are proud of their grandchildren, but

Joséphine was puffed up beyond measure. She was especially thrilled because Rita was so fair, and blonde, with blue eyes that turned green after a few months. My mother would say, “Look at that, would you? Did you ever see a white make a black child? But here a black has made a white child. They can’t do it, but we can.” The things Joséphine said were so naive they really struck one.

My mother was extraordinary at finding remedies in the leaves of the forest. She could often cure illnesses by very simple means. For a child with sore eyes, she would hold the leaves of a certain plant over a flame until the sap ran, then put the drops in the eyes. It was sensational how quickly they would heal. For a small baby, there is nothing better for sore eyes than mother’s milk. A little trickle of mother’s milk—no remedy on earth is better. But never in the ear, as that will produce an otitis. For diarrhea or dysentery, the velvety tips of the shoots of the guava tree are an immediate cure.

Joséphine carried my baby in a sling on her back, the African way, and spent hour upon hour playing with her. Gay, young, and thoughtless as she was, at last Joséphine was a grandmother. For so long she had feared I was going to be as barren as that sacred Mother Germaine. I was almost a little jealous as I watched my mother and my daughter together. But my Rita knew me very well and laughed when she saw me coming, from a long way off.

In spite of all my defeats, I was still insufferably proud. I might be alone in my struggle to survive, but the cotton dresses I wore were starched and modish, and my plump, darling baby sparkled with health. She and my mother, at least, I told myself, were happy in their cocoon of love together.

While I was pregnant I never went to Mass, but after Rita was born, I was drawn back to the Church again. Although I had disobeyed the

Church's teachings—Rita being the cruel, sweet proof of this disobedience—I was still under the influence of what I had learned as a child. When Rita was four months old I had her baptized.

The first Sunday I was back in Brazzaville I went to Mass. My feelings were very complex as I entered the cathedral where so many memories lingered. When I looked at little Rita I felt a sense of guilt with respect to her future. I remember how at the midnight Mass or Christmas in Leopoldville, I knelt in front of the altar of the Holy Virgin, lit with dozens of flickering candles, and I said to myself, "Perhaps my unhappiness is a result of having sinned. I can't let my child be as unhappy as I have been. For her I would do anything." So I began to go to Mass again. I knew the nuns would say humiliating things to me. But if that was God's will and would give my child a better life, I would accept that.

This was true, but there was also a certain defiance in my returning to the cathedral with the evidence of my sin in my arms, and worse yet, a white baby, a bigger sin. I knew the nuns would interpret it as an insolent example to the younger girls who had known me. Halfway through the Mass, Rita began to cry—she was hungry. I didn't dare nurse her as I was still shy. One of the kinder nuns was sitting near me, saw my predicament, and whispered to me, "Feed your child, go ahead, feed your baby." So I took out my fine breast, so swollen with milk, and my baby nursed greedily. When the Mass was over, the orphanage girls gathered around me, marveling at my child, but the nuns, furious, shooed them off. This was exactly what they most feared: my beautiful baby would undermine at a glance all their teachings.

I went regularly to the Mass after that. My little apartment in the Salvation Army building was far from the cathedral. I was afraid to walk the great distance in the heat with my baby, so I would take a *pousse-*

*pousse*, a kind of taxi used by the whites. It was a chair set on two poles with a single wheel underneath. A man in front of the poles pulled and a man behind pushed; they could run like this for kilometers as their endurance was extraordinary. This form of transportation came from the Orient. To build the Congo Oceanic Railroad, the French imported Indo-Chinese labor. That was a terrible project in which many laborers died, the most heartless kind of exploitation.

At that time in Brazzaville there were only a few bicycles and a very few cars, which belonged to the administrators, plus the trucks that regularly crisscrossed the city in commerce. These *pousse-pousses* looked charming. They were kept very clean, with a white cloth over the back of the seat, and, gaily colored pompoms dancing on the ends of the arm rests.

When I was at the orphanage and went to Mass at the cathedral with the other girls, I would see the European ladies and gentlemen being drawn up to the steps of the cathedral, one by one. I once remarked that one day, I too would like to arrive in a *pousse-pousse*. “The very idea!” the nuns reprimanded me. “For whom do you take yourself?”

One can imagine the chagrin of the nuns to see me arrive, not only with this white child of sin, but in the splendor of a *pousse-pousse*. Impudent little bitch! But it was above all for my baby, because I was so afraid of the sun and the germs. At the door of the cathedral, I paid the runners and told them to wait for me. They went to the Mass too, and then they were there to take me home. This cost me 2 francs 50, which was as much as I got for making a dress. But Roger sent me a money order from time to time, and that helped me to stretch my budget.

I was mending my sheets for the CGTA’s riverboats one morning, when Roger’s boy appeared with a note for me. Roger, I knew, had been called

into the service. He was a captain, living in Leopoldville, working for the governor general. His message said that he had taken room eight at the Hôtel Régina, and he wanted me to come and bring the baby.

Thus began a series of trysts that brought me pleasure and excitement, but also a sense of frustration and shame, as Roger snatched time away from his work and his life as an upstanding husband and citizen of the white community to be with the baby and me.

It made me proud that Roger was interested in the development of our little daughter. When she began to get her teeth and we could see a space between her two tiny front teeth, Roger laughed with joy.

“It’s the mark of the Serruys family,” he said. “Everyone in our family has it. We say it brings happiness. She is a true Serruys.” And Rita laughed to hear her father laugh.

When a note came that Roger could see me, I would take a taxi and hasten across the river. The driveway in front of the governor general’s office was always heavily patrolled with military guards who kept the traffic moving, so the taxi could not stop directly in front and we were obliged to park a little farther on. Then I would send the taxi driver into the office with a note for Monsieur le Capitaine Serruys, and he would leave work to come and spend a moment with the baby and me.

Life is extraordinary. The governor general’s office was later to become the residence of the president of the new republic, Patrice Lumumba. Roger’s office, which I knew so well from the outside—I had so often looked at the great tree in front of it as I waited for him to come to my taxi—was to be my own office, when I was chief of protocol.

The wheel of fate turns! During the days of colonialism I could not put one foot in the office of the big boss of Leopoldville. What could I pretend to, I, of mixed blood and a woman at that! Twenty years later I would sit in

that office. Sometimes, in spite of the enormous pressures of my work during those crucial days of the new republic, I would catch a glimpse of that tree, and, with a wry smile, remember.

My father obsessed me, still. One day I went to the British embassy to ask for news of him. I learned that he and his group had become attached to the Anglo-Saxon forces that were now crossing the desert in Libya on foot in General Leclerc's column. They were going to meet the British Eighth Army in the Middle East.

One afternoon, when I was delivering work to the home of one of my European ladies, I met a French colonel. He was leaving in a few days, he said, to join the Free French Forces in Cairo. At these words, I had to speak. Timidly, I asked if I could give him something for my father, who should be there. The colonel agreed, provided the article was not cumbersome.

That evening, I had a photographer come to my house. He took a picture of Rita on the bed, fat and smiling, her head lifted to survey a world in which she was meant to be happy. In the corner of the photo, I wrote, "Grandpapa, I am six months old." With a silent prayer I delivered it to the colonel, for my father.

Two weeks later a telegram was delivered to me in Poto-Poto. It was the chief of the quarter, in those days, who told the mailman where to find those in his sector. With shaking fingers I opened the printed form. The words were from my father, and read, "I embrace you both very affectionately. I love you very much." I devoured the telegram three, four, many times, in a happiness that hurt my heart almost as much as my father's earlier rejection of me had.

I was glad, yes, but after being in pain too long one can bear only a little gladness at a time, as one who is starving can take nourishment at first only in small sips. I had taught myself not to need his love; now a little time was

necessary for my hardness to melt away. I cried often, in a bittersweet abandonment to my new feelings.

It was some time later that the colonel in Cairo sent me a letter from my father, written in a hospital. From the letter and from the colonel, I learned that my father had marched across the burning plains of Libya with a pack on his back like any ordinary foot soldier. In making his contribution to the war he had not sought any privileges for himself. Although he was the leader of his group, he looked for no favors, bearing all the hardships of the younger men. His health, however, was not up to the rigors of the terrible task he had set himself. He had heart trouble and high blood pressure. Now physical fatigue had taken too heavy a toll, and he was completely exhausted. It was impossible for him to continue with the Free Forces. He was being discharged. He had given all he could to France.

My father asked to be repatriated to Oubangui-Chari. He had lived 36 years in French Equatorial Africa; although he was white, it had become home to him. Soon afterward I received a second telegram, this time with a money order attached. It asked me to return to Bangui, to be with him.

When my mother came back from the market I was still in a state of shock. "Maman," I said, and she saw by my face that something extraordinary had happened. "We have a telegram from Papa." And I read it to her.

Joséphine exploded with joy. In the first place, it was proof to us that at least he was alive. We had heard so much of the terrible ravages of the battles in North Africa that we feared he might be dead. Hitler had taken most of Europe, and we weren't sure where my father might have been sent. It was not until later that we learned the extent of his illness and the reason he was being repatriated to Bangui. At that moment, for my mother, it was



the undiluted joy of knowing first that he was alive, and second, that he wanted us.

As for me, I wept. I was overwhelmed by feelings, of which a large part was astonishment. I was astonished by my father's request. It was so far from what I had required myself to believe, all this time.

Joséphine began shouting the news all over the neighborhood. Within minutes everyone in our quarter knew that we had received a telegram asking us to return home to Bangui, and that there was a money order attached to the telegram. That was important; it was proof of the intent of the telegram.

At once we began making plans to leave Brazzaville. I would not refuse this call from a father who was now lonely and repentant, and in need of care. Henriette was gone. In the end, his one child was all this broken man had left.

I too wanted the tenderness of family life with my father. I yearned for it. Even more than that, I wanted a grandfather for my daughter, who needed stability and protection. I would close the chapter on the first, sad part of my life. Now I had only one aim: to live for my child, to spare her what I had suffered, to make her happy.

This time my father would not disappoint me. I felt sure of it. In the joy of our going home I would not consider any other possibility.

## 8

# Grueling Enterprises and Tragedy

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My father's house, bordered by large mango trees, looked across the main street of Bangui to the river. A few doors away there was a café where the Europeans gathered to drink coffee or take an aperitif. After I returned home, my father noticed that he began to receive an unprecedented number of visits from the town's businessmen, on their way to and from the café. They would stop to ask about the health of "Old Gerbillat" as he was then known, and to give him their greetings.

"I never had so many callers in my life," my father remarked dryly. "As if they wanted to have my news!"

One of those who passed our house frequently was an enlisted man from the artillery post that was not far away. Each time, he looked searchingly toward the house. "There he is again," my father would say. "I guess he's taken by our mango trees."

Charles Greutz, with his colonial helmet in tatters, was the poorest of my suitors. Why did I choose him, from among all the others, to be my husband? From the education I had received from the nuns I still had certain notions about what one deserved in life. Roger had been a man with a large

fortune, and God had punished me for my affair with him. I therefore believed that I was destined to spend my life in poverty. When I saw this poor enlisted man, I thought, “There is your fate. Accept it.”

Besides, there were qualities in this man that I admired. He was a hard, hard worker. I had evidence of this from the beginning. He was an attractive man, but cruel. Above all, he was brutally racist. He loved me, I believed that. But he in no way loved my race. He loved me, perhaps for his bed, perhaps because he was a man and I was young and beautiful and desired by many men, including a general and businessmen of position. Perhaps it was a feather in his cap to win the daughter of the hero, Monsieur Gerbillat. But Charles Greutz had no idea why I decided to be with him, much less how to give me the peace of mind a woman needs while she is living with a man.

The fact that I had adapted to our life at all was due to my education, which had taught me that my life as a *métisse* should be one of resignation and poverty, hoping for nothing better than to be a housekeeper to a white man: to clean his house, cook his meals, mend his socks. Even this was considered a step up in our status, as it offered us a certain amount of protection. If we found scorn for our persons within our own house, that was only our lot. And I confess that this was what I accepted. I did not tell Charles how I felt. He had no idea of the constant duel going on within me, between my outrage and my attempt to resign myself to the fate given me as a *métisse*. I was constantly sad, because I knew I was cowardly, that I was putting up with things that I should not. I knew that, as a witness to his racism, I was an accomplice to it.

The only time I did not feel Charles’s racism was when we were alone, just the two of us. But I felt his racism terribly in his relations with our domestic help, and above all, with my mother. Charles would not permit my

mother to come into our home. He would not have a black in his living room, except as a domestic, to serve. Our “boy” he called *bakuya*, which means “big chimpanzee.” We *métisses* had to make a terrible choice in our relations with our men: if we insisted on bringing our black mothers into our homes, it was likely to destroy our relationship with the men; the alternative was to sacrifice our mothers and live by the men’s terms.

My mother had to wait until Charles was gone before she could come to our house. And when we heard his truck coming from afar, she had to flee through the kitchen, almost like a thief. Of course this hurt my mother grievously. She could not understand how this could happen, above all, to her daughter. “You are the daughter of Gerbillat,” she would say. “Except for the governor of the province, he has no equal. And you fall in love with a white man like that? How can you stay with him?”

I said to her, “Maman, the nuns taught us to accept such humiliations as inevitable. Give him some time to learn, perhaps one day he will be more kind.” Alas, that was never the case. He never really changed.

While I knew that Charles loved me, he gave me no tenderness, none of the words that would make a woman open up, flower in happiness. But he adored Rita. Poor though we were, difficult as our life was, because of his feelings for Rita, I felt myself protected. His affection for her was a strong guarantee of stability, I felt, for both her and me. When I found myself pregnant, I knew that Charles would give our child his name, that it would not be at all the same as with Roger. It would be the beginning of a new life. For Rita, and for the new child I carried, it would be different, and that was the important thing.

When my pregnancy came to term, I had the privilege of being delivered, like a white woman, at the European maternity clinic, with nuns who were midwives. Throughout my pregnancy I was followed by a doctor

and these nuns, a very different experience from the first time, when I had no medical care at all. This time I was assisted by Charles, and there was the new sensation of two distinct relationships involved: this man and his child, this man and myself.

In 1942, René, a magnificent boy, was born to us, and this created an explosion of joy. Charles was so proud, so happy to have a child, a son, and I was too. Like his sister, and myself, René also was born on December 16. I have often pondered the additional intertwining of our fates, in sharing this day, and the same stars, to enter the world.

My father was no longer able to work, and his trucking business was gone. Charles, who was still in the army, decided to start a trucking concern of his own. Although my father's poor health required him to rest much of the time, he helped us with good advice. Thus we arranged to borrow the money to buy our first truck. Charles drove it, repaired it, and made contacts for the goods to be transported; like my father he was ready to do anything and everything himself to launch the business. He was a prodigious worker and he had an astute sense of commerce. I continued to sew, to earn a little money for us, for every franc counted then. I made all Charles's clothes for him, his shirts, his undershorts, even his trousers and lizard skin belts. We hadn't the means to buy imported articles at first, so I sewed everything myself.

Living modestly, we were soon able to buy another truck, then another. From my mother I had learned to speak Sango. When we were living together in Brazzaville, this was the language that we usually spoke. Now I needed it while working with our help in the transport business. I gave the instructions to the men and was always there when the trucks were loaded. Demand for our services grew; Charles meanwhile remained at his post in

the artillery. In addition, he took on the job of managing a small coffee plantation twelve kilometers from Bangui for a friend of his, and there we went to live in its rather primitive house. Not far from us was the Mpoko, a large river infested with crocodiles. Our work on the plantation was supervisory. There was a black overseer who followed the actual day-to-day maintenance job of keeping the weeds and undergrowth hoed out from under the trees so they would be healthy and productive. Then there was the harvesting of the coffee beans, which had to be done correctly. But these processes were already well known to the workers, so it was just a matter of assigning certain sections of the orchards to be cared for, each day.

With the knowledge gained in the experience here, Charles was encouraged to buy a plantation of his own, 800 kilometers to the east of Bangui, at Bangasu. This was quite a different project, for there we were in the process of creating a plantation in the middle of the jungle. About fifty hectares were under cultivation when we got it, and I enlarged it to a hundred. I say "I," because soon after René's birth, Charles was stricken with viral hepatitis. Because of the war, it was not possible for the army to send him to France for treatment, so he went to South Africa to recover. Without me, of course; there was no question of my going with him, not only because I was not yet his legal wife, but because of the apartheid laws of that country, still in effect today, which forbid sexual relationships between the black and white races. During the nine months that Charles was gone, I took care of the transport business and both plantations.

There was no road to our property in Bangasu, and we had to leave our truck about three kilometers away and go in by trail through the jungle. The vegetation there was dense; only workers who knew the area well could find their way through. It was no use cutting a road for our truck because in that moist heat everything grew so fast that a week later the road would

have been obliterated. The first time I went in, with Charles, I was pregnant. The workers made a litter of two poles and a sling of liane vines and carried me in. When the coffee was harvested it also had to be taken out on foot. A procession of men carried the precious bags on their shoulders to the road, where the truck was waiting.

To enlarge the plantation we had to cut down huge trees, some of them fifty meters tall. There were about a hundred full-time workers. They did not have the saws and tools we do now, only picks and hand axes; it was brutal work. Sometimes the trunks of trees were as big as an ordinary room. In fact, a big tree has often served as a house for an African: he cuts a hole in one and takes shelter there.

One of my first jobs was to create a nursery of seedlings. The women wove baskets of pliable willow branches, then put a banana leaf in the bottom of each one so it would hold dirt. A grain of coffee or a sprouted seedling was placed in each basket to root. The soil was black and extremely fertile. On the roads the earth is red clay, but in the jungle, with all that drops and rots, the earth is black and rich.

When one of the giant trees was cut down, there would be no other heavy vegetation within the circumference of its branches because all that grows in the big trees' shade is much smaller and weaker—the growth of other trees is smothered. After clearing a stretch of land, we would trace out the rows in which the coffee trees were to stand, and then, at the proper intervals, put the baskets of seedlings directly into the ground.

Our workers came from villages that were not far away. They were well paid by general standards, and they hadn't the expenses of people in town. Their huts cost them nothing—they could put one up in an hour or two—and they lived largely on the animals they caught. The women planted peanuts, manioc, and vegetables beside their huts, and occasionally they

brought in provisions from their own villages. Above all the men hunted. The forest was rich in game: antelopes, buffaloes, wild pigs, and feathered game, such as guinea fowl. Cages were built in which to keep live such captured poultry. The men used bows and arrows for game in the trees; for the big land animals they used their *saggaies*, or lances.

Little Rita was with me, and I trembled for her because the area swarmed with panthers. Regularly the panthers carried off the goats and chickens kept by the workers, and a small child like her would have been a picnic. She was a lively child, curious and full of energy; I was constantly hugging her to me to keep her safe. The panthers were so bold they came even into the courtyard of our house. These panthers, tan with dark spots, were active at night. This is the only member of the cat family that we have in Equatorial Africa. There are no lions such as on the great plains, which support the herds of hoofed animals. The panther holds a special place as a noble animal in our African folklore. But at Bangasu, when night fell, I shut myself up in our house with my child in fear.

Snakes were another worry. They were not lacking, and included vipers that lived underground, and the beautifully marked black-and-white horned vipers. There were rattlesnakes, and the poisonous green snakes that hid in banana trees, and the venomous, aggressive mamba, the most dangerous of all, which lives high in trees and attacks birds. The mamba must subdue its prey at once, because if the bird struggles and falls thirty or forty meters to the ground, the snake's meal is lost. We had a nurse on the plantation, who carried serum to inject in case of snake bite. None of us was ever bitten by a snake, although Rita was stung by a scorpion.

The most serious danger in the jungle can be the red ants or the *magnans*. When they come, they arrive in enormous waves and can devour a human being in minutes, leaving the bones as polished as ivory. They



sweep over their prey, asphyxiating it, penetrating every orifice at once—the nose, the eyes, the ears. They know exactly what to do; they head for the vital organs—the lungs and the brain. I knew of a case where the boy of a group camping in the brush was attacked while he slept. Although he jumped up, cried out, and ran, he could not be saved. The ants were already within his body. It was too late.

This almost happened to us once. It was while we were traveling the long, hard route from Bangui to Bangasu, soon after we bought the property, that we had our nearly deadly encounter. We stopped in the late afternoon and our workers made us a little *paillote*, or straw hut, in a pleasant clearing. This is not difficult to do. Some tall stakes were driven into the ground and the surrounding grass was cut and tied into bundles to fill the spaces between the stakes. The straw was also piled over a light scaffolding of branches for a roof. Several mats were spread on the ground for a floor, and within this little overnight shelter we set up the two folding beds and big mosquito net for Charles, Rita, and me. When one makes a camp thus, cutting vegetation, cooking food, and disturbing the natural order of the site, the ant scouts are alerted and come to see if there is something for their army to devour. This is their way in the jungle.

That night I left the kerosene lantern burning in our little hut because the sounds of the night in the brush made me tremble. I wasn't used to the cries of the wild animals and slept only lightly. About midnight I heard a strange, rasping sound, *kss, kss, kss*, like a comb scraping on a bottle. I sat up and looked through the mosquito net. Instead of the straw-colored mats on the floor, I saw a moving carpet of red ants. They filled the hut, entirely, their hard bodies rubbing together with a strange, whispering noise.

With a scream, I scooped Rita up in my arms. I tore away the mosquito net and jumped into that wave of red ants, for the door. Charles woke, and

with a bound followed me. Barefoot, we stepped on that horrible, seething carpet of ants. In the three or four seconds that it took us to run through them out to the trucks, my feet and ankles became encrusted with the ants. It looked as though I were wearing red boots.

In the trucks were the driver, the “boy,” and two laborers for the plantation. They awakened at our cries and came to help us. Together, we threw kerosene about and set fire to the army of ants. It was the only possible way to drive them off.

I was badly stung, as was Charles. The bite of one of those ants is worse than fire. They have pinchers like crabs and hold on to their prey tenaciously. You have to pick them off with your fingers, and even then the claws often remain in the flesh. To rid ourselves of them we could only rub our feet and legs vigorously. Because we had no alcohol with which to do this, we had to use gasoline to disinfect their bites. It was terribly painful. For many weeks afterward I had scabs where their claws remained embedded under my skin.

I was happy, however, that Rita did not receive a single bite. She was then about two years old. I was several months pregnant with Charles’s child at the time, and ill with nausea and vomiting, besides.

From then on, when we had to make a camp in the brush we were always careful to surround our encampment with a protective circle of fresh ashes. Occasionally, when there was a lot of work to be done at the far end of the plantation, we would have to spend the night there. First we would make a bonfire, which would provide us with enough ashes to provide a barrier against the ants around the camp. It is curious that these ants, from which even a boa constrictor will flee, will not cross a little layer of fresh ashes.

The boas of Equatorial Africa are huge. In the jungle they can attain a length of six, seven, even eight meters. Their prey, which they crush to death, is sometimes so large that the boa needs a month to digest it. For this, the security of a safe place is needed. After killing a large animal like an antelope or deer, the boa will make a tour of the jungle for one kilometer around, to be sure that there are no armies of ants that might attack him during the rest he needs. If he finds the area is safe, he returns to his prey and swallows it. But if there are *manions* in the area, he will prefer to leave his prey and look elsewhere for his meal.

Not all boas live in the jungle. In Chad there are boas eight meters long that live among the dunes of the desert. They leave a distinctive track in the sand by which they are hunted. When the track is found, a basin of poisoned milk is put out; the boa drinks it, and dies nearby. The cured skin makes beautiful leather articles. I myself have seen these boas at Fort Lamy. They are terrifying. In the jungle, of course, boas don't leave tracks, so they are not so easy to find. Movies depicting Africa often show boas hanging like vines across a trail, waiting to make the acquaintance of some passing human, but actually this is rare. They have so much else to eat in the jungle, especially monkeys, that they do not seek humans. The monkeys were everywhere on our plantation, even coming into our kitchen to steal food.

Life on the plantation at Bangasu was an adventure every day. The work was cruel, but eventually I doubled the size of our productive land. When Charles came back from South Africa, well and strong again, and saw that I had not only managed his business for him, but actually expanded it, I think I convinced him that I was a worthwhile person. My work contributed, I think, to his decision to marry me.

Although my father was helpful to us in the trucking business, he never really approved of my liaison with Charles Greutz. In the community there

was more acceptance of a *métisse* mistress than a black one; still, the French Catholic customs prevailed. I believe that the sense of honor and patriotism that inspired my father to join the Free French Forces had also developed his conscience in other ways. His sacrifices for France had made him a well-known personage, respected and admired in the community. Perhaps he wanted to see me married and living a conventional life. There were many nuances in the situation.

Marriage had never been a concern of mine. There was no question of our marrying when René was born, although Charles was mad with joy. We simply continued our life of poverty together in a small house. René had a name, that was what counted for me. But as a woman I continued to be frustrated, I felt my dignity violated; all the humiliations that I experienced as a woman of color living with Europeans I continued to feel with Charles in our own home.

When Charles went off to South Africa, I arranged for my father to come live with me in our little plantation house outside of Bangui. I wanted him near me so I could see that he was properly cared for. Profiting by Charles's absence, my mother also came to help look after him for days, even weeks at a time. Thus at last, as a mature woman and mother of two, I was able to have the experience that had been denied me as a child, to live with my father and mother as a couple.

They seemed wonderfully happy together. I was astonished by their closeness and harmony, these two people from such vastly differing worlds: an African woman who had been abandoned with her child, and a European businessman, now old and broken. This innocent, spirited little black woman and this bent, pot-bellied man with the often vacant stare.

There is not a shadow of a doubt that my mother adored my father until the day of her death. It was through her veneration of him that my own

feelings came. I felt mostly admiration for his patriotism. I never really knew this man who had begotten me, but through this mother, who was so naive and who bore so much unkindness from him, I learned to honor him in spite of my own pain and rebellion.

My father's feelings for my mother were less original than hers for him. At the time their liaison began there was no radio or television in Africa, and hunting was almost the only distraction for pioneers such as my father. Their lives were hard, although of course they had made this life their choice. Sharing life with a woman made it more pleasant, and of course she was convenient to him as a man. Joséphine was a child when he found her, a child designed to love and please. Her heart-shaped face radiated the beauty of Africa; her smile was ravishing. When he won her with a larger dowry, Pierre Gerbillat was a happy man. Certainly, the relationship between my father and mother was better than that which existed between most other white men and their black women; my father felt a real attachment for my mother. But also, one must concede the usefulness of the arrangement for him. Joséphine provided pleasant evenings for my father, and he did not feel alone because he had this delicious girl for company.

Now it was like a miracle to me to see them together as a couple. Teasing one another like children, their naturalness was touching. I was even a little uneasy at their frankness in front of me, once, when they spoke of their wedding night. My mother was preparing a poultice of herbs to treat a fungus on my father's face. As she crushed the herbs, which made a gluey paste, my father, who was watching, began to laugh.

"I'm remembering our wedding night," he said. Then he turned to me and explained. "Your mother was so small and frail, she was still a child when I made a woman of her. Her parents left in our nuptial quarters a calabash with cooked gumbo in it. This was a native custom, to ease the

rite, for the bride. Yes, I needed the gluey gumbo in order to consummate our marriage.”

At this my mother laughed quite spontaneously, marvelously, and said, “Yes, and afterward you wrote your name on my arm with a quill and ink. That was what they used in those days.”

Then together they went on to tell me about how Joséphine’s family, when they had seen the evidence that Joséphine was a virgin, traced his writing in a tattoo of cinders. On her arm for all time was the name Pierre Gerbillat, spelled with a “t,” for my mother had the right to his name with a “t,” even though I, their child, did not.

Thus, in my home I was able to witness moments between them that were very moving to me. It seemed to me that they became quite young in their happiness together, although my father was not at all well. When my mother wanted to leave, my father held her, begging, “No, stay. Stay!” I had the impression that my father invented little illnesses in order to keep her near him.

Life, for Joséphine, was not complicated. She wanted her small privileges of coquetry, especially a new *pagne* each Sunday or at least twice a month. For the rest, she was an utterly adorable, heedless, child-hearted female, for whose smile one would forgive anything. A smile from Joséphine was like a gift; it made one feel as though life, after all, was surely a success. I knew it wasn’t true. I was sometimes exasperated by this when I was feeling so depressed and she, in her blithe carelessness, found nothing to complain of. Her naiveté produced some hilarious incidents. Once a Portuguese shopkeeper admired a solid-gold bracelet that had been given to her, and offered to make her a trade of anything she wanted in his shop. Joséphine picked out some big enamel basins and other junk, then

crowded for days how she had put one over on that foolish Portuguese shopkeeper.

Joséphine's life was entirely shaped by the usages of colonialism. Still, she did not resent them, she submitted to them easily, even joyfully. She never really understood the combat in which I was later involved, and often tried to dissuade me from my work, which she saw was so harsh and painful for me. Because we were close, inevitably she was touched by the problems that became mine through my political options; eventually these problems were to reach the ultimate limits by producing her death.

Although I am not religious, the cult of the ancestors is important to me. Each morning when I awaken, my first thought is for my mother. Speaking to her in the language of our country, I greet her, I tell her she will share my day. I tell her my problems, I remember things we have shared, I tell her that I love her.

Sometimes I call other members of my family, my grandmother, my uncles, my son, but always my mother first. My father—I rarely have the joy of speaking with him as I do with the others. I am still too unhappy when I think of him; I have not yet been able to put aside my memories and to be quite simply, in my own heart, a loving daughter.

It was my father who finally helped me to break away from the religious notions, learned from the nuns, that still haunted me.

“I'll go to Mass with you, if you like,” he said, “but just look at the Church for what it is—all those theatrical effects, and always aligned with power and money.”

This put the Church into an entirely new perspective for me. When I thought about it, I had to agree with him.

“Then why,” I asked him, my old pain rising, “did you put me with the nuns—those legalized torturers of God—if that’s the way you feel about the church?”

“There was no choice,” he replied. “There was nothing else available.”

At the time I had to accept his answer, but during the succeeding years I continued to ponder the mystery of my broken childhood. Granted that his wife did not want to be encumbered with me and may at one time have thought of having a family of her own; still, why did he and Henriette put me in that orphanage? Why didn’t they simply leave me in the village, where I was so happy? Was it because he thought I would be given an education by the nuns? But he must have known that the education from them at that time was absolutely nothing at all. If it was an education that he desired for me when he took me from the village, why had he not taken me to France, where I would really have learned something, since they were on their way, at that time, to France?

The fact that he deposited me in that “institution of purification,” as the nuns called it, in Brazzaville, seems to me to indicate that he was moved by a sense of guilt. As I consider what his dilemma must have been, I think he must have felt guilt, not only toward my mother, Henriette, and me, but also toward the colonial system in which he had found such a prosperous place. Although he was not of a philosophical nature and would never have defined his discomfort in those terms, I think he felt guilt confronting him on every side. It was guilt, I think, that required expiation somewhere, by someone. Burying me in Brazzaville among the nuns charged with dealing with such sins may have seemed to him the way out.

It was during this peaceful interlude in 1943 when the three of us were together that my father recognized me officially, and gave me the right to



sign my name with a “t.” Only someone who has suffered such an experience can understand, I believe, what such a minor detail can mean.

But even this long-delayed event was not without its bitter nuances for me. As he told me of his decision to take the necessary formal steps at the city hall, he added, “If you had not turned out to be such an intelligent child, I would not have recognized you.”

I gave that statement a lot of thought. I think he found it necessary to justify the act because he was living in my house. He felt an obligation to me, but he wanted to make me forget his dependency on me. More than ever, I felt pity for him. I answered nothing when he said those words. Even if I had not been a child who tried to raise herself in the world, I would not have been less his child for that. Perhaps he thought it would give me satisfaction to think, “Ah, my father finds me intelligent.” But that did not matter to me.

I was never able to have any serious discussions with my father about colonialism. When I began to understand the usages of racism in the colonial system, and to speak of it to him, he would say, “If the whites hadn’t come to Africa, where would the blacks be today?” To which I would answer, “Look at it: if the blacks hadn’t been here, where would the whites be today?”

And so our discussion would stop short, because he saw where I would take it. I did not want to jeopardize our relations after he returned from the war, so I avoided painful subjects with him. I knew that he was quite capable of saying that the white race is very superior to the black.

Charles returned from South Africa, strong and well, and apparently delighted to be with me and the two children again. In his absence, my father and I had not only looked after the trucking business and the

plantations, we had extended them. Charles was pleased, as well he might have been. I had worked like a man, taking the trucks into areas where there were no real roads, in order to pick up cotton, coffee, and other raw materials. I jolted over rutted trails, wondering what I would do, far from help, if the old truck broke down. When Charles learned these things, he saw that I was a woman whom one could count on, a worthwhile person who would add something to his life.

He hurled himself into his work again, and our life together was more agreeable and more bearable than it had ever been before. Even though his businesses were becoming major enterprises, he remained in the artillery. Charles seemed to have mixed feelings about the war and the occupation. Some of his ideas were pro-Nazi. He and his Alsatian comrades sometimes seemed more German than French to me. Of course, the history of Alsace explains a great deal, but it seemed to me that they insisted on the German aspect of their background. My father, in his unconfined patriotism, had some sharp exchanges with Charles on this, and I was disturbed by his attitude too. In spite of the manner in which I had been brought up by the nuns, I still had feelings for France, and especially my father's sacrifices had been a lesson to me in the love of country.

Many aspects of Charles's personality displeased me. He was a "*Boche*," peevish, racist, brutal with my mother, and wildly jealous. His ideas about the relationship of a man and woman were strange. Although I felt he loved me, that he depended on me, he never showed it. I had to interpret this for myself. He hardly ever talked to me; he was very closed in on himself. But he loved his two children. It always came back to that. For the first time, I felt myself passably protected, at ease, for my daughter and son. So in spite of everything he inflicted on me and my mother, sometimes through carelessness, sometimes deliberately, I thought that, with the

affection he gave his children, this was a lot. As for myself, I was used to having nothing, so for me, this was no real change.

Perhaps it was my own father's apparent indifference to me as a child that made me prize Charles's attachment to his children so much. His affection for René and Rita was really profound. It made happiness for us all. When he came home late in the afternoon, I had the children waiting for him, all bathed and powdered. Because it was so hot, talcum powder was used to prevent prickly heat; their little bodies were fresh, the skin cool and powdered; they were beautiful to see as we listened for the sound of his old truck coming up the plantation road. When he arrived, the children and the dogs would run to meet him while I waited at the top of the steps. He would catch the children in his arms and swing them up to him. I found this marvelous to see. This was a side of Charles that was very precious to me.

There was a great contrast between our two children. Rita was a Nordic type, with large green eyes and soft blonde curls that hung to her waist. It was not necessary to form the curls, but only to run a comb through them, and they fell into long coils of their own weight. René was a fat little brown baby with olive skin, chestnut curls, and black eyes like his father's. He was not destined to be tall; young as he was, you could see in his stubby little legs that he would not have long bones, while his sister had the morphology of one who would be tall, élancée as she is today.

Rita was of a turbulent nature, lively and gay, with a strong personality. She was not one of those "good-as-gold" little girls, quite the contrary. She lived intensely, reacting strongly to every moment in life. She was a little tomboy, much more active than her brother, although of course he was younger. Perhaps he was a little dominated by his sister, for he let her do what she liked with him. He was a calm, good-natured child who watched his sister with big eyes as she climbed trees, or climbed on our big dogs.

When Charles came back from Cape Town, he brought with him two Great Danes. They were so large that their heads peered over the dining table while we were eating. Once one of them snatched a piece of meat off Rita's plate. She seized the dog's muzzle, pried his mouth open, and put her arm halfway down his throat to get the meat back.

"This is *my* meat," she pronounced. We told her it was dirty, not to eat it, but she ate it anyhow. With satisfaction. She was so brave she would do anything. She chastized the dogs, and they let her do it. That was the way she was, confident and brimming with life.

My mother loved the children so much that she absolutely had to spend time with them. Occasionally Charles would come home unexpectedly and find her in his house. Those were terrible days. The things Charles said then I have chosen not to remember. I protested, argued, denounced, and pled, but halfheartedly. I did not see any alternative to accepting this. The revolt was in me, but it had been stifled for so many years by the nuns.

For all his delight in his daughter and little son, there were times when Charles was inexcusably brutal in his discipline of them. One night, Rita did not want to eat her soup. He sent her out under the lemon tree, twenty-five meters away from the house, and there, in spite of the swarms of mosquitoes and the danger of panthers who regularly prowled the plantation, he made her eat her soup, alone, on her knees. The little one cried and cried, but Charles insisted, and had to prevail. He would not let her come back until she had finished eating her soup. Then he took her, sobbing, in his arms. Even though he loved her, there was this iron side to his nature. Rita was traumatized by the incident, and I felt that it was too severe a punishment for a child who had not been raised in such a way. And of course, I suffered, furiously, to see her so hurt.

Charles's feelings for the children were sincere; they were not a pretense. He did not pretend. At least he was honest. He was hard with everyone: with me, with his children, with his workers.

I would not describe Charles as handsome. He looked quite a bit like Clark Gable. Although not tall, he was a man you would notice: a certain physical type, intensely male, hard, complete in himself. What I appreciated in him, besides his tenderness for the children, was his enthusiasm for work. He had an unlimited appetite for work, and could work twenty-four hours a day, smoking one cigarette after another and drinking beer. He was an enormous beer drinker, constantly perspiring, and drinking bottle after bottle of beer, day and night. He smoked more than anyone I have ever known in my life.

The Africans called him "the lion" because he had an exceptionally powerful torso. When he was displeased with one of his workers, he did not beat the man. He merely seized him, turned him upside down and banged his head hard on the ground. Then he tossed the body contemptuously aside. The poor man was usually so stunned he could hardly move as Charles turned his back and walked away. Charles Greutz was not tall, but he was a block of solid muscle.

One day, he returned to the house, his face agitated, pale. There had been an accident, he said, and one of his men had been hurt.

"I didn't mean to do it," he kept repeating. "I didn't do it on purpose."

The army had given Charles a contract to transport bales of military garments to Fort Lamy in Chad. His men were loading the fifty-kilo bales of goods into the trucks at the artillery post when the accident happened. As the men lifted and carried the heavy bundles on their backs, they sang. In work like this, when they are lifting and carrying hundreds of kilos for hours on end, singing gives a rhythm to their work. It makes their burdens

lighter and the task go faster. They raise their voices in chants and songs. This may have irritated Charles, who was always of an impatient nature, and of course no one ever worked swiftly enough to satisfy him. He was there, supervising the job and shouting at the men to get on with it. He spoke Sango, as he had made a point of learning their language. One of the men loading the big bales was not going fast enough, Charles shouted at the man, hitting him on the head with the implement that he happened to have in his hand at the time, a *tringle*. This is a pole with a metal hook on the end of it, which is used to release a catch high up on a warehouse door when it can't be reached by hand.

The blow must have been severe, for the man sank to his knees and then fell on the ground, unconscious. Charles discovered that the hook was embedded in the man's head and had penetrated his skull. Because it was impossible to remove the tringle, the man had to be transported, as he was, with the pole and hook, to the hospital for surgery.

I was overwhelmed by the news. Privately, I thought that Charles could not continue to act like that with blacks because someday he would get himself killed. People would not put up with such treatment indefinitely. Already there was evidence that things were beginning, a little, to evolve.

"How could you, Charles?" I said bitterly. "You haven't the right ..."

Charles, of course was not about to let me tell him what he had a right to do, concerning blacks. We had serious quarrels around this accident. The affair troubled him, not because he regretted what he had done, but because of the police inquiry. He feared it would reflect badly on his business and that his license to operate might be revoked. And besides, the truck was supposed to leave for Fort Lamy that day and it couldn't because it had been requisitioned for the inquest.

“After all, he’s not dead,” Charles kept saying. It was more important to Charles that the departure of the truck was delayed than that he had seriously injured a black man.

The road from a boat landing on the Mpoko ran by our plantation. People coming from the landing, on seeing our house, often stopped for a friendly visit. This was the custom of colonials in those days. A plantation, it was understood, was run by a white, and one white was always glad to see another. Hospitality was an accepted way of life. Thus I came to know many French people and began a small business of my own.

France had fallen to the Germans. The war had left the French without food, they were suffering under the occupation. In Paris, people were reduced to eating their dogs and cats; in the provinces things were only slightly better.

Africa, which has always provided Europe with many natural resources needed to keep its factories running, was rich in many products that could not be had in the metropolis. The people in Africa began sending packages of desperately needed items, such as sugar, rice, coffee, tapioca, white beans, and soap, to their friends and families back home. One had the right to send three packages of three kilos each per month to one’s relatives. Each sender had a card. Whenever a package was mailed, a little square was stamped, as a means of controlling the number of packages sent. The post office delivery system worked very well. The packages arrived as they should, and many people in France depended on them for their very survival.

Because I had access to African products at wholesale prices, friends occasionally asked me to make up packages to send to France for them. Always willing to be helpful, I gladly did this. They paid for the articles and

the postage, while I did the buying and mailing for them on a regular basis. Finally, when people began turning their cards over to me and I found myself sending about thirty of these packages a month, I put out a sign in Bangui, "Packages for Families," and opened a little business. Soon hundreds of people had placed standing orders with me. I charged 2 francs 50 for handling each package, and bought the products at good prices, on credit. The packages were wrapped not in paper but in several meters of percale, which was also badly needed in France.

When there were only fifty or sixty packages a month, I did all the work myself. I sewed the beige-gray cloth into sacks, wrapped the articles in protective paper, stuffed them in the sacks, and sewed the sacks closed. Eventually I had three thousand orders a month to fill. I hired two men as helpers; in those days it was men, not women, whom one hired, and who sewed. We had a regular assembly-line production, one worker stuffing the fragrant coffee, the heavy sugar, and rice into the sacks, the other doing the sewing. I also had a helper who, with me, wrote the names and addresses of the persons to whom the packages were sent, in ink on the cloth. That was the part of the work that took the most care.

Finally my business gained such status that the post office gave me the stamp for the expediting cards, and I began to stamp the squares myself as well as weigh the packages. When I delivered a load to the post office, all that was needed was to check the weight of the whole lot against the number of cards in hand. The post office relied on me to do part of their work as well as my own. It was a satisfying task, as one thought of how glad the recipients were to get those treasured packages during the hard days of the occupation. Later I raised the price of my services to 5 francs a package, and still had all the business I could handle. For three years my "Packages for Families" was a highly successful enterprise.



On August 26, 1944, General Leclerc, leading French troops for the Allied Armies, entered Paris. For four years the capital had been a dead city, half of its inhabitants fleeing. When news of the liberation reached us, it produced a cataclysmic reaction in my father. His feelings, in fact, went far beyond response to that national event, I believe. He was sitting in the living room with my mother and the baby. Before preparing lunch, I put on the radio to hear the noon news. We had always followed the development of events in France passionately. Now it was announced that, rolling up from the south, Leclerc's tanks and troops had taken the capital, and Paris was ours. My father, usually so dry and controlled, burst into tears. Within moments he was convulsed with sobs.

Although moved myself—as who could fail to be at such news—I was stunned by this display from a man who had shown so few feelings to those closest to him. Here, in the hinterlands of Equatorial Africa, thousands of kilometers from France and its fate, was a man who was utterly devastated. At first, I thought, “This is a truly rare patriot, he has done more, shown more emotions for his country than he has for his wife and child.”

But for a man to cry like that, to sob helplessly, without end! I began to think further. Certainly he was not weeping at that moment for the success in his country, but for the failures in his own past. At the mercy of his old age, without a fortune or a future, impotent before life, I think he finally faced, in my house, his regret for what he might have done for me. I think he wept then for what might have been.

The Mpoko is a large, sluggish river that thrusts deep into the equatorial forest and keeps the land perpetually, sickeningly humid. Clouds of mosquitoes make a continual concert in the swamps along its shores, sowing malaria and even death among the unwary. Occasionally these

clouds of mosquitoes swept into towns and infested the houses. Our plantation, not far from the Mpoko, was particularly vulnerable to these swarms.

Charles's transport business continued to prosper and my "Packages for Families" was doing well. We had begun to build a fine home in the center of Bangui, when our family was struck by a terrible grief.

For some time, René, who was then two years old, had been subject to bouts of malaria. He had an attack that was so severe that I was frightened. At the hospital, I discussed his case with Dr. Vincent, our family doctor. He told me that René's condition was very serious, that he should be given several tablets of quinine every day. Unfortunately, in order to obtain quinine one had to have a special card, and in French Equatorial Africa this card was not given to anyone with African blood. Only Europeans had the privilege of obtaining shots of concentrated quinine with this card.

The African children who were stricken with malaria often died because they could not have the medicine. This, sociologists said, was an example of the theory of natural selection at work. The process served, they said, to keep the race sturdy.

I spent a dreadful night at René's bedside, alternately wrapping him in blankets when he shook in an ague of cold, and wiping his face and limbs with a damp cloth when the raging fever was upon him. Every breath seemed to wrack his tortured, bronze little body. The next morning he was better, but the doctor warned me that René could not bear another such crisis. He let me look at a sample of René's blood in his microscope. What I saw there made me nearly crazy: hundreds of swarming parasites. "He is so heavily infected he cannot resist another attack," Dr. Vincent said.

When I told Charles what I had learned, he thought I was exaggerating the situation.

“I’ll pinch some quinine from the army dispensary,” he said, as if that would solve everything. The principle of the thing, that his child could not obtain medicine legally, did not concern him. That I was petrified, in a state of shock, he considered a case of nerves in an oversensitive mother. It could not be as serious as all that.

That afternoon, desperate, I went to see the all-powerful mayor-administrator of Bangui, to ask him for a quinine card so that I could buy the life-saving medicine for my son.

As I hastened to his office, against all reason, there was hope in my heart. Not only was the law against my mission, but already I had received one harsh rejection at the hands of this man.

The French of Bangui met and socialized at an exclusive club called “The Circle.” My father, who was one of the earliest French settlers in the region, known to everyone and extremely well thought of, had been one of the first members. He was so proud of me that he took me with him to “The Circle” and presented me to the people there. One of the club members drew him aside and said warningly, “Actually, your daughter has no right to be here unless her membership is approved by the others.”

Soon afterward, my father proposed my membership to “The Circle,” seconded by a “godmother” and “godfather,” two friends who lent their names to support my nomination. Among the club’s members were the mayor, his excessively ugly wife, and two unattractive daughters. To see their faces when they looked at me was to know that they hated me. Quite openly, they said that to accept me as a member would be to prepare the way for Africans with ambitions to join their private club. The only way to avoid this was to refuse, at the outset, anyone with African blood. The answer was “No,” and it was the mayor who reported this decision to my father.

As I approached the mayor's office, I remembered how it felt to be refused the right to go to the club's social events and to dance with the young men who were so eager to partner me. I knew that if the mayor had no pity for a young girl then, there was little chance that he would be favorably disposed toward me now either. Still, I felt strong, combative. It was not for myself that I was making this appeal, but for my little son. As a mother I had no choice. In spite of everything, there is always a curious hope that lingers in the heart for each human encounter, that this time will be different. The hope of change, of rehabilitation, of a freshening of generosity to provide a new outcome. Perhaps, I thought, he refused me before because of his jealous wife and daughters. This time he would be alone, and judging the case of my innocent, desperate son, perhaps he might be more kind.

I crossed the courtyard of the city hall, carpeted with white, cracked gravel. The military guards who were on duty outside the mayor's office asked me the nature of my business.

"I wish to speak to the mayor about the illness of my son," I said with courteous firmness. "He is in need of quinine."

The guards looked at one another with an expression that meant that I was wasting my time. But they let me go in to the secretary and be announced.

The mayor was an impressive-looking man. In the colonial system they always were. They were chosen to scare the Africans, to intimidate them with the white man's authority. He was not tall, but he was well-built. He carried himself well. Pride in his role was written all over his face and in the way he moved. His hair was grey, receding a bit. His accent showed that he was from the south of France. Actually, he was an insignificant person, about whom no one would have given a second thought in France. But in

Africa he had achieved power and prestige. More: he had the privilege of meting out life or death over the people in his little territory.

He was alone in his office with a big desk, his shelves, and cabinets of files, when I entered. Humbly I approached, and reminded him of who I was, the daughter of Pierre Gerbillat.

“He’s a patriot, Monsieur Gerbillat,” the mayor said, nodding his head in approval. “It’s not everyone who would give twenty-eight trucks to the government for the war, then go, himself, to fight.”

My father’s story was well known. He was something of a hero in Bangui.

“I have come to see you about my son,” I began. “He is suffering from an acute attack of malaria. I have here the records of his condition written by Doctor Vincent.”

“Doctor Vincent?”

“He gave them to me today. My son was in the hospital last night, fighting desperately for his life. He cannot endure another crisis.”

The mayor pushed aside the papers that I had gently laid before him but said nothing. He continued to listen as I explained my case, his eyes going over my person in a way designed to humiliate me as a woman.

“I know that the distribution of quinine must be authorized by the city hall. That is why I have come to you, Monsieur the Mayor, to ask you for a quinine card, to save my child’s life.”

His eyes slid over me again before he replied, “You know very well that we can’t make exceptions to the rule. Quinine is for whites only. You are black. That makes your son black.” He was very relaxed, cold, at his ease.

“But Monsieur the Mayor,” I begged. I would have dropped to my knees if I thought it would soften his heart. “It’s my son’s life.”

“No exceptions,” he said, in icy tones.

“He’s a *child*,” I pled fervently. “He is innocent. Let him live. That’s all I ask you. Let him live.”

“You heard my answer,” he said, his voice rising harshly.

Someone led me away. I was outside again. Blindly I ran through the streets. As if in a nightmare, pursued by unknown horrors, I ran. I thought I saw an open tomb in front of me. It was a tomb that I was running toward. The sun beat down on my head pitilessly. I felt as though I were succumbing to madness. I found myself back at the hospital.

When he saw my face, Doctor Vincent knew what had happened. “Oh, my poor child,” he said, his own features drawn with concern. “Your son is lost.”

I burst into tears. “If you will write the mayor, you, yourself,” I entreated him, “explaining how serious it is. Perhaps you can make him see ...”

Doctor Vincent made out a certificate testifying to the gravity of René’s case, adding that he would die if strong doses of quinine were not administered immediately. To this he appended a personal note for the mayor.

I ran back to the city hall with these papers. The mayor instructed his secretary to say that he was busy. I was sure this was not true, and I would not be put off by such a hollow device. I pushed my way into his office and found him comfortably settled in an easy chair, watching the flies circling about.

“Monsieur the Mayor,” I began, thrusting my papers toward him.

He stood up, furious. “I told you: no!” he shouted. “How dare you bother me with this again!”

“Why?” I shouted back. “*Why?* What good is our French citizenship if we can’t have the medicines provided to the French? I am a French citizen, the same as you, and so is my son ...”

“Out! Out!”

Guards were dragging me away, *manu militari*. I did not go quietly.

“Cursed race!” I yelled back at him. “Yours is an accursed race. Cursed authors of a murderous law. Child murderer! You are murderers, murderers, all of you!”

My heart was bursting. René was being condemned to death because of his bronze-colored skin.

I have been asked, “Why would white people be so cruel to a child who was three-fourths white?” My answer is: this was deepest Equatorial Africa, and the war was on. I think something of the same kind of hatred existed in the Old South of the United States at one time toward blacks of mixed blood, because they represented a more subtle threat to the whites. The usual categories of behavior could not be so easily applied. The octoroons were more detested, I have been told, because they were more feared. The deepest human fears often cannot be put into words. And they are the most irrational.

I returned home, beside myself. My father was waiting, and I told him what had happened. In a rare moment of spontaneity with him, I poured out my despair. I could see he was dazed to think he might lose little René. He had become very attached to his grandson. In his old age, grandchildren brought him more pleasure than his own child had, when she was young.

Sick and weak though my father was, he decided to see the mayor himself, hoping to make him relent. Painfully, my father dragged himself

into his old warrant officer's uniform. He hoped that the sight of the decorations would move the administrator to change his mind.

As I helped my father walk slowly across the town to the city hall, I was the object of hostile and jeering comments from some of the colonials whom we passed. Word of my scene with the mayor had gotten around quickly. I could hear people laughing about "that badly bleached woman who thought she could defy the administration." I cared nothing for their words, or their laughter. I could think of only one thing: to obtain for my little René the medicine that he needed.

But the sight of the fragile, beribboned old veteran trembling for his grandson did not change the mayor's heart. The plea failed.

That evening, when Charles learned of how I had forced my way into the mayor's office, he was furious. He thought I was going to turn all the Europeans, on whom he depended for work, against him. They were his public, his clients. He could not afford to have his business damaged by getting on the bad side of the administration and with the people who used his trucking services.

"What right have you?" he shouted at me. "For whom do you take yourself?"

"For a mother!" I shouted back.

He stormed out of the house and went to the artillery post. Later he returned with a little package in which there were fifteen quinine pills. He threw the package down on the table in front of me and said, "There! There's your quinine."

Nothing at that time gave us any idea that we blacks would ever have our independence, or any rights of our own. When I claimed the right to



have medicine for my child, it was an unheard-of event. Intolerable. Inadmissible.

A month later, another attack, even more severe, made René so ill he had to be hospitalized. His health was too deteriorated to fight the disease. When we took him, in convulsions, to the hospital, I had a presentiment he was going to die. Only when Charles saw the child's agony with his own eyes did he realize the seriousness of the case. Then he came three or four times a day to the hospital, but it was too late. The malaria had gone into the pernicious stage, last in this terrible illness. As René lay there, gasping in his hospital bed, I was totally helpless against the unspeakable cruelties inflicted on him.

By a stroke of fate, Pascal, the child of one of our European neighbors, was hospitalized a few days later in a room close to René's. He was the same age as my son and he also was in the throes of an attack of malaria, in the pernicious stage. Mosquitoes are not racist and bite all humans—whether white, black, or yellow—with the same ferocity.

Our two families were good neighbors. I was sad when I saw my son's playmate enter the hospital. But it was even more painful to me later, when I saw that Pascal was receiving the quinine necessary to save his life, while my child, only a few meters away, was inexorably sliding down the road to death.

I was so terrified of the fate that lay ahead for my child that I refused to believe it. I begged Doctor Vincent to tell me something I could do for my child; he told me to give him apple juice.

It was a relief to have something, anything at all to do that might ease René's suffering. I rushed to the stores and bought all the fresh apples I could find. Only the racist Portuguese merchants had them, and the fruit was from South Africa, but that was of no importance to me then. I pressed

the apples for their juice, and coaxed René to take it. Supporting his weak little body against my own, I held him up, putting the glass to his cracked lips. He did not want to swallow anything; it was as if his throat were sealed closed. Bravely he took a few sips. A few moments later he vomited the juice back up.

In the hospital corridor, I met my neighbor, who was now looking happy and relaxed: her Pascal was improving. I was even more prostrated at this news, more outraged. From then on, I avoided meeting her. I shut myself up with my child in his room, holding an ice bag to his poor burning head. Jealously, I guarded for myself what remained of his life, unable to bear the presence of anyone in his room except the doctor. Despite all the evidence, I still cherished a hope that somehow Doctor Vincent would be able to set aside the monstrous colonial rule and save my child with quinine.

There was another bitter turn to the situation. In spite of my good intentions, I began to hate the white child who was getting well. Poor Pascal became the victim of racism from the mother of his playmate, in the room nearby. I ground my teeth in fury at the white skin, which it was Pascal's good fortune to have, as I watched my own child fail.

In the panic that finally overtook me, I lost all objectivity and all control of my reactions. Two days before the death of my René, Pascal was released from the hospital. I shut myself up in our darkened tomb of a room so as not to see him and his mother leave. I cried and cried, without taking my eyes off the body of my child, now shaking with the convulsions of approaching death.

I refused to allow, refused to understand, refused to accept the death of my son.

There was an ironic twist to this tragedy of inhuman treatment. A bulletin, which usually was reserved for whites only, was issued for him:

The Mayor-Administrator of Brazzaville regrets to announce the death of the child, René Greutz, the son of a European. The funeral will be held at five in the afternoon.

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## 9

# A Funeral and a Marriage

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No one forced Charles to marry me. It happened because things had evolved in our lives to the point that it seemed the appropriate thing to do. I don't say that we were swimming in happiness, but we had arrived at a point of tolerance between us where life together was bearable. In fact, it seemed inevitable.

Charles had not changed at all in accepting Africans, or my mother. Not in the least, never. And that produced one of the cruelest memories of all: when René was ill and dying, my mother, who loved him so much, could not see him except by sneaking in, occasionally, for a short glimpse. It was pitiful.

The night René died, Joséphine was there, waiting furtively, all those long hours, in the hall. When it was over, Charles refused to let her see the body. Refused! After that long vigil through the child's last agony, she could not see her little grandson at peace. She could not give him her last expressions of love.

"She can't go in," Charles said. "I don't want her to touch my son. She'll rot his flesh."

I was speechless. I could do nothing. I was totally exhausted from my own calvary, night after night, at René's bedside. When Charles said this unforgivable thing, I wanted to claw his face to ribbons. I went to my mother and we fell into each other's arms. There was nothing we could do. Together we wept. She had to say goodbye like that. There were friends present who saw this happen, white people. They said, "How cruel this man is ... to say such a thing."

Again, at the interment, I was like a robot, unable to react for my mother. She was not allowed to see René in his little coffin of zinc. And she had to follow at the very end of the funeral cortège. Charles did not want her to be seen, made up in the mourning tradition of her people, with daubs of white paint on her face.

Africans have many beautiful and valuable customs surrounding the loss of their loved ones. Like the Egyptians who provided oil, perfume, and money for the long road of the dead, African people also give what help they can for the crossing of the great abyss. A part of this ritual is for the bereaved to paint their faces—a way of accompanying the soul of the dead as it departs to find its ancestors.

This "*maquillage*" is not a capricious or individual choice. In our lore, each color and line is symbolic and has its own meaning. *Maquillage* is permitted only to those who are closely related to the one who has passed. The markings are determined by the relationship with the dead, and his age. A child, for instance, who has done nothing bad in his life, would not need as much help as an older person, who has regrets. The *maquillage* of a widow is different from that of a mother or sister. These traditions deserve the greatest respect. They are not at all naive and have played an important role in keeping the African people sane and open to the joy of life. It is in

proportion to the loss of such unifying rituals that I have seen, unfortunately, a decline in the wholesomeness of the African personality.

In Europe, a widow is regarded as “dignified” if she does not weep before the body of her loved one at the funeral. That is the European idea of *dignity*. But it has nothing to do with the African concept of life. We believe that we have bodies—eyes, mouths, lungs, hearts, arms, and feet—to *express* life. It is through our bodies that we manifest our life, which to us is our feelings.

When someone dies in our country, Africa, our feelings are strong and we believe they should be exteriorized. We say we help our grief to leave our body by using our body to help it leave. We may even dance to release our pain and grief, for when we are in pain, that pain is not only in our minds but in the farthest cells of our bodies.

I understand that now Europeans say, “Go ahead and cry,” or “If you are angry, show it!”—that this is recognized as a healthy catharsis. We Africans were right, after all, in exteriorizing our feelings.

René’s burial was as Charles wished it. My mother was there, outside the cemetery, with her white points painted in the middle of her forehead, and on the side. She had to wait until dusk to approach the tomb. Then, in the dark, she dug a little hole in which to place a small package of the things she wanted René to have for his long journey. Because of Charles Greutz’s cruel interdiction she could not publicly offer her grandson the comfort of her African rites.

The question is certainly going to be asked: “Why, after all these humiliations, would I stay with this man?” I accept this question, for it is certainly a natural one. My answer is this. I could not bear the thought of my daughter suffering the same fate as my son. I had to look further than the immediate drama through which we had passed. The important thing

was to give Rita a good beginning, and Charles Greutz seemed to be the key. Our destinies, I felt, were inextricably linked. He had treated my mother unpardonably, it was true. That was irreparable. He had a child who had died, but we had another who was living. Over the cadaver of my little son, I had again suffered the shame of my race from my husband. But it did not seem as important to fight for my mother as to fight for my daughter.

It seemed clear to me that I should take Rita away from colonialism, away from Africa, that tomb for children without medicine. I had suffered colonial scorn too much not to know how far that scorn would go: I had seen its limits in the wasted corpse of my son.

It was my father who suggested that I take Rita to Europe as soon as possible. Charles agreed with this idea, and further agreed that we should be married before I left.

So in a sense, the death of our son was one of the elements that provoked our marriage. It was a suffering that we had shared, as it had been a joy we had shared when René was born. And there were other things. Before Charles went to South Africa, he was never really kind to me. When he came back, he seemed to have matured. It was as if he had learned a lesson. He saw me as the woman who had given him a son, his first son, and he showed a new respect for my person.

My marriage to Charles Greutz was conditioned by all these things. It was not a marriage of love—I have never claimed that it was. It was a marriage of reason. I saw no other chance for my daughter's future, except that I marry Charles and take her to Europe to stay with his family, which I could not do if we were not married.

On August 14, 1946, we were married in a civil ceremony at the city hall, and then in a religious one at the cathedral. For the occasion I made myself a white two-piece dress. I wore a big, soft-brimmed, organdy garden

hat with a ribbon, and carried a bouquet of tiny, pale-pink roses. Charles was in a dark-grey suit. As witnesses we had two or three friends, and my father. Again, my little mother could not be there.

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# 10

## Europe and My Great Love

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It was decided that Rita and I should leave by boat for France. The war had ended, and Charles's family in Alsace wrote that they would be delighted to receive us. Before leaving Africa, however, I had work to do.

The death of my son politicized me as nothing else could. In the revolt that overwhelmed me after the first pain had passed, in the wonder and bitterness of my grief, I came to integrate in an entirely new way the meaning of the colonialists' terms in Africa.

I understood at last that it was no longer a matter of my own maligned fate but a system of evil whose tentacles reached into every phase of African life. I experienced this evil in the grief particular to a female—in an orphanage for girls, as a repudiated mistress, and most of all, as the mother of a dying child. For men, there were other kinds of torment and degradation.

The difference between my new attitude and the old one was a matter of clarity of vision. I had suffered intensely for the blacks who were whipped with the *chicotte*, and I had been outraged by the forced marriages of my friends. These injustices I had related to my own. Still, it had all been a little

removed from the understanding that is at the source of one's energy and will. When I lost my bronzed little boy, I saw finally the pattern connecting my own pain with that of my countrymen, and knew that I must act.

I began a campaign against the infamous quinine-card law. For help, I turned to the women who had been my companions at the orphanage, and who were now, most of them, mothers of children, like myself. Unfortunately, they had been so trained in submissiveness and apathy that not one of them responded. They had become so inured to their plight they could not imagine anything better.

I was alone, except for my father. He, perhaps in a surge of conscience over his part in the inhuman system, fought gallantly with me. Together we prevailed, winning a modification in the quinine law.

I should make clear that not all the Europeans involved in the colonial system were to be detested. There were some who cared about human values, who were good people. But the colonial system was not designed to recognize human values. It was created to ravage the country, to make beasts of burden of its people. This was the whole purpose of colonialism, to keep the blacks in submissive service to the whites. But even in that epoch there were whites who had the courage to denounce the colonial system. They were only a very small part of the whole. Still, it is necessary to remember, and to distinguish between them and the others. There were some, even in the French administration, who applied the yoke of colonialism in moderation; we could see in their eyes a kind of sympathy for us, as if asking pardon for what they inflicted on us. That is true. But usually there was an ulterior motive if a white person showed us any decency. Even with "Papa" Balme, I was aware that there were other possibilities and considerations involved—after all, he was a man. But that is normal, that is human. Everything is a matter of perspective, and above

all what is important is the *right* to defend oneself. That is the basis of all other rights. Usually, we *métisses* were not given that right. If, when we speak of colonialism, we speak of the things that were cruel, it is because it was they that marked us. You cannot tell a child to forget all it has suffered in an unhappy childhood by saying, “You are big now, that is past. Let us be friends.” One does not forget. We who have been colonized can never forget.

In the fall of 1946, I sailed with my daughter from the port of Matadi to Marseilles. The French of France proved an extraordinary revelation to me. The people I met were kind, generous, and apparently not racist. I was overwhelmed. After all the cruelties I had suffered at the hands of the French in Africa, culminating in the death of my beloved son, to find the people of France so different astonished me. Africa must somehow corrupt whites, I decided. How else to explain the mentality of most of the colonials I had known: narrow-minded, mediocre, coarse, and scornful? A kind of malediction must descend on white people when they came to our land, I decided, blinding them to knowing us as human beings.

I never knew people more excellent than the family of Charles Greutz. They took me in, heart and soul. They had never seen people of color before, and they knew that my little daughter was not their son’s child. But they made us their own.

Although they had never traveled such a long distance before, Monsieur and Madame Greutz came all the way from their little town of Guebwiller in Alsace to Marseilles in order to welcome us. For me, a stranger on a new continent in a new climate, this was a great kindness.

When my mother-in-law learned that I had been raised by nuns, she thought that the thing to do to please me was to visit all the churches in Marseilles. God knows how many churches there are in Marseilles, and it

was necessary to pray in every one of them. But things improved immensely when we left Marseilles, and, traveling by train, arrived in the town of their home.

The whole Greutz family came to see me. There was a great deal of curiosity about this woman of color who was Charles's bride. None of them had ever seen a woman of color before, and now they had one in their family! Relatives who lived in the farthest corners of the country arrived to hug me, and little Rita, whom they adored.

Immediately the women set to work knitting clothes for her so she would not take cold. I don't know how many socks to wear to bed they knitted for us. Since the end of the war there was no wool to be bought anywhere, none whatsoever with which to do this knitting. So the women unraveled their old shawls, to make things for us. They deprived themselves of useful things, to be good to us. I was deeply touched. My mother-in-law managed to buy a pair of rabbits and made house-boots of the pelts for me. That was the winter of 1946, a terrible winter, still remembered in France today, one of the most severe in history. There was no coal for heating, and the houses were icy. Milk froze on the kitchen table. *Clochards* died in the streets. But the Greutz family did everything they could to keep us warm.

My mother-in-law was a small, stout, robust woman with a great deal of character. Work was her life. She could not stay still for five minutes; she had to get up and do something, that was her way.

My father-in-law was a good-natured man, young and lively in his manner. He still glanced at pretty girls out of the corners of his eyes. His wife teased him about this. "Look at you! Still watching the girls go by, at your age!" This was only a family joke—Madame Greutz was not really worried.

I stayed with these good people for two years. Charles came to visit several times during this period, and each time the two of us went to Paris for a fling. He had plenty of money then, and could afford to buy me beautiful dresses and extravagantly priced gloves and shoes. As we strolled in the city's fine parks or on the Champs-Élysées, I had the satisfaction of feeling as well dressed as anyone.

In 1948, homesick for Africa, I returned, leaving Rita with the Greutz family. She was to go to school in Alsace for the next four years, giving much happiness to her grandparents, who truly loved her.

Back in Bangui I found Charles involved with another woman, which was hardly astonishing. The real surprise was that I was to meet, in our own house, the man who was to become my second husband. The hotels were full and there was plenty of room in the big new villa that Charles had built in town, so we could leave the coffee plantation. Charles had given a visiting engineer for the French Bureau of Mines, André Blouin, a room in our home, a courtesy often extended among colonials. It was there and then that the great romance of my life began.

One does not choose love: one is taken by love; one is overwhelmed by it. Love is an uninvited guest, pervading the soul. In 1948, for the first time, I fell deeply in love. I did not fall in love with a white man. I fell in love with André Blouin, who was a white man.

All my life I had been trapped by racism. Why should my heart turn now toward that which had so often made me suffer? Was this to be another twist, even more cruel, more cunning, to the hateful contradictions in which my life had been conceived?

If we had met elsewhere, I might have deceived André about my background and my family. But it was there, amid all the evidence of my origins, that we met. Around us, everywhere, were the manifestations of this

white society, with its arrogant claims, and these black people, with their constant penance for the color of their skin.

The position of the person of mixed blood of those years is not to be compared with what one finds today. Now, everywhere, there are thousands of lighter skins, a comfortable, many-toned layer between the black and white. At that time, there were only rare individuals, highly visible, even odd; the strange detritus of two societies that had surreptitiously touched, and in that touching left a reminder of forbidden greed.

Every detail concerning the one we love is a source of interest and pride. I can recite André's life as if it were my own. A Breton, he was born in Avranches in 1912, and studied at Rennes. In 1933 he received his degree from the École Polytechnique in Paris. During the war he was a captain in the artillery, serving in Lebanon, Syria, and Morocco. With the occupation army he went to Italy, France, Germany, and Austria. After his demobilization in October of 1946, he was sent a second time to Morocco where he received the Croix de Guerre with two citations. In 1947, a civilian again, he went to the Ivory Coast as chief of a mission prospecting for diamonds. A year later he was sent to Bangui.

It was marriage with this white man, I am sure, that gave me the courage to fight the colonialist system. When I see how my friends who married colored men remained stuck in their humiliating resignation, I do not believe that I could have moved forward as I did, unaided.

I was never courted or asked to marry by a black man, I should explain. If I had fallen in love with such a man, of course I would have married him. But my ways were not those that would attract an ordinary black, who was accustomed to expect a docile, long-suffering wife. One who, having borne much from the whites, would accept in her home further injustice from her

black husband. My fierce independence undoubtedly set me apart. I was not cast in the usual mold. This is not something I regret.

I don't blame black men for their ways. They were taught what they were taught, and this was, often, to treat their wives the way the whites treated them. This seemed normal in a hierarchy of power rather than a relation of feelings. To show little respect for their wives was the only way that they could assert, in their homes at least, that they were men. The wife of the black man, then, suffered the double injustice of her husband's authority as well as the white's scorn. This is not to say that black men were not deeply attached to their wives, with whom they had life-long, deep bonds. But often these attachments were expressed in a manner that I was unable to accept.

Not for me was the roving eye of the man who lived in polygamy. Nor could I give myself in a life of love and service from the bargained position of a dowry, my mind, body, and person marked in the rude terms of material possessions. Dear as was my mother and the customs of her brave people in their simple village near the river, I was my father's daughter in my uncompromising pride; I wanted to be won for myself alone, on my own terms.

Somehow, André Blouin had escaped the colonialist mentality. This good-humored, pipe-smoking man was to give me the equilibrium I needed before I could begin my real political life. I found in him a husband on whom I could lean, a generous, understanding man who put human considerations before his own interests and who was willing to let me develop in the work to which I was drawn. He did not assume that my role as wife should take precedence over my duties to my people as an African woman.

But those choices were still years away.

One of the things I most appreciated in André Blouin was his kindness to my mother. After the way Charles Greutz had treated her, I was profoundly grateful, deeply touched. When I introduced André to her, he said, “How do you do!” and shook her hand. My mother was overcome. For a white man, and a high-ranking engineer at that, to shake a black’s hand! It was almost unheard of.

Within a few months my feelings for André Blouin, and his for me, had become clear. André suggested to Charles that he obtain a divorce so we could be married. Charles’s reaction to that was to propose a duel. Our situation was difficult. But I was madly, madly in love with this distinguished man who was to prove to be the great good fortune of my existence.

Eventually, Charles and I were divorced. He was well on his way to consolidating a handsome fortune. I left without a backward glance the enterprises on which I had worked so long and hard, to follow my heart with the tall, bespectacled Polytechnician, who also needed a divorce before we could be married. Eventually it was arranged. In the meantime, André Blouin’s work for the French Bureau of Overseas Mines took him to Siguiiri, Guinea, and I went with him. We were to remain there seven extraordinary years.



# 11

## Siguiri, Land of Gold and Thirst

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In Bangui, André Blouin had been director of the diamond-mining operations of his company. In Siguiri, he was in charge of the French government's research into methods of mining gold. Siguiri is a feverish place. Located near Guinea's border with Mali, it is known as "the land of gold and thirst." The climate is scorching, dry. Each year, in the hope of making a fortune, thousands of gold prospectors poured into the area from all the corners of French West Africa. During the dry season, from March to June, when the heat was greatest and the thermometer often registered forty degrees centigrade in the shade, as many as 50,000 souls converged there in a mad dream of finding gold. Whole villages of straw were built in days, and the pitiless quest was on.

Feverishly, deep pits were dug in the alluvial deposits; the precious auriferous dirt was pulled up, sometimes to fifteen meters, by hand, in baskets for the women to wash in nearby streams and pools. It was a desperate business. Gold, which has the taste of blood, exacted terrible payments. Weak with hunger, avid for wealth, the wretches dug, starved, hoped. Hope brings life. But it can also kill. Only rare luck enriched the

miner who came upon a fabulous nugget or a streak. For the rest, the mirage of a fortune produced destitute people with hollow bellies.

Gold deprives people of their reason. For nine months of the year, the peasants cultivated their crops of rice, millet, and corn. These they traded to the shopkeepers for cloth and status gimcracks such as jewelry and European drinks. Then, during the dry season, when they began to starve as they dug for gold, they bought back their own products at high prices. Misery was everywhere. But want and greed do not release their hold easily. Each year the scene was repeated. The haunting names of Africa's legendary far-west villages remain: Kouremale, Kintinian, Fatoya, Doubaya, and Kofilate.

André Blouin's job was to modernize the old-fashioned placer methods of washing for gold. This he did, enabling commercial operations to take place all year round. The blacks as well as the whites liked this easy-going man. Because of his patience and integrity, his name was pronounced with great respect in Upper Guinea.

The population of Siguiiri was composed of about thirty Europeans, a few Lebanese shopkeepers who formed a group apart, and the blacks. The black people were intensely political and furiously divided among themselves. Like the burning sun, political passions raged. There was a constant fever of excitement, and many sensational political trials. The whole country of Guinea, in fact, was in the midst of a political tempest, which was spreading through Africa.

General de Gaulle was a man of vision in international affairs. Three times during France's hour of need, Africa had come to her aid. In acknowledgment of these debts, and also because he was a man of history who recognized the inevitable when it was stepping on his toes, de Gaulle had promised the colonies their freedom. He announced that a referendum

would be held. The people of each colony would be given the option of deciding whether or not their state, when it became independent, would remain “in the community.” That is, within the economic, diplomatic, and military orbit of France.

The Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA), a political group formed to arouse and prepare the people of all the French colonies for independence, was becoming a major force. While it could not be banned, it was intensely feared by the French administration, and, on one excuse or another, members of the RDA were being thrown into prison by the dozen every day. In Guinea their leader was Sékou Touré, and he was campaigning to have Guinea cut free, to have no ties with France at all, after independence. This, of course, infuriated the French, both in Guinea and in the metropole.

I had never heard anyone speak for the rights of Africans as he did. In Ubangui, Africans were just beginning to dare to go into a café. In Guinea I found a completely different attitude. There were blacks who dared to hold the gaze of a white. To keep one’s eyes upon a white for ten seconds in my country would have been considered a terrible insolence. Here it was considered a form of freedom.

I arrived in Siguiri on the arm of Monsieur Blouin, and was accepted everywhere as his wife. I was not yet married to him but I was beautiful and happy. The people in the French administration received us without hesitation, and we passed agreeable evenings with them. I enjoyed my new status; it made a coward of me.

The conversation of these officials and their wives, I found, inevitably turned to one topic, the RDA. Each of them had a horror story to tell of how their boy or chauffeur had been found to belong to the party and had been arrested. I listened to this talk with a mindfulness that they did not suspect.

Justice must be on the side of these Africans, I told myself; they would not submit to such persecution for nothing. I saw this movement as Africa arising. Still, I did nothing. I dabbled in charity events, enjoying life as Madame Blouin.

Our home, “The Hermitage,” was four kilometers from town, high on a lonely bluff above a majestic river, the great Niger. The house had been built by a Siguiri businessman as a weekend retreat. It was a simple structure of wood and *banco*, a mixture of clay and cement. To enlarge our living quarters I added a large, circular straw hut, a *paillote*, which served as our bedroom and study. Man began life in caverns and tents and straw huts, those were the beginnings. Real life is there. In such simplicity is the real condition of life. I helped in the construction of our straw hut with my own hands, and I rejoiced in living there. Each day I sprinkled water on the beaten earth of the floor, to make it cool. Never was I more in my element. I felt the soul of my people, the soul of my ancestors under that straw roof. In such a reality one finds a living presence.

I was disappointed when I returned to my old quarter in Poto-Poto not long ago and found that the straw huts that were once so common, had disappeared. The people say that because the town has been extended straw cannot be found in the fields a few hundred meters outside, as before. But that is only an excuse. It is because the people want to be chic and modern that they have a house with a roof of metal. But this is a serious mistake in Africa, where the roof is low and not insulated. The strong sun cooks one inside—it’s lethal! Straw is infinitely cooler. Of course, one must take care of straw and change it every two years, because with the humidity it rots. But there is nothing better than a well-maintained *paillote*. I don’t know why our people abandon their traditions, which are so healthful and

reasonable, to follow the ways of the whites; to imitate, badly, a style that is not useful to them at all.

There was a new equilibrium to my life in the happiness I found beside André Blouin. And yet ... despite my greedy relish of this undreamed-of fortune, I was often seized by moods of sadness. It was as if I could not be truly happy if the rest of the world were not happy with me. That was the way I interpreted it, when a sense of *tristesse*, almost nostalgic, brought me to unexplained tears. I began to write poetry. During the hot afternoons, at my table in the *pailote*, I let my feelings spill forth about the death of René, about the madness of the gold miners of Siguri, about my desolation as a child of mixed blood. I wrote of love: “Word born in a rose ... The pronouns have always made music of this verb, ‘to love.’”

I wrote a poem blessing my mother. I wrote ardently of the forest of my childhood, of the *tam-tam*, of the black woman, of a dawn after a night of love. I wrote of my sadness

O *Tristesse!* O *Noblesse!*  
Your presence is dear to my heart.  
Your serenity gentles me.  
Brings me to calm and reflection  
And my soul loves to shelter you.  
You raise me to the purity of your heights.  
God is in you, O sadness;  
It is when you are in me  
That I can love most.

Also, at my table, I wrote prosaic letters to my father in Bangui. Only once, in all our relations, did I reproach him for abandoning me as a child

and delivering me to the nuns. Only once did all the grief and fury, pent up in me for years, break out in words of accusation. But when they came, they were cruel.

It was in 1950, in France. My father had gone to Paris for medical treatment. I went there to be with him. The funds I was expecting from André were slow in arriving, so I asked my father for 15,000 francs to pay my hotel bill. He refused to advance me the money. At this I became so furious that I said things that I had never said before. I accused him of letting me grow up in ignorance, of abandoning me to strangers, and of giving me a childhood of such misery that I suffered still.

“I should have told you a long time ago,” I raged, “about how I felt. About all my confusion and pain. About how you ruined my life.”

He was so bent over then, so old and ruined himself. “I always guessed that you had a bit of hatred in your heart for me,” he said, shaking his head.

Beyond myself, I answered, “Not just a little.”

He looked at me a long time, but said nothing, absolutely nothing. What was there to say? He had no one else whom he really cared for, in France. I was the only person he had.

I had never thought of throwing those things in his face. I hadn't dreamed that I would make such a scene. It had simply escaped me. Here he was, paralyzed, and I was there to be near him, and he thought I was asking too much. He had done a lot for his country, it was true. But it was for his country that he had made sacrifices, not for me.

We made up, and when I left for Sigüiri we parted with our usual embrace. But I was never to see my father again. We continued to correspond. He seemed in reasonably good health, considering his

condition. Three months later, shortly after writing us a long letter, he died, alone, on a train between Toulon and Marseilles.

Perhaps I will never be fully able to integrate the meaning of Pierre Gerbillat in my life. But once in a while I find myself saying something or doing something in which I recognize myself as Gerbillat's daughter. And then, perhaps, I move a little closer to the truth.

Toward the end of 1952, André and I went to Paris. There, in the city hall of the 17th Arrondissement, on November 19, we were wed. It was a magical day when, wondrously out of season, it snowed. Amid the falling white flakes, we felt as if we were living a fairy tale. It was a gay wedding, a marriage of love.

André and I lived seven years in Siguri. There, on that barren, rocky hill that plunged down to the silvery, elegant Niger, some of the happiest days a human could live were spent. It was under the frail and rustic roof of my *pailote* that I gave birth to two children, Patrick and Eve.

When Patrick was born, he was a huge baby—4 kilos 900 grams. My God, how marvelous it is to make children out of one's love!

My husband, who had been beside me throughout the delivery, disappeared. I was badly torn; the doctor was busy with me when suddenly someone asked, "Where is Monsieur Blouin?" And then, "And where is the baby?"

My husband had seized the child in its cloth, just as it was—the clamps were still attached to the umbilical cord—and plunged out of doors. Like a madman he was striding in the wind around The Hermitage. A father! Father of a new boy!

Eve was a big baby too—4 kilos 700 grams. After each birth, swarms of friends came to our home the next day to celebrate with dances. Professionals, in beautiful costumes laden with *perles*, were among them. Leaping and chanting, in spontaneous lines and circles they danced to the tam-tam's rhythms for hours on end, to welcome the new children. And my heart danced with them.

My days were the calm ones of mother-mistress-wife. There were servants to help me with the little ones. We had no major cares. I had got Rita back from the Greutz family, with whom she had lived in Alsace for six years. Rita was ten then. It was a terrible, heart-breaking wrench for both her and her adopted grandparents. Rita's life changed radically as she adjusted to Africa again, with a new father, then a baby brother, and two years later, a new sister.

I pondered life, making my own distractions. In my *pailote*, I wrote my poems and published them. Some were read on the radio and television in Paris; one of them took a prize. I observed the feverish political activity in Siguiiri as the RDA grew stronger.

At first, I understood nothing of the principles involved in the work of this party. I only knew that more and more people were being sent to prison every day. Collections were taken up to pay off the judges. I had always had feelings about the fact that my husband was white, and feared that any efforts to help my people might harm him. Now, secretly, I began giving money to help pay off the judges. It was in this way that I began my work with the RDA. The news soon got out.

Since almost no entertainment was available in our small town, I decided to put on a little show for Christmas of 1956, with the help of several friends of mixed blood. The proceeds would go to a charity for abandoned children. At that moment, the municipal campaign, which was



preliminary to the one for the legislature, was in full swing, and the atmosphere was strained. Although the presentation that I was staging was not political, the European community, which had found out about my support of the RDA, chose to believe that it was.

A European man wrote obscenities on the bulletin announcing the program of the festivities. We found out who did it and André demanded that the man abstain from coming to the event, in order to avoid a scene. The local administrator then gave us a note signed by all the Europeans in the community, including the missionaries, saying that, by common accord, they had decided not to be present at the show. Our audience was of Africans only; the evening was a success. After covering our expenses, I sent a modest money order of 22,000 francs to the head of the Home for Abandoned Children in Dakar.

Fate gave me fourteen years in an orphanage for girls of mixed parentage, from which all my subsequent experiences seemed to derive. Although I did not know it, my fate was swerving in a new direction now.

# 12

## Little Joséphine, My Own Maman

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My mother detested all my attempts to improve the lot of my people. Even in Bangui, when I fought for a change in the quinine law, she complained.

“What you are doing will get you into serious trouble,” she said bitterly. “This hard-headedness, this rebellion—it’s not right. It will certainly turn out badly.” Then she would begin to weep. “You’ll be far from me when I die. Oh, why did I have such a daughter! I know you won’t be there to bury me.”

“Oh, come now, Maman!” I would try to comfort her. “Wherever you are, you have only to send for me. Now we have airplanes ...”

I wanted my mother to visit us when we were in Sigüiri. Patrick was about two years old when I sent her a plane ticket for the trip. That visit produced a number of hilarious incidents involving my little mother, Joséphine.

First of all, when she found out how much the plane ticket cost, she was scandalized. She thought it was sheer thievery; for the same amount of money, she said, she could buy a big store and set up a fine business.

Second, she was terrified of flying, and she did not want to take the plane, which she called a “bird,” at all.

She had been aloft for an hour or so when a steward frightened her by pounding on a cupboard near where she sat. Apparently the door was stuck, and he needed to open it for some supplies. When she heard his blows, she jumped up and began shouting, “This man wants to kill me. I know it. He’s going to kill us all. For a long time you people have been trying to kill my daughter, and now you’re after me. My daughter paid a lot of money for my ticket and now you’re trying to bring this bird down ...”

The steward, a European, said, “Pardon me, Madame, but ...”

Scornfully, she dismissed him. “Don’t you ‘Pardon me, Madame.’ You may be a white, but you’re here to serve us. That means you’re a boy. It’s the boss I want to talk to. I want my money back right now. I refuse to go along with this any further.”

She made an excruciating scene. Soon the whole crew of the plane was gathered around, trying to soothe her, to reassure her. “No, Madame, he’s not trying to kill you personally, he was only ...”

Clearly, she was terrified, and indignant too. But seeing the impression she was making, she played it to the hilt.

“Here’s where I get off,” she kept telling them. “I’m leaving now.”

They were flying along the coast—the Atlantic was beneath them.

“We can’t stop here, Madame. It’s the ocean, look.”

“No, no. I don’t care to look.”

“But Madame, you must look, to understand. There’s only water.”

“Only water?” At that she went off, worse than ever. “Then what *shall* we do? Help!”

Soon they would stop in Dahomey, they promised her. Dahomey had a certain reality for her, as she had lived there with her husband, Joseph Mialou, for a year. This news reassured her somewhat. At Cotonou, once inside the airport, she did not want to board the plane again when it came time to leave. Again, the crew gathered around, pleading, cajoling her. On learning that the giant shrimps that are the specialty of Dahomey were her passion, they put in a special order for them—they were not on the menu—at the restaurant.

“Trying to bribe me, are you?” she snorted when the grilled shrimps were brought. “I see what you’re doing. You can’t corrupt me!” She refused to eat those fabulous shrimps. Refused.

For nearly an hour the flight personnel worked on her. Finally, she was persuaded that her daughter, who was waiting to meet her at the airport in Bamako, would be disappointed if she did not arrive. Reluctantly, at last, she boarded the plane. It was the captain of the plane who described the event when he delivered her to us at Bamako. Very politely, he suggested that henceforth my little mother should take a boat or a train—anything but a plane.

Our arrival at our home in Siguiri was another story. I saw that my mother was terribly dissatisfied—disdainful even. For one thing, the road from Bamako to Siguiri of several hundred kilometers was little more than a trail. It was full of holes and seemed to go on forever. For Joséphine, the experience of being in this new, dry country was very fatiguing. My life was so full of happiness then, I was never tired, but she would hardly speak to me.

When we reached our home, The Hermitage, overlooking the majestic Niger, and she saw my straw hut, she said, “What’s that?”

“Isn’t it beautiful?” I said. “I myself had it constructed.”

“Beautiful? What’s beautiful about it? That’s a house for blacks, not for a white man.”

“No, Maman. It’s very hot here in Guinea and the house is perfect for us. Don’t you see how cool it is inside?”

She looked around at the dry, rocky wilderness.

“Why are you stuck out in this hideous desolation? Where are the people?”

“Maman, we go into town in our Jeep every morning ...”

“You left that other man, back there in Bangui, to come and live in a place like this? My daughter, what is the matter with you? He may not have been polite with me, that other one, but at least he kept you in a place that was a palace compared to this. How could you leave that fine house you built, and that big business? Why, today he is *rich*, and you’re living in this misery.”

Next to the straw hut was the second structure, of *banco* and wood. In Africa, the evening after the first rain of the rainy season, the termites make their nuptial flight. At sunset they pour out of their holes by the millions. This is an event for which everyone waits with joy in an African village. The women and girls get out all their baskets, buckets, and basins to catch the termites, after their wings fall. If a bucket with water is put under a light, in five minutes there are more termites in the bucket than water. The insects are toasted on a hot metal grill. In a few minutes they are cooked; no oil is needed, for each one is a little ball of grease. They are delicious. Sometimes women pound the cooked termites into a powder or paste that is mixed with other dishes, like gumbo, but mostly we ate them at once, like roasted peanuts.

When my mother finished her hot bath after the trip, it was early evening. Just then the nuptial flight of the termites began. They had perforated many holes in the beams of our house and they came pouring out of these holes by the millions. The sky was blackened with them. It was beautiful, marvelous to see. Little Patrick was enchanted. He was running about, shouting. My mother snatched him up as if to protect him from the horror. "Such things are not for him," she said, as if he should not be contaminated with such filth of the brush.

At the same time that the termites fly, dozens of big scorpions, ten or fifteen centimeters long, emerge from their holes among the rocks. They are black and drag themselves with a scraping noise, like a crab. My mother wasn't thrilled to see them, either.

She looked at me with disdain. "You, the daughter of Gerbillat! I can't believe it."

I was spellbound, watching the soaring, humming flight.

"Maman, can't you see how *beautiful* it is?"

How could one not love those termites? One did not think of what they destroyed as one watched their flight ... this fabulous coupling in the air, one night of love, before they lost their wings ... their wings falling to one side, their bodies to another, linked until death in love. It was extraordinary.

I tried to make my mother see the beauty of the act, this exaltation of love. But all she could think of was that a white man had dared to install her daughter in a house full of termites. It was an insult.

Worse yet, I seemed happy.

"Certainly, you have come under the spell of a fetisher," she pronounced. "Nothing else could explain it."

My little mother, Joséphine, stayed with us for a year. In spite of all my husband did for her, she never really forgave André Blouin for the way he treated her daughter. She could not accept that the man I had chosen dared to install his loved one so far from town, out there in that godforsaken place, under a straw roof. She simply could not stand it.

“The whites have nice cars, now,” she said scornfully. “And look at you!”

“I have my Jeep, Maman. It suits me fine.”

“A jeep, my daughter, is for a soldier in the army. It is not for you, or for a white man who is an engineer.”

“But Maman, the roads are very bad, we go many places where a car couldn’t go. We go hunting in the desert.”

She never could understand what possessed me to settle for so little.

“When I go home, I’ll never tell the family that you are living in a straw hut. Not for anything. They would laugh at me. Why, my sisters have married white men who, even if they are Portuguese, live in decent houses. And you say *you* constructed that grass hut?”

“Yes.”

“And before it was put up, where did you sleep?”

“There, in the courtyard.”

“Better and better! I will certainly see my fetishist when I go home. You are not in your right mind.”

Often I laughed at her obsession with these childish, materialistic details. But sometimes I found it sordid—it hurt me, and I cried. She would never be a real, adult woman, I thought, as long as she was stuck in these foolish notions. She herself had built and lived in a straw hut with her Gerbillat. But, for her, he was the great Gerbillat, the elephant hunter and

entrepreneur, the man who owned boats, made teams of black men scurry around like ants, and sent trucks roaring into the countryside: *her* white. He was a real governor, and this was what she wanted for me.

My mother's room was next to ours. One day, as my husband came out of our room, he passed through hers. The floor was of cement over wooden planks. Because termites had devoured the planking beneath, his weight broke through the thin layer of cement and his foot went through, up to his knee. He struggled awkwardly to extricate himself. When he finally withdrew his leg, it was encrusted with thousands of white termites. My mother was there, at ease on her bed. Her disdain was royal—at the sight she did not move.

When the time came for her departure, I said, "Maman, since you are afraid of flying in an airplane, we will put you on the train to Conakry and then you will take the boat to Brazzaville. We will arrange for you to have a nice cabin for yourself."

"What!" she said, imperiously. "Never in your life! Everyone would laugh at me. They saw me leave by airplane. By airplane I'll go back."

"Oh, now, Maman! After all the problems you had on the airplane, coming here!"

"No, no. They have to see me arrive by airplane."

My husband took his pipe out of his mouth and rolled his eyes. "Honestly, Andrée, your mother ..."

So we worked it out this way. At Kankan we put her on the train for Conakry, where she took the boat, with a cabin of her own, to Douala. There, she boarded a plane to Bangui. Thus family and friends would see her arrive properly. In fact, she gave me a list of people to write to and



advise of her arrival, so that they could go to the airport and watch for her themselves, as she stepped off the plane. It was a real *pièce de théâtre*.

But even at Kankan she provided us with one last memorable scene. On the platform at the train station, my husband struck up an acquaintance with another engineer. His wife appeared, and it was none other than Henriette. We had just put Joséphine on the train. From her place at the window, she recognized Henriette. Furious, she at once began to shout.

“I know you, you horrible white woman. You’re the one who took my white man from me. Don’t think you’re going to get away with it!”

The train began to move.

“I’ll fix you, just let me get my hands on you, you miserable ...”

As the train bore her away, Joséphine was still vociferating out the window at the woman who had taken her white man thirty-seven years earlier.

That was my little mother. I guard those memories, like treasures, deep within me. From her point of view, I totally ruined my life. First of all, I worked, as no one should be permitted to do, sewing day and night. Then I refused the “governors” I could have had, especially the one with the chauffeur and the big bottle of lavender toilet water—I heard about him for years. And finally, supreme injury, I lived with this character in a house of straw and termites, far from town.

The deepest differences between us, never really discussed, were political. “You’re fighting like a man,” she complained. “Why? Why do you fight for those black people? You’re the daughter of a white man. Those things don’t concern you!”

This dreadful naiveté exasperated me. And she was not the only one who thought like that. Such base ideas infected blacks everywhere. There was so much to combat, so much educating to do, beginning in our own homes! When she said such things, I felt discouraged. How would we ever succeed?

Although I found her point of view childish, I understand her perfectly when I look at my life through her eyes. I can reproach her for nothing. Really, I find nothing in her to reproach. She wanted the best for me. She had not been prepared for the kind of life I had to confront, the kind of life I chose. My options. She found them stupid. But then, how could she think differently?

Although my mother is dead, for me she is very much alive. I still have dialogues with her that for me are extraordinary. In the morning when I waken, my first voice is for my mother. I call her, I ask her to accompany me in my day.

I have told everyone who has been a part of my life about my mother; I have always made her a part of our relationship. Even if they never met her, they know about her and my feelings for her. They know she still lives with me and in me, and thus, in a relationship with me, they are also in a relationship with her.

I want everyone to love my mother. I want to make her loved. I want everyone to know what kind of a person she was and to know the tenderness I feel for the fragility of a being like her.

I think that this love that I experience in my awareness of her derives from my role as her protector. She was so unequipped for life, so unconscious of many of its realities. They escaped her, as they do many Africans. Whatever was painful, she lived only for a moment. Then she

forgot it, thrust it aside in some riotous new joy, usually associated with her family. She made life live. She was constantly surrounded by troops of children; there was usually a little one on her back. Although she had only one child, in her love of the young and of family, she was a real maman, the embodiment of the true mother spirit.

Each morning I call my fragile, child-hearted little mother, in whom I see Africa itself, and each evening. No one can know what it means to me.

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# Part II

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# 13

## Destiny Calls, My Political Work Begins

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A few people are fortunate enough to know the precise moment when their life takes a powerful new course. I am one of those lucky few. The circumstances of that moment were unusual, in that although I was given a clear message, it did not come from an apparition, or a disembodied voice, as it has for some. My message came from a photograph of Sékou Touré.

I had heard Sékou Touré's name pronounced a thousand times since my arrival in Guinea—with respect by the blacks, with scorn and fury by the Europeans. The French administration was constantly denouncing him as a political brigand. To do away with him was their avowed desire. Secretly I admired this leader with the stirring glance, both cruel and kind, who so nettled the French. I had no idea that he would become the catalyst of my political commitment. This took place at a moment so clear, so overwhelming, that it was like a mystical conversion.

The circumstances could not have been more banal. I was in a humble African shop in Siguiri, buying some everyday necessities for my family. My husband was with me. I selected several things and paid for them. As I

waited for my change, I raised my eyes to the poster photograph that was on the wall behind the shopkeeper. There was nothing unusual about this photograph being there, as it was often on display in these shops. I had seen it thus many times before. But this time, as my eyes rested on the strong face of the man about whom all Guinea was talking, it seemed that his firm gaze held mine. It was not just a photograph at which I stared; a compelling presence was there. A spirit, a light, a recognition—I hardly know what to call it—came over me.

The eyes that looked into mine challenged me. I felt sure I heard words spoken. “Why are you on the other side, in this struggle? Why are you against us?”

Of course, I knew what was meant. I could not pretend not to understand. The words filled me with fear, elation, dismay. My whole way of life was being put into question—this comfortable, middle-class life with my distinguished white husband. It was such a satisfying refutation of what I had been taught at the orphanage: that I was made for nothing better than to be a servant to whites!

“Why are you not with us?”

Words that I had refused to acknowledge in my own heart seemed to be coming from the lips of this dynamic man whose eyes accused me.

“You belong with us,” he seemed to be saying. “You haven’t the right to be on the other side. Are you a coward?”

Burning with shame, I had to answer. I could not bear the accusation. Standing there, staring at the poster, from my trance I answered, “No. No, I’m with you. I’m *with* you!”

I must have sounded idiotic. My husband, who was beside me, looked at me with confusion. “Andrée!” he protested. “What’s the matter with you?”

Thus it happened. In this humble shop, looking at a photograph that I had seen many times before, I experienced this miracle, this transformation. It was at this moment that I made the commitment to stand with my black brothers and sisters that, ever since, has meant more to me than my life.

Today, I feel that I owe everything to Sékou Touré. With him I experienced what was for me a second birth. All the courage and determination that I have shown in my political options were catalyzed by this leader—they came from this great man. Yet it was not a result of meeting him or talking with him. This change in me took place because of a mysterious conversion in a simple African shop.

When people have been abused and deprived of their humanness for too long, it becomes hard for them to imagine that a better life is possible. Even when they realize that they deserve better, they still may lack the means to reach out for it. And once they are resolved that they will be cheated no longer, still they may not know the correct path on which to move forward.

These were some of the problems we were facing in Guinea in 1958, when I threw myself into the RDA's campaign to prepare for the referendum.

To thank Africa for coming to France's aid during the war, de Gaulle had promised the African colonies their freedom. First, however, each colony would have the opportunity to vote on whether or not it wished to be a part of the Communauté, the French community. This meant remaining within the military and diplomatic orbit of France, with mutual agreements for economic, technical, and military aid.

French prestige had suffered enormously with the loss of Indochina, and now, in divesting itself of its African empire, France hoped to keep its former territories economically close and politically reliable in this more

subtle fashion. France fervently desired that each of its eighteen African properties would vote “oui” in the referendum.

Mature African leaders, chief among them Sékou Touré, saw that there was no real political freedom for the people while the economic power remained in the French metropole. To teach the Guinean population to vote “non” in the referendum, the RDA undertook a campaign of delirious ardor. Meetings were held morning, noon, and night, in every town and village, even in the farthest reaches of the scrub and desert. All my combativeness awakened, I hurled myself into this compelling political struggle, proud to be associated, at last, in my people’s cause.

With my colleagues in the RDA, I drove hundreds of kilometers, and mounted platforms—sometimes hardly more than a few rude planks on stools, to denounce the guile in the referendum’s offer.

“The referendum,” I explained, “is really a device to keep the French in control here. Is that what you want? If you want to be masters in your own house, then you must vote ‘non’ in the referendum.” This usually brought salvos of enthusiastic support.

To ensure the safe conduct of the young nation in its new role we also had to win the people’s support for Sékou Touré, the RDA, and the leaders who represented the RDA in that locality.

Not all our candidates, *hélas*, were as invigorated by the campaign as I. Once, after explaining the principles of the RDA, I begged the crowd to support the local candidate who would energetically put those principles into effect. I turned to present this dynamic leader who was ready to take the helm for his people—and found him unprepared, at the moment, even to pronounce his own name. He was peacefully asleep in his chair by the microphone.



The French worked and plotted furiously to undo our campaign. They poured in funds, speakers, and spies. As my companions in the RDA and I pounded the roads of eastern Guinea, we met vexations, provocations, and attempts to intimidate us everywhere. We knew that our French opponents would not give up easily. Still, we were not really prepared for the extreme means they would resort to in order to silence us. Twice during the campaign I was almost killed.

One day in Siguiriri I was at the wheel of my heroic little Deux Chevaux, going to a meeting with three directors of the RDA. As we crossed an intersection, we were astonished to see a truck coming hard out of the street at right angles to us. The truck accelerated at our appearance. It headed straight at us, as fast as it could come. There was nothing I could do in that split second after I sensed the danger, except to jam my foot down on the gas pedal, hard as I could. We shot past as they bore down on us at a ferocious speed. The rear end of my car was hit, creating a terrible impact. For a few moments we skidded crazily out of control. None of us was injured, although we were badly shaken. Then we saw who was in the truck—a group of our political opponents—and the incident became clear to us.

Several days later, crossing the country, I was in a savannah, again at the wheel of my trusty Deux Chevaux, when I saw a brushfire flaming on both sides of the road ahead. I slowed and looked back, thinking to turn around and return. Astonishingly, the road we had just passed a moment earlier was now also engulfed in flames lit by mysterious hands. Aided by a brisk wind and no doubt many gallons of applied combustibles, the fire was racing toward us. I stepped on the accelerator and hurtled through the blinding, smoky flames. Miraculously, we made it. Half a kilometer farther on, when I knew we were safe, I stopped and looked back. The man who was seated beside me in front said nothing. He had fainted. As I watched,

the fire spread over some two kilometers. The seriousness of what I was engaged in now came home to me, as never before. But I confess that this did not in the least deter me from my purpose. On the contrary, I felt an extraordinary sense of being alive in facing such danger. Exhilarated by the justice of our cause, I felt nothing but scorn for those who would stoop to such means. My will to fight for my people, my race, was only reinforced.

Not all of my choices were easy, however, because I was also a mother. My little green-eyed daughter, Eve, was now six months old. I decided to wean her so that instead of being tied to her nursing schedule, I could leave my home for longer periods of time for the campaign.

One day, when I returned to The Hermitage, I found my baby very ill with toxicosis, which was widespread in this arid country where the temperature can be forty degrees centigrade in the shade. At her bedside was our friend, Doctor Abdoulay Touré (no relation to Sékou Touré), who was one of the RDA leaders in Siguiri.

I looked at him in panic, not only for the health of my little one but because I was committed to going to Doubaya, another terrible gold-mining community, the next day, to speak on the referendum.

“What shall I do?” I asked him, trembling at the terrible choice of leaving my little one with the household help, or failing in my duty as a militant.

Seeing the state I was in, Dr. Touré did what he could to help me. “We need you at Doubaya tomorrow,” he said. “You must go, at the head of the convoy, as usual, to explain the referendum to the people. I will take your baby to my house and care for her there.”

The next morning, my heart torn and my thoughts returning constantly to my sick child, I set off in our convoy of three cars and three trucks to that

meeting. This was, for me, a real sacrifice. It measured my feelings for a free Africa, even more than the dangers to our persons that we courted.

Of all the sacrifices that my work in Guinea cost me, only one made me really suffer. When the RDA won the legislative elections, the French made us pay dearly for the defeat of their candidates. They punished me in the cruelest way of all; they obliged me to leave my dear Africa. My husband's position as director of the diamond mines of Kérouané was hopelessly compromised. He was relieved of his job, and was without work for many months. Governor Ramadier, with whom I had crossed swords many times politically, was at the bottom of this. He had sworn vengeance. He had it.

The president of the RDA, Houphouët-Boigny, asked Monsieur Roland Pré, ex-governor of Guinea and acting head of France's Bureau of Overseas Mines, to reinstate my husband. The answer fell like a guillotine: "We will have him back on one condition only—that he remain outside Africa. This is because of the political activities of his wife."

My husband was named engineer for the mining and drilling section of the public works department of Madagascar. The day of exile came. I left Guinea with death in my soul.

Madagascar was to prove a strange experience for me. My family and I were to spend a year in Antananarivo, the capital of this island that lives in the memory of its dead. As our plane approached the island, full of hills and valleys, I found it resplendent, full of promise. I felt sure that I would become profoundly attached to it. But in spite of my hopes and intentions, I found something inaccessible in the Malagasy people. They had a faraway look in their eyes and bitter expressions on their lips. I walked in the silent city, admiring the Malagasy women who with slow and measured steps mounted the many stairs to reach their homes in the high quarters. With my

brown skin, I hoped not to seem a stranger to them. I smiled, trying to mingle with them; but their faces remained cold.

Catching a glimmer of hope in the children, I studied the little ones tenderly. They were clean and beautiful with large black eyes, liquid and troubled. Perched on his mother's back, the Malagasy child was as quiet as she. He seemed to be waiting for something other than that sun that shone every day on his native soil.

In the marketplace there were no shouts or laughter. Wonderingly, I studied the people, noting the care and deliberation in which they spoke and carried out the simplest tasks, as if they had a horror of false or abrupt movements. The deliberation and harmony of each gesture was very beautiful to observe. It was as if they were miming a slow ballet of life. But it was a ballet of sadness and resignation. Melancholy seemed suspended upon them like a cloud. Even Malagasy music was sad, each note like a discreet sob, a plaint to eternity. In my heart I called Madagascar "the Island of Waiting."

Why, I wanted to know, did the Malagasy people not laugh and have faith in the future of their land, as we did in my Africa? I was to learn their dreadful history. In 1947 they had revolted against the yoke of French colonialism. They never recovered from the price of that revolt: the slaughter of 100,000 souls out of a population of six million. There was not a single family who did not mourn someone in that terrible carnage. The sadness of that memory exerted a nearly total effect on the island.

How aptly the Senegalese poet Léopold Senghor put it when he contrasted the ideals of France with its dreadful practices: "That France which speaks so well of the true road, and follows so often tortuous ways."

Although our family life was happy, and the days were pleasant and smooth within our home, I was troubled by the sadness of the city and my

inability to become part of its life. There were African soldiers in the French occupation force. One day I took the initiative of talking with some of them. I found they were from Ubangui-Chari, the French Congo, and Chad. There were also Guineans and Senegalese among them. They were unhappy in Madagascar, I learned. They felt the hostility of the local people toward them and the French authorities saw to it that they should not fraternize. I began to invite these soldiers to my home for meals. They appreciated this enormously. Sometimes I had fifteen guests at our table. In fact, our home became a sort of chancellery for Africa in exile. Far from our native land, we comforted one another.

I never stopped trying to find a way to return to Africa. I found our exile tragic and stupid. Guinea voted “*non*” in the referendum, the only French African colony to do so, and in 1959 became free. Our place, I felt, was back there, where my political life had begun.

Before leaving Madagascar, however, I made one last effort to create a bridge between the Malagasy and African peoples. I asked the general in command of the armed forces and the high commissioner for permission to present a theatrical evening, as a charity for the Malagasy children. The program would include skits, and African songs, games, and dances. I did not want the Malagasy people to have a bad impression of Africa, and this event, I thought, would give them some idea of what our continent and people were like.

Both the general and the high commissioner approved the project. For one month I wrote short sketches, worked out ballets, and had African records sent from the continent. The African soldiers were to perform in many of the numbers but I was also counting on the beautiful Malagasy children to dance in some of the ballets. We were rehearsing for the program when I received a letter from the high commissioner, regretting

that he must rescind his earlier approval of the project. The reason he gave was that “the African soldiers already have too many distractions.” I translated this as: the Malagasy people and the Africans must be kept divided.

Early in 1959, my family and I left for Guinea. Without expecting to, I became involved in African politics on our trip. Our itinerary took us through Brazzaville, where we stopped for a few days to see friends and relatives. I was dismayed to learn that the Congo was on the verge of a civil war. Tribalism had exploded, and the Lari and Mbochi peoples were killing one another.

At the bottom of the affair was the unsavory Abbé Fulbert Youlou, head of the local group associated with the RDA. He was a defrocked priest who had become mayor of Brazzaville through a one-vote majority in 1956, a vote that, it was commonly agreed, he had bought for 500,000 francs, CFA (about \$2,000). He came into power by posing as the successor to a charismatic religious and political messiah named André Matsoua. This Bakongo prophet-chief became, during the 1930s, the object of a cult among the Lari and Bakongo peoples, who were of the same ethnic group, inflaming them with his speeches against the whites.

“God has said,” he proclaimed, “that the blacks should be masters of their own country. The day will come when Africa will get rid of the whites.”

Disillusioned with the blessings promised by the European missionaries, the people were ready for just such a message. Matsoua also opposed the census, which was for the purpose of assessing taxes, and he advised the people not to be counted or to pay taxes. His impassioned speeches mixed

religious hope and nationalist sentiments. The prayer of Matsoua's disciples was:

We who have no support!  
We who have no defender!  
God. Father all powerful, watch over us!  
Father Congo, Father, who will think of us?  
Of us, who will think of us?  
Matsoua, Father All-Powerful, watch over us.  
Matsoua, Father All-Powerful, send us a defender.

The movement caught on like wildfire, proving how desperate the people were to hear of their right to freedom. They raised hundreds of thousands of francs for him "to procure their independence," funds that Matsoua appropriated for his own use. He was arrested by the French at Brazzaville, charged with fraud, and convicted. Chained naked, his body covered with whip marks and wounds, Matsoua's martyrdom only contributed to the passions of the cult surrounding him. The stories about what happened after he was imprisoned at Maya-Maya differ. Some say he died there in 1940. Others say he was burned alive in Chad. Many of his entourage, it was known, were deported to the desert regions of Chad, from which they never returned. At any rate, there was no sign of Matsoua after 1940, although his ardent followers elected him to represent them in Paris in 1946. He had entered history as one of the immortal objectors for the African conscience.

Recognizing the spell that the legend of Matsoua still cast over the Lari and Bakongo populations, the clever Abbé Youlou proclaimed himself the hand-appointed successor to Matsoua. It was on this wave of sentiment that

he took political power. The small, fat ex-priest, who spoke an execrable French, thus put himself in the odd position of pretending to represent both an idolatrous cult and, in the *soutane* he wore in spite of the fact that he had been excommunicated, the authority of the Catholic Church. But this contradiction did not trouble the man who was to become president of the new nation, not only at the price of silver but of blood.

At first, he worked with Jacques Opangault, who was premier of the provisional government and head of the opposition party, the African Socialist Movement. But then, counseled by his white advisors, including the infamous Alfred Delarue, Youlou broke with Opangault and encouraged tribal hatreds between the Mbochi, who supported Opangault, and his own Lari people.

When I arrived, Brazzaville was electric with the tension between the two peoples. A terrible massacre was in the offing. The *abbé* walked around armed to the teeth, encouraging the fratricidal struggle, which was to his own profit.

As one who was dedicated to the freedom and fraternity of the African people, I could not stand by and let that happen. I said to my husband, “I can’t accept it. I won’t. I refuse!”

I hurried to the home of Youlou, which had been transformed into a *caserne*, with weapons everywhere and his followers speaking of nothing but arms and munitions. The gunsmith of Brazzaville had made a fortune selling thousands of guns to the Lari, Youlou’s devoted followers. The M’Bochi, on the other hand, were unarmed, for guns could be bought only with the authorization of the mayor, Youlou.

I presented myself: “I am Andrée Blouin, of the RDA, coming from Guinea.” That was all the introduction I needed. It was my feelings that gave me the right to act.



I spoke with Youlou earnestly and at length about his responsibility in his first test of Africa's political process. "Don't let this bloodshed go on," I begged him. "Don't let Africans kill Africans."

"You are an angel," he replied, smiling.

I became more vehement. I actually accused him. "It is you who are provoking this fratricide. It's you!"

"What a beautiful woman!" he exclaimed. "So beautiful!"

"That's not the point," I said firmly. "In the name of African fraternity, I beg you to meet your opposition and settle your differences together."

Nothing I said seemed to have any effect on him. Before I left, I said, "I'll come back this evening with your adversary, Jacques Opangault. You must absolutely work things out together."

I did not know how I would arrange such a meeting but I simply could not let blood be spilt without trying every means to avoid it.

I called Jacques Opangault. He said, "I can't receive you. We're in the middle of a crisis. There are hundreds dead."

"Exactly," I replied. "I want you to meet with the Abbé Youlou. I told him you will meet him tonight. You have got to stop this killing or I will put myself in the middle, between the two camps, and you'll have to pass over my body."

Opangault saw that I meant what I said. "Where are you?" he asked.

"At the hotel."

"All right," he said. "I'll do anything to have peace. I'll come to your hotel."

When he arrived, he looked at me with surprise. "I recognize you," he said. "At the orphanage, when the girls were receiving their French citizenship, you took your father's name. I remember that very well. The

nuns didn't want you to, but you insisted. You were just a *gamine* then. I was the clerk for the affair."

Jacques Opangault was a tall man, stretched thin, *filiforme*, dry, like an ascetic. But he was gay, sparkling, and intelligent. He was a real patriot. I sensed that at once, in his handshake. There is an electrical charge when you meet someone who is going the same way you are, and this was what I felt when I shook Jacques Opangault's hand. I knew at once that he was sincere about peace, and his words proved me right.

He spoke with great feeling. He said, "I could reach an understanding with the *abbé* if he weren't surrounded by the worst kind of white advisors. It is they who are encouraging this war. We Africans could work things out among ourselves. I am ready to meet him, at once. If he is willing, we can make a declaration together on the radio to calm the people. But we should act quickly. My people are exasperated and restless. I'm having a hard time controlling them. Take this message to the *abbé* and perhaps we can calm the situation."

My husband was with me as I talked to Opangault. We went to Youlou's immediately after this meeting. Youlou was seated in the great room of his house, surrounded by his warriors. Determined to make the greatest possible effect, I went to him and threw myself at his knees.

"Father, I bring you news from Opangault. He is ready to meet with you and to settle matters peacefully. I beg you to accept his offer, and avoid bloodshed." I called him "Father" deliberately, although everyone else was addressing him as "Mister President." I hoped that this word, reminding him that he was a priest, although no longer in the church, would touch his better nature at this critical moment.

"We are going to fight!" he cried furiously. "You'll see."

“No, no! You mustn’t,” I begged, almost in tears. “This can be settled without spilling blood, if only you will meet with Opangault.”

Youlou turned to my husband. “Madame Blouin is too high-strung. Take her out of here.”

That same evening, there were six dead in Brazzaville. A few days later, more than five hundred were dead, as Youlou’s partisans, armed with guns, slaughtered Opangault’s people, who had only *sagaies* and lances.

The Lari, wearing white bands around their heads, were gathered in the village of Bakongo. The M’bochi wore a palm leaf on their heads and a white mark drawn with lime on their foreheads. They were in Poto-Poto. Fires broke out everywhere; huts were incinerated. Families, afraid of being killed on the streets, hid under the verandas of the European shops in the center of town, or bunched together in doorways, paralyzed with fear.

The indifference of the Europeans to the affair was astonishing. In the residential section for whites on the high plateau, calm reigned. One would never have believed that men, women, and children were being killed not far away if the roars of trucks full of refugees fleeing toward the interior of the country had not been clearly audible.

With the superior force of his armed men, Youlou managed to have Opangault arrested. Imprisoned with him were many of his followers and several of his deputies.

I could not accept the failure of my previous efforts. In spite of the revulsion I felt for Youlou and his encampment, I went back to see him again. Physically I found him repulsive. He was small, broad-backed, strapping, round. His nose was full of crusts, he sniffed constantly; he was disgusting. In the evening he put on African pajamas and went out in a Jeep to look for girls. He lived openly with several women and had fathered a

number of children. The Church had excommunicated him but he put on the soutane from time to time, to give himself a certain authority.

Several dozen heavily armed men guarded his house. I had to pass by them before I was admitted to see the *abbé*. He wore his cassock, with a long dagger strapped to his arm. The house was full of women and children lying about on the floor. Youlou, surrounded by his European advisors, was on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“Look!” he said, and lifting his soutane at once showed me a knife stuck in his boot. “And here ...” Another knife in the left sleeve of his robe, and the right sleeve too. “And a revolver, here!”

When he heard my plea again, he cried out, “I’ll fix Opangault! You’ll see! I’ll have him guillotined. I’ll show his head to my people!” As if these disgusting words were not enough, he raved on. “And if General de Gaulle supports him, I’ll withdraw from the Communauté.”

He trembled, shouting like a man on the edge of collapse. His followers cheered, approving him noisily. Stolidly, his white advisors looked on, saying nothing. I was obliged to withdraw without having accomplished my purpose. I was nearly ill with humiliation and pain. This was, after all, the country in which I had passed fourteen perilous years of my youth. This was the town in which I had run, feet bloodied from shards of glass, to my own freedom. In these streets that saw new corpses every day, I had hastened, between showers, with my sewing, to the homes of my proud white ladies. Here I had carried Roger’s child to term; she had been baptized in the cathedral, which I already knew so well, over there.

My heart throbbed like an infected wound as I walked slowly back to the hotel. I had watched these people dancing in joyous rivalry in the Sunday festivities of Poto-Poto. I could not accept their killing one another in their bewilderment at the approach of freedom.

The next day, my family and I left for Bangui, to visit my mother, before going to Guinea. Brazzaville was in a state of siege as we drove to the airport at Maya-Maya. On the plane Youlou's dreadful words of hate and death obsessed me, as if Youlou, invisible, were repeating them in my ears.

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## Healing the Breach between African Brothers

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My reunion with Joséphine, my irrepressible little Maman, was one of unsurpassed joy. She had put on weight and was quite round, as generous people often are, but she was as deliciously gay as ever. It had been nearly two years since we had seen one another. In the meantime, our country had become independent and changed its name from Oubangui-Chari to the Central African Republic. Our new president was Barthélemy Boganda, a man who began his public life as a priest, then decided that his countrymen were more in need of material aid than spiritual succor. He was a great African leader.

When I met him, he was already enormously popular, the affection of the people for him reaching proportions of near idolatry. He was considered a prophet by many. His proclamation “Zo Kwé Zo” (A man is a man) strengthened his people and threatened terribly the residual colonial interests. It meant: every man counts. One man, one vote.

This new republic was also suffering from serious political rivalries. The RDA and Boganda’s own political party, the Movement for the Social

Evolution of Black Africa, had had a number of clashes involving killings. Several members of my own family who belonged to the RDA had been put in prison.

While I was in Bangui I went to see Boganda, as a courtesy call. He knew who I was, having read about me in the newspapers. Even *Le Monde* had written about me as the only African woman who was making a serious contribution regarding the issues of the continent's decolonization.

Boganda was of medium height, very dark-skinned. He was not fat, but of a comfortable weight. The whites of his eyes were very red. This startled me at first; I thought he must be drunk twenty-four hours a day to have such red eyes. But this was just a condition he had, and I soon forgot it because his personality was extraordinary. When he looked at me it was as if I had been pierced by a laser beam. He had the manner and culture of a *curé*, which was as he had been trained. I knew immediately that I was in the presence of a leader of men. I was to receive one of the great honors of my life from this statesman who had suffered imprisonment by the French administration.

My husband and I, with two other guests, were invited to dine at the home of Boganda and his French wife. He welcomed me with the words, "The child has returned to her homeland! You shall eat from the trunk of the elephant! At our table you will find only the dishes of our people."

My own family criticized me for going to see Boganda. "You're supposed to be with the RDA and you're fraternizing with *him*?" But I didn't care what they said. The local squabbles between the two parties were not my concern. I had a larger view of the work that had to be done. I saw my work as involving principles, and it was on the basis of principles that I met Boganda.

His simplicity impressed me. I saw it as a sign of great strength. During the meal, we spoke of the new republic's future and he told me of his difficulties with the Abbé Youlou.

Since the beginning of the century, the products of the country had been shipped to the ocean by river, down the Ubangui into the Congo, through Brazzaville. Now, annoyed by the provocations of Youlou's partisans, who were members of the RDA, Boganda was threatening to route the country's products by truck and by train instead. Cutting straight across the continent through Cameroon would be a thousand kilometers shorter.

Losing this profitable traffic would be ruinous for the Congo, which was already a very poor country. Abbé Youlou was using every means to press Boganda to renounce his plan. Feelings ran high on both sides.

"Youlou's people have infiltrated the RDA here," Boganda told me. "They are fomenting crises right here in our own territory. We can't tolerate sabotage like that."

What he said was true, but I was thinking of Africa as a whole, and of world opinion.

"If you carry out your plan, Mr. President, you will cause a grave economic crisis in the Congo," I said. "The Europeans who believe that Africans are incapable of running their own affairs will be delighted. They will say that since the blacks have become masters in their own house they are leading Africa into bankruptcy. I beg you, Mr. President, don't let these doomsday prophecies of the Europeans prove true."

Boganda looked at me in astonishment. Fervently I went on. "Youlou's behavior is inexcusable, but believe me, he has been pushed to do the things he does by his advisors. The fate of his young republic is in danger. Don't jeopardize his chances of succeeding. In the interest of all Africa, please postpone your project. You can work out a compromise together later."



Boganda frowned. "Youlou has shown no scruples in his ambitions. I can't forgive the way he has shed African blood in order to become president."

"I know, I know," I said somberly, remembering what I had seen. "Still, whatever the price, we must avoid being divided. We all have the same ultimate goals. When we are torn apart, we help those who mock our freedom and will profit by our dividedness. I know you are angry with the RDA, but remember: in politics there must be an opposition. How else can one learn one's errors?"

"For two years," he said, "the RDA here has fought our party. It has given us many serious difficulties in our work. No doubt you have heard of some of them."

"Yes. I was dismayed to find that some of my own relatives are in prison." I went on to speak of the special qualities of some of them, how they could be used to serve the country, given a chance. I asked for this chance, I said, "not because they are RDA and I am RDA or because they are members of my family, but because they can be useful in the cause of our people."

"It's not that we want to put people into prison," he said, "but that we must prevent the fights and excesses of these heated times." He promised me: "I'll look into the situation of these relatives you mention." I pressed on. I proposed that he meet our leader, the president of the RDA, Houphouët-Boigny, in Paris. "Talk with him," I urged. "I'm sure you can work things out together. If you like, I will arrange for the meeting. I'll speak with Houphouët-Boigny myself."

"Oh no," Boganda refused at once. "No. No. That's not possible." For some moments Boganda said nothing, deep in his own thoughts. Then breaking the general silence, he said, "Thank you, just the same. I

appreciate your efforts to reconcile the two groups. It's too bad you're not with us. I've never had such generous, farsighted counsel given to me before."

He rose and went to his writing table. A moment later he returned and presented me with a booklet of the country's new constitution and a miniature flag of the Central African Republic. On it he had inscribed the words, "To the apostle for all Africa, Andrée Gerbilla Blouin, a citizen of the Central African Republic." Then, "In the name of all my countrymen," he had signed it. I was overcome to receive such a tribute from this man whom I had esteemed at once.

Later, in a meeting, speaking of me, he said, "This woman here ... If we had three like her, we would be happy in Africa."

But I feel that I really have no right to talk about this great man. Even today I can hardly give myself permission to speak of him.

At that time there were no plane connections between Bangui and Guinea. We had to return to Brazzaville to get our flight there. Boganda knew that I was leaving the next day.

"When you are in Brazzaville," he said, "Go to Youlou and tell him you have seen me. You may give him my reassurance that for the moment I will continue to ship our products through the Congo. This should relieve the tension between our peoples."

I took this good news to the *abbé*. He did not conceal his joy. It was a great relief to him to be able to count on the continuing revenue from this trade. I wondered if he understood that this gesture of fraternity was the mark of a noble spirit.

Youlou told me that Jacques Opangault had just been released from prison. In the name of African unity, I begged him to be conciliatory with

his old rival. Again, I tried to show him that what he thought were differing goals were in fact a misunderstanding. I asked Youlou to let me arrange a meeting of reconciliation between himself and Opangault.

I was astonished by the lack of bitterness that Jacques Opangault showed when he received me. In spite of all he suffered in prison, he said, he was ready to shut his eyes on his own past for the future of his country. That same morning, he and Youlou met for the first time since the proclamation of the republic. This reconciliation brought peace to Brazzaville, which had not known calm since Youlou's election. I had at last reached my goal in making the voice of African fraternity heard.

Two days later, a colleague of Boganda's phoned me from Bangui with an urgent message from the president. Boganda was willing to meet Houphouët-Boigny in order to resolve the differences between the two parties. He wanted me to accompany him to Paris. My appeal to solidarity had not been in vain—he had listened to a woman.

I returned to Bangui to leave with him. As we were flying over the countryside of our new republic, Boganda said to me, "Look at those coffee plantations. Two years ago they didn't exist. In another fifteen years all these lands will be cultivated." His voice was sober as he added "Unfortunately I won't be here for that marvelous harvest."

"Not here?" I asked.

"Because I will be dead. For a long time the Bouzou [whites] have wanted to wipe me out. One day they will succeed."

He said this with a calm that chilled me. I remembered that people had spoken of him as a prophet.

In Paris I contacted Houphouët-Boigny and tried to arrange a meeting between him and Boganda. But Houphouët-Boigny avoided this meeting,

saying on several occasions that he was too busy. Boganda was furious.

“Don’t be bitter,” I begged him. “You are a chief. Forgive him. You have held out your hand to your brother. One day he will remember this and regret not having answered your appeal at once.”

In spite of this disappointment in Paris, Boganda kept his word and gave up his project of passing his country’s goods through Cameroon. He had a generous, creative mentality and hoped, in fact, to unite all the Latin countries of central Africa into a broad federation that would include, besides the old French territories, those of Belgium and Portugal. But first he had to struggle against the misery and hunger in his own country. He had a people to raise up, a nation to make prosperous.

His dream was not to be realized. Six weeks after our trip to Paris, on March 29, 1959, the world was shocked to learn of the death of Barthelemy Boganda. His plane exploded in the air and crashed in the forest of Oubangui-Chari. Why the plane exploded has never been satisfactorily explained. To this day it remains a mystery that haunts painfully all those who knew the republic’s first great president.

Boganda not only foresaw his own death, he prepared for it. When he left the priesthood and married, he was excommunicated from the Church. This was painful to him. While in Paris on his mission to see Houphouët-Boigny, he paid a visit to his old religious superiors. He asked that, when the time came, he be permitted a religious burial.

I was in Conakry with my family when the dreadful news came. It shocked me almost to the point of depression. This was the first of the terrible losses I was to experience in my work for Africa, the unexplained disappearance of the man whose vision promised so much to his people. I remembered his words: “To liberate Africa and the Africans from servitude and misery: this is the purpose of my life.”

Boganda, my brother, you are remembered here!

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## An Invitation to Help the Congo's Women

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Guinea was the only colony in Africa to vote “*non*” to de Gaulle in the referendum on September 28, 1958, and four days later, on October 2, became free. The price of such independence, we knew, would be heavy, but the people were prepared for this. Stolidly Guinea took the consequences as the enraged French made their departure from the country as disruptive as possible. As they withdrew, they took with them every piece of materiel that they could carry off, including the telephones from private homes.

The president of the new republic was, of course, Sékou Touré, who had been vice president of the colony under the *loi-cadre* during the interim year before independence. This dazzling political figure had begun his career as a bold and ardent trade unionist. He came from an illustrious Malinke family. His maternal grandfather, the great Almany Samory Touré, still honored today, was a peerless general who held the French occupation army in check in the late-nineteenth century.

To punish Sékou Touré and his wayward people, the French, deprived of their economic ties with Guinea, did all they could to cut off Guinea's economic relations with everyone else. Through threats, rumors, and alliances, using every pressure they could bring to bear, they sought to establish an economic *cordon sanitaire* around Guinea.

The hardships during the succeeding months were terrible. There were massive breakdowns in communications and transportation. The stores had no goods, and the markets were almost empty of food. Still, Guinea was admired as a model of revolutionary zeal by the other African nations. Their leaders came to Guinea to present their respects to Sékou Touré. It was thus that I was to meet some important political figures from the Belgian Congo, that country that had fascinated me since my tour with Roger through Kasai and Kwilu. But even before then, in a sense, the Belgian Congo was part of my fate, for Henriette was Belgian and the Congo was the fiefdom of her people.

I met these Congolese nationalists entirely by chance, through impulse one evening while I was dining out with my husband and some friends. When I consider the difference between what my life became and what it would have been if I had not acted on that single, spontaneous impulse, my mind boggles.

It was in January of 1960, and we were at "Maitre Diop," a restaurant in the center of Conakry. African melodies were playing on the radio. Then I heard a song that I recognized from my youthful days in the Congo. At a nearby table a voice began to sing the words, in Lingala. No one in Guinea spoke Lingala. My curiosity piqued, and an old nostalgia revived; I rose and went to the table of three men, where one of them was singing.

"Forgive my forwardness in speaking to you," I said, "but I heard you singing in Lingala." I presented myself, then added, "May I ask where you

are from?”

“The Belgian Congo.”

We began talking in a friendly fashion and I learned the names of the men: Pierre Mulele, secretary of the Parti solidaire africain (PSA); Raphael Kinkie, a member of the party; and Antoine Kingotolo, secretary of the Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), the party of the Bakongo people. Then I learned of an astonishing coincidence. On the evening that I was to leave Brazzaville for Conakry some friends had come to me, and with the precautionary airs of a grand intrigue said, “This evening, if you like, we can take you several kilometers from the city to meet, in strictest secrecy, three refugees from the Belgian Congo. They are nationalists who are tracked by the Belgian authorities for promoting independence. I think it would be of great interest to you to meet them.”

My guide took me to the clandestine rendezvous but no one was there. They had left already—for Conakry. At Maître Diop I found that the three hunted political leaders whom I should have met that night outside Brazzaville were the three men before me.

They told me, “Our country will obtain its independence on June 30. We are here to study the political and social experiences of a brother country that is lucky enough to be free already.” We spent the rest of the evening in an exhilarating political discussion.

Fascinated by the work of these dedicated men, I invited them to our home, The Hermitage, on many occasions after that. Thanks to them I met Antoine Gizenga, president of the PSA, when he arrived. He had been visiting the capitals of a number of countries—Brussels, Bonn, East Berlin, Moscow, and Paris—to arouse world opinion in favor of giving the Congo its independence. It was this trip that forced the Belgian government, at last, to agree that it could not keep the Congo forever, as Leopold had once



sworn. Until then the Congolese people had been forbidden any kind of political activity at all. Demands for change of any kind could be made only through cultural or athletic organizations for professionals, of which the Belgians had taken care to form very few. But when the French Congo, across the river, voted on the referendum in September, suddenly the emancipation fever caught like a brushfire. Politically, the Belgian Congo's "nerves were all on edge."

It was at a cocktail party at the Hôtel de France given in honor of President Gizenga that the Congolese group asked me to return to Leopoldville with them and join them in their work. I felt honored, but my first reaction was to refuse. I was afraid that my presence might bring prejudice to their cause.

"Think of the Belgians' reaction," I said. "They would certainly assume the worst, since I come from Guinea. This might bring you problems. It might damage your chances in the elections."

But the group refused to hear this excuse.

"We need you there," Gizenga said. "The women of the Congo have not been politicized like the women of Guinea. You can help us to awaken the women to their part in the political and social development of our country."

Gizenga then asked Sékou Touré his opinion about my helping to organize the women of the Congo. By then I had met the man whose photo changed my life, and he had introduced me to many of the great leaders of Africa. Through him I met, in Paris in 1957, Félix Houphouët-Boigny, the president of the RDA, which Sékou Touré had helped to found. At that time Houphouët-Boigny was the minister of health for the French government.

I also met Sékou Touré's great friend, the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah. It was Nkrumah who asked me to make a call to Africa's women to help bring the men together, setting aside the old quarrels between

peoples. He wanted to unify the continent. Nkrumah envisioned a new political entity, a United States of Africa, similar to the United States of America. Africa had been fractured not only by the arbitrary patterns of European colonization but by old tribal claims. Before all else, a new unity had to be achieved. I wrote and broadcast a plea to Africa's women that was heard throughout the francophone territories. Translated into English it was also broadcast in many of the anglophone countries.

When Gizenga asked Sékou Touré his opinion about my working with the women in the Congo, Sékou Touré's answer was, "Of course. She will help you as a patriotic woman of Africa." I was proud that he thought of me, not as a woman of one country, but above all, as African. After the 1957 congress in Bamako when I made the acquaintance of the RDA's great family in many countries, I was known to all as "our sister."

My Congolese friends left Conakry to return to their country in February 1960. I excitedly discussed my plans to join them with my husband, who was then working for the Guinean government. Since I would be gone for several months, he agreed that I should go alone. At the end of April, I received a telegram from Gizenga, asking me to come and help his party immediately. The electoral campaign was about to begin.

When I arrived at the Leopoldville airport, as I had foreseen, the Belgian police looked at my passport distrustfully. The mere fact that I was arriving from Guinea, that dangerous country, made me suspect. Two days later I joined Gizenga and his staff. Where? Precisely in Banningville, where I had disembarked with Roger after our idyll on the river boat, the *Bolongo!*

Gizenga introduced me to his entourage and explained his plans for the tour of the provinces we would make. That same evening, I took part in my

first meeting. Gizenga, the president, and Mulele, the secretary, spoke first. Then I launched my appeal to the women, begging them to settle the quarrels that divided peoples. I asked them to work for unity and liberation. My words were well received; it was an auspicious beginning.

Immediately I was accused by the opposition of being a spy for Sékou Touré, the terror of French colonialism, planted in the heart of the PSA. The Belgians pointed me out with hatred.

We began our tour of the country. Traveling in a convoy of fifteen vehicles—cars, vans, and trucks—we explained the PSA program to the people of the towns and villages. As we traveled the Kwilu I was the only woman in our group. But the fervor of the campaign made me forget that I was alone among so many men. We had a meeting every evening and two each day. There was hardly time to eat. I never felt tired, for I had work to do! Never have I felt more alive.

It became my job to organize the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity. While we spoke of the need to liberate our continent, I saw that the women, in fact, desperately needed to be liberated themselves from crushing tribal traditions and from the vice of alcohol. In Kikui, between eight o'clock in the morning and two o'clock in the afternoon of April 8, I enrolled 4,325 members in our organization for women. Even men jostled to sign up an absent wife, mother, or sister whom they wanted to be a part of our movement. That afternoon, at the home of Madame Kamitatu, a nun who had left her order to become a teacher, I met a group of her colleagues and nurses who offered to help me. I gladly accepted, and appointed them the provisional leaders of the first chapter of our movement. Together we worked out a temporary set of by-laws while waiting for the permanent representatives to be selected democratically.

That same evening about six thousand women and three thousand men attended our first meeting. After I presented them with our new pro-tem committee of directors, I invited the women members of our audience who cared to do so to join me on the platform and to speak of their problems. I wanted to learn more about them, and I wanted them to see, by this airing of difficulties, what their common problems were, so they could envisage what was needed to solve them. As they told their stories, I saw that these women had suffered terribly. At the bottom of most of their grief was the dowry system in which they were sold by their parents to their husbands. The price of their dowries marked them ever after that, stigmas for the rest of their lives. They were trapped in a system in which they were mere chattel.

I told the women that this custom would be abolished if they worked to free their country, which would also bring about the liberation of the women. If she so chose, the woman could be the foremost instrument of independence.

These unheard-of ideas aroused great excitement among the women. At the end of the meeting, these “submissive” women pressed forward to touch my hand. They cried out with joy, “Thanks, little one! Bravo!” Even their husbands promised me their support. A number of older women pushed through to me and insisted on carrying me triumphantly on their shoulders. From then on, these women took to confiding in me. They came to me with stories so lamentable, so fantastic, that any one of them alone would have served to condemn the system. I was so outraged for these women that I vowed, more than ever, to fight for them and to free them from the traditions that kept them in such appalling ignorance, so unable to cope with life, and above all, so much at the mercy of their men. I looked at the children of Dima and thought of my own daughters. I swore! Let it not be said that I did nothing to make the African woman free!

The platform for our organization was dedicated to the following concerns:

To make all women, no matter what age, literate.

To promote an understanding of health and hygiene.

To combat alcoholism.

To work for women's rights.

To work for the protection of the abandoned woman and child.

To work for the social progress of the African.

The best way to reach the women, I thought, would be to have one of their own beside me in my work. I looked around and found just the woman I needed—Augustine, I will call her here. She was a flamboyant woman, big in every way. Big of voice, tall, portly, and with an exuberance, an authority of her very own flavor. Everyone knew her. She was the public relations figure for the Polar Beer firm. Under her direction, huge receptions and *soirées* for dancing were held at which beer was given away free, in order to develop the popularity of the Polar brand. Whole kegs were donated at funerals. The promotion of beer was of great importance then. Lumumba represented Polar Beer earlier; he too had been one of the animators of its publicity.

There were two main breweries, Polar and Primus, and the rivalry between them was intense. In a certain quarter of the town there were sometimes even organized fights between female combatants. Thousands of people would come to watch the women fight. Each shouting about the virtues of her own beer and cursing her opposition, the women got into really violent exchanges in which they were sometimes seriously wounded and charges were brought into court.

All this was to encourage the sale of beer, which the women were drinking too much of, already. Really, it was terrible the way the Congolese women drank: sometimes a case—a dozen bottles—before noon. They paid for their vice through use of household money that should have fed their children, and through petty commerce and prostitution.

One day, when I was lecturing the women about their vices and especially about abandoning themselves to drinking when they should be working for their country, I saw in the crowd this woman, the Polar publicity woman, Augustine. I made my decision then.

I said, “Now we have entered a new period of responsibility, and to help us in our women’s movement I’m going to call on a woman whom all of you know and *love*.” I emphasized that. Then I beckoned to Augustine in her place in the crowd. “Come, my sister,” I said, “It is you who will help us and lead us in our campaign for a better life for Congolese women.”

Everyone turned and looked. A great murmur ran through the crowd.

“Come,” I said. “Now it is you who will help me in my work. I don’t speak the dialect of the country, so it is you who will speak. It’s your duty to educate our youth of today. It’s you who will teach them not to drink like bottomless holes. Come stand beside me, my sister. Come up on the podium.”

Slowly, Augustine came up to the front. Taking her time, she climbed the steps and came to the microphone. With her *pagne* she wiped her tears, for in fact there were tears of emotion on her cheeks. Finally, she was in control of herself. Then she addressed the crowd.

“Voilà!” she said, in her impressive voice, and she made a large gesture toward me. “This is a *man*, here.”

The crowd responded. They knew what she meant and were ready to hear whatever she would say.

“As for the rest of you, out there,” she boomed, and here she made a sweeping gesture to the crowd, “you are *zero*! This sister, here, has come to teach us something. And I have something to say to you myself.”

The crowd was hanging on her words.

“You all like Polar beer, don’t you?”

Immediately there was great shouting and cheering.

“Bon. And you all know me. Bon. All this time I’ve been talking about Polar beer. Day and night, Polar beer. Well, now I have something new to say, so listen to me. If I see any of you drinking a bottle of beer before noon, I personally will bust you up.” (*Je vais te casser la gueule.*)

This proclamation electrified the crowd. It gave a whole new spirit to our movement. Augustine left her own work to travel several hundred kilometers with us in Kwilu, speaking to the women. She was a wonderful collaborator because she was so well known, even in the brush, and she spoke the *patois* of the forest people. When this *bon vivant* personality who had always been associated with self-indulgence and good times turned around and lectured on the need to be responsible and work for the good of the country, the people were enormously impressed. It was just the psychological shock that they needed, to see the errors of their ways.

As we slowly toured through the provinces, we created chapters of our movement at each important town. We named a few strong women of the district as the leaders to carry on our work after we left, in what was to become a veritable women’s crusade.

Nothing less was needed for the Congolese women. I found them crushed between two pitiless stones: the tribal customs in which they were mere chattel to their men; and the education they received from the missions, largely Catholic, in which they were trained in ignorance, apathy, and submission.

To improve the lot of these women would be a long and arduous task, for their spirit had been damaged for many years. The situation was truly appalling.

The Congolese woman of the village who lived according to tribal customs had one advantage. She derived a sense of stability from this system that acted as a significant moral force in her life. She had a given role, especially as a mother with her children, that was important. On the other hand, she was bound by tribal traditions that were implacably harsh.

A daughter is regarded as a source of capital by her parents who look forward, from the day of her birth, to profiting by her dowry. When they bargain over the dowry with her future husband, it is *their* interest, in gaining as much as possible, not the daughter's interest in whether or not he would be a kind and decent husband, that is at stake. Given a choice between an old, cantankerous man who already had three wives but would pay well and a poor well-intentioned young man, the parents would unhesitatingly opt for the old man's larger dowry. Unconditional submission is expected of the daughter. She is little more than object of sacrifice on the altar of filial devotion.

Few women revolt against these marriages, either by committing adultery or by running back to their parents' home, because then the dowry would have to be reimbursed to the husband. Usually this can't be done, because it has been spent. So the parents become accomplices in forcing the daughter to remain with her husband, even in the face of real cruelties, in



order to avoid being required to return her price. There is no valid reason that a woman can give to leave her husband. She is condemned in advance to submit to whatever sadness the conjugal roof holds for her. If her husband whips her, he is merely preserving his rights of property. And the parents, in their laziness, provide the collusion that closes the door of the woman's trap.

Maternity in Africa is considered a blessing from heaven, and an unwed woman with a child is not condemned for this except that she is not worth as large a dowry. The father of the child has no rights to the child unless he pays a dowry, however small. The child is considered the property of the parents of the young mother, and they can dispose of the child as they please. If the child is female, they can negotiate the dowry for *her* marriage.

Polygamy is another means of keeping the woman in servitude. Having several wives is a sign of a man's wealth; it inspires respect. It also gives the man more leisure, as the cultivation of the fields, in Africa, is done mostly by the women. In many regions the man does nothing but fish and hunt. The man with more than one wife can profit by his wives' work: he can buy himself a new wife!

Through her work, as a cultivator and as a mother, the black woman made an enormous contribution to the African social structure. She was, in fact, the indispensable work horse of the family. I saw that it would not be easy to reverse a custom that had for centuries served the male half of the population so well.

The more I pondered the sad lives of the Congolese women, the more I saw that one could not separate the problem of the African continent's resources from the problems of the African woman. Africa is a continent of many disparate people who have little training. The need to utilize human resources better is one of the most important aspects of the economic

development of the African nations. It has two sides: the idleness of the men on the one hand, and the overwork of the women on the other. A society can develop only through organized and fruitful labor. The African woman absolutely had to be freed from her role of servitude.

The alternative to a traditional life for the Congolese woman was to have an education. But the family that sought to improve their daughter's lot by sending her to school was giving her a poisoned present. The missions, Catholic or Protestant, had a monopoly on education in the Congo. From them, the girl learned that a spiritual life was much more important than a knowledge of practical matters, in which one ran the risk of becoming proud. The girls learned to read and write only in their own ethnic dialect. They were spared such distractions as geography, history, mathematics, and science, while being apprenticed to such harmless occupations as cooking, housekeeping, and needlework. They were not taught the skills with which to earn money, thereby generating self-respect. So, often, they were unable to resist the temptations of the facile life with which women, since time began, have degraded themselves. Many of them became prostitutes. They fell into every sort of vice, including alcoholism and drugs. Most of them, by the time they were twelve, had already had relations with a man. I am ashamed to speak of such things, but there is no progress without facing the facts as they are.

One woman who came to tell me her story was Félicité. She had a rather ordinary face but a plucky spirit. She said, "Madame, I have five *macagous* [lovers], but now that I have funeral expenses to pay for my family, none of them comes to see me. They don't want to have to give me money for my debts. Just when I need help, they abandon me, and that's the way these men of our country treat their women. They are so proud, so stuck-up; they all want to be governors, and they just dump you when they feel like it. I'm

so mad I'm going to have the public scribe write a letter to each of them, asking them for 2,000 francs. If they don't give it to me, then I'm going to go to the marketplace and pick a fight with their wives. Then the wives will go home and attack their husbands, and I'll have my revenge."

I said, "Félicité, my sister, don't make an ugly quarrel like that. You shouldn't count on these men in order to live. You are capable of working to support yourself. Times have changed. Congolese women must learn to be strong and self-reliant, instead of abandoning themselves to drink and prostitution. By getting into a brawl, like a public woman, you dishonor your country. If you are a public woman, it's not your fault alone, but you must change. With your sisters, you must be the creator of your own freedom."

Félicité looked at me for a long time without speaking. In her eyes I saw a glint of hope. "I understand," she said at last, in Lingala. "We are treated like dirt because we count on men too much. You're right. I don't need them to pay for my funeral service. I'm going to sew some little caps and robes for babies. The nuns taught me how to do embroidery work for their fairs, and they got a lot of money for my work. This time the money is going to be for me."

To encourage her in this new resolve I gave her 1,000 francs, CFA (\$4).

"Oh, thank you, my sister!" she cried. "With this *bangola* [money] I'll buy three meters of fabric right away." She smiled as if a terrible illness had been lifted from her. "I hope I still remember my stitches," she said as she left. "It's been such a long time since I embroidered!"

I asked Félicité to come back again in two days, so I could see her work. When she returned and showed me what she had sewn, I gave her three little dresses and two caps that I had cut and basted for her. She was so

happy. She was quite a different woman from the prostitute who had talked to me.

“You are really my sister,” she said. “May God protect you in the Congo. You will help us to become *moto*.”

It is a historical truth that, until 1959, nothing at all had been done to try to salvage the Congolese women from the various forms of debasement into which they had fallen. On the contrary. In the moral crisis of the Congo the powerful missions bear a direct share of the responsibility.

The missions collaborated constantly with the colonialists in their policies of subverting and repressing the blacks. From the pulpit on Sundays the African people were regularly tongue-lashed for their whim of desiring emancipation. The churches, both Catholic and Protestant, were direct instruments of the impoverishment, morally and physically, of that great land. After festering for decades, the Congo was soon to explode in a crisis that the whole world could no longer ignore.

## A Perilous Campaign in the Brush

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Our movement gathered momentum, and echoes of its work began to ring threateningly in the ears of the colonialists. They turned to the churches for support against the movement. As it was difficult for the clergy to defend in the pulpit what we were attacking—prostitution, alcoholism, illiteracy, and other forms of misery—they had to find indirect means of discrediting the movement. They did so by claiming that it was communist-inspired.

Here they made a bad mistake. They did not explain of what this ideology consisted. Instead, they tried to frighten the people, like they would children with ghost stories. They said that the communists were demons who, when night fell, grew extra heads and legs and would bring death and desolation to the land. They even claimed that communism would strangle the precious liberties that the people had enjoyed with the Belgians!

The basis for their assumption that the movement was communist-inspired was because it was the trip to Moscow of the president of the PSA, Antoine Gizenga, that pressured Belgium into taking steps on Congolese independence. Also Gizenga, with Pierre Mulele, had visited Guinea, which

was said to be communist, and Madame Blouin came from Guinea. What further proof was needed?

I am not and never have been a communist, but no matter. In my person, as a foreigner, and as a woman, they found a juicy target for their rage, and birds always peck at the ripest fruit. At Sunday Mass I was denounced as an adventurer in the service of communism. This did not provoke much response, so they said I was teaching revolt against their husbands and homes; I scorned the customs of their ancestors and was trying to abolish them. What sacrilege! Only the old chiefs had the right to modify the traditions of women!

There was some truth in this charge against me, but the outrage they sought was not much in evidence so they became more fanciful. Since calling me an agent of Sékou Touré was not enough, they claimed that I was his mistress. Even this did not evoke much reaction, so they said I was the mistress of Kwame Nkrumah, too.

Not many people minded, so they were forced to go on to stronger stuff, addressing themselves directly to the women. “You think she’s married, this Madame Blouin, but she’s not! She’s a woman of the streets who has come to take your husbands away from you! She has neither a husband nor children! She is a prostitute in disguise!” (I could not produce my family; they had stayed behind in Guinea. I was quite alone there in the Congo. But those who attacked me did not realize that when one is fighting for one’s country one can bear all, brave all, accept anything.)

By the end of May 1960, I had enrolled 45,000 members in the Feminine Movement for African Solidarity in the provinces of Kwilu, Kwango, and Kasai. The news of our success spread throughout the Congo, and we were solicited by various politicians who saw in our work a means of boosting their own popularity, although in fact they were very little

concerned with the emancipation of women. Still, wherever we could gather a crowd and speak of our program, we did.

The Belgians did all they could to harass our caravan. They banned our meetings. They cut off our ferry boats. Sometimes we had to wait two days in the heart of the brush, without food. I cannot list all the devilish things they did to try to discourage us, to halt our work.

Besides speaking to the people, I found myself involved constantly in organizing the provisions for our caravan. Pierre Mulele didn't understand anything about food—it was of no interest to him. Gizenga was the same. They were so concerned with the political aspects of each stop that they simply could not deal with the problems of getting supplies for this crowd of some fifty or so people who were with us. I saw that it was very important to feed the men who were doing the heavy work of setting up the lights, sound, and platform for each meeting. They were all big men who wanted to eat well. We could not afford to have the people in our party discontented. When the caravan began and we had plenty of provisions, spirits were high and the group was united. But divergences began to appear and the men complained when we were in the brush where food was hard to get.

As soon as we arrived at a new destination I would begin foraging for food. If we were in a small town then I could buy several dozen cans of sardines, baskets of manioc, and sweet potatoes. In the country I would look for someone to sell me a goat that could be butchered by one of the local people, and this we would clean and cook as best we could. The village people were glad to sell us whatever food they could part with, in order to earn a few sous. Beer was indispensable. In that heat our men drank enormous quantities of beer. So we carried beer, and whatever provisions we could stock up on when we were in a place where we could buy them.

But sometimes, caught at a river crossing without a ferry, or in the brush with a mechanical breakdown, we simply did without.

The men of the caravan respected me because I did not complain and I worked as hard as any of them. I did everything. I helped with preparing the food; it even happened that I would help with gathering and splitting the wood for the fire. I was everywhere, pushing, encouraging, insisting that we give our best. Sometimes I'd even resort to accusing some of the men: "Aren't you ashamed, you big, strapping fellows, so much stronger than I ... to have a female doing more work than you!"

I was never tired. In the car, as we drove, I would have Mulele on one side of me and Gizenga on the other, and one of them would say, "Make a note that we must do thus and so." Then the other would say, "Write down such and such for me." I, in the middle, was constantly making notes, planning what was to come next, or analyzing what we had done, to make it better. Dead with fatigue, the men would begin to doze. Eventually, I would have Mulele asleep on one shoulder and Gizenga on the other. But I didn't sleep. Sometimes, when the chauffeur was tired, I would even take the wheel and do the driving. This scared the others to death at first. They didn't believe a woman could drive over rough trails in the brush like that. But I had strength enough for it all.

I don't know where I got my energy. I was thin as a rail and not really in good health. I had had surgery for an extrauterine pregnancy in Guinea on October 16, and six months later the incision still had not healed. When I left for the Congo, my doctor in Guinea gave me tubes of antibiotics and bandages for the trip. I had to change my bandages regularly. Whenever we reached a center where there was a nurse, I took a shot of penicillin. Worse yet, one of these shots began to fester. Perhaps the needle had not been properly sterilized.



At any rate, the wound became infected and worsened until it abscessed. I had not yet recovered from my operation and then I developed this extremely painful abscess besides. I was really in a lamentable state. But most of the time I paid no attention—I just kept going. Only twice, I believe, in the whole month-long campaign, was I unable to take my place on the podium.

In our caravan was a group of ten musicians from Leopoldville, paid for by the PSA, and photographers to provide pictures for the press. We also had electrical generators to supply our banks of multicolored lights and loudspeakers. Thus we were equipped to set up a dazzling platform in even the most remote villages that had never known electricity.

Antoine Gizenga's appearance in the Kwilu and Kwango districts came as a sort of resurrection. In order to install a more docile, easily controlled leader, the Belgians had put out the word that he was dead. They said that he died on his trip to Europe. (There had, in fact, been an assassination attempt made against him.)

Our meetings opened with the musicians playing the PSA hymn: "Congo, country of my ancestors, you will be reborn in freedom ... the old ones have promised it ..." Then Gizenga appeared on the platform. He was hailed with roars of welcome and relief. Kwilu, the most densely populated region of the Congo, with more than two million souls, was his fiefdom, and it was here that the PSA originated, with him as its president.

Everyone in the area came to our meetings, including the whites, the Belgian administrators, and the Portuguese shopkeepers. It was formidable, although of course the Belgians were beside themselves with fury when they heard Gizenga speaking to the people about their nation and the rights of men, and their freedom to govern themselves.

After Gizenga, I was introduced as one who came from Guinea, a brother state that had already got its independence. I would say that I brought them the fraternal greetings of the men and women of Guinea who wanted them to have the same rights as themselves. This made me into something of a curiosity. After the speeches were finished, the people would surround me, pell-mell, to ask me questions. They would sit in a big circle on the ground and ask wonderingly about this country, Guinea. What was it like? Was it far from there? What did the people do to become independent? If they are independent, then why aren't we? I would answer them in Kikongo or Lingala, sometimes in French.

If possible, after each meeting we sent out dispatches and photos of Gizenga and the local chiefs and political personalities. There were times, however, when we were so deep in the brush that this could not be done. Often our meetings were attended by people who had walked for more than a week to see us. They came from villages tucked in such far corners of the jungle that there were not even trails between them so that our advance party could not go in to bring them the news that we were coming. In such cases, the only way of communicating was by tam-tam. On their drums they spelled out, in their own code, that the big chief, Gizenga, was coming to meet with his people. Thus the tiny, hidden villages were notified. Thrilled, the people walked for kilometers, cutting through overgrown jungle trails, in order to be at the meeting place when we arrived. Old people and young, women, men, and children, were all there—brave, humble, sincere. And in their eyes, the hope of a better life: *freedom!* They brought us little gifts of papayas, eggs, and bananas. It was a great *fête* for them, these people who had never seen electric lights, or a car. When the lights went on and the music swelled, the people shouted with joy!

Our publicity men went first and notified the villages a week or two in advance, and then on the day of the meeting our caravan of workmen arrived to set up the platform, lights, and sound system. In their enthusiasm for the occasion, the village people sometimes constructed an arch of greenery for us to drive under, or to serve with the platform. The road was strewn with flowers. Last of all, when everything was in place, the presidential car, complete with banners on its fenders, rolled in, as the people shouted with triumph. The legend of Gizenga's death contributed to the excitement of the people at learning that he was still alive. Often they greeted us with salvos of shots, hundreds of them. These clever people fabricated their own rifles and used pebbles for shot. Then, with a rag on fire, they lit the powder and created the explosion. It was sensational, the explosions of joy from the people's throats, and from their primitive guns. This was all for Gizenga, their honored "Lipata," their traditional chief on whom they placed a cap made of hundreds of *perles*. It was beautiful to see. They would place this cap on his head, and then, joyfully, they would sing and sing.

Occasionally there were touching displays of the people's affection for Gizenga. Once, as the caravan was preparing to move on after its stop, I saw an old woman crying and rolling on the ground in what seemed to be terrible distress. We stopped, and I learned that she was overcome by desperation at not having been able to touch the hands of her "Lipata." Gizenga got out and comforted the old woman. Her daughter put in my hands a frayed handkerchief. "I am very poor," she said, "I have nothing else to give you. But keep this in memory of me."

The climax of the campaign came when we reached Gizenga's native village. There his car could not roll. The people would not permit the wheels to touch the ground. They picked it up, this presidential car, a

convertible limousine, and they carried it on their backs. A framework of poles had been constructed in advance, and when we arrived, this grid of supports was placed under the car. Then they picked it up, with us within, and carried us, the men nearly expiring under the weight, to the village.

I was terrified. When I looked down and saw the muscles of the men, straining under the weight as if they would burst out of their skins, I nearly screamed. "Let me out!" I said in a panicky voice to Gizenga. "I can't stand this. I want down."

But Gizenga refused. "You can't get down," he said. "It would make a very bad effect. You must be calm."

So I had to stay. But I didn't like it. I was reminded too much of slavery. Gizenga reassured me. "They *want* to do it. There's no use getting upset by it."

Horrified, I clung to my seat, as the men labored beneath us. Their skin had turned a light grey with the heat, the sweat, the effort. Worse yet, they were not just carrying us over flat ground; there was a rise, we were going up a hill. I looked down at these men bent double beneath us and nearly fainted.

Dancing along beside the car were crowds of people, singing, rejoicing. "Here is our chief. He has returned to his people. He has come to bring us freedom."

The PSA was allied with another important group, ABAKO, which represented the Bakongo people. This coalition controlled most of the political activity in the capital of the Congo, Leopoldville. Terrified by the potential power of this coalition, the Belgians sought to break it up by encouraging differences between sects and by stirring up tribal passions.

This tactic became our greatest problem and almost resulted in my assassination on one dramatic occasion. On April 11, our caravan was moving toward Feshi, one of the principal centers of Kwilu. The Belgian administrator of the region forbade our holding a meeting there. As we approached Feshi, we saw painted, armed warriors watching for us, in the brush, by the roadside. The LUKA, a dissident group of the PSA, cultivated by the Belgians, had whipped the Basuku men into a rage against us.

In Feshi, we installed ourselves as best we could in two small barracks. The drivers, exhausted and trembling with fear, remained curled up in their locked cars, not daring to come out. All day we had driven over terrible roads and eaten little. The members of our caravan needed food. I decided to try to buy some canned goods nearby, although the president had warned me not to go out.

The chauffeur whom I asked to drive me tried to decline. “Oh no, Madame. It’s too dangerous. We would be risking our lives.”

“Shame on you!” I scoffed. “A man like you, talking like that! Come on. We’re leaving,” I added in a tone that did not permit reply, and I got into the car.

We had not gone far when we came to a tree lying across the road. As we slowed to a stop, cries rent the air around us. At once we were encircled by warriors. Their bows were stretched, their guns were cocked as they pressed in toward us. To make them even more fearsome, their faces were smeared with red, ocher, and white paint. Their torsos were bare, a simple torn *pagne* around their waists.

I was glad then that I spoke three Central African dialects, although the Belgians had tried to use this knowledge against me. “This woman from Guinea,” they had put out, “learned Lingala and Kikongo the day she arrived in the Congo. Is that not proof that she’s a witch?” Now, trembling

at the warrior's ferocious appearance, I called out in Kikongo in an innocent and friendly manner, "Hello there!"

"How goes it?" they answered.

"What are you up to?" I asked sociably.

"We're going to kill some people. The PSA."

"Why?"

"Because they want to make slaves of us, and take our lands," they replied angrily.

Their indignation at the idea of being made slaves was a good sign, I thought.

"Who told you the PSA wants to make slaves of you?"

"The LUKA. And the *abbé*."

I knew who they meant, a Congolese agitator and religious figure who worked for the Belgians.

"Oh, then you want to kill me?"

"No. Not you. But why are you in this PSA car? You ought not to ride in this car. You might get hurt."

"You should kill me if you want to kill every one of the PSA. Because I am of the PSA."

At this they laughed heartily. "You? You are a woman! Politics are for men ..."

"Believe me, I am with the PSA, and I can tell you that we have not come to fight with you. If you attack us we will not resist. We carry no arms. It is a point of honor with us, because we are here to speak to you of unity and brotherhood. We are all brothers, whether we are from Kwango or Kwilu or Kasai or anywhere in the Congo."

They were listening to me, astonished. They had never heard a woman talk like this. “Look at it,” I said to them. “What would the PSA want to do with your lands? They are poorer and less populated now than they were eighty years ago, when the Belgians arrived.

“What have they done for you, the Belgians? You hardly see them, except once a year when they come to collect taxes. And if you don’t pay them, then you are condemned to forced labor. You have been misled by the Belgian administrator. The PSA is the party that unites all the people who want Africa to be free. We must all work together, for our freedom.”

Their arms, I noted, were now pointed toward the ground, their manner more calm.

“But why are you here?” one of them asked.

“We came to tell you that actually there is no LUKA, there is no PSA, there are only Congolese who must unite in order to be strong. At the hour of independence your land will be free; you will govern yourselves. Don’t prepare your freedom in the blood of your brothers. Independence is not war. It is the union of all.” Sometimes I had to be very simple, to make my point quickly.

“It is true, it is true!” they cried. “They lied about you. They said you would kill our animals, destroy our crops of corn and manioc, even our fruit trees. They said there was nothing you would not steal or destroy because you are communists. And the communists come from hell.”

“Is that what they told you?”

“Yes, they promised that if we would exterminate you the Pope and the whites would send us chickens and cattle by airplane. ‘Kill the devils that the PSA has brought to our land.’ That’s what they said.”

I was stupefied. I saw I would have to work fast.

“I want you to meet our president,” I said. “Come with me.” And I led them to the barracks where our group was quartered. My comrades could not believe their eyes when they saw me approaching, followed by this troop of men savagely streaked with paint and armed to the teeth. But they were walking behind me in an orderly manner.

In a few words, I gave Gizenga an idea of what was up. “This is the moment, you talk to them,” I said. I brought out a table, which Gizenga climbed on to address the warriors.

“My friends, if you condemn me because I speak of African solidarity, then kill me on the spot. Here I am.”

No one moved.

“I have never attacked other parties. It is not my way. But I am going to tell you who is setting the Africans against one another. It is the same people who have kept us in a degrading servitude for eighty years. We have been more like beasts of burden to them than men. And unfortunately, the Belgians have succeeded in corrupting some of our brothers who are now speaking for them, doing their work for them.”

The group broke into wild shouts, gesticulating, approving noisily.

Soon it was the turn of Pierre Mulele. As usual, when he took the platform, he spoke of our program, “the African program.” When it was my turn, and I climbed on the table, I felt that the audience had already been convinced with words; only one thing more was needed to wind up this impromptu meeting in a spirit of great enthusiasm. I ordered the orchestra to give us some music. But the musicians still feared for their lives among those armed and painted men. A tense argument produced no results. It was up to me to act. I seized a drum and began to beat it, strongly, rhythmically, with increased insistence. Timidly, one of the musicians picked up his instrument and began to play with me. Two or three more musicians joined



in. A quarter of an hour later, the warriors' arms were piled up in a corner and the men, now joined by the women and children, were joyfully dancing together. Thus, at Feshi, that same evening, more than three hundred men added their names to the ranks of the Parti Solidaire Africain.

At Kahemba, the frontier of Angola, an immense crowd waited for us. They came from all the neighboring villages, and even from the interior of Angola. Our presence here took on a special significance. We had been speaking of the total liberation of our continent, from north to south, east to west, and here we found ourselves among brothers who lived under the stubborn, blind colonialism of Portugal. At that time, the Portuguese refused absolutely even to consider giving independence to what they called not their "colonies" but their "overseas provinces." The only way for the Angolan people to achieve independence against such intransigence was through armed struggle. It was the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola which was leading in this fight.

In Guinea I had met members of the Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA) and sympathized deeply with their cause. Even then I had wished I could help them. Now, at this frontier village to which hundreds of Angolans had fled, I saw work I could do.

In Kahemba we created a village for refugees, the first cell of a free Angola. The village would also serve as a base for MPLA's militants, the freedom fighters. This was an important event. On learning of it, Radio Leopoldville furiously denounced the news to the world.

We found the people completely without resources, in indescribable misery. They had no clothes, food, blankets, medicine, or shelter. It was necessary to find everything for them at once. Hastily, we sent three small vans to Kikui for the provisions that we could not find in the region. With

the help of the people of Kahemba, we constructed several dozen straw huts in an atmosphere as gay as a country fair. This show of spontaneous fraternity was a great comfort to the refugees who had lost everything.

Whereas usually I held meetings of an organizational nature with the Congolese women, here there were more basic things to do. As usual, I was everywhere among the work that was being done, and above all helping the women with the preparation of food. My heart on fire, I composed the first leaflets for a free Angola, which were to be carried back into the interior of the country.

It was a painful wrench to me to leave Kahemba. I felt as though I were abandoning someone wounded. It seemed to me that my place was there, among those disinherited people.

A great sadness came over me as our caravan began to move again.

## Ominous Developments Surround Lumumba

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When we returned from our campaign in the brush, Leopoldville seemed like a marvelous European metropolis. After our weeks on those hard trails, I was dazzled by the modern buildings, the lights and automobiles, the animated crowds of people. To tell the truth, our visit to the poor villages of Kwilu and Kasai had politicized us as much as we had politicized them. Now we understood the real misery of these rural areas, and more than ever were resolved to work for them.

In Leopoldville I stayed at the home of Pierre Mulele and his wife Clementine, in the Cité Congolaise. Pierre was close to both Gizenga and me. At our first meeting in Guinea we immediately became friends. At that time Pierre was only thirty-one years old. He had been a rebellious spirit since very young, when he was expelled from his Catholic mission school for refusing to accept the dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Although he spoke with authority at all our meetings on the caravan, he had not yet become the charismatic leader who was to head, in 1964, the last great Congo rebellion. But even then, during the campaign, I recognized in him

rare qualities that were desperately needed in our cause. He had a strong personality, and a true sense of African fraternity, transcending petty tribalism. His endurance was extraordinary. He hardly ever ate, and never stopped working. Intelligent, farsighted, clever, and tenacious, he was a great African, as his part in Congo history was to prove.

Mulele and Gizenga complemented one another politically and in their personalities, too. Gizenga rarely spoke; his silences were disconcerting. Because he talked so little, the Belgians feared him more than anyone else. “I prefer ten Lumumbas to one Gizenga,” they would say. Gizenga personified all that was most feared in communism. No one knew what was going on in his head. He was small, dark, and formal in his manner. Mulele was tall and thin, easier in his style. He was capable of telling little stories during a discussion, to lighten the mood. But while speaking of other things he never lost his sense of direction. His goal was always clear. Although he and Gizenga did not always agree, they worked well together.

One of the first things I had to do when I got back to Leopoldville was to take care of my physical condition. There was only one representative from the Eastern Bloc in the Belgian Congo then, and that was the ambassador of Czechoslovakia. When this kind man, whose name escapes me, learned that I was in need of treatment for my abscess, he proposed to take me to a small clinic that the Soviets had recently established in Leopoldville. I was relieved and grateful to get competent medical attention at last.

But I was astonished by what I learned about the Soviets during my visit for treatment. My wound needed to be cleaned and drained. I was lying there on the table, face down, gritting my teeth against the pain as the Soviet doctor probed, scraped, and swabbed. Near my head stood a Soviet nurse. To comfort me, she stroked my hands. “There, there, little one,” she

said. “That’s all right. You’re doing fine.” And the language she used was ... Lingala! The Soviets were prepared, when they came to the Congo. Prepared to stay!

The Belgians had no intention of letting go of their prize, the Congo, just because they had agreed on the colony’s independence. They professed to receive the shock of their lives when they found how savagely their nefarious maneuvers to hold on to it were rejected by the people. Full of rage and self-pity, they cursed the day they had agreed to negotiate on the subject. Up until the last minute, in spite of the evidence before them, they persisted in fabricating plots to remain in control. If not officially, then through *béni-oui-oui* surrogates.

Chief among the Belgians’ tactics was to sow discord within the parties that best represented the Congo’s interests, and if possible, create schisms there. Another was to subsidize the many new groups, however idiotic they might be, that were mushrooming everywhere and that might drain off the large parties’ effectiveness. Suddenly Leopoldville was swarming with self-appointed ethnic “leaders.” Often they were greedy and naive, concerned about their own region only and with no understanding of the needs of the Congo as a whole. With the magic word “freedom” they won the support of their innocent people, and then, full of self-importance, they rushed to the capital and threw themselves into the politics of the nation. Their benighted interest came too late, in a country that was moving too fast.

The center of activity for the Belgians and those through whom they planned to work was the Hôtel Régina, which formerly had been off limits to Congolese. Here the aspiring politicians of the so-called “moderate” parties met. Congolese who only a little earlier had been stiffly excluded from the establishment took intense delight in using its rooms and bars

noisily. Exuberant in their new privileges, they conspired there with their former tormentors with the greatest satisfaction. It was pitiful to see them, really. There they were, every day, drinking, shouting, gesticulating, plotting against their country and those who were trying to save it.

The garishness of the scene was aggravated by their female companions. Many of these politicians were flanked by young women of dubious morals, who were sophisticated, stupid, and vulgar—authentic products of the Belgian regime. Others were closely chaperoned by their Belgian “counselors.” These fascistic types, arrogant and oafish, now adopted an obsequious manner with their handpicked Congolese “colts,” who in turn, did just as they were told, like good seminarians.

Besides the Parti solidaire africain, and its ally, ABAKO, headed by Joseph Kasavubu, the most important political party was Patrice Lumumba’s Congolese National Movement (MNC), which was split into three factions. One of them was presided over by the sinister Victor Nendaka Bika, who would later play a leading role in the assassination of Patrice Lumumba. He would, in fact, become the foremost executioner of the followers of Lumumba.

It was at this time that Brussels sent Walter Ganshof van der Meersch as minister to the Congo. The great purger of Belgium during the days of Nazism, he was known for his severity as “The Iron Horseman.”

Gizenga protested, “We don’t need an Iron Horseman. We will be independent a month from now.”

As June 30, the promised date of independence, drew near, the extreme tension gave Leopoldville the atmosphere of a city under siege. Dramatic ambushes and intrigues charged the atmosphere. Corruption and even death lurked at every corner. One could hardly breathe, as the hopes and yearnings of the 14 million people of the Congo seemed to be suspended

like a cloud over the capital. A curfew was instituted. Massive reinforcements of Belgian troops landed. All day long the radio reminded us of the great loss we would suffer when the Belgian administration withdrew. They said that China, Siam, Egypt, and Persia had asked for Belgian technicians to help them in their development. The Congo certainly would not survive without the Belgians.

We could not say that we had not been warned of the catastrophe that they had so effectively prepared for us! Whereas there were five thousand black students from the French colonies studying in France, preparing for their roles in their new nations' work, there were only two Congolese students at the University of Louvain in Belgium. On the eve of independence, diplomas were quickly manufactured for twenty-five Congolese students. In what field? Political science! There was not one single Congolese engineer or doctor.

I had met many political personalities since my arrival in the Congo, but never Patrice Lumumba. This revolutionary was already a hero that mad year in the Congo—1959—and his name was written in letters of gold in the Congo skies.

Lumumba had attentively followed Gizenga's work and supported his platform of Congo unity. During Gizenga's electoral campaign he had sent Gizenga several telegrams of congratulations. A collaboration between the MNC and the PSA was logical, and the two leaders were working toward this.

One day, Gizenga said to me, "Tonight I'm going to meet Lumumba and I'd like you to be with me. I want your impression of him. You women sometimes have more intuition than we men."

At that time Lumumba had just returned from the Round Table in Brussels. There he had participated with the Belgians in discussions on independence, his wrists still scarred from the manacles he wore during his three months in prison.

Patrice was his characteristically natural self at our meeting with him. It was he who came to the door of his residence to receive us. Laughing, his white teeth shining, he shook our hands warmly. He wore black trousers and a white shirt. With a feline step he led us into his receiving room. I felt a great deal of joy in his easy manner.

After he had made us welcome, he turned to me. Constantly moving his fine, long, nervous hands, he said, “It’s good of you to come to the Congo and help us, Madame Blouin. We’re sincerely grateful. Until now our country has been a *chasse gardée* for the Belgians. But soon it will belong to us. We’re willing to fight hard for it. You’ll see.”

He said this firmly, but with a smile. He went on.

“We’re facing serious problems in forming the government. The Belgians are trying to divide us, turn us against one another. They’re putting spies everywhere. On the very eve of our independence, they’re still intent on destroying our unity.”

Smiling, full of good spirits, he continued to talk, his hands moving restlessly as he expounded on the obstacles to be overcome to prepare a viable new system. I listened intently, my admiration for him growing. Before the evening was over, I felt sure I was in the presence of a great man. I said so to Gizenga, later, as we were separating.

“I’m glad I met Lumumba. He’s brave and he’s sincere. Above all, he is *committed*. That’s the important thing. He is passionately committed.”



Gizenga, silent as usual, was listening. “He will be your friend,” I predicted, happy that I felt this to be true. “One of your best friends, politically. He won’t disappoint Africa,” I added, in words that now seem prophetic.

The next day, the historic agreement uniting the two largest parties, the PSA and the MNC, was signed by Lumumba and Gizenga. This was an important step forward for the nationalists.

But there was much work to be done as the intrigues multiplied around us. Each evening Pierre, Antoine, and I returned to Lumumba’s home, late, when he would not be disturbed, to report on our work of the day and confer with one another. As there was a curfew in Leopoldville, Lumumba arranged a *laissez-passer* for each of us. He always laughed as if he were neither tired nor worried, although we knew how hard he was working and how many problems he faced as he tried to bring together reliable elements to form a nationalist government.

A constant line of candidates for positions presented themselves at his home. As we discussed the merits of these aspiring officials, our friendship developed. It was the special friendship that is to be found only among those who are working heart and soul for the same cause.

One evening he had something special to show us. He took a dossier out of his briefcase. “Look!” he said, triumphantly. “Here’s a document from the Leo secret police. One of our friends managed to get hold of it for us. Reports on the three of us.” (Pierre was not there that evening.)

The first report concerned Lumumba. It complained at length about how he was no longer as grateful and docile seeming as he had been at the Round Table when he thanked the Belgian authorities for agreeing to hold the Round Table, and to let him take part in it. “He has changed his tune,”

the report said. "His work is now damaging the Belgian government program."

Patrice laughed heartily. "And they think *we* are naive!" Then he began to read the second report. "Gizenga is a communist," wrote agent X ... "This man never says anything. He is dangerous. One never knows what he is thinking. He has imported a *métisse* woman from Guinea who was raised in Brazzaville. She is a courtesan. After having been the mistress of Sékou Touré she became in turn that of Nkrumah, Tubman, Modibo Keita, and other well-known African leaders. Today Gizenga is the favored one. This woman must not remain in the Congo."

"Congratulations!" Lumumba said to me. "You're a success. The Belgian Secret Service is very concerned about you."

I was used to being slandered. Their vilifications were nothing new to me.

"That's not all," Lumumba went on. "Listen! 'This young woman is not what we first thought. We have watched her as she worked for the PSA in the cortège through Kwilu. Madame Blouin has a gift for speaking. Already she is in demand in several provinces to organize new groups of her feminine movement. She is all the more dangerous because she scorns money and sex. She is sincere and tireless. A fanatic.'"

"Their logic is astonishing," Gizenga noted. "First you are a courtesan and an adventurer so you should be deported. Then they see that they misjudged you; you cannot be corrupted either by money or sex, but you should be deported anyhow, because you are sincere."

"At least your name was linked with hers, Antoine," Lumumba laughed. "I haven't the honor, it's not very flattering for me! But listen to the rest of this. Our sentence is pronounced. 'Lumumba and Gizenga must be eliminated by whatever means necessary. As to Madame Blouin, she must

leave or suffer the same fate as the others. We cannot have Lumumba plotting with her against our plans for the new government.”

He looked at Gizenga, then pronounced his own resolve. “The national government will be formed by *us*. Not by the Belgians’ puppets who are proliferating their plots at the Hôtel Régina.”

He went on to speak of his concerns about Joseph Kasavubu, head of ABAKO, whose unbridled ambitions, he feared, were headed not toward sharing the country’s leadership with a prime minister, but toward ruling the country as king.

“If he doesn’t get what he wants, his people, the Bakongos won’t hesitate to shed blood. The Belgians know that, and it’s just what they’re waiting for. It will serve their purposes exactly. Kasavubu doesn’t care. He’s openly courting the Belgians’ support. Do you know—he took it upon himself to invite King Baudouin to the independence festivities. The cheek of it! Going over my head like that! But if I challenge him, it may bring on war. His people are already threatening to secede and become the Bakongo Kingdom, as it is.”

Patrice’s position was precarious, I saw. But we could not let petty concerns divide us. We could not give the Belgians a readymade schism by which they could profit.

“You’ve always said, Patrice,” I addressed him earnestly, “that the unity of the Congo must be preserved. You’ve fought hard for it until now. Continue. Hold out your hand to him. Ignore his impudent assumption of rights, like inviting King Baudouin. Do this, not for Kasavubu, but for his people.”

Lumumba pondered this. “Peace in the Congo is my dearest wish,” he murmured, shaking his head.

“We can have unity only by paying for it,” I replied. “If we don’t include Kasavubu in our plans in naming the future government, Leopoldville will explode in blood and fire.”

After we talked a little more, Patrice suddenly became enthusiastic and announced, “You’re right! Tomorrow let’s meet at noon at the restaurant of The Carrefour Leo II. I’ll be there ... with Kasavubu! Yes. I’ll hold out my hand to him, tomorrow morning.” Patrice burst out laughing. “I think we should offer Kasavubu the position of vice prime minister, for the prime minister will be you,” he said, pointing to Gizenga. “And I will be president of the republic.”

Gizenga shook his head resolutely. “Kasa will never accept that, nor will the ABAKO people. No. I will simply keep the presidency of my province.”

“Don’t be so modest,” Patrice said. “Kwilu is the province with the largest population in the Congo. You have a right to be prime minister.”

“The opposition doesn’t care about that,” I pointed out.

“We must avoid offending the Bakongos,” Gizenga said in a low voice. “Kasavubu will have to be given a post suitable to the role he has played in Congo politics. Don’t forget, he is known not only nationally but internationally. Since he is a tribalist, the best way to neutralize him is to have him with us.”

“No!” pronounced Lumumba. “The key posts have to be in safe hands. He hasn’t given us any guarantees at all. We really can’t trust him.”

Gizenga answered that if Kasavubu were in a key post he would see the whole country’s interests better. Finally he convinced Lumumba. It was decided to offer Kasavubu the role of prime minister. According to the

Congolese constitution, this position was subordinate to the president of the republic, which would be Lumumba.

As we were leaving, Patrice thanked me warmly for my work with them. "Let me salute you," he said, kissing me on the cheek. "You are a real patriot of Africa. It's a great comfort to see a woman who is willing to take part in our great struggle."

"Thank you, Patrice."

"But be careful! In being with us here in the Congo you are exposed to real danger."

The next day, at noon exactly, we met at the place of our rendezvous. Patrice was happy and relaxed and seemed gayer than usual. He told us he had seen Kasavubu who had accepted the position of prime minister eagerly.

"He will arrive in a minute or two. God of our ancestors! May this luncheon mark the beginning of a new Congo unity. We need peace!"

We waited until two o'clock to sit down to our lunch. Kasavubu did not appear. He remained invisible all day. Later we found out where he had been. With the "Iron Horseman."

The Congo crisis was upon us. New political groups were being formed every minute on the basis of fresh news about the possibilities of their leaders' positions. Riots broke out in many places, taking numerous victims. Nerves were stretched to the breaking point. The atmosphere crackled with hostility.

The Belgians were a depressing sight. Pitying themselves, trembling with fear, rage lurking in their eyes, they saw an enemy in every Congolese, who in turn saw them as their declared foe.

It would be unfair to say that all the whites in the Congo were detestable. But the sum of misery inflicted on the blacks by the many far eclipsed the deeds of kindness of a few. Rare and precious indeed was a friendship with a white.

The imperialists, who called themselves “the moderates,” organized one plot after another against the nationalists, who wanted to make a common front with Lumumba. No trick was too petty, no treachery too heartless for the imperialists’ purposes. There was nothing they would not stoop to in order to achieve their purposes. They even resorted to cultivating the tribal chiefs. For years these chiefs had been only figureheads among their people, serving mainly to collect taxes for the Belgians. Now these chiefs were decked out in a pretended new prestige and authority, for one reason only: to open old tribal wounds and set the people against one another.

It was pitiable and disgusting beyond words to see the dreadful farce enacted: the Belgians cozying up to these old chiefs whose significance had been in tatters for so long. These chiefs, displayed as objects of curiosity in a Brussels exhibit of second-rate folklore ... these chiefs, so amusing in their exotic ornaments except that their dark skins frightened the blond babies of noble Belgium ... these chiefs, charmingly illiterate, whose signature was a thumbprint, that thumbprint agreeably affixed to a document depriving them of the right to manage their own affairs ... these chiefs who had been dishonored and discarded and who sometimes did not understand when their race was being insulted ... these were the same chiefs, forgotten in the night of time, who now became the new instruments for the Belgians’ intransigence and greed.

And they let it happen, the chiefs. They let themselves be used for the white trusts’ iniquitous purposes. For decades they had worn only the poorest cotton cloths and had known cold in their simple straw huts. Now in

the pride of their new *pagnes* they rose in arms against their racial and ethnic brothers, to tear their land asunder.

On the eve of independence, this great country had to undergo such things—to write its history in letters of tears and blood. Poor Congo!

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## Expulsion on the Eve of Independence

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In the midst of the intrigues that rocked the Congo like a boat in a tempest, two factions became clear. That of Kasavubu, at the head of the “moderates,” and that of Lumumba, whose party had obtained the most seats in the parliament. This meant that it was he who should form the government. Although this was his legal right, attempts to thwart his work and subvert his authority were everywhere.

The signs around us were ominous. There was a rigorously controlled curfew. In the African quarter only, however. If a citizen drove around the city after 6 o'clock, he was stopped at control points by soldiers who would shine a strong flashlight on him for a long time, examine his identity card and the *laissez-passer*, and search his car with great deliberation. The time and the license plate of the car were recorded, as was the owner's identity number. All this information, we knew, was useful to someone.

Each evening, with the *laissez-passer* provided by Lumumba, Gizenga, Mulele, and I continued to meet at Lumumba's house, to give each other an accounting of the day's work.



“This country is nowhere near being decolonized,” I complained. “The Belgians are pretending to maintain order with this curfew. But there’s no curfew in the European section of the city!”

We could do nothing about such outrages except apply ourselves all the more to our work at hand, the forming of the new government. Lumumba’s optimism at this time was both comforting and disturbing. Often I asked myself if he were aware of the real fury that was being generated against us, and especially him.

We were to be given evidence of this one evening at an PSA meeting at the home of Pierre Mulele. The PSA was close to a schism between the hard-line wing that followed Gizenga and the moderate wing that followed Cléophas Kamitatu. The tension in the air was at its limit.

That morning, Anicet Kashamura, who we had hoped would be with us, had made a speech on the radio, adopting a demagogic anticommunist theme and calling Lumumba a dictator. He was present at the meeting. Infuriated at what he had done, I attacked him. “How could you do such a thing?” I stormed.

Joseph Iléo, who was already known as a sworn enemy of Lumumba’s, was also there. He turned on me furiously. “Why shouldn’t Kashamura say that Lumumba is a dictator? We know a dictator when we see one. And we know what to do with one. The Congo still has cannibals, you know. We will eat human flesh after independence. Yes, the flesh of our enemies, right here in Leopoldville!”

I was stupefied to witness such hatred for Lumumba. Mulele and Gizenga riveted me with their eyes to try to keep me from reacting.

Kashamura shrugged off my attack on his speech as if it were nothing. “I had to say those things,” he said. “When you go on the radio, that’s the sort of thing that’s expected.”

Wild with rage at him and Iléo, I shouted, “You are contemptible! Both of you! You are *beneath* contempt!”

Kashamura took me by the arm and led me into another room to quiet me. “Don’t take my speech so seriously,” he said soothingly. “Tomorrow I’ll pass by the PSA offices and talk to the folks there. I’ll smooth it all over.” Kashamura was one of those who professed to be a Congo nationalist. Poor Congo!

Lumumba had drawn up his lists of candidates and the government posts that they were to fill when a veritable bombshell landed. Just as he was about to announce his choices, Ganshof van der Meersch asked Kasavubu to form the government. Lumumba’s authority, conferred by the majority in parliament, was openly being flouted. Never had there been such a scandal in politics.

That evening we held a council of war at Lumumba’s. The Belgian government was no longer bothering to keep a semblance of democratic form. We had to find some means to stop their takeover, through their puppets, of the Congo. But how? For hours we furiously debated the problem without arriving at any concrete results. We did not separate until dawn.

The next morning at eight o’clock, dead with fatigue, I was asleep when a policeman knocked at the Muleles’ home, with a summons for me to appear at city hall at once. The mayor, a Belgian, informed me that my visa, for which I had requested an extension of one month, would not be renewed. I would have to be out of Leopoldville within three days. I had been in the Congo for just three months. Ever since Patrice had shown us the secret service reports I had, from day to day, been expecting something like this.

With Gizenga, I went to Lumumba to tell him of the measures taken against me. Immediately, Lumumba seized the telephone and called the governor general, Hendrik Cornelis.

“What is this, putting an African woman out of her own home!” Lumumba protested angrily. “This is shameful! Here, as everywhere on this continent, Madame Blouin is in her own home.”

Cornelis replied that it was Gizenga’s fault for having taken Madame Blouin as a “counselor.”

Furious, Patrice shouted, “It doesn’t suit you that Gizenga has a nationalist at his side? Well, there are plenty of Belgian counselors around, too, although I’ve never had one. Look, this is June 14, the 30th is almost here, and you’re still trying to get rid of nationalists? Do you really think you can turn things around in the next sixteen days? You are wrong, Mr. Governor General. After our independence it will be a nationalist government that you will have to deal with, and no other. Meantime, Madame Blouin will not leave. And if you imprison her, I warn you, we will all go to prison with her!”

Trembling with wrath, he hung up. Passionately, he turned to Gizenga. “We must organize a huge demonstration. Andrée must not leave. This affront against her is against all of us. Perhaps it will be the last. The partisans of the PSA and the MNC will block all the crossroads of the capital to prevent her departure. It would be cowardly not to do it. If the PSA hasn’t the courage, then the MNC will do it alone. It is our duty. Our African duty.”

I could not speak for emotion. I looked at Patrice gratefully, my eyes full of tears. It was the first time in my life that someone had defended me, had fought publicly for me. And our causes were indeed the same. But I could not accept it. We had to avoid all incidents.

Finally, I was able to speak. “Thank you, Patrice, but no. Don’t do anything, please. Perhaps my departure can serve our cause. The Congo is in a vacuum and the world doesn’t know what is happening here. We should inform international opinion. From the outside perhaps I can help you. I can look for valuable support. Thank you, Patrice, my brother. I will never forget your generous offer.”

The next morning Lumumba held an important press conference. He denounced the Belgian and American intrigue against the nationalists. (Yes, we knew then that the Americans were working hand in glove with the Belgians in holding onto this prize, the Congo.) He denounced the Belgian authorities for attempting to install a Kasavubu government when the legislative election had given the nationalist movement a clear majority. He calculated the price in deaths due to manipulating tribal hostilities. And he threatened to form a popular government, bypassing entirely the Belgian government’s instructions.

Pointing to me, Lumumba said, “You see Madame Blouin, this African woman whom the Belgians think they can expel from the Congo only a few days before independence? When the Congo is independent it will be the Belgian counselor’s turn to be expelled. Madame Blouin will not leave. She is in her own home here.”

Pierre Davister, a Belgian journalist for *Pourquoi Pas?*, was present at this press conference and wrote about my expulsion at length for the paper. In his article he called me “the Black Pasionaria,” an expression that was to be used later by the European press in speaking of me.

We enlarged our group for the meeting that evening, as we had decided on a tactic that would turn my expulsion to our advantage. We would fight the Belgians in the arena of international opinion. When I left the Congo, I would take with me a protocol of accord signed by the leaders of all the

nationalist groups. This protocol would prove that the majority of the Congo was on our side, and that the nationalists—not Kasavubu—had the right to form the government. The hypocritical and criminal maneuvers of the Belgian government in trying to bypass the majority would thus be exposed to the censure of the world.

That, at least, was our hope. We still believed that the Congo could be saved.

Our plan was terribly dangerous. We knew that if the Belgians got wind of it, they would stop at nothing—literally nothing—to prevent the exposure of their crime. Our very lives were at stake. The greatest peril in the plan was the unreliability of some of the so-called nationalists who were constantly shifting their allegiance out of expediency, unable to commit to our cause on principle. Some of them were with us one day and not the next. It was infuriating. It was frightening. We needed their signatures for maximum effect, and yet we were not sure we could trust them to keep the secret of our strategy. The risk in all this was terrifying. But we had to take the chance.

Cautiously, holding our breath, we approached each nationalist leader. One by one, we managed to persuade them of the value of signing the protocol of unity to show the world. Even Kashamura saw the importance of it and agreed to join us.

The signing was to be only minutes before my departure. But I warned our core group that the others, the “borderline” nationalists, should not be informed that I would be leaving immediately afterward. Some of those “chameleons” might be afraid to be caught in an irreversible position. So at the gathering for the signatures I spoke only vaguely of my departure from Leo “in the next few days.” As if it were of no real urgency.

At the actual signing of the document, again I was afraid of a last-minute change of mind. If even one withdrew or faltered, it might be an excuse for another to refuse. We could not have a single hesitation.

Lumumba signed his name firmly, laid down the pen.

“Here, *cher ami*.” One of the men motioned to Gizenga to sign next, since he represented the most densely populated region of the Congo. Gizenga was ready to pick up the pen when I made a gesture to him, seen by no one else, not to sign. I distrusted several of the others so much that I feared that once Lumumba’s and Gizenga’s signatures were on the paper, someone might seize the pretext that it was *their* document, a Lumumba-Gizenga pact, which he would not support. There was such danger in the air, such a lack of conviction among those slippery, self-serving nationalists, that until the ink was dry on the page I could not be sure they were with us.

So Gizenga passed the pen to someone else, who signed second. Then, smoothly, one after another, the rest signed their names. Gizenga was last, when the others were already committed.

Thus it was done. Here, in this document, we had invincible proof that Lumumba had the majority and the right to form the government. Now they were all engaged.

It was only those whom we trusted who were there at the solemn moment, a little later, when Lumumba presented me with the protocol. He placed it in my hands, saying, “If the Belgians learn of this document before you are out of the Congo we are lost. This will be a death warrant for all of us.”

I knew he was not exaggerating. I would be carrying the lives of my friends in this single piece of paper.

“Be brave,” Lumumba said to me with a smile, that smile that carried such bravery and optimism on his own part. “May luck go with you. On our day of victory, when we proclaim our independence, you will be with us.”

Five men stood before me: Patrice, Gizenga, Pierre Mulele, Kashamura, Sendwe. I looked at each of them in turn, pressing the precious paper to my bosom. “This mission will be accomplished,” I solemnly promised them. “At the price of my life, if necessary.”

At my request, the others left me alone for a moment with Lumumba. I had one last concern to confide in him. “Mr. President, I leave Antoine Gizenga to your protection. I know he is a hunted man, tracked by adversaries on all sides, both black and white. I know that the work I have done here has added to the list of his enemies. I feel dreadful to think that because of me he may be harmed.”

Patrice put his hands on my shoulders, and said softly, “Go in peace.”

I was wearing my hair in an elegant chignon that day. It was within the roll of my chignon that I carefully buried this burning document. It almost scorched my fingers as I folded it into a tight strip and hid it there. Carefully I made up my face, preparing my most haughty look to carry me through the departure that lay ahead.

Tensely, Gizenga and Mulele hurried me to the airport. We had no idea what awaited us there. For all we knew we might already have been betrayed. Was a net even now being prepared to take me? We tried not to believe it, and tried to have faith that the others would keep their word.

Besides these fears, of which we hardly dared speak, I had other feelings about leaving. I could not conceal them from my friends. Fighting back tears as we drove, I said, “The hardest part of this for me is to have to leave you in the middle of this crisis. We’ve been through so much together. We’ve shared everything. And now, just at the end, when we’re so close to

independence, we're being separated." I did not want to embarrass my companions, but I had to add: "Really, I feel so sad."

Taking a more practical turn, I tried to warn the always silent Gizenga. "Be careful, my friend," I said gently. "You are surrounded by danger." I added, "Tell the women of our movement that I am not abandoning them. Please reassure them of that. I know they have put so much hope into our work. We will carry on. Tell them I've only left on a trip. I'll be back."

This was my first expulsion, just a few days before independence was to be proclaimed. It was in those last terrible days that I bitterly, painfully, came to realize that the real enemies of Africa are the Africans themselves. The betrayal of Africa has been the work of our own brothers who were willing to sell out to the imperialists. This terrible fact was something that I, as a militant, could no longer ignore.



## The Protocol and the Escape

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At the airport there was an Alitalia plane on the field, scheduled to leave at one o'clock p.m. for Rome. It was the next flight to Europe and it was not going to Belgium. That was all that mattered. We had not specifically chosen Rome as the capital in which to announce the protocol. My ticket was hastily bought.

At once the Belgian security apparatus went into high gear. They took over my luggage and went through it with excruciating thoroughness. They insisted that I give them my purse and they examined every article within. The only thing they did not do was make a body search. While all this activity was going on, I waited with a cold poise, although my heart was beating so hard that I was exhausted.

I was now behind the barrier that separates passengers from those who are merely visiting the airport. Gizenga and Mulele stood behind the barrier, watching my every move, watching everyone with whom I spoke, intently. Nothing was certain. A last-minute abduction was still possible.

The document in my chignon burned me like a living flame. But it gave me strength, too. It made me bold. It made me feel that I could brave

anything, even death, which I knew might be waiting. Never have I carried my chin more high.

In the crowd I noticed a high-level Belgian functionary who was watching me constantly. He was very discreet, remaining at a distance, but his eyes never left me.

I lifted my hand in farewell to my companions and walked out onto the field with the rest of the passengers, headed for the plane. With each step I felt that much closer to freedom. My knees trembling, I had just reached the top step of the plane's ladder when the Belgian functionary hastened up the stairs to me and indulged in the formality of shaking my hand.

"Madame Blouin," he said, "I have been charged by my government with checking your departure from the Congo."

"I know," I said, with an aplomb that astonished even me. But inside I was shaking. Now, would he stop me? *Now?*

"Are you expecting to return to the Congo?"

I found this assumption that the future concerned them intolerable. "Are *you*," I retorted, "expecting to *leave* the Congo?"

For several seconds, our eyes locked. It was a real confrontation. I could think only of the document, burning the nape of my neck. My hands were damp, I felt dizzy. But I kept a cold, sure look. Nothing else was possible. Something made me turn my head, and I saw that we were being photographed with a telephoto lens. The official had set me up for that picture. The next day it would be in all the papers: Madame Blouin entering the plane, proof that the Belgians had got rid of her at last.

Without a word, the officer left me. I watched for a moment as, holding himself very straight, he went down the steps of the ladder. Finally, breathing deep draughts of air, I seated myself in the plane.

But even then I could not be at ease. I was so full of emotions that I could not sleep for one moment the whole eight-hour trip.

When we landed at Rome, I was astonished to find a crowd of journalists waiting for me. The wire services had reported that I was expelled from the Congo. It was the Belgians themselves who had jubilantly broadcast the news. There was a group from London, and another from the French national radio and television. As I came down the stairs, they crowded around me with microphones and cameras.

“Madame Blouin! Madame Blouin!”

I was not experienced in setting up an international press conference, but I thought it would be better not to say anything at this moment to the journalists. So I refused to answer their questions. I said only that I would have a press conference later. They would be notified where it would be held. I had no idea then where this should be. I didn't even know where I was going to sleep that night. I went to the airport bus and asked where it stopped. The driver told me “At the Hotel Artemide.” That was where they took the flight personnel. So I went there, quite unprepared. It was a big hotel, very impressive.

My first task was to mimeograph dozens of copies of the protocol. I folded them and addressed them for all the newspapers and embassies, and put them in the post myself. They were all on their way, in the mail, before I held the press conference. Thus, if anything happened to me, the evidence would still be in the hands of the press and the diplomatic world.

When all this was done, I had a press conference. The moment came, like the easing of a great pain, as I delivered myself of my burden. First I read them our prepared statement, denouncing Belgium's attempts to maintain control of the Congo by nefarious maneuvers within its body politic. This declaration ended with the words, “If the imperialist maneuvers

should succeed in installing a puppet government [in the Congo] it will be overthrown.”

Then I presented the press with copies of the protocol, which gave absolute majority to the nationalist groups and confirmed that only Lumumba, not Kasavubu, had the authority to form a government.

The stroke carried. The revelation of the protocol created a sensation. The Belgians’ ignoble machinations were exposed.

That evening, I phoned Lumumba in Leopoldville. “Our mission has been accomplished, Mr. President!” I could not conceal my pride and relief.

“We know!” he shouted over the crackling line. His voice was happy. “Everyone here is talking about it. The Belgians are dumbfounded. And the moderates are wild.” After congratulating me, and thanking me, warmly, he added, “Return to Guinea as soon as you can. You’re not safe there, in Rome. The Belgians are beside themselves. Anything at all could happen.” I promised to leave the following day.

Exhausted, I fell into bed and slept until nine o’clock the next morning. When I heard the story of the protocol on the news of my room’s radio, I knew my work had been done.

A few minutes later, the phone in my room rang and I was astonished to find myself speaking with the ambassador of Czechoslovakia in the Belgian Congo. It was the same kind man who had arranged for the treatment of my abscess after the electoral campaign.

“You must leave at once,” he said to me in his heavily accented French. “Quickly! Quickly! Pack your things. You must get out of Rome immediately!” There was such urgency in his voice that I knew I had to obey.

The ambassador knew which hotel I was in because he had been at the airport when I arrived. His car had followed the airport bus. As a matter of discretion, he had not sought to join me, or asked me to ride with him. When he saw me get off, he knew where I was staying.

“I’ll come for you in five minutes,” he said. “Don’t leave the hotel. Don’t talk to anyone. Just pack. I’ll come to get you. Your life is in danger. There’s not a minute to lose.”

Fortunately, I had very few things to pack. “You have an uncomfortable place in all the world, today,” he said as he greeted me.

He hurried me to a waiting car. As we drove to the airport, he told me that he had already booked my flight to Paris and Guinea. He had found that the Guinea flight was supposed to leave before the Rome-to-Paris flight arrived, so he telexed the airline, asking that the plane be held for me.

I don’t even remember which airline I took to Paris. I was so rushed, I bounded onto the plane, feeling death at my heels. How the Czech ambassador had known I was in danger, I never knew. I had hardly thanked him, and then we were airborne.

When we landed at Orly, I was notified to go at once to the departure gate for Guinea. The plane was already there, passengers inside, waiting for some time. “You must leave at once,” the officials said, and put me in a small car that hustled me out to the plane. The cabin door was reopened. Everyone seemed to know what was happening to me. I hurried up the ladder and seconds later we were in the air.

When I arrived at Conakry, there was again a swarm of journalists waiting for me. They knew what had happened in Rome, and that I had left precipitately. They did not know whether I had been abducted (and if so whether I was still alive), or if I had fled. Since Conakry was where my home and family were, they had been frantically trying to get information

there. Back in Paris, the airport officials were smoothly denying that anything special had happened. “No, we took only the normal measures that one takes for a passenger ...” Thanks to the Guinea plane connection there had been no time between my rushing through the formalities and the moment of my flying for intercession by an outside party. There was no time for my papers to be checked out. The affair had been beautifully orchestrated by the Czech ambassador.

My daughter Rita, who was then twenty and had taken the name of Christiane, was working for the Conakry radio station. She showed me a huge stack of telexes that the station had received.

“Look at them! From all over the world!” she exclaimed.

Everyone was marveling. “You escaped. My God! After doing what you did, you escaped with your life!”

It was so good to be with my family again. I could hardly believe that I had been gone for only three months. It seemed like much longer as I looked back at all that had happened during those brimming days.

Soon after the revelation of the protocol, Ganshof van der Meersch was obliged to ask Lumumba “for appearance’s sake” to form a government. Kasavubu, in a show of magnanimity, did not contest but asked, himself, to be relieved of the task. But even this apparent victory was to prove another treachery, and Lumumba knew it.

The day of the Congo’s independence, June 30, arrived. I was in my home in Conakry as I listened to the ceremonies. Baudouin, King of Belgium, spoke first. I listened with bitter irony as he enumerated all the splendid things Belgium had done in the Congo. He spoke of the pioneers of African emancipation, as if the Congo’s independence had been Belgium’s very own idea all along. Frozen by a premonition of disaster, I listened, my heart beating, eyes closed.

Then, like a miracle, came the prime minister's speech, restoring the dignity, so long mocked, of his people. Patrice Lumumba's speech began: "If the independence of the Congo is proclaimed today in agreement with Belgium, this friend with whom we deal as an equal, still no Congolese worthy of the name can ever forget that this independence was won only by struggle. Daily struggle, ardent and idealistic struggle, struggle in which we spared neither our strength nor our sacrifices, nor our suffering, nor our blood. It was a struggle born of tears, fire, and blood. We are deeply proud of this noble and just struggle, for we had to put an end to our humiliation and slavery."

His discourse closed: "In all these things, my brothers, we have suffered deeply. But we whom your representatives have elected to direct our dear country, we who have suffered the colonialist's oppression in body and soul, we say to you, 'All that is henceforth ended.' The Republic of the Congo has been proclaimed and our beloved country is now in our hands, the hands of its own children. Together, my brothers, we are going to begin a new struggle, a sublime struggle, which will lead our country to peace, prosperity and to greatness."

What feelings stirred in me as I heard Patrice's words! Here, at last, in dignity, was the truth about what our people had suffered. A truth smothered for eighty years. The sad truth of a people for whom Patrice bore the wounds.

But all truths are not good to tell, for that one cost him his life.

## The Congo Catastrophe

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The burden that Patrice Lumumba, prime minister of the Republic of the Congo, assumed was an awesome one. On his young, slim shoulders—he was then thirty-four years old—rested the heavy weight of a country of six provinces containing 14 million souls speaking three principal languages—Lingala, Swahili, and Kikongo—and an uncounted number of dialects.

He inherited a scene set for disaster. Government officials and businesspeople were resigning. People in the professions were leaving en masse. The Belgians had not trained replacements. There were few people in any field who were capable of taking responsibility. The workforce was made up only of copying clerks, blue-collar workers, and laborers. The most basic services began to go to pieces. As the Belgians had hoped.

In Leopoldville, on the eve of independence, out of a population of 350,000, there were at least 100,000 unemployed. This number was to swell “miraculously” at the proclamation of independence, and the people demanded “work and a good salary, at once.” How was the new government to wave a magic wand and, within two days after the



proclamation, find a solution for the catastrophe that the Belgians had been preparing for eighty years?

Before June 30, the Congo was already mortally wounded. First there had been the divisive personal and political rivalries, then the tribal conflicts, and then the demonstrations of the unemployed. Finally, on July 5, it was the army's turn to add to the country's calamities. The Congolese soldiers refused to obey any longer the commands of their Belgian officers. They mutinied.

The chief source of their fury was the rule that the highest rank that a Congolese could hold in the army at that time, after fifteen years of service, was sergeant, or first sergeant. A few months earlier, at the Belgians' Round Table, Patrice Lumumba had raised the "serious problem" of the Africanization of the army's upper echelons.

A Belgian, General Janssens, in particular, was detested by his Congolese troops. Scornfully, he had announced that he had "thrown out independence." "That," he said, was "for the civilized."

With a ferocity that accurately reflected what they'd learned from the Belgians, the army went into revolt. Congolese blood was spilled as the men turned against their officers. The Belgians' reprisals greatly resembled techniques of the Nazis, by whom they had been trained. Patrice Lumumba tried to halt the riots, making personal appeals to each side for calm and reason.

The ship of state was listing dangerously as bad news continued to pile up everywhere.

On July 4, I was in Conakry when I received the prime minister's telegram asking me to return to the Congo. On July 8 I was back in Leo with my friends.

At the airport, the Belgian police were still on duty. When I arrived, the man who examined my passport said to me in an aggressive tone, “You’ve been expelled from the Congo. You can’t come back.”

Georges Grenfell, a minister of state and member of Lumumba’s MNC, was beside me. He had been sent to Ghana to take part in the festivities there for the proclamation of the republic. We sat together on the plane after he boarded at Accra, and now he interceded for me.

“Are you still trying to make the law here? Where do you think you are, in Belgium? This is the independent Republic of the Congo. In-de-pen-dent, you understand? Yes, this woman was expelled, but the new government of the Congo has brought her back. Does that displease you? Hand me the phone.”

The Belgian police officer hesitated, marking time. “Whom do you wish to phone?”

“The prime minister, Patrice Lumumba.”

“And your name?”

“State minister Grenfell.”

The police officer was perplexed. “Has no one come to meet you?”

“Perhaps they did. But the plane was eight hours late, you know.”

He let us pass. We took the aviation company’s car and arrived at Leo just at curfew. Lumumba received me with open arms, and these words: “You’re eight days late! Have you heard the news?”

“That the army revolted? Yes, I heard it in Dakar. From Modibo Keïta. Tell me ... what happened?”

“It was General Janssen’s statement that lit the powder keg. The men just couldn’t bear it any longer. They had been working for starvation

wages as it was. The idea that they would continue to be commanded by the Belgian officers was simply intolerable.”

“And at this time!”

“The men had been taught to shoot. Even their own brothers. And they had arms and ammunition. So they took their revenge wherever they could find it. On the Congolese population as well as on the Europeans. The revolt spread through the city blindly, like a disease. It has been terrible.”

“And now? How are things now?”

“As of today, they are a little better. I spent the day talking to the soldiers, with Kasavubu. We managed to calm them. Camp Leopold has been quiet ever since.”

Patrice seemed exhausted. Still, he had the courage to laugh as he spoke to me, that laugh that was the trademark of his hope and idealism. In spite of everything, he laughed, to defy fate. “And you?” he asked me. “What news have you?”

“In Guinea I saw President Sékou Touré, and Nkrumah. I asked them to give us technical help.”

The news of the revolt was frightening. But the Belgian press made it even worse than it was, aggravating the situation so as to justify the Belgians’ sending parachutists to establish order. The first act of these Belgian troops was to disarm the Congolese soldiers.

This happened on the very evening that Moïse Tshombe announced the secession of Katanga. It was a reconquest, pure and simple.

In Leopoldville, the Belgian paras, in combat clothes, took control everywhere. Machine guns were stationed at the crossroads. Radio-controlled jeeps blocked the major boulevards. N’djili Airport was surrounded by the paras to assure the evacuation of the Europeans who,

baggage in hand, were fleeing for Belgium. There was a fantastic traffic on the beach too, where boats were rented by whites fleeing to Brazzaville, to Youlou's great profit. The panic in this exodus was terrible to behold. Hundreds of cars were abandoned in the streets, giving a terribly sad appearance to this city, which was armed like a fortress.

If the Congolese mistreated the Belgians, it was often to try to keep them from leaving the Congo. They did not want the whites to go. Throughout the country there was the revolting spectacle of violence, and woes of every kind.

Hate breeds hate. The word *macaque* (a species of monkey) was used as an epithet for blacks by the Europeans, even by the children. And the Congolese thought that the word *Falamand*, a corruption of Flamand, said with terrible scorn, was the supreme insult.

At N'djili Airport there were incidents between the blacks who worked there and the Europeans who were fleeing. Several Congolese were killed. General Janssen declared, "This will teach a lesson to those who were lucky enough to escape our bullets. If they don't shut up, we are ready to begin the sport again."

The Assembly of Deputies tried to find a means of regaining control of the country, but found itself paralyzed. With the secession of Katanga, the Belgians' plan for keeping control of their economic interests in the Congo moved ahead with diabolic success.

The idea of Katanga as a separate republic was really like a vulgar caricature of a mini-state in an operetta. The Belgians were quite serious about it, however, as they saw in the secession a means of escaping the nationalization of Katanga's rich mines. It would also, the Belgians believed, draw other provinces with tribal aspirations into secession after it. Thus Belgium would officially let go of the Congo, whose enormous needs

and continued indebtedness, aggravated by the flight of capital and the repatriation of the gold and credit reserves, had put it in the red for a long time. But it would keep the prize, Katanga, and through its secession hope also to gain later the other two useful provinces of Kasai and Kivu.

I cannot speak of Katanga without mentioning its extraordinary reservoir of minerals, as yet hardly touched: gold, cobalt, chrome, platinum, pewter, industrial diamonds, diamonds for jewelry, manganese, nickel, rare metal, uranium, asbestos, lead, tungsten, and germanium. Above all, Katanga produced copper, about 350,000 tons a year, from a vein 300 kilometers wide of the purest copper ever found.

The Congo was only in the fifteenth day of its sovereignty when the president, Kasavubu, and the prime minister, Lumumba, decided to make a tour through the country to calm the people and find a solution to the many problems that had hit the young nation so hard. Tirelessly, Lumumba mounted the platform, speaking to the people. Often, he used demagogic language. It was the lesser of the evils. This was a race against the clock. He had to avert the ruin into which the country was plunging.

When the presidential plane returned to N'djili Airport near Leopoldville at the end of the tour, the Belgian ambassador refused to give Lumumba and the chief of state the honors of arrival, on the pretext that he wanted to avoid any provocation of disorder among the Belgian refugees who were waiting at the airport to leave. There was, in fact, a scandalous scene.

One of the Belgians pulled the prime minister's beard and slapped him. "President of monkeys," the European women screamed at the top of their voices. "We will come back." "Bastard ... murderer ... son of a bitch ..."  
Others spat in his face. Lumumba remained dignified. He always was and always would be dignified.

When I heard of this disgraceful event, I asked myself who the savages in this case were: were they in the skins of the blacks, or the whites?

That evening, Lumumba called Antoine Gizenga and asked him to bring me to his house.

The prime minister did not in any way show that he was affected by the scene that had taken place at the airport. Lithe and elegant, he almost glided when he walked. Some friends were visiting him, so we were about a dozen in all. But this time, in contrast to our other more intense political consultations, the atmosphere exuded a family-like peace and intimacy. Friendship lit his own open, loyal face.

He said to me, “You see our poor Congo, Madame Blouin! There is so much work to do.”

He spoke without passion (a rare thing for him) of the tour for peace that he had made through the Congo. He denounced the cruelties that the Congolese people had inflicted on the Europeans, and repeated his desire to have them remain. He wanted the parachutists to leave so that life could become normal again. Above all, he wanted to avoid a break in diplomatic relations with Belgium.

For a long time he talked without interruption. He himself served us martinis, talking constantly. He told us of other affronts he had received on the tour. “You know, when we were on our way to Luluabourg, the Belgian pilot turned the plane around and came back to Leopoldville, without even telling us! Pretended that he hadn’t enough gasoline. When I asked why, since we had filled up at Stanleyville, the pilot answered ‘It’s a military secret.’ And in Katanga they refused to let us land. That is inadmissible. Inadmissible!”

Patrice was calm, relaxed, but I felt that something was about to happen—something important.

“But we will have them yet ... with this!” Triumphant, majestically, he took a copy of a telegram from the pocket of his white shirt. It was typewritten, and bore two signatures: his own and that of the president, Kasavubu. “It’s for Moscow,” he said. “If people want to say that because of it I am a communist, then the president is too!” He laughed gaily. “And we sent the same telegram to the United States. We are simply asking that Belgium not be permitted to take away with one hand what they gave with the other.” Waving the telegram, he pronounced, “This will get results! Even Kasavubu now sees what the Belgians are capable of, and he is with me in this. Tomorrow I will address the nation on the radio and tell them what we are doing.”

I have been accused of being behind certain of the prime minister’s acts, and there were even journalists who referred to the work of the team “Lumum-Blouin.” Ever since I humiliated the Belgian government with the press conference in Rome, I had been tagged with many labels. The media referred to me as “a red,” “the Black Pasionaria,” “the secret counselor of Lumumba and Gizenga,” “the prime minister’s *eminence grise*,” and “the courtesan of all the African chiefs of state.” This never troubled me. After all, it’s quite fair for an adversary to sling mud at you!

Some people thought that these two telegrams, which were to make so much ink flow in the world press, were the work of Madame Blouin. I can swear that this is false. On the other hand, I do not deny being the one behind an earlier appeal to the US government. The prime minister knew that the United States was supporting Belgium’s underhanded maneuvers in the Congo. But we decided to act as if we did not know, in order to bring into the open what the position of the United States was.

On my suggestion, Lumumba wired the US government for cooperation in asking the Belgian government to remove its troops from Congolese soil.

He knew the request would be refused. But making it would give him elbow room for maneuvering and it would also make clear, at last, the US government's intentions with regard to the Congo.

The US ambassador's answer did not even take a normal, diplomatic form. It was given the status of "not having been received."

It was then that Lumumba asked the United Nations for help.

*[OceanofPDF.com](http://OceanofPDF.com)*



## Betrayal Everywhere

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Soon after July 14, when Patrice Lumumba asked the United Nations to assist in stabilizing his new state, the *casques bleus*, or blue helmets, as they were known, arrived. Twenty thousand of them.

The United Nations also sent “technicians.” Dressed like businessmen, they behaved more like conquerors in search of fortunes than professionals charged with rebuilding a country.

There were swarms of Haitians among them. Because they were black and spoke French, they were assimilated into the scene with an ease that alarmed those of us who knew what they represented. The white technician was easy to identify as he set about his work. The Ethiopian was a little less conspicuous: he was an African, nearly black. The Hindus were clearly what they were. But the Haitians caught the Congolese off guard. They seemed like blacks who had come back to their homeland. They acted so brotherly! And they were everywhere, on the streets and boulevards, in the bars and at the dances in the Cité Congolaise, wearing their loud, multicolored made-in-Miami shirts. Their black skins were a passport to go anywhere with an innocent look. The Congolese people were quite touched

that these Haitian “brothers” had “spontaneously” answered their country’s call. Little did the Congolese know that they came from Papa Doc by way of New York, and what that meant.

It all went with a well-known song, “Indépendance Cha Cha!”

The secretary general of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, arrived in the Congo. That same evening, the seceded Katanga issued its own money, made in Switzerland—neutral Switzerland! The prime minister was not in Leopoldville. He had gone to New York to speak at the United Nations and subsequently was visiting several European capitals. In his absence, it was Gizenga, the vice prime minister, who received the secretary general. Gizenga made an important speech in which he denounced the secretary general’s policy of *laissez faire* with regard to the secession of Katanga.

The following day, the sensationalist press attacked me, as usual, saying that it was I who had written the speech and instigated the vice prime minister’s provocative attitude. The press also claimed that I had quarreled with Hammarskjöld in a nightclub.

The fact was, I did an enormous amount of writing, for Gizenga, and for the radio, to offset an insidious campaign that described itself as anticommunist but that in fact was designed to subvert Lumumba’s regime. It was called Moral Rearmament. I therefore initiated a series of broadcasts called “The African Moral Rearmament” to teach the Congolese people the need for unity in this hour of crisis.

Besides my work for Gizenga and my radio editorials, I had a new post. On the day of his departure to New York to speak to the United Nations Assembly, Lumumba had named me his chief of protocol.

At the same time that Lumumba wired me in Conakry to return to Leopoldville, he named my husband as director of mines for the Congo. I

was free to leave at once, but for André it took longer as he had to give notice to the state of Guinea. About a month later he arrived at Leo with my mother and the children.

When he saw the calumnies with which my name was smeared in the newspapers, he was enraged. This was at the height of the political ferocities, and my enemies would say anything to discredit me. I came home from work at noon one day and found André beside himself with fury. We had some strong exchanges and then André went to Lumumba to complain.

“Have you seen the papers?” he demanded.

“They’re just rags,” Lumumba dismissed them.

“Do you expect me to accept this? To let my wife be treated like this?”

“I know,” Lumumba agreed sympathetically. “Our enemies attack her all the time. Not for what she’s done, but simply because she’s a woman, and she’s there, in the thick of it. Believe me,” Lumumba went on, “she has nothing to gain in this whole affair. She’s nearly ill from working so hard, from serving with such devotion.”

“If I knew it would be like this I certainly would not have agreed to come!” André raved.

“But, Monsieur Blouin,” Lumumba said calmly, “I’m astonished at your reaction. If Madame Blouin is persecuted by the imperialists, it’s because she’s doing good work. And I? Don’t they do the same to me? Have you seen what they write about me?”

“That’s not my problem. It’s my wife they’re dragging in the mud. And I won’t have it.”

“In that case, Monsieur Blouin, you will be putting brakes on our work. You will be damaging our cause.”

Before we left, Lumumba put his hands on my shoulders and said, “Courage, my sister.”

My husband got over his initial reaction, although he remained edgy about my giving so much of myself to my work. My little mother, Joséphine, took care of Eve, who was still too young for school, and our family life became as normal as it could among the growing disasters around us.

I had not asked for the position of chief of protocol, but I was glad of the chance to be in the heart of the activity, receiving advance telegrams from all over the world and meeting important people. Lumumba absolutely wanted me to be with them, and as I was now skillful in the mechanics of arranging events—something I had learned to do as mistress in my own house and hostess to large gatherings—this seemed appropriate for me.

An official car took me to work each day, depositing the children, Christiane and Patrick, at their schools, on the way. The first thing I had to do at my desk each morning was look over Lumumba’s appointments for the day and check the names of important people arriving at the airport. I was supposed to send cars to meet those people, but often I was unable to locate a car. Depriving me of transportation was one way in which my enemies sabotaged my work. The VIP, exasperated by a long and fruitless wait, would be obliged to take a taxi, to my chagrin. This petty humiliation to my office transpired many times.

To reach the office of the prime minister I had to go around a hedge ten meters long that bordered a wooden fence. One morning I had some folders to take to his office. Nearly every day Lumumba held a press conference to which he invited foreign diplomats and the international press. This day, on my path, I met the Soviet ambassador, Mr. Yakolev. We shook hands and he

asked if the conference would be held soon. As we shook hands goodbye, after this very ordinary encounter, a flash bulb blinded us.

“Why did you take that picture?” I snapped at the photographer, although I could easily guess who put him up to it.

“Because you are so beautiful and elegant, Madame,” answered this hilarious imbecile. The photo was to be used as evidence that I was dressed by the great couturiers. While it is true that I have always made an effort to appear dainty and fresh, it is not true that I was then dressed in high fashion. There was a time when I had worn couturier clothes, but while working in the Congo certainly was not one of them. I was in fact living in a simplicity that approached poverty.

The Belgians had deliberately emptied the state’s coffers before leaving. There were no funds, at the time that Lumumba’s government took over, with which to pay its employees. A few of the ministers managed to scrape together some funds for their salaries, but aside from one advance of 20,000 francs, I received nothing for my work as chief of protocol. My husband, as director of mines, was not paid one centime. I could not bear to add to Lumumba’s difficulties by complaining about our financial plight, so instead I asked Roger for help, which he sent, and Charles Greutz, who also gave me money at that hard time.

The next day, the picture was on the front page of the capital’s newspapers, asserting that this was proof that I had been bought out by Mr. Gromyko, the minister of foreign affairs for the Soviet Union. Little did they know how the Soviets, too, detested me for my independent ways, and for my cynicism about their particular brand of imperialism. I had seen their ambitions in Guinea and knew very well what they wanted in Africa.

The prime minister's phones rang twenty-four hours a day with urgent requests for appointments. Patrice had the annoying habit of trying to see everyone who asked for him. This greatly handicapped my work. It made me indignant to see people streaming through his office as if it were a train station, and I made an effort to staunch the flow of traffic. The situation was quite the opposite, on the other hand, with the president, Kasavubu. He passed his days peacefully, in an ivory tower, surrounded by Belgian advisors who sent everyone with complaints to the office of the prime minister. Doubtless this was a deliberate tactic to hamper Lumumba's efficiency, for his goodhearted efforts to be available to the people were well known.

The one time that I was able to function in a really creditable fashion was for the arrival of Dag Hammarskjöld. We gave a splendid reception for him. The press, in fact, said that it seemed designed to put the Belgians to shame. But that was just their vulgar way of looking at it. The music, the flowers, and the food were all excellent, and it was a truly beautiful dinner.

I was not always at Patrice's side, as some people expected me to be. In fact, I saw him only when he had specific instructions to give me on my work. This reserve disconcerted some of my enemies who presumed I was an adventurer and courtesan.

One day I met Patrice in the yard between our two buildings. He took my hand and said, "I am touched by your reticence, Andrée. I know you are under attack. We all are. But be patient. Those who are against us will tire before we do." He gave me his wonderful smile. "Don't hesitate to come and see me if you have problems!"

Problems! They were daily. Telegrams announcing the arrival of visiting dignitaries were hidden in order to sabotage my protocol work. Folders of documents disappeared from my office. Strange mix-ups occurred that cast

suspicion on me. It was a war of nerves. For Patrice, it was even worse. Each day new traps were set for him. Hands were closing around his throat. Still he kept his courage and optimism. He continued to work for the Congo of his dreams.

Sometimes goodness and simplicity are misinterpreted during the lifetime of a genius, and are recognized only after his death. I think Patrice was such a genius. Perhaps he was not meant to go the whole way in his work, but only to be the apostle who opens the path.

“His goodness will ruin us,” Gizenga repeated to me every day. “It’s not just goodness, to tell the truth, it’s naiveté. He’s too easy.”

Mournfully, I had to agree. And then there was the matter of Patrice’s soft policies.

“Every time the Council of Ministers takes a position on reform,” Gizenga said, “Patrice refuses to put it into effect because he’s afraid of angering the people. He says they will sabotage the economy. He’s trying to please everyone. With his methods we are heading for disaster.”

Gizenga was right. This man of iron was a loyal friend, but he also saw the situation as it was. His silence was his strong card. He listened and he watched. But he was tenacious; he never forgot his ultimate purpose.



After his visit to the United Nations, Lumumba made a round of visits to friendly countries. I considered this a serious tactical error at a time of so much chaos at home. Worse yet, he took with him several politically unreliable people. Poor Patrice! It is true that those who are of the best faith are often the most cruelly deceived.

When he returned, he was engulfed by people clamoring to see him. The office of the prime minister and his residence as well were a regular Tower of Babel, with constant, noisy comings and goings of all kinds of visitors. One of our grave concerns at this time was the large number of airplanes of all nationalities bringing in swarms of people who sought to profit by the country's chaos. Leopoldville was a center of intense movement, with almost no immigration control. Opportunists from both Eastern and Western Europe rushed to the Congo. Bankers, business experts, diplomats and special envoys, trade union men, journalists, representatives of this and that, dubious spectators of every nationality—they all came to reap what they could from the crisis in the Congo. Crammed with theories, ambitions, and readymade ideas, each of them had something to try out on the Congo guinea pig, this phenomenon of the age.

In this feverish, impossible atmosphere, it was Patrice Lumumba, only, whom everyone wanted to see. I found it almost impossible to control his visitors because of the press conference which he held almost every day. The people who attended were admitted to the garden of his residence, which was only twenty meters from his office. Although the conference was announced for eleven o'clock a.m., the prime minister did not actually address the press before one p.m., which gave the crowd two hours in which to move about freely, consuming the cakes and drinks that the prime minister had ordered served to them.

Traitors were organizing everywhere, even in Lumumba's cabinet. In the vice prime minister's office, dossiers disappeared from Gizenga's desk as well as from mine. I realized my desk was being systematically searched, every day. When I locked the drawers with a key, they were callously forced. I complained about this to the prime minister and asked for a thorough investigation. Lumumba replied, "Patience, my sister. Try to have



patience. I know it's difficult. But our opponents will get tired. We will have the last word, you'll see!"

Exhausted, furious, I lowered my eyes to keep Patrice from seeing my profound frustration and distress at his naive reasoning. There was nothing I could do. I knew then that it was already too late. Too late for the Congo, too late for Africa, too late for the prime minister himself, and for his friends who believed in him. Too late to stop this infernal, grinding machine that had been set in motion by the Congo crisis, and that, one way or another, would mean tragedy for each of us.

Since the United Nations general secretary had not, with his *casques bleus*, made any real effort to end the Katanga secession, Lumumba, sick at heart, sent in Congolese troops. These troops were close to victory when Hammarskjöld saw that their success would open his own lack of efforts to charges of complicity. He had to act, and swiftly. He asked Kasavubu to stop immediately the advance of the Congolese troops. Kasavubu obeyed.

On September 5, President Kasavubu discharged the prime minister, and asked Iléo, president of the senate, to form a new cabinet. Sirens broke the heavy silence that weighed on Leopoldville.

Lumumba made immediate reply. He, in turn, discharged Kasavubu. The door opened on a gulf and the Congo plunged into the abyss. Alone, at night, like a mad woman I raced to the home of the prime minister, on Boulevard Lippens. A dense crowd had already gathered there: ministers, members of the MNC, journalists, and the merely curious. The security guard had been given instructions to admit only members of the government. I did all I could to try to enter the residence but the guards prevented me. This was, in fact, the first time that they respected orders to keep the dignity of the place.

My heart aching, I sat in my car in front of the residence for a long time, waiting for the results. The very thing I had dreaded had come to pass. It broke like a thunderclap over the young republic, blasting its new life. Finally, unable to sit there longer, I decided to walk to the home of Pierre Mulele, who was now minister of education, only a block away. I waited with his wife, Clementine, until five o'clock in the morning. Pierre arrived, exhausted from the grueling night without sleep.

"I tried to come to you," I assured him. "I wanted to be there, to help, if I could."

"Yes, they told me that you were at the front gate. I asked that you be permitted to enter. Bomboko refused on the excuse that you were neither a minister nor a deputy. As chief of protocol it would have been normal for you to be there. But it was not the moment to argue over hopeless issues."

"Tell me," I begged passionately, "What happened?"

"The government unanimously rejected Lumumba's discharge. According to law the prime minister cannot be dismissed without the signature of two ministers," Mulele said.

"Then who are the two ministers on Kasavubu's side?" I asked.

"No one. Not one member of the government is against Lumumba," answered Mulele.

"Are you *sure*?" I was stupefied that Pierre would say such a thing. He was so well informed, and sound, usually.

"Yes, we are united."

These words stabbed me. I was sure he was wrong. Two names immediately came to mind: Albert Delvaux and Justin Bomboko. They were quite capable of it. It was they who had called in the Belgian paratroopers. On several occasions the prime minister had wanted to

dismiss them, but, always too generous, he had changed his mind, believing that they would mend their ways.

In the assembly it was Bomboko who referred to me as the “evil genius” of the government. “We are opposed to this woman’s presence,” he said. “Opposed to all her provocative acts.” Constantly the word was whispered around “The trouble is ... Madame Blouin.” Lumumba had repudiated these accusations in the National Assembly, this place for settling personal griefs. Ardently, he had defended me.

Later, we learned that it was indeed Bomboko and Delvaux who had signed the order for the dismissal of Lumumba by Kasavubu. But their treachery did not succeed. Both houses rejected the dismissal and the prime minister appeared at a session of the National Assembly and refuted his detractors’ charges, one after the other. Wildly acclaimed by his partisans, he was carried out in triumph.

I was still in my office when he entered the great court of his residence. I hurried to him with his wife Pauline, who threw herself into his arms. I shook his hand and said, “Congratulations, Mr. Prime Minister! We are proud of you!”

Patrice put his hands on my shoulders and kissed both my cheeks. I was never to see him again.

## Lumumba's Downfall and Ruin

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Lumumba's victory was ephemeral, and he knew it. Soon after this there was to appear in the halls of power the sinister figure chosen earlier by Belgium and the United States to replace him: Mobutu.

Like the secession of Katanga, carried out by Tshombe, the takeover of the Congo by Mobutu had been prepared at the Round Table. It was with the treachery of these two creatures that the Congo's ruin was prepared.

Mobutu, an army sergeant and member of the MNC, was a minister without portfolio in Lumumba's government. After the army's revolt, Lumumba made him a colonel. His earlier activities, I learned later, had included being a spy for both the Belgian intelligence and the US Central Intelligence Agency.

It was not enough that Lumumba had the Belgian government and all its unscrupulous maneuvers to deal with. The young state, because of its riches and its evident weakness, also became the pawn of the two giants of politics, the East and the West. The echoes of the Cold War found a new sounding board in the Congo, this bastion of international trusts. Here,

communism and capitalism faced one another like the rhinoceros and the elephant.

The fabulous Union Minière, it should be pointed out, was controlled by three groups of stockholders: the Belgian corporation, the special Board of Katanga, and an Anglo-American company, Oppenheim de Beers, through the intermediary of the Tanganyika Concession, Ltd.

Firmly supported by his two principal backers and sure of the complicity of the United Nations, Mobutu carried off his coup d'état of September 14, after buying, with millions of francs, acquiescence to his rise to power. The theme of his right to the takeover, the hook with which he insured the cooperation of the West, was anticommunism.

Because of him, many Congolese died, including its own best son. It is true that copper has the color of blood and mud.

The days that followed Mobutu's seizing of power were like a modern apocalypse. The Congo was on the edge of madness. Kasavubu had at least pretended to conform to the constitutional laws drawn up by Belgian lawyers. Mobutu made no such pretenses. Democracy was completely overthrown and replaced by a military dictatorship. The National Assembly was closed by Mobutu's orders, and rigorously guarded by soldiers. The last session of the assembly was the one in which Lumumba had been confirmed. The *casques bleus* prevented Lumumba from speaking to the people on the radio. Bomboko, minister of foreign affairs, produced a crop of freshly milled young Congolese technocrats who acted as the "shock troops," appearing everywhere to justify Mobutu's takeover.

Bomboko was, at that moment, a man to be reckoned with. In a press conference the morning before the coup d'état he announced the measures deemed necessary to prevent communist penetration in the Congo. These measures involved the expulsion of certain undesirable elements: the

Ghanian and Guinean contingents, the Egyptians, Félix Moumié, a Cameroon leader, and ... Madame Blouin.

When the order for my expulsion was announced on the radio, my mother was stricken by a heart attack. She was hospitalized immediately.

I was supposed to leave the city within twenty-four hours, but Joséphine's condition was so serious that I phoned Mobutu to tell him that I could not leave her in such a critical state. He informed me that an order for my arrest had been issued by the chief of state, Kasavubu, and sent to him for execution. But he would allow me another forty-eight hours.

Gizenga was arrested and placed in an underground prison twenty-five kilometers from Leo. Hearing of this, the Moupende warriors, the most fearsome in the Congo, prepared to liberate their chief. They sent warning telegrams to Mobutu: "If Gizenga is not released tomorrow, all the missionaries and Europeans of Kwilu will be killed." Gizenga was released instead of being transferred, as planned, to Katanga, where he would of course have been put to death.

Lumumba's calvary began with Mobutu's takeover. From then on, the conspiracies against him were carried on openly. Each day, Kasavubu crossed the river to Brazzaville to consult with Youlou and the Belgian embassy there on decisions for the young republic.

Patrice Lumumba knew that his life was in the hands of Mobutu. Fearing Mobutu's intentions, he put himself under the protection of the United Nations, which stationed guards around his residence. But Mobutu's troops, with machine guns, also encircled the residence of Lumumba.

It was then that I remembered an appeal which Lumumba, heartbroken, had made on the radio, to the people one day.

“My Congolese brothers! You’re selling your country for a glass of beer! A tragedy is engulfing our country, and the dancing continues at the Cité Congolaise. Leopoldville is a cheap cabaret where the people think only of their pleasures—dancing and beer.”

The Congo was sinking, the Congo was dying, and the best of its children was soon to be assassinated. Still the Congo danced. Perhaps the heart was less festive, but the dancing did not stop. Before the curfew, around the crates of beer, the Congo danced.

Cut off in his residence, Patrice Lumumba lived his last days with courage and daring.

Three days after the coup d’état I was summoned to see Mobutu at his military camp. The order specified that my husband was to be with me. We had no alternative; we were, already, in effect, prisoners. I wondered if this summons were not a trap to seize us inside the military camp, where Mobutu was responsible to no one. But I was so desperate to remain a few days longer with my mother at this critical moment for her that I would do anything. Trembling, I presented myself with my husband to Mobutu, who was surrounded by guards.

He had a nervous air, however, as he said, “Look at these telegrams from Belgium. I received more than two hundred this morning. They are scolding me for the release of Gizenga and the others of the PSA. Oh, this coup d’état will surely end badly. I shan’t come out of it alive.” To me, he added, “As for you, I can’t do anything for you. You can stay a few days more because of your mother, but I know your enemies will renew their demands for your expulsion soon.”

“But what have they got against me?” I asked. As if I didn’t know.

“I can’t answer that. The order comes from far away, very far away. Here is what you must do,” he said, adopting an almost conspiratorial manner. “Leave Leo. I’ll have you taken to an island that is between the two Congos. You can wait there until things become quiet again. In a month or so you can come back. We need you in the Congo.” He used the intimate form, like “*tu*,” in Lingala as he spoke. “Stay home,” he said ‘Don’t go out under any circumstances.’”

I glanced at the heavily armed military camp around me. Mobutu’s offer made my flesh creep. An island between the two Congos! I had no desire to become a meal for the Congo’s crocodiles. But I was powerless and knew it. My fate depended on the orders that Kasavubu and Mobutu received from Brazzaville, where Radio-Congo broadcast for hours each day the most vile calumnies against us. But that didn’t matter. The important thing was to remain a few days more with my mother.

Trapped in his residence, Patrice Lumumba continued to fight. He was permitted to receive a few faithful friends and some diplomats. This measure of privilege was to make it seem as though he were not a prisoner. No one dared execute him yet, as planned. That was not for lack of hatred but because, to tell the truth, Patrice Lumumba still impressed his enemies. He remained ready to talk with even those who had betrayed him. He explained, he pleaded for African unity, he planned. He knew that he was still the legal prime minister, elected by the National Assembly.

This was true. But there was another truth which could no longer be ignored. No one listened to Patrice Lumumba any more. His was a voice from the past. He was secretly admired by all. Everyone knew that there was no one equal to this great African. But politically he was dead. Invisible



hands were strangling him, and those invisible hands came from far away. Very far away.

One October day, in a burst of superhuman energy, and with the help of some conspirators, Lumumba secretly left his residence to go to the Cité Congolaise. He believed he could still arouse the people to action and reverse the situation. He saw it as his duty to denounce publicly Mobutu's coup d'état.

Standing in an open car, he spoke to the crowd. Once again, he held them with the magic of his words. Hypnotized by his almost forgotten presence, their enthusiasm was reborn. "Long live Lumumba!" they shouted. "Long live Lumumba!" An ironic phrase, indeed.

Mobutu's army was already hunting "the prisoner." After traveling the main streets of the city, Lumumba managed to escape their net and to return, safe and sound, to his residence. That evening, there were hundreds of arrests of Lumumba's supporters by the executioner Nendaka, who moved them to Bakwanga to be killed.

The wife of Patrice's cook visited me from time to time, to give me the news inside the residence. Through her, I sent a letter to Patrice. I expressed anew my admiration for him and reassured him of my loyalty and confidence. I also told him of my unbearable sense of isolation during these hours when I so yearned to be useful to him.

That same evening, I received an answer from this man whose fraternity and optimism were matchless. It read:

Dear Madame Blouin,

I received your letter today.

The first thing I must tell you is that we shall never let you down. Our difficulties are certainly many, but I have the firm hope that we shall win!

Know that you can always count on me, through thick and thin. For my part, I am used to adversity.

My warm greetings to your husband, Monsieur Blouin.

Be strong.

Indeed sincerely,

[signed] P. Lumumba

It was our last contact. It was also the farewell letter of a true hero of modern times.

This letter gave me great comfort when everything I had worked for was disintegrating around me. Even in his own moment of peril, Patrice was able to send me strength. I could almost see his smile, behind his brave words.

I was relieved to meet Gizenga again, after his narrow escape. He told me he'd been rescued just as he was boarding the plane that was to take him to Elizabethville to be hanged the same day.

Gizenga had a new plan. He was leaving secretly for Stanleyville to gather the military of the eastern part of the country around a new legal government for Lumumba. There, Lumumba and his friends could count on the population's loyalty. Stanleyville would become the new capital of the Republic of the Congo.

"But you'll have to cross Kasai!" I protested.

"Yes," Gizenga said stolidly. "But I'll do it. On foot, if I must."

That night he left us, headed for Kikui, from whence he would enter that extremely dangerous territory, Kasai. He had only one thought: to save the legal government of the Congo. He deliberately risked his life to do so. This was the venture of a brave man indeed, for which I felt the deepest admiration and respect.

In November, Gizenga sent word that he had taken power in Stanleyville in Lumumba's name. The people were awaiting his arrival.

The moment that Lumumba chose to escape his encircled residence seemed propitious. On that day, all the major personalities of the regime were in Brazzaville. Youlou was giving a banquet in honor of his collaborators: Kasavubu, Mobutu, Tshombe, Bomboko, and a number of the commissioners. Security was lax. With this stroke of good luck, Lumumba slipped away and was not missed for some hours.

A convoy of several vehicles had been prepared for the flight. Madame Lumumba, her children, and a handful of MNC members were waiting when Lumumba appeared, and they set off for Stanleyville. Unfortunately, they did not move swiftly. Several times, Patrice stopped to speak in towns and villages, to denounce Mobutu's coup d'état. This proved to be a fatal blunder. The convoy made a wide sweep through the interior of the country, delaying the group's arrival in safe territory, controlled by the MNC, by ten hours. It was at this stage of the trip that the convoy was spotted.

When the news of the escape was delivered to the presidential palace of Youlou, there was, of course, a general panic. At once a massive search was instituted. All resources and strategies were united in the single aim to recapture the prime minister, dead or alive.

One of the searching helicopters spotted the convoy not far from the Sankuru River. By radio, they alerted the Luluabourg soldiers who hastened to the ferry landing where the convoy was making the crossing. The prime

minister's car had already been delivered to the other side when the soldiers arrived. The ferry was about to return for Madame Lumumba and the others.

From his side of the river Patrice saw his wife brutally seized by the soldiers. It was then he made an unforgivable mistake. Unable to bear the screams of his wife, begging him to save her, Lumumba betrayed the Congolese people. He ordered the ferryman to take him back across the river. The good friends who were with him, one of them Pierre Mulele, begged Patrice not to go back, for the life of the whole nation was at stake. But Lumumba could hear only his wife's cries on the other side of the river. He returned.

There he was taken. Gilbert Pongo, the black mercenary and inspector for the Sûreté nationale, arrived quickly, getting out of a United Nations helicopter. This well-known figure was unsurpassed in his cruelty. Lumumba now belonged to his executioners. The Baluba soldiers abandoned themselves to violence, behaving atrociously toward Lumumba. As always, in spite of his pain, Lumumba remained dignified. The helicopter took off and headed for the capital to deliver the fugitive to Mobutu.

Before a crowd of curious spectators at Leopoldville, Lumumba was forced out of the helicopter, his arms tightly bound behind him. The international press photos of the scene revealed the truth about this leader who was made to live in men's hearts forever. The contrast between him and his white captors was extraordinary. Their malicious glee was painful to behold.

On Lumumba's dazed face was the look of a man who did not yet believe that fate could be against justice for his people. His white shirt was

now spotted with blood, but his head was still erect. He personified the best of a race that would never again be slaves.

Lumumba's calvary in prison lasted four months. During this time, the League for the Rights of Man protested vigorously against the trumped-up charges against him and attacked Dag Hammarskjöld for his undisguised complicity. Even some of the capitalist newspapers joined in this protest.

The prime minister was transferred to the prison of Camp Hardy at Thysville [now Mbanza-Ngungu] on December 3. He would be taken out only to be delivered to Tshombe in Katanga.

One version of how the prisoner was taken to Katanga is that the first destination was Bakwanga, where dozens of Lumumba's followers had been taken to a frightful death. But the Belgian pilot of the plane, fearing for his own safety, at the last moment refused to land there, declaring he didn't "want to be eaten by cannibals." So the plane set a new course for Elizabethville in Katanga. One member of the crew asserted that Lumumba and his companions were already no more than a mass of bloody flesh. Lumumba seemed lifeless because one of the soldiers yanked out a tuft of his hair, bringing with it a large piece of his scalp, but Lumumba no longer reacted.

Another version, taken from the United Nations' inquiry into the circumstances of these murders, says:

The witness, who wishes to remain anonymous, declared that Lumumba and his companions were transferred from Thysville to Moanda, and from there to Elizabethville, and that during the trip they were savagely mistreated by their soldier escort. When they arrived in Elizabethville, Lumumba and his companions were

loaded on a truck and taken to a place some kilometers from the airport. Munongo, who was waiting for them, went to Lumumba and, seizing the bayonet of a soldier's gun, thrust it into Lumumba's stomach. Lumumba screamed, dying. A certain Captain Ruys, a Belgian mercenary in the Katanga army, put an end to his sufferings by firing a shot into his skull.

Throughout the world, rage and revolt at the news exploded. Blacks everywhere were stricken with grief and fury. The whole great black family was convulsed with pain.

In the United Nations, in an extraordinary session, men spoke of the young black who had been assassinated "somewhere over there" in Africa, while outside, American blacks rioted and were clubbed down as they shouted, "Long live Lumumba!"

From that day on, a once indifferent world was to have a new recognition of the deep ties binding black people together. It was not only at the United Nations headquarters in New York that there were demonstrations. The chancelleries of Belgium and the United States were sacked or burned in many of the capitals. President Kennedy made a statement expressing his disapproval of the assassination.

Several days later, Kasavubu, in an interview with a journalist, remarked in his soft, pointed voice: "The protests about this death are strange. The Congolese people, you see, are quite calm. Nothing has happened here. Nothing. The foreigners are the only ones who are making a commotion."

The United Nations commission of inquiry came to the Congo to study the circumstances of the death of Lumumba and his companions. Kasavubu received the commission. When Lumumba's name was pronounced, the

chief of state refused to continue the conversation. The commission and the UN secretary general did nothing. The complicity continued.

I was not in the Congo on January 17, 1961, at the time of Lumumba's death. Three months earlier, in November of 1960, the order for my expulsion had been carried out.

For days, our house had been surrounded by troops armed with machine guns, and we had been expecting the dreaded knock on the door at any time. Then, early one morning, two Jeeps loaded with soldiers stopped in front of the house. Pongo dismounted and presented me with the order for my expulsion. The soldiers crowded into the house after him and made themselves at home. They asked for food and drink with a naturalness that confused me. They played with Eve and my son Patrick, who was eight, allowing them to handle their weapons, to the children's delight.

I was half-prepared for the event, so there were not many things to pack. Still, at this last moment I could not really accept what was happening. The order specified "Madame Blouin."

"My children," I begged. "Let me take them with me."

"No, your children and your husband will not be permitted to go with you," Pongo informed me.

At the airport, before the departure of the plane, he reminded me that my loved ones were being held by the government as hostages against my good behavior. "Don't forget! Not a word about the Congo to the world press! The smallest remark will cost them dearly!"

I closed my eyes so as not to cry, not to scream, not to faint.

Then he added a curious apology. "Excuse us, these are our orders. We have to carry them out. It's not our fault."

## My Africa, My Joséphine

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I consider myself very handicapped, being born of the female gender. Women are second-class beings in the civilized countries; in Africa it is far worse. If I had been born a boy, I would never have accepted the way I was treated at the orphanage. At a much earlier age I would have settled that. But as a girl I could not act on my feelings toward the nuns. All I could do was run away.

Since I was not born a male, I should at least have had a brother. When I was suffering at the orphanage, I thought, “If only I had a brother. I would teach him to do many things I cannot do myself. I would not have to bear in silence whatever they choose to inflict on me. I would teach him to kill. Yes, to kill!” So great was my pain in those terrible years, I thought of that. I thought, “He would defend me, he would revenge me, I would teach him to kill.”

When one wants to express admiration for a great leader, one says, “There is a *man!*” The compliment is that he does not act like a woman. But the fact is, women can be very strong. Often I have seen them show as much or more courage than the men around them. Society does not yet care



to admit that a female can also take risks and impel changes. Men are given the right to do many things: to make war, to speak out, to act out what they think. Yet women, too, are capable of great sacrifices and bravery.

My mother often said that the gods of our ancestors were afraid to let me be born a male. At the last minute they changed my sex. Little Joséphine swore to this. She said it would have been catastrophic if I had been born a male. My father said that too. Certainly, I would not be alive today. As a man I would have been assassinated long ago. Even as a woman, for a long time, my life has been on reprieve. I brushed death in Guinea, in the Congo, in Rome, and in Switzerland too. But I have learned to live with that. I only regret that I was not given the right, in my sex, to go as far as I could.

My husband and son were expelled from the Congo one morning several weeks after I had left. Soldiers came to the house, ordering them out, and sent them across the river to Brazzaville. My mother had gone to the market with Eve on her back. Eve was then four, but she loved to be carried and my mother humored her in this. Someone at the market told my mother the news: André and Patrick had been shipped off to Brazza, and soldiers were sacking our house.

Joséphine ran home as fast as she could and found the soldiers taking everything they could carry. “What are you doing?” she shouted. “Those are *our* things!”

One of the soldiers wrenched Eve off Joséphine’s back, and threw her on the floor. At that my mother hurled herself on the soldier like a lioness. With the butt of his gun the soldier struck her brutally, knocking her to the floor. Not content with this, he continued to pound her with his gun, wherever he could, again and again. In the terrible beating Joséphine’s spine was damaged. She was never to stand erect again.

In Brazzaville, for three days my husband waited desperately for the arrival of Eve and my mother, whom he assumed would follow him. It was Papa Balme of the CGTA who lodged André and Patrick in his home then. Finally, Papa Balme sent a boat to Leo carrying someone to find and bring back my mother and daughter. My mother, when she arrived, could hardly walk. She wanted only to return home to her people, so André bought her an air ticket and put her on the plane for Bangui. There she underwent an African treatment that was not appropriate for her condition. For pains in the kidneys, village people boil certain herbs that are very strong, and apply the solution, with massage. This was exactly the wrong thing to do in Joséphine's case. She became paralyzed.

I was then in Switzerland, said to be "neutral," although this was not the truth. I thought that there I would be able to write articles for the press about what was going on in the Congo. In every other country, I was in danger of being put in prison, kidnapped, or assassinated. There was nowhere I could live in Africa, and especially I could not go to Bangui or Brazza. So I could not take care of my mother in her illness.

André and the children joined me in Lausanne; then André got work in Paris and came to see us every two weeks. I worried about my mother and the care she was receiving, and sent money to her faithfully, each month. However, since she did not know how to read or write, I signed the money order over to someone else in the family, who did not give it to her.

People have asked how I reacted when I learned of the death of Patrice Lumumba. I cannot describe my feelings. I can only describe what happened. We were in Lausanne when I heard he had been killed *en route* to Katanga. The news was not unexpected, yet when one learns such a thing

the sense of shock and revolt are not diminished by months of foreknowledge. A hope that defies reason persists to the end.

I went out and bought all the newspapers I could find. When I returned to the apartment—a beautiful, sumptuous apartment lent to us by Swiss friends—I did as we do in Africa when we are bereaved. I sat on the floor. This is one of our ways of expressing grief over the passing of someone we love and esteem. We sit on the floor.

The newspapers were spread around me on the salon rug. I sat there in the gloom contemplating what the black world had lost, my mind brimming, spilling over with painful images. And then a man and a woman journalist arrived from Paris to interview me. It was my little daughter, Eve, who let them in. I was unable to rouse myself, to defend against this intrusion.

“Madame Blouin, you were closely associated with the work of Patrice Lumumba. We have come to ask you for a statement on this tragic death. What can you tell us?”

I just looked at them. All the hot words, the passionate outpourings that had been the substance of my days for so long, had been drained from me in this loss. I was unable to speak.

Words had always been so quick to my lips. With the nuns, over their cruelties. With the mayor of Bangui over the quinine card. With the Abbé Youlou over the intertribal warfare. Wherever there was a cause to defend I was quick to speak. Words were also quick to my pen. I wrote voluminously for our radio broadcasts. Some of the speeches I prepared found echoes in the United Nations Assembly. Never before had I been without torrents of things to say. But before this stroke of destiny I had nothing to give. Nothing. I looked at these strangers dumbly. Finally, I mumbled, “What I think is of no importance. It’s not for me to say anything now.”

There was no story in my words for the journalists, so they found one in the eyes of my daughter. The next day in their columns they wrote that they felt obliged to depart because of her accusing look. In that look they found all the unbearable questions surrounding Lumumba's death. There was also the unspoken reproach of their presence, during my grief. "Leave my mother to the dignity of her solitude," Eve's eyes seemed to say. And so they quickly left.

As I look back, I think the hardest thing for us to bear during the long struggle for viable statehood has been the knowledge that it is not the outsiders who have damaged Africa most, but the mutilated will of the people and the selfishness of some of our own leaders. There are politicians among us who serve neocolonialism for their own interests, and they sell out their black brothers and sisters to do so. They are our worst enemies.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, black chiefs collaborated with white traders in the sale of their own race into the slavery of the New World. In the last half of the twentieth century, African history has repeated itself. Some of our corrupt leaders have betrayed their people, and are still doing so, in tyrannies of cruelty that are sheer madness. And among the people themselves, the spirit of slavery too often prevails: an attitude of cynical resignation alleviated by a childish escapism. Within this lack of belief in the right to determine one's own destiny, corruption finds an easy foothold.

I believe that Africa's susceptibility to cynicism and corruption comes from the fact that African independence was not won in the crucible of war. The people have never been united, through crisis, in the self-abnegation, work, and sacrifice that would have prepared them for the tasks of new nationhood. Our independence came—after much suffering, it is true, but

with no real preparation in its disciplines—on a European timetable, at the stroke of a pen. I see now how ill prepared, morally, we were for our new responsibilities. Like greedy children freed from unjust restraints, we often abandoned ourselves to selfish, short-term prizes. We have not yet learned the long-term, day-to-day faith and application needed in the slow task of building a responsible citizenry.

But these things we will learn. In the history of nations, our twenty-odd years of freedom is not very long. Africa's struggle to rise from the dark night of its servitude will take time.

After Algeria won its independence on July 3, 1962, my husband was given a job with the Algerian government's department of mines, and we moved to Algiers. There I wrote articles analyzing the development of events in Africa, and especially in the Congo.

That same year there was a congress for African youth in Algiers. At this congress I talked with a young man from Bangui who knew about my mother's condition. He told me that she was indeed very crippled and ill, and that she had not been receiving the funds that I sent in the care of someone who could sign for them. In a village, when money arrives, everyone throws themselves on it so there's nothing left. Joséphine was too handicapped to defend herself against this. I was sickened, wild. Joséphine absolutely had to have money and care. But I could no longer continue to send international money orders, as in the past. André and I went to the Red Cross and asked them if they would deliver a money order to my mother, in person. This they agreed to do. They also agreed to make arrangements so that she could receive medical treatment once a week. This eased my heart beyond telling. At last, I was assured that she would have funds coming in

regularly, so she could buy the small things she needed. And I was sending her letters of love and encouragement constantly.

I continued to keep in touch with the leaders of the Congolese opposition. When the Conseil national de libération was organized in 1963 to overthrow the puppet government installed by the Belgians, I became president of the Algerian branch. Even from far away, I followed their work and was as helpful as I could be. For two years there was a series of upheavals throughout the Congo, led by the men who had been associated with Lumumba and Gizenga's Kisangani government. Pierre Mulele's maquis overthrew the installed authorities in five of the twenty-one provinces. At one moment Kasavubu's government seemed in danger of collapse, before the rebellions were put down.

In 1965 many Congolese children had become orphaned or abandoned because of these activities and the repressions which followed. I was appalled when I heard of the suffering of the children, and brought their plight to the attention of Ahmed Ben Bella, the chief of state of Algeria. He wished to do something for them, so he created a commission of aid and asked me to go to Brazzaville as head of this commission, and arrange for the children's care.

My hope was that while in Brazzaville I could have Joséphine come from Bangui to be with me. Then I would bring her back to Algeria so that she could end her days among her loved ones, as she wished. In preparing this plan, I asked for permission to return on the boat, instead of by plane, and this was granted me.

By then the government of Congo-Brazzaville had evolved to a more liberal position. The Abbé Youlou had been thrown out, and the Conseil national de libération, which was frankly dedicated to the overthrow of the government across the river, was accepted in its territory. Since its presence

was accepted, so was I. However, I still could not go to Bangui. I had to make all my arrangements for my mother by phone. As soon as I arrived in Brazzaville, I called the doctor who had been caring for her and asked him to prepare her to come. He was not enthusiastic about her undertaking the trip in her condition, but agreed to let her go. She would make the two-hour plane flight on a stretcher. I had an ambulance waiting for her when she arrived.

When they lifted her down from the airplane, Joséphine didn't even recognize me. The trip had put her in such a state that it took an hour for her to be able to fix her attention sufficiently to see who I was. The doctors told me, "There's no hope; she's paralyzed forever. The best thing is to build her up enough so that she can bear, in comfort at least, the boat trip to Algeria."

Augustine Sounda, Joséphine's full sister—with whom she enjoyed bathing in the stream when they were young—lived in Brazzaville. Joséphine stayed with her. During the next weeks the doctors gave her many shots. Her appetite began to improve, she showed more interest in life. Once she asked me to buy her a piece of jewelry. When she saw what I brought, she laughed with her old delight, that marvelous, sparkling laugh for which I have never found an equal. In spite of the doctors' gloomy predictions, I had hope for her.

After two months of this care, I felt she was ready to make the trip and began preparations for our departure. I reserved a private compartment for us on the train to Matadi, where we would get the boat, and bought our tickets for the sea voyage to Algiers. Then I was expelled again.

The Brazzaville government changed its position on harboring the rebels of the Conseil national after July, and ordered us out, with me prime among those forced to leave.

I had the habit of taking my mother her tea each morning, with a little fresh bread. The ritual made her happy, made her feel like eating. When I did not appear for two days my mother was distraught. Augustine tried to calm her, saying that I was busy with the orphan children, but my mother knew that she was lying.

“She wouldn’t not come to see me for two days, if she were here,” Joséphine protested. Which, of course, was the truth. “They’ve killed her. I know it. For a long time they’ve been trying to kill her.”

Augustine denied that I was dead but the idea became fixed in Joséphine’s head. For her it was the only conceivable reason that I would not come to see her. My enemies had prevailed and I was dead.

“I have nothing more to live for,” she said, and she prepared for her own death. From that moment on she refused to eat or drink or receive any treatment. Eight days later, my little mother turned her face to the wall and died.

I was not there to bury her, as she predicted. The full meaning of her death was thus denied to me. I was unable to share in the mourning rites and to speak of Joséphine, and what she meant to me, to a gathering of loved ones. The sane and beautiful customs that accompany African mourning and give richness to life were not to ease my grief.

She was interred at Brazzaville by Augustine and her family. Since then, because of the political situation in the country of my birth, I have been unable to return her body to Bangui, where she wished to be buried next to her little grandson René. For years I have been *persona non grata* in the Central African Republic, that source of uranium for France’s atomic bombs and the site of a hunting chalet belonging to France’s chief of state, Giscard d’Estaing. The word has been sent out: “We will fatten the crocodiles if



Madame Blouin sets one foot here.” But the threats of a tiny despot are only as dangerous as the powers that keep him in place.

Africa is said to be streaked with gaudy colors, “folkloric.” This has a pejorative overtone of abandon to undignified nonsense. In Africa, we believe that life is to be lived, and that our bodies are to help us live. We dance for joy. And we dance for sorrow. We speak to the earth through our feet. In mirth, anger, delight, or dissatisfaction, we express ourselves with the whole body.

The African laughs like a clap of thunder, and in his laughter one sees his entire healthy pink throat. He slaps his thighs, waves his arms. It has been said that the African is irresponsible because he laughs so often and so heartily. But that is our custom, to show our love of life. In Europe only the peasants still express themselves thus. In general, white people’s expressions of joy and pain are muted. We who have been Europeanized, unfortunately, have adopted the habit of judging ourselves against their standards. This is our loss. We have reduced ourselves according to the criteria of the whites.

Only in the matter of expressing love are Africans more modest than the whites. In Europe one sees people embracing full on the mouth on street corners; that is not done in Africa. There is a sense of reticence about love, a respect for the engagement of the soul in this sentiment, that lends a certain restraint.

But the true African laughs to the full, cries to the full—and when he is angry, he is really angry. We give ourselves in friendship with a gift that is total. We withhold nothing. That friend becomes for us a sister or a brother.

African hospitality has no limits. Even when an African has nothing, still he will give to you, he will even borrow to give to you. One never goes

away from an African door empty-handed, even if a drink of water is all that can be given. Water is for everyone; it is life itself. Africans acknowledge this. In every village a jug of water is put out, sometimes in its own little straw hut, for the stranger who passes. This is my Africa, which I want to be better known.

For myself, I am irremediably African. I have always laughed to the full, cried all my tears, and given my heart in friendship without reserve. I carry Africa within me, wherever I go. In my home, Africa finds her own.

There is nothing more wonderful than an African *fête*. The people enjoy themselves with a freedom of expression in which life is at its best. They feast, they sing, dance, tease one another, they renew their spirits, they squeeze all the pleasure out of their relationships with everyone present. This is true whether the *fête* is a happy occasion, like a birthday, or a sad one, as at the end of a period of mourning for someone dear. In addition, the celebration takes on a special meaning to its participants through the words that are spoken there. For the *fête* is an opportunity for the chief celebrant to share his or her thoughts and memories with family and friends. By common accord, a quiet moment arrives in the festivities at some point, and then the chief personage speaks. Usually he recounts the story of his life, pouring out its joys and griefs, and what they meant to him. This is a strong and useful device through which the wisdom of the people is shared.

Joséphine delighted in celebrations, and when it was her turn it was always of Gerbillat that she spoke. Gerbillat, her Kisi Kani, her “governor,” the elephant hunter and owner of trucks and pirogues, the big boss before whom teams of men trembled and worked until the sweat streamed down their bodies. She told of how she met and married this white man and bore him a child, which his white wife couldn’t. This, to Joséphine, was her

glory. It was to this that her existence had been consecrated. With laughter, tears, and pride, when it was her turn, Joséphine recounted her life as the mother of Gerbillat's child.

My story, which I have often pondered, is, I see, inextricably entwined with Africa's fate as a land of black people colonized by whites. The contradictions within my life are those from which Africa has suffered.

If it were my turn to speak, I would tell of my sad years in the orphanage for girls of mixed blood, of Mother Germaine and the red belt, of my escape over the walls bristling with shards of glass. I would tell of sewing dresses for haughty European women by the light of a kerosene lantern, and of my idyll on the *Bolongo* with Roger, my first love. Now I can see how prejudice against my race marred my romance with him, and later with Charles Greutz. I can see that when I gave myself to those embraces of love, I cheated myself, as my people have often cheated themselves, in accepting less than they deserved.

If it were my turn, I would speak of my precious children, the birth of Rita in an African clinic, and of Roger's distinguished friend for whom I later named my son, René. I would speak of African paludism and the colonial law that cost me my little bronze prince, and how this changed my life forever.

I would speak of finding my true love, at last, in a Frenchman with the same given name as myself; of our happy years together in Guinea, of our straw hut high above the Niger where I gave birth to Patrick and Eve. And of the call to political action that I received from a photograph of Sékou Touré in a humble African shop. I would speak of Barthélemy Boganda, that fraternal, farseeing leader whose mysterious death haunts us still. I would speak of the election campaign in the Congo, with Antoine Gizenga and Pierre Mulele, and of the honor of being associated with Patrice

Lumumba. I would speak of those blazing first months after independence—months of ferocious efforts, terror, betrayal, and heartbreak.

I would speak of an Africa that has not yet found its way but that has in its soul lessons for all peoples.

I see that the story of my life is inseparable from my feelings for Joséphine, and for Africa. My little mother with her marvelous smile, and the heart of a child. My marvelous Africa, where the sun warms all and laughter is king.

It became my lot, when I was a young woman, struggling to survive on my own, to protect my mother, and she gave me strength for my struggle. It became my lot, when I matured politically, to fight for Africa, and Africa gave me the courage for that fight.

That I feel so strongly, even violently, for my country, Africa, is the legacy of passion for one's homeland that my father, a great Frenchman, gave to me. The attentive love I feel for Africa's weaknesses and errors is the legacy of my mother, my tender Maman. I learned to love her, just as she was; I love my people, just as they are.

In setting down my life here, I have, in a sense, made this my celebration. I have taken my turn.

But the truth is, speaking of my life has been my way of speaking of Africa. I want to share my Africa with people who do not yet know what Africa may mean to them.

I want Africa to be loved. I speak of my country, Africa, because I want her to be known. We cannot love what we do not know. Knowing comes first, then love follows. Where there is knowledge, surely there will be love.

# Epilogue

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I know that you can die twice. First comes physical death, burial or cremation. My mother chose the latter, to end things. In ashes.

Her few friends gathered at the Hôpital Tenon, in the 20th Arrondissement of Paris, where she died the night of April 9, 1986. Her passing came as a relief, they said in hushed tones. She had suffered so much. But above all, she was tired of living, weary and haunted by lost illusions. Helpless, I had watched as she succumbed. She who had committed body and soul to so many struggles at last gave in to her final adversary, the cancer that took hold of her and ravaged her lymph nodes.

In the depths of the morgue, in the glacial cold, her body lay on a stretcher shrouded in white cloth, like an iceberg lost at sea. I caressed her face one last time, the softness of her skin contrasting cruelly with its icy rigidity. My brother Patrick burst into tears. So did my sister Rita. Her comrades in the struggle, her faithful coterie, engaged in silent reflection, their mouths set in an embittered expression. Then her coffin entered the crematory furnace and the fury of its fire engulfed her remains.

Apart from the small circle of activists and the faded old guard of the great anticolonial epic of the 1960s, there wasn't much of a crowd. My mother's death was greeted with dreary indifference. There was an obituary in the *tiers-mondiste* press—was it in the magazine *Jeune Afrique*? I no longer remember. To be forgotten is a second death, a visible wrinkle that asks only to be smoothed out.

Once her modest apartment was emptied, all that remained of my mother's life were a few boxes overflowing with writings, photocopied documents, yellowed photographs. Nothing else. She had no gravestone, for she had requested that her ashes be scattered in the Oubangi River in what today is the Central African Republic, where she was born. My brother saw to this task. Holding tight to the urn, he traveled by plane to Bangui and then by car to where the Kouango and the great Oubangui meet. The Banziri organized a ceremony to honor their sister with a final funerary rite before the contents of the urn were cast into the turbid waters.

After we fled the Congolese disaster for a brief sojourn in Switzerland, it was Ahmed Ben Bella, president of the nascent Republic of Algeria, who offered us sanctuary in 1962. Powerfully affected by the murder of Lumumba, Ben Bella would throw himself into supporting his comrade Che Guevara, making Algiers the rear base of the conflict raging in the Congo.

We arrived by boat from Marseilles, traumatized and exhausted. On the quays at the Port of Algiers, a few families of *pied-noir* stragglers waited with a haggard air to embark for France. The White City, epicenter of liberation movements from across the African continent, would be our refuge for the next ten years.

“Muslims make their pilgrimage to Mecca, Christians to the Vatican, and revolutionaries to Algiers,” said the Bissau-Guinean independence

leader Amílcar Cabral, who likewise found exile in the Algerian capital.

On the fourth floor of a building in the city center, we finally put down our suitcases and led an almost normal family life. There was an elevator and a utility room on the top floor. The other renters were an assortment of French, Spanish, and Algerian civil servants. No one locked their doors, good relations were the rule. We had a black-and-white television that picked up Radio télévision algérienne (RTA) broadcasts. Often neighbors who didn't have a TV set would come over to watch Indian and Egyptian films, which were particularly appreciated, especially those starring Faten Hamama and Omar Sharif. Sometimes they would stick around, bemused but full of good sense, for one of the countless political meetings that convened in the apartment.

We lived across from the magnificent Palais du Peuple, built by the Ottomans and surrounded by an immense park whose stout trees hid the minarets from view. In our typically middle-class, state-furnished apartment, passionate discussions were what counted. Freedom for Africa! The great slogan of Third-Worldism and socialist anticapitalism. Even as a child, I could sense the fervor of that unextinguishable force, resistance against subjugation.

Beginning in the 1970s, my mother undertook to map out her unique life and write her autobiography, submersed in the depths of her contradictions, carried along by the tides of fate as if determinism preceded revolution. She unpacked a manuscript that she had started to write in Switzerland and continued working on it by hand. On the dining-room table, she assembled notebooks filled with her agonies, passions, and concerns. I was a young adolescent at the time, but I found myself charged with correcting syntax and spelling errors and collating annotations, cut out

one by one and reassembled with Scotch tape. An unpaid laborer, I was her staff of old age, a copyist enlisted in the duty of remembrance.

Two attempts were made to steal her memoir. The first occurred in 1962, when she entrusted a copy of the manuscript to journalists from *Opera Mundi* who, a few months later, published it in Italian without her consent, under the title *Mi chiamavano la Pasionaria nera* (“They called me the black Pasionaria”). After she successfully sued them, all the copies were destroyed. The second time, after her death, my mother’s friend Jean MacKellar—her editor and translator—silently usurped the rights to *My Country, Africa*, first published in English in 1983. It took me decades to recover them and save her out-of-print book from oblivion. I had sworn to honor my mother’s memory, and I kept my word.

Reading the text that MacKellar edited and translated, I noted phrases here and there that seemed to distort my mother’s convictions, resulting in an undue emphasis on questions of racial identity and occasional notes of Russophobia. In fact, she inherited from her father a great deal of respect for the country. “Twenty million Russians died to free Europe from Nazism,” she would recall, “and they were our allies in the decolonization of Africa.” “Never forget it.” Many African leaders of the period shared this view, which the West, blinded by Cold War prejudice to the preeminence of peoples over ideologies, qualified as “pro-communist.”

Whenever there wasn’t a political meeting underway, the large table overflowed with papers, pens, scissors, and staplers. A typewriter clacked away, tapping out tracts, bulletins, and urgent manifestos, not to mention the fiery articles my mother wrote for *El Moudjahid*, the official newspaper of the Algerian Revolution. I grew up in this atmosphere of militant effervescence, in which *fraternité* was not an empty word but a reality, and collective reflections became common cause.



My father used to say that our apartment was the antechamber of anticolonialism. He would tranquilly puff on his pipe during the never-ending conclaves, completing unfinished sentences, interrupting digressions, deflating partisan rhetoric with his wicked sense of humor. A distinguished alumnus of the École polytechnique, class of '33—the same as Valéry Giscard d'Estaing—he never seemed out of place among the activists and apparatchiks. Even when they laughed at his wisecracks, they were slightly intimidated, for nothing got past him. He never had the sort of career expected of a graduate of the prestigious “X,” founded in 1794 to train the French Republic’s elite. That was the price he paid for rallying to the anticolonial struggle. Antoine Gizenga had a particular fondness for him, always calling up to talk on the phone. They would speak at length about politics, not so much its workaday manifestations as its profound, philosophical meaning. The more jovial Lumumba delighted in his caustic wit, greeting his jokes with great bellows of laughter. My father wore a black armband when he died.

The ties between the National Liberation Front (FLN) and other African nationalist movements predated Algerian independence. Already in 1960, Nelson Mandela had received military training from FLN cadres. “The Algerian army made me a man,” he declared with pride. Before him, there was Frantz Fanon, the Martiniquan psychiatrist who served as ambassador for the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) in Nkrumah’s Ghana. My mother met Fanon on the occasion of the Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent in Accra in 1960. She was impressed by his uncompromising vision of Pan-Africanism, which he argued was necessary if the newly sovereign states of the continent were to unite against the threat of neocolonialism. He grasped the essence of this form of international solidarity, in which racial differences counted for

little: it sufficed to look at the Pan-Africanists who surrounded Lumumba, among them Luis López Álvarez and Serge Michel.

My mother's typewriter was her most treasured possession. She struck its keys with all her heart.

Only recently, a friend from Kinshasa sent me the video of a press conference in which Victor Nendaka Bika, former chief of police and director of the Congolese intelligence services under Kasavabu, reveals that my mother wrote the speech Lumumba delivered on June 30, 1960, at the Palais de la Nation in Leopoldville. At minute 13:16 of the recording her name is pronounced in front of a gaggle of Western journalists. "Lumumba chose the speech prepared by Madame Blouin," Nendaka remarks. "A number of people had written drafts, but he chose Madame Blouin's version."<sup>1</sup>

On the day Congo declared its independence, Lumumba had several typescripts in his bag. He opted for my mother's. She never spoke of it—her silence was eloquent.

Our living room was an obligatory waystation for political leaders when they first arrived in Algiers. "Welcome to the chancellery of the United States of Africa," my mother would say, laughing. She hosted delegates of the Parti solidaire africain who almost prostrated themselves before her; Lumumbists of the Conseil national de libération (CNL), with their calling cards that read "La patrie ou la mort"; tea-drinking representatives of the Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF); François Tombalbaye's Chadians; South African ANC members; the Mozambicans of FRELIMO; Angolans of the MPLA; Palestinians; Black Panthers, at war with Babylon; and more besides. There were even envoys from Free Quebec and the Canary Islands.

Mother was a consummate, extravagant host. In the kitchen there was always a stew on the boil, a steaming bowl of rice, and cold beer in the

refrigerator. The revolutionaries didn't have to be asked twice to stick around for supper. "An African will walk miles to come enjoy 'le manger de sa bouche,'" she would say, generously serving their plates. Our domestic routine was that of an uncomplicated, middle-class family. My brother and I attended the Lycée français; my father went to work every morning; my sister got married. We had an active social life, with friends of all nationalities.

For the Fourth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, emissaries of the seventy-five member states and a bevy of national liberation movements congregated in Algiers. Behind their dark sunglasses, the Russian, Swedish, and Austrian delegations arrived, followed by those from Bangladesh, Cambodia, and Perón's Argentina. No fewer than fifty-seven heads of state were in attendance, including Castro, Tito, Gaddafi, Bourguiba, and Hũu Thø. The Third World was now a force to be reckoned with. My mother went from one symposium or special session to another. The Non-Aligned Movement, inspired by the Panchsheel Agreement, put on a marvelous demonstration of the "Five Principles of Peaceful Coexistence." We were invited to countless diplomatic cocktail parties, the most coveted being those hosted by the Vietnamese embassy, overlooking the neighborhood of El Biar. Petits fours, flutes of champagne. At the beginning of the evening, Dalida's "Histoire d'un amour" played as background music, before things got serious and the dance floor filled to the first sounds of "Super Bad" by James Brown. In this unforgettable, occasionally fantastical ambiance, it was not unusual to see a Czechoslovak delegate or a Canadian observer dancing the shuffle with a slightly tipsy official from the People's Republic of China. A playful truce before the pillaging recommenced. If renaissances last no more than a decade, as it's sometimes said, how exhilarating the post-independence '70s were—an epoch of euphoria, enthusiasm, and

edification! But no celebration surpassed the one that kicked it all off, the 1969 Pan-African Festival in Algiers. At the time, the future of Africa had never looked brighter.

After a period of political incubation, the Congo from which my mother had been expelled would be rebaptized Zaire, then the Democratic Republic of the Congo (RDC). Across the river, Congo-Brazzaville remained faithful to its name. But in both states, the looting of natural resources continued unabated, worse even than under colonial rule.

“The neocolonial interests that rely on local potentates and national traitors will always fail us,” my mother affirmed with conviction. “They are our worst enemies.”

She shared the sorrow of populations who knew that their leaders were betraying them. This betrayal did not only bring shameful profits to those responsible. It provided the means for keeping whole countries in shackles.

My parents divorced at the end of 1973. We left Algiers for Paris. The shock was terrible: the separation, the cold, the gray skies. I was born and raised in Africa—we had only taken a few short trips to France, which was terra incognita for me. My mother fell into a deep depression. On her own, she had to construct a new life and a home for her children. But she managed. Her hold on life was remarkable; she had courage to spare. She could have given up on so many occasions, but she always pulled herself together. Although my father also lived in Paris, they did not see each other. Divorces are sad affairs. I resented the revolution that had impoverished and torn apart our family, leaving incurable sequelae in its wake. How can one withstand so much pressure, so much tragedy, so many sacrifices? We were merely collateral damage.

In Paris, the struggle continued in the form of articles and almost daily meetings. My mother found less and less motivation to read the papers; news from Africa depressed her. One day a friend from Guinea came to see her at her apartment in the 20th Arrondissement. He had lived in Siguiri, where my brother and I were born and where our parents had spent their happiest years together. My father ran the gold mines there, those ancient quarries that had enriched the Mali Empire for centuries. Entire families from neighboring countries traveled by foot to Siguiri to pan for gold. Everyone had the right. At the end of the day, the prospectors would get together to weigh and distribute the fruits of their labor: one-third went to the tribal chief; one-third to the company that maintained the mine and furnished the tools; and the last third went to the person who had discovered it. All in all, everyone was satisfied. Usually the lucky party would go buy a goat and some palm wine and everyone would join in the feast.

“Do you know who operates the mines these days?” the Guinean asked. “The Swiss and the Canadians. Gold panners today can barely make ends meet.”

In the Congo, the calamity seems only to have grown in proportion. When Mobutu died, he left the country a debacle. Today, it is blighted by endless conflict, the deadly dance of factions and mercenaries in the pay of multinational conglomerates, a genocide that has claimed six million lives passed over in silence. For shadowy forces fearful of pressure from below, all means are justified in eliminating resistance. Recolonization has insidiously taken hold, barring any peaceful way forward. Predation continues under new auspices.

My mother never doubted that Pan-African revolution would overcome all the neocolonial intrigues and conspiracies that lay in wait, for the future belonged to the unity of free, sovereign peoples. She was a romantic for

whom the lessons of contemporary history were cruel. Beneath the indomitable bravery she displayed throughout her life, there was the incurable pain of childhood trauma. She had brushed against a dream that appeared to be on its way to being realized, and she was burned by contact with an ideal that collapsed, revealing no more than utopia. She believed there was no such thing as inevitability, that the people were the ultima ratio.

“You cannot sell off a nation’s rights,” she would proclaim to anyone who cared to listen.

She was convinced that a sovereign people owed it to itself to be the source of its own destiny, capable of expressing authentic political power. When she died, the prodigious, Edenic ideal of a free Africa disappeared with her. Her old comrades, gathered around her body, understood.

Eve Blouin

August 2024

# Notes

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## 1. From the Village to the Orphanage

<sup>1</sup> This has two meanings to the French: it is a tangerine, and it is also a member of an intellectual elite.

<sup>2</sup> *Chikwang* is fermented, boiled manioc. Made into a crust, it replaces bread.

## 3. Coming of Age Brings New Terrors

<sup>1</sup> *Evolués* are blacks who showed by their manner that they were westernized. They were a step up, by education or training.

## 5. Hard Days Precede First Love

<sup>1</sup> Kwanga is a foul-smelling grayish paste made of cassava.

## Epilogue

<sup>1</sup> “Victor Nendaka ne témoigne pas au Congo mais en Europe,” available on YouTube.

# Index

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ABAKO, [217](#), [224](#)  
Accra, [244](#), [279](#)  
African National Congress (ANC), [280](#)  
African Socialist Movement, [191](#)  
Algeria, [270–1](#)  
Algiers, [271](#), [277](#), [280](#), [281](#)  
Alliance des Bakongo (ABAKO), [202](#), [228](#)  
Alsace, [163](#), [171](#)  
Álvarez, Luis López, [279](#)  
Angola, [220](#), [221](#)  
Anna, [55–6](#)  
Antananarivo, [188](#)  
Argentina, [280](#)  
Assembly of Deputies, [246](#)  
Austria, [164](#)  
Avranches, [164](#)

Babylon, [280](#)  
Bakongo people, [55](#), [71](#), [91](#), [190](#), [191](#), [217](#), [228](#)  
Bakwanga, [261](#), [263](#)  
Balme, Hubert, [119](#), [161](#), [267](#)  
Bamako, [174](#), [204](#)  
Bangasu, [134](#), [135](#), [138](#)  
Bangladesh, [280](#)



Bangui, 5, 35, 38, 78, 105, 115, 129, 147, 148, 149, 151, 163, 164, 166, 169, 173, 175, 178, 194, 198, 199, 267, 270, 271, 277  
Banningville, 98, 99, 100, 204  
Banziri people, 4, 277  
Belgian Congo, 96, 110–11, 122, 202, 203, 223, 240  
Belgium, 111, 199, 224, 245, 248  
Ben Bella, Ahmed, 270–1, 277  
Bessou, 4, 8  
Black Panthers, 280  
Blouin, André (husband), 163–72, 184, 187–8, 191, 193, 196, 250–1, 252, 267, 268, 270, 279, 280  
Blouin, Eve (daughter), 170, 171, 251, 265, 267, 268, 269, 276–83  
Blouin, Patrick (son), 170–1, 173, 176, 265, 267, 268, 276  
Boganda, Barthélemy, 195–200, 274  
Bomboko, Justin, 255, 256, 258, 262  
Bourguiba, Habib, 280  
Brazzaville, 3, 13, 32, 47–8, 66, 85, 87–8, 105, 113, 122, 125, 127, 133, 141, 177, 189, 191, 193, 194, 198, 202, 245, 262, 267, 271, 272  
Brown, James, 281  
Brussels, 203  
Bulungu, 107

Cabral, Amílcar, 277  
Cambodia, 280  
Cameroon, 199  
Canary Islands, 280  
Cape Town, 144  
Carrefour Leo II, 228  
Castro, Fidel, 280  
Central African Empire, 4  
Central African Republic, 195, 198, 272, 277  
Chad, 138, 145, 189, 190  
Chari River, 5  
Che Guevara, 277  
China, 225, 281  
Cinema Athenakis, 117  
“Circle, The”, 149–50  
Cité Congolaise, 222, 249, 259, 260  
Compagnie générale des transports en Afrique (CGTA), 119, 125, 267  
Conakry, 177, 200, 202, 241, 242, 244, 250  
Conference of Women of Africa and African Descent, 279  
Congo, 189–90, 196, 203, 211, 225, 232, 234, 242, 243, 259, 282  
Congo-Brazzaville, 271, 281  
Congo Oceanic Railroad, 127  
Congo River, 97, 119

Congolese National Movement (MNC), [224](#), [225](#), [233](#)  
Conseil national de libération (CNL), [270](#), [271](#), [280](#)  
Cornelis, Hendrik, [233](#)  
Cotonou, [174](#)  
Creuset, Marie, [37](#)  
Czechoslovakia, [223](#), [240](#)

Dahomey, [38](#), [39](#), [42](#), [110](#), [174](#)  
Dakar, [172](#), [245](#)  
Davister, Pierre, [234](#)  
de Gaulle, Charles, [125](#), [167](#), [185](#), [201](#)  
Delarue, Alfred, [191](#)  
Delvaux, Albert, [256](#)  
Democratic Republic of the Congo (RDC), [281](#)  
Diagne, Blaise, [56](#)  
Dima, [99](#), [102](#), [103–4](#), [111](#), [112](#), [206](#)  
Djoué, [48](#)  
Douala, [177](#)  
Doubaya, [167](#), [187](#)

Éboué, Félix, [6](#), [7](#)  
École polytechnique, [164](#)  
Egypt, [225](#)  
El Biar, [281](#)  
Elizabethville, [263](#)  
*El Moudjahid* (newspaper), [278](#)  
Eritrean Liberation Front (ELF), [280](#)

Fanon, Frantz, [279](#)  
Fatoya, [167](#)  
Feminine Movement for African Solidarity, [205](#), [213](#)  
Feshi, [217](#), [218](#), [220](#)  
Fort Lamy, [138](#), [145](#), [146](#)  
Fourth Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement, [280](#)  
France, [57](#), [146](#), [147](#), [161–4](#), [167](#), [169](#), [188](#), [225](#)  
Free French Forces, [125](#), [128](#)  
Free Quebec, [280](#)  
FRELIMO, [280](#)  
French Bureau of Overseas Mines, [165](#), [187](#)  
French Congo, [3](#), [109](#), [110](#), [189](#), [203](#)

Gaddafi, Muammar, [280](#)

Gerbillat, Pierre (father), [4–13](#), [28–9](#), [33](#), [34](#), [35](#), [41](#), [43](#), [59](#), [75–9](#), [81–5](#), [115–16](#), [124–5](#), [128–31](#), [133](#), [138–43](#), [148](#), [149–53](#), [158](#), [161](#), [169–70](#), [177](#), [267](#), [274](#)  
Germany, [57](#), [164](#)  
Ghana, [244](#), [279](#)  
Giscard d'Estaing, Valéry, [272](#), [279](#)  
Gizenga, Antoine, [203](#), [204](#), [212](#), [213](#), [214–17](#), [220](#), [222–9](#), [231–3](#), [235](#), [236](#), [238](#), [247](#), [250](#), [253](#), [258](#), [261–2](#), [279](#)  
Grenfell, Georges, [244](#)  
Greutz, Charles, [131–4](#), [137](#), [138](#), [142–6](#), [148](#), [153](#), [156–9](#), [163](#), [252](#), [274](#)  
Greutz, René (son), [133](#), [138](#), [143](#), [144](#), [148–9](#), [151–8](#), [169](#), [272](#)  
Greutz, Rita (daughter), [125](#), [126–9](#), [133](#), [135–7](#), [143–5](#), [158](#), [160](#), [171](#), [241](#), [251](#), [274](#), [276](#)  
Gromyko, Andrei (Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs), [252](#)  
Guebwiller, [162](#)  
Guichard, Monsignor Firmin, [48–9](#), [62](#)  
Guinea, [165](#), [167–8](#), [183](#), [187](#), [188](#), [189](#), [194](#), [198](#), [201–2](#), [212](#), [214](#), [215](#), [221](#), [222](#), [227](#), [241](#), [245](#), [252](#), [267](#)

Hamama, Faten, [277](#)  
Hammarskjöld, Dag, [249](#), [250](#), [253](#), [255](#), [263](#)  
Houphouët-Boigny, Félix, [187](#), [197](#), [199](#), [200](#), [203](#)  
Hũu Thọ, NguyỄn, [280](#)

Iléo, Joseph, [232](#), [255](#)  
Indochina, [56](#)  
Interfina Company, [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [9](#), [104](#)  
Italy, [164](#)  
Ivory Coast, [164](#)  
Janssens, Émile, [244](#), [245](#), [246](#)

Kahemba, [220](#), [221](#)  
Kamitatu, Cléophas, [232](#)  
Kankan, [177](#), [178](#)  
Kasai Company, [98](#), [100](#), [103–4](#), [106](#), [107](#), [113](#)  
Kasai province, [120](#), [213](#), [222](#), [246](#)  
Kasai River, [103](#), [202](#), [262](#)  
Kasavubu, Joseph, [224](#), [228](#), [229](#), [231](#), [232](#), [234](#), [240](#), [242](#), [245](#), [246](#), [248](#), [252](#), [255](#), [258](#), [259](#), [260](#), [262](#), [264](#), [270](#), [279](#)  
Kashamura, Anicet, [232](#), [235](#), [236](#)  
Katanga, [245](#), [246](#), [248](#), [249–50](#), [257](#), [263](#)  
Keïta, Modibo, [227](#), [245](#)  
Kennedy, John F., [264](#)  
Kenya, [125](#)  
Kérouané, [187](#)

Kikongo language, [45](#), [117](#), [215](#), [218](#), [243](#)  
Kikui, [107](#), [205](#), [221](#), [262](#)  
Kimbé, [5](#)  
Kingotolo, Antoine, [202](#)  
Kinkie, Raphael, [202](#)  
Kinshasa, [279](#)  
Kintinian, [167](#)  
Kivu province, [246](#)  
Kofilate, [167](#)  
Kouango region, [4](#), [10](#), [12](#), [277](#)  
Kouremale, [167](#)  
Kwango province, [213](#), [215](#)  
Kwilu province, [213](#), [215](#), [217](#), [222](#), [227–8](#)  
Kwilu River, [97](#), [202](#), [205](#), [208](#)

Lari people, [14](#), [19](#), [56](#), [190](#), [191](#), [193](#)  
Lausanne, [268](#)  
League for the Rights of Man, [263](#)  
Lebanon, [164](#)  
Leclerc, Philippe (de Hauteclocque), [148](#)  
*Le Courrier d’Afrique* (newspaper), [120](#), [124](#)  
*Le Monde* (newspaper), [195–6](#)  
Leopold II of Belgium, [203](#)  
Leopoldville, [96](#), [121](#), [126](#), [203](#), [215](#), [217](#), [222](#), [223](#), [224](#), [226](#), [240](#), [243](#), [245](#), [247](#), [250](#), [254](#), [259](#),  
[263](#), [279](#)  
Libya, [128](#), [129](#)  
Lingala language, [32](#), [42](#), [45](#), [90](#), [116](#), [117](#), [202](#), [211](#), [215](#), [218](#), [223](#), [243](#), [260](#)  
Lingala people, [14](#)  
London, [239](#)  
Lusambo, [120](#)  
LUKA, [218](#)  
Luluabourg, [247](#)  
Lumumba, Patrice, [128](#), [206](#), [224](#), [225–36](#), [240](#), [242–57](#), [259](#), [260–4](#), [279–80](#)  
Lumumba, Pauline, [256](#), [262](#)

MacKellar, Jean, [278](#)  
Madagascar, [56](#), [188](#), [189](#)  
Maître Diop, [202](#)  
Mandela, Nelson, [279](#)  
Marseilles, [161](#), [162](#), [170](#), [277](#)  
Matadi, [161](#), [271](#)  
Matanga-Matanga, [80](#)  
Matsoua, André, [190–1](#)

Maya-Maya, [55](#), [190](#), [194](#)  
Mbochi people, [191](#), [193](#)  
Meersch, Walter Ganshof van der, [224](#), [232](#), [242](#)  
Mialou, Joseph, [38–9](#), [41](#), [43](#), [76](#), [79–81](#), [87](#), [174](#)  
Michel, Serge, [279](#)  
Ministry of Colonies, [57](#)  
Mission of the Fathers of the Holy Ghost, [60–1](#)  
Mobutu, Joseph-Désiré, [257–62](#)  
Morocco, [164](#)  
Moscow, [203](#)  
Moumié, Félix, [258](#)  
Moupende people, [108–9](#)  
Movement for the Social Evolution of Black Africa, [195](#)  
Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA), [221](#), [280](#)  
Mpoko River, [134](#), [146](#), [148](#)  
Mucongo people, [14](#), [19](#), [56](#)  
Mulele, Clementine, [222](#), [255](#)  
Mulele, Pierre, [202](#), [204](#), [212](#), [213](#), [214](#), [220](#), [222–3](#), [226](#), [231](#), [232](#), [233](#), [236](#), [238](#), [255–6](#), [263](#), [270](#)

National Liberation Front, Algerian (FLN), [279](#)  
N'djili Airport, [245](#), [246](#), [247](#)  
Nendaka Bika, Victor, [224](#), [261](#), [279–80](#)  
New York City, [249](#), [250](#), [264](#)  
Niger River, [170](#), [175](#)  
Nkrumah, Kwame, [204](#), [213](#), [227](#), [245](#), [279](#)  
Non-Aligned Movement, [280](#)

Opangault, Jacques, [58](#), [191](#), [192–3](#), [198](#)  
*Opera Mundi* (newspaper), [278](#)  
Oppenheim de Beers, [257](#)  
Orly Airport, [241](#)  
Oubangui-Chari, [4](#), [125](#), [129](#), [189](#), [195](#), [199](#)  
Oubangui River, [4](#), [13](#), [196](#), [277](#)

Panchsheel Agreement, [280](#)  
Paris, [146](#), [148](#), [164](#), [169](#), [199](#), [200](#), [203](#), [241](#), [281](#), [282](#)  
Parti solidaire africain (PSA), [202](#), [204](#), [205](#), [212](#), [215](#), [217–19](#), [220](#), [225](#), [232](#), [233](#), [280](#)  
Pasteur Institute, [24–5](#)  
Polar Beer, [206](#), [207](#)  
Pongo, Gilbert, [263](#), [265](#)  
Portugal, [118](#), [199](#), [221](#)  
Poto-Poto, [68](#), [69](#), [71–3](#), [87–9](#), [94](#), [129](#), [168](#), [193](#), [194](#)  
Poussart, Henriette, [11](#), [12](#), [33](#), [35](#), [76](#), [79](#), [81–4](#), [125](#), [130](#), [141](#), [178](#)

Pré, Roland, [187](#)

Radio-Congo, [260](#)

Radio Leopoldville, [221](#)

Radio télévision algérienne (RTA), [277](#)

Ramadier, Jean, [187](#)

Rassemblement démocratique africain (RDA), [167](#), [168](#), [171](#), [172](#), [185–6](#), [190](#), [195](#), [197](#)

Red Cross, [270](#)

Rennes, [164](#)

Rome, [239](#), [241](#), [248](#), [267](#)

Rossi, Tino, [71](#)

Salvation Army, [116–17](#), [127](#)

Sango language, [30](#), [32](#), [36](#), [133](#), [145](#)

Sankuru River, [262](#)

Sendwe, Jason, [236](#)

Senegal, [56](#)

Senghor, Léopold Sédar, [188](#)

Serruys, Roger, [97–100](#), [102–13](#), [116](#), [120–3](#), [127–8](#), [133](#), [194](#), [202](#), [204](#), [252](#), [274](#)

Sharif, Omar, [277](#)

Siguirri, [165](#), [166–72](#), [175](#), [183](#), [187](#), [282](#)

Sounda, Augustine (aunt), [8–9](#), [271–2](#)

South Africa, [138](#)

Spain, [57](#)

Stanleyville, [248](#), [261–2](#)

St. Joseph of Cluny (convent), [8](#), [14–22](#), [36](#)

Swahili language, [243](#)

Switzerland, [250](#), [267](#), [277](#), [278](#)

Syria, [164](#)

Tanganyika Concession, Ltd., [257](#)

Thysville (Mbanza-Ngungu), [263](#)

Tito, Josep Broz, [280](#)

Tombalbaye, François, [280](#)

Toulon, [170](#)

Touré, Abdoulay, [187](#)

Touré, Almany Samory, [201](#)

Touré, Sékou, [167](#), [183](#), [184](#), [185](#), [201](#), [203](#), [204](#), [213](#), [227](#), [245](#)

Tshombe, Moïse, [245](#), [257](#), [262](#), [263](#)

Tubman, William, [227](#)

United Nations, [249](#), [250](#), [254](#), [255](#), [264](#)

United States of America, [152](#), [204](#), [234](#), [248](#), [257](#), [264](#), [248](#)

University of Louvain, [225](#)  
Upper Guinea, [167](#)

Wouassimba, Joséphine (mother), [4](#), [5–11](#), [13](#), [29–33](#), [38](#), [39–42](#), [75–84](#), [87](#), [93–5](#), [113](#), [114–15](#), [121–6](#), [129–30](#), [132](#), [138–41](#), [148](#), [156–9](#), [165](#), [173–9](#), [195](#), [251](#), [258](#), [266–8](#), [270–2](#), [274](#)

Yakolev, Mikhail, [251–2](#)

Youlou, Abbé Fulbert, [190–4](#), [196–9](#), [245](#), [259](#), [262](#), [271](#)

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