

## SISTER WHITE MAN

### Brazzaville

I arrived in Accra, Ghana, West Africa in September 1968, sporting a pink hat with a veil and a hangover. The hangover could be forgiven – the hat could not. A greeting party stepped forward, two black men with dazzling white smiles and a bevy of ladies with big hair (which I later discovered were wigs). We lined up. Flash bulbs popped, sending hundreds of swirling suns into my already addled head.

An official from the Ministry of Health leaned forward to be heard over the din. “We asked the World Health Organization for an advisor a long time ago. We are so glad you finally arrived to help us revise the nursing curriculum for the country.” I nodded and smiled wanly. He continued in a booming voice, “We expect the project to last two years.” How wrong he was. It was not until three and a half years later that I finally bid Ghana a tearful farewell.

Throughout this exuberant welcoming ceremony, I struggled to restore equilibrium. For the past ten days my circadian clock had been operating at warp speed. From the moment I boarded the sleek Air Afrique jet in Paris, I felt like Alice stepping through the Looking Glass into a weird new world. For example there was an awesome threesome just in front of me, a lady and her two poodles. Each occupied a seat and each had a separate tray at mealtime. Surprisingly, the dogs were not served wine.

It seemed I had entered Africa through the back door. Our first stop was in Lagos at the height of the Biafran civil war. The tiny terminal was an armed camp. Soldiers with cocked rifles were lounging beneath a banner that read, *Welcome to Nigeria*.

We were herded into a hot room while the plane refueled. The tense atmosphere

was heightened when a blonde hippie with long beads, overcome by emotion and probably pot, began to chant, "I'm in Africa, I'm in Africa" as she snake danced through the sweating crowd. The soldiers' eyes bugged out and they shifted their rifles nervously. Cold water was thrown on her parade when a dignified gentleman with a diplomatic mustache said imperiously, "Madame, we are all in Africa."

At midnight the plane touched down in Brazzaville, Congo. I was to stop here for a few days of orientation at Head Office before proceeding to my destination, Ghana. After much palaver a WHO (World Health Organization) official extricated me and my baggage from customs, called a waiting car and mumbled something in French to the driver. We shot off into the black hole of night. After nearly an hour of careening through dark roads we passed by city lights. When we plunged back into the gloom again I knew for sure that I was being kidnapped, never to be heard from again.

Panic ensued when the car stopped at the end of a lane. A flashlight beam revealed a glimpse of a white flowing robe -- from this I deduced my kidnappers must be Muslim. Then joy and relief flooded over me when I heard a voice with a familiar flat Canadian cadence, loudly directed at some barking dogs. It was my new boss Dorothy Potts from Saskatchewan, in her nightgown.

"I told them to bring you here instead of the hotel," she explained, "I'm dying to talk to someone from home." In those days there were no phone connections and the mail was often censored and re-censored. Fresh news was a treat.

Dorothy and I chatted into the night. I immediately liked her but never learned to love her dogs, a gaggle of five unruly dachshunds with nasty personalities. And they had the run of the house, including the guest room and guest's bed.

Dorothy was up early next morning and cheerfully prodded me out of bed to join her on a trip to the market in Brazzaville. The road took us past dusty fields, a dreary scene brightened here and there by a Poinciana tree heavy with scarlet blossoms.

“Damn, an army check point.” Dorothy skidded to a stop, “They keep moving them around.” The barricade, several rusty hospital beds strewn across the road, was guarded by three soldiers with AKA rifles. They motioned us to get out and asked for our papers. In French one of them ordered Dorothy to open *la trompe* of her car for inspection. He became impatient as she struggled in vain to follow his orders. Irritably he handed her his loaded rifle, took the car keys and proceeded to wrestle with the lock. When he was finally successful he said, “Voilà,” handed back her keys and reclaimed his gun.

We proceeded into the city of Brazzaville, a collection of low scattered buildings with two major structures dominating the skyline. One was the imposing stone cathedral built by the French, the other, the Cosmos Hotel built by the Russians and famous for its croissants, which were as hard as snail shells. Garbage littered the gutters and plastic bags attached themselves, like deflated jelly fish, to trees and fences. The whiff of fresh bananas and rotting rubbish permeated the air. The country had fallen on hard times since its independence from France. The world powers, vying for their friendship, offered aid and ammunition in exchange for gold and diamonds. At present the country was communist (Chinese variety), and large posters of Chairman Mao adorned all public places while his advisors were firmly ensconced on the top three floors of the brooding Cosmos Hotel.

Another delay. This time we were stopped by one of the numerous parades that

featured youth shouting slogans and waving red flags. As we watched the procession Dorothy said, “The local women complain that they can’t buy red cloth at the market anymore because it’s all been made into flags. This regime will never last,” she predicted, “the Africans have too much *joie de vivre* to live under this dull regime.”

The women enlivened the otherwise dreary scene. They walked tall, slim and straight, dignified even when moving quickly to avoid blaring horns and spinning wheels. Their long dresses were the colors of the jungle -- red, orange, emerald, azure, violet, that provided a striking contrast to their black skin. Most had bundles tied on their backs, topped by wee curly heads.

The ladies’ hair was an absolute show-stopper. It was done in tight braids that stood out vertically and horizontally from their heads, as if they had been plugged into an electric circuit. It was amazing -- it was gravity defying. These women challenged their surroundings and rose above them.

For my stay I was billeted in a cottage whose owner was on leave. It overlooked the broad, slate-colored Congo river, clogged with islands of blue hyacinth that waltzed in circles with the current as the massive body of water moved forever slowly to the sea. The path to my door was overgrown with green and white ground cover, fringed with and lacy ferns, arched overhead by tinkling bamboo. Gardening was obviously not a priority for my missing landlady. I loved it, imagined I was Jane Forsey, and this my private jungle.

The WHO Headquarters for the Africa Region was a strange place. The site, about eight km from the city, had been a French enclave in colonial days and a pillar of support for DeGaulle, when his Free French troops had their headquarters in Brazzaville

during WW2. After independence the French deeded the land and buildings to the World Health Organization.

A succession of hostile governments proved it to be a most inauspicious location for a Head Office. Staff members mumbled that the property was more like a curse than a gift and in time the Congolese would demand it all back. A few years later this prophecy came true. (In 1998 a rebel army overran the compound, dispersed the staff, and burned the buildings to the ground). Yet in spite of this uncertainty, WHO had built an impressive six story headquarters building that towered white and imperious over the tiny church and the bougainvillea-covered cottages, loosely strung together by a sandy road.

Dorothy lived in a rambling house with a spacious screened porch and uneven tiled floors. "I told them when I arrived from Egypt that I must have a large place because, with so many staff coming and going for briefing, I'd have to do a lot of entertaining." She laughed, "I just love throwing parties."

Dorothy explained, "It's a friendly place here - although you have to expect some problems when people from so many different backgrounds live and work in such close quarters." I thought it was dreadful. The atmosphere at work was bureaucratic beyond belief. It was ruled by the Regional Director, who was always respectfully referred to as *The RD*. He was a brilliant man in his early forties, always immaculate in a dark business suit and Gucci shoes. However his administrative style was taken directly from the lexicon of the all powerful African Chiefs. He never appeared without his entourage. The RD led the parade accompanied by three scribes, one to clear his path, another to carry his papers, and the third to record his commands.

When new staff had an audience with the Big Man, they were frisked first.

Female consultants were warned not to wear slacks, as he did not consider them appropriate attire for women. Handbags had to be left in the outer office. The reason for this last edict was open to much speculation. Did he fear that some disgruntled lady friend might be concealing a weapon? (Office gossip confirmed that this fear may not have been unfounded!).

The local staff suffered most under the firm discipline. Each morning, minutes before 8:00 a.m. the buses from Brazzaville rolled up to the door, spewed out anxious male secretaries, who then scurried like cockroaches to be at their desks on time or risk dismissal. Such punctuality had never before been seen in all of Africa.

Working hours were from 8:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. There were no breaks and hence no need for a staff lounge. To save time and prevent groups gathering to indulge in useless chatter, Turkish coffee, or the regular deadly brew, could be purchased from boys who made the rounds with small carts. So it was not just the air conditioning that made Head Office a cold place. This despotic regime particularly irritated consultants from the Western world who were used to a more relaxed working environment. Perhaps that is why, off duty, everyone socialized so much.

At two o'clock, famished employees went to lunch, often entertaining each other at their cottages. In good French tradition red wine was served, very heady on an empty stomach in the muggy heat of midday (the cottages were not air conditioned). The mix of wine, food, and torrid temperature produced a somnolence only overcome by two hours of sound sleep. By six o'clock it was dark and cooler. Then the compound came to life.

There were ample excuses for soirees and parties as there were always consultants coming and going on various assignments. I had now been at Head Office for over a

week as my clearance to work in Ghana had not yet been approved by that government. I became tired of living in the claustrophobic compound with its constant round of house parties. I hoped that I would not have to stay much longer.

However, my spirits were revived when Dorothy announced, “Sunday is picnic day.” Then she laughed, “Except of course in the rainy season, which is guaranteed to start promptly on September 17th.” She had her special picnic place, a spot where the Congo river sent small tributaries churning between the rocks, and which over time had produced a strip of golden sand right up to the edge of the jungle. Tall palms provided welcome shade from the searing sun.

On a flat rock, near a stream, we set down our picnic basket and bags of crusty French bread, whose yeasty breath soon mingled with the mouth-watering aroma of fried chicken. The picnic hamper was bottomless. Out came giant oranges, smoked oysters, crisp lettuce, ruby tomatoes, mushrooms, olives, tiny jars of caviar, and of course French cheese -- Camembert, Brie, Roquefort, and many other exotic varieties that I had never seen before.

Dorothy laid out the checkered tablecloth and napkins and the mandatory bottles of wine while the guests prepared to feast in this idyllic hideaway. Given the setting, one would not be surprised to see Pan, the woodland elf, dance by tooting his flute. But all was not as peaceful as it seemed.

After the coup, spent rifle shells littered the pristine sand of Sunday beach.

## The Coup

It happened one evening when I was writing letters in my bedroom, happy that for once I did not have to mingle. A voice boomed from the front room, “Madam, you must lock your door!” Startled, I went to meet the intruder, a six-foot man with light brown skin and a marvelous smile. Extending a huge hand he said “ I am Maurice Benson.” I introduced myself and his brow furrowed, “Oh, you’re the nurse who breached regulations by coming here before you were cleared to proceed to Ghana.” (All consultants had to have their professional qualifications and political affiliations reviewed by the host government before being allowed to work in a country).

I knew it was useless to try and explain the mixed travel orders that I had received so merely consoled myself by thinking, yes, and you are the SOB Medical Director who decreed that I must take leave without pay in this godforsaken place until my clearance arrives.

“I don’t want to alarm you,” he continued in a lilting tone that had a trace of West Indies sunshine, “but we’ve just heard on the BBC that there is a coup underway in downtown Brazzaville. No one is to leave the compound until further notice.” He added reassuringly, “There is no immediate cause for concern, the army seems to be in control. Now I must make the rounds to warn the others - - will keep in touch.” He ducked through the doorway and crunched down the gravel path.

Soon after, I had a visit from Dorothy and three of her five overfed Dachshunds. She was uncharacteristically agitated. She’d been in some of the troubles in Somalia and knew what could happen if rebel troops went on the rampage. However, she spared me



the details. But her concern was not for us but for her dogs. “If the soldiers come they will chop [eat] them,” she moaned. I looked at the fat little sausages and could see how a hungry rebel might find them quite appetizing. Then she brightened. “I will find the pharmacist and ask him for some strychnine tablets. I’ll put a bit of meat around the pill, then if the soldiers come I will give one to each of my little dears. It works quickly – they won’t suffer.” Relieved, she proceeded on her quest with her three sacrificial lambs in tow.

I went to bed with my clothes on. If the army came I felt it would be a great indignity to be marched off in pink baby doll pajamas.

Next morning news began to filter in from the BBC in London, still our only reliable source on the fighting going on less than eight kilometers away. Apparently the government offices had been sacked and burned. Some people had been killed or wounded. The rebels were the *Jeunesse*, a brigade of young men who had been specially trained in communist commando tactics. No one knew the right or wrong of the situation. Was it an uprising against Chinese domination, or against corrupt African leaders? Who was behind the *Jeunesse*?

Occasionally there was the sound of mortar fire in the distance. The order was still in effect. No one was to leave the compound. The permanent staff went back to work to secure files. Visiting consultants were not allowed to help. Some worried, some read, others slept. Time hung tense and heavy in the humid air. No one discussed the worst-case scenario. Neighbors drifted in, shared a cup of tea, moved on. Staff who lived there expressed relief that most of their children were safe -- away at boarding schools in Europe. If there were any contingency plans, we were not made aware of them.

Again Dorothy had a solution. She would have a party. Everyone was welcome. She wanted to put up colored lights in the garden but was advised against this. No servants had come to work so everyone pitched in to make hors d'oeuvres and mix drinks. Dorothy, no mean cook herself, whipped up casseroles while I washed and cut fruit for dessert. Other ladies joined in by making their favorite national dishes, spicy curries, shish-kabobs, fragrant rice dishes, flaky pastries, sushi, baklava, and wonderful coconut concoctions. The affair was so successful that Maurice, the Medical Director, announced that a party would be held at his home the next night -- and it would have a Caribbean theme.

That night the drinks were exotic, sweet and potent. We all learned to sing calypso and listened with fascination to the local stories spun with such humor in the sing-song dialect of the West Indies. We laughed and danced till dawn. On taking our leave, a lady doctor from the Gambia spoke for everyone. Lapsing into pidgin, she rolled her eyes and declared, "Man, dis party pass all!"

The fighting continued and an occasional explosion or gunfire could be heard -- closer now. The gaiety was just a facade to hide the concern everyone felt, not just for ourselves but for the safety of our local co-workers who lived in town.

On my way to church the next morning I took a short-cut. Just outside the perimeter fence was a young boy dressed in camouflaged fatigues, sleeves and legs rolled up, bulky, amusing. Like a child playing war, I thought. Except the rifle slung over one shoulder, and the loaded cartridge belt on the other, was very real. He saw me, began to twirl a revolver on his index finger, smiled arrogantly at my obvious frozen

fear. He could not have been twelve years old. The war was coming closer. No party was planned for that night.

Late Sunday afternoon the news came. After three bloody days the coup had been crushed. We were to remain in camp until “mopping up” exercises had been completed. One by one the servant boys returned with red eyes and drooping spirits. The Jeunesse had been their friends and their brothers. Three hundred of them had been killed and buried in a mass grave at the edge of town. The boys did not elaborate and we did not pry. Everyone tried to lessen their loss with kindness, food and money. In a shockingly short time, everything seemed to return to normal.

As soon as the ban was lifted we went to Brazzaville for supplies. The sight was sobering. Windowless buildings with blackened insides gaped vacantly out upon littered streets. It was the ultimate image of anarchy. The lily pond in front of the old Assembly Building was a muddy cesspool filled with submerged filing cabinets and soggy, floating files. (A suitable last resting place for government documents, some cynic suggested). Dogs rummaged through the debris.

Women, still erect and colorful with loaded baskets on their heads, sure footed in bare feet, picked their way past the devastation wrought by men, to get on with the business of feeding their families.

The Regional Director was not pleased with our partying, even though it had proven to be a highly successful coup-coping strategy. He took immediate steps to remove the disruptive visitors so peace and dignity might be restored at WHO Headquarters. A mass exodus was planned. My clearance had come so I was outward bound on an early plane for Ghana the next morning. Even earlier a large contingent was

to leave for Nairobi to take up assignments in various countries in East Africa.

There was still time, on this our last night, for one final farewell. This gathering was not like the others -- it was melancholy, more like a wake. We listened to reminiscences, stories about home and families that struck a common chord whether the narrator was from India, the Cameroons, the USSR or Canada. We sang sad songs and reluctantly parted in the early hours to the plaintive strains of Auld Lang Syne. In dangerous situations people reveal their true selves. This openness promoted trust, which grew during our incarceration, welded us into a cohesive group. Although no heroic words were spoken, we knew that whatever we had to face, we would face it together. It is not surprising that friendships were fused -- some that have lasted a lifetime.

All this is to explain how it came to pass that I arrived in Accra, Ghana, West Africa in September, 1968 at high noon, with a hangover.

But it still does not explain the pink hat with the veil. Suffice to say it was a bit of cultural baggage transported from another civilization in another exotic place -- namely Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. The hat had been a gift from concerned colleagues, who feared that I might embarrass them before I left by appearing at the podium without a head covering during the annual general meeting of the Saskatchewan Registered Nurses Association. In the 1960's this would have broken a sacred taboo which stated that a lady must not appear in church or at a public function without a piece of felt, or straw, or feathers perched upon her cranium.

Subsequently I gave the sacred headpiece to my neighbor's cook, whose wife wore it to church every Sunday until the rainy season, when it mercifully dissolved in a downpour.

## Papa James

“You will need a cook,” they said. I was not so sure. My place was small. I could manage. “But,” my African colleagues protested, “How will you get groceries? The stores and the market close at four o’clock, the same time we get off work.”

“And what about washing?” Mrs. Bonso, my American friend chimed in. “It all has to be done in the bathtub you know.” A good point. This hot climate required frequent changes of clothing and bed linen.

“And it all has to be hung out to dry,” she continued. “And ironed, even the underwear. You’ve heard about the tumbo fly. It lays eggs, especially in elastic. The larvae then burrow into your flesh. Later they emerge through the skin as full-blown worms. Ironing destroys the eggs.” Not a pretty prospect. I was convinced.

That is how I met Papa James. An old man with knobby knees. He stood at the far end of a long lineup in the dingy employment shed, grizzled head bowed. He wore tattered shorts and a faded T-shirt that bore the warning *Fear Woman*. Overcome by the oppressive heat and the abject poverty of the applicants, I had passed quickly down the line of men.

“They are all experienced cooks,” the official-in-charge said as he trotted in my wake. “Some even have references.”

On an impulse I paused in front of. Papa James. He raised his head and his sharp black eyes and cocky smile reached out to me.

“What is your name?” I said hastily, anxious to leave the dank surroundings and the smell of sweat, stale urine and rotting banana peels.

“James,” he answered.

“Would you like to work for me?”

“Yes Sir-Madam,” he replied coming smartly to attention, clicking his bare heels together.

“Madam, I like to look natty,” James said when he reported for work. Translate this meant he would require three pairs of *knickers*, (baggy white shorts that came just below the knee), five white shirts and three long green aprons with pockets in the front. He assured me these were minimum requirements for any respectable household. I suggested we add sandals to this wardrobe. He agreed and ordered two pair.

James proudly donned his new attire and paraded around the compound like a grenadier guard. Actually he looked more like Anansi the Spider from a children’s book with his gnarled black arms and legs protruding from the snowy white uniform.

Papa James loved to cook. He was good at it. He was very proud that he once worked at the British Embassy, and let me know in many subtle ways that my establishment was definitely a step down. For example he considered me quite stingy for not purchasing Grand Marnier to flavor his sauces. He was also distressed that I did not care for his *frittahs*, a cross between a pancake and a crepe, that he insisted must be smothered in jam. I tried to make up for my lack of good taste by extolling the virtues of his roast beef and Yorkshire pudding, exceeded only by his delicious mashed plantains and luscious brandy-laced trifle.

Papa James was in his element when I had a dinner party and he could show off his culinary skills. One evening when my boss complimented him on the excellent meal James beamed with pride and replied, “Oh, yes, should be good -- cost Madam plenty

money!”

Those most appreciative of his gourmet cooking were my young CUSO (Canadian University Service Overseas) and Peace Corps friends. Frequently these volunteers would come down from their isolated postings up country sick to death of the monotonous village fare, which consisted mainly of flavourless garri made from boiled cassava served with stew. The minute one of my *bruddahs* or *sistahs*, as James called them, appeared he would run to the stove and start frying chicken. The young people had voracious appetites and were lavish in their praise of the feasts he prepared. Papa James loved them -- and they loved him in return.

We had something in common, Papa James and I. We both suffered from arthritis. Every payday he would go to the market, get his grey hair dyed black, and then visit the juju man for an injection to cure his aches and pains. After this procedure his neck would be red, swollen and sore, so of course he did not feel the arthritis pain. He had great faith. “You must have needle Madam,” he insisted. After a week the inflammation in his neck subsided, the arthritis pains returned, and Papa James again reluctantly agreed to share my aspirins.

Papa James, it turned out, was also a connoisseur of womanhood. His highest praise was reserved for a Canadian colleague of mine at the University of Ghana at Legon. By any standards Ruth was decidedly plump, a trait much admired in Africa. “Oh Madam, she is *tough!*” Papa James exclaimed the first time he saw her. I didn’t realize the depth of his admiration until one afternoon I returned with supplies for a dinner party that night.

“Fat Madam from Legon was here,” he announced.

“What did she want?”

He ignored my question. “I tell her come to party tonight -- 7:00 o’clock sharp!” I was annoyed because I had quite a small table. As a consequence the invited guests had to be squeezed together to make room for *Fat Madam*.

When I went home on leave Ruth agreed that Papa James could contact her at the University if any serious problem arose in my household while I was away. Upon my return she reported a number of emergency calls. For example, once Ofli my dog, was supposed to be very sick. She came and Ofli was just fine.

Another frantic call reported there were cockroaches under the kitchen sink. There were frequently cockroaches under the kitchen sink -- all he had to do was spray them. Each time she arrived Papa James would have tea ready to serve with some of his special coconut cookies. “I think,” Ruth laughed, “while you were away I was dating your cook!”

One day I sent a message I could not come to work. All night long I had suffered the alternating chills and fever of malaria, even though I religiously took my pills. In the morning the sweating and shaking had stopped but I felt grey and spent. I desperately needed sleep.

Mid-morning the school bus arrived filled with kindly colleagues concerned about my health. The last thing I wanted was a horde of cheerful well-wishers sitting on what I thought might well be my death bed. Papa James welcomed the guests and to my disbelief assured them, “Oh, no, Madam not proper sick, she just hab the fever.”

I dragged myself to a wicker chair where I slumped like a limp noodle. In the



meantime Papa James, the consummate host, was in his element serving tea and his famous coconut cookies to the appreciative crowd. This prolonged the visit.

When the guests finally left I wobbled to my feet and said sternly, “Papa James bring me some chicken soup -- because I am proper sick!”

James lived in the servant’s quarters. It was a walled off compound adjacent to the garden and quite comfortable by African standards. He had been in residence for over six months when early one morning he appeared on my doorstep with a very pregnant young woman. Even in the dim light of dawn she looked vibrant in a long cotton dress, alive with slashes of gold and green and blue. She had a heavy bundle on her head and a small child on her back. As she put down her head load the porch light glinted off her large loop earrings.

“My wife,” Papa James announced proudly. “She market lady, live Katababi way,” he explained. “Yestiday she have plenty trouble with poleece. She no cover her bread wif plastic.” He made a face and I gathered it was another case of the police hassling traders for the infamous *dash*, or bribe, that was part of the cost of doing business in West Africa.

I refrained from giving my usual pious homily on democracy and justice and asked, “How much does she need for the fine?”

The young woman took the money, knotted it securely into the cloth around her waist. She bobbed politely, adjusted her head load, and then turned towards the gate. Proudly erect she set out to walk the three miles back to the market with her heavy burdens.

“Your wife is having another baby?” I turned to Papa James in disbelief. The wee one on her back could not have been ten months old.

“Oh, yes, Madam,” he beamed, “mebee twins.” I was shocked. I looked at this old man and then thought of the poor young woman who would be left to raise these children on the meager income of a petty trader. I launched into my best family planning lecture. Papa James’ joyful face turned solemn, then cloudy.

“Have you any questions?” I asked after delivering my very important message.

“Madam,” Papa James exploded, “not your business this Adam and Eve palaver. God’s business!” And he turned on his heel and went to his quarters. Two months later the birth took place -- fortunately not twins.

Papa James and I had the occasional domestic disagreement such as this one. However for over three years we managed to maintain a cordial, if rotating, master-servant relationship -- with James in control most of the time.

## **Kumasi Airport**

Delays, breakdowns, human error and Acts of God were not unusual occurrences on my monthly trip to Kumasi, a city in central Ghana. It was necessary to make regular visits to the Nurses Training College there to ensure their curriculum developed in tandem with the school in Accra.

The plane headed north. I looked down at the lush green jungle of central Ghana and waited for the trees to part and reveal a small brown island that was the city of Kumasi. It was a dusty, bustling African town and the cultural hub of the Ashanti people.

“Kumasi was the capital of the once powerful Ashanti Empire,” Comfort, the Principal Tutor, explained on my first visit. “We defeated the British in 1863 even though our warriors only had spears to use against their guns.”

She drove past the grounds of the hospital to show me a sword embedded in stone. “It was placed there by our chief priest, Okomfo Anokye, way back at the turn of the century. It represents a new start for our people,” she said. “If the sword is ever removed it would be the end of the Ashantis. Our traditional chief, the Asantahene, lives in his palace at the edge town. He’s a very wise old man.”

I always dropped in to the Cultural Centre when I was in Kumasi to admire the unique gold jewelry and the cloth woven in traditional Ashanti designs. My favorites were the gold weights. They were a reminder of the days when this precious metal was plentiful and Ghana was known as the Gold Coast.

The Curator said. “Originally coffee beans were used on the scales to measure

the weight of the gold but as we became more affluent they were replaced by small figures. The artists cast them out of gold. Now of course they use a mix of copper and lead.”

I picked up one of the tiny sculptures. “Look at this one! It’s a man killing a snake with a stick.”

“I like the juju man with his big headdress and his rattle,” she added. “The gold weight reflect the daily life of people – and some are even a bit risqué!”

I enjoyed my visits to Kumasi. However, getting there and back could be frustrating. One time in particular my stamina was strained to the limit.

I’d been in the town for three days. It was hot and humid and some of the local staff had not been particularly receptive to my foreign ideas. I was relieved when Comfort arrived to take me to the airport to return home.

“There’s no need for you to wait until the plane actually takes off,” I told her. Reluctantly she left. In this generous society it was considered a gross breach of hospitality to leave a guest alone.

The airport was set in a clearing in the jungle and joined to the town by a narrow dirt road. The terminal, a low, battered, off-white building, was completely exposed to the searing tropical sun. I slumped into a plastic seat and listened to the ceiling fan creak and groan. It continued to turn but failed to move any air.

The waiting room was full. The Muslim men were clad in flowing robes, the others wore brightly embroidered shirts. The women presented a brilliant swirl of colour as they moved through the crowd. Many had sleeping babies tied comfortably on their backs.

Nearly everyone appeared to have all their earthly possessions in tow. This excess

baggage was securely trussed up in bulging striped nylon bags. The overflow of yams, sacks of sorghum, and pots and pans were tied on the side.

The time for take-off came and went. People laughed and talked and swatted flies. They did not show any of the impatience that I was beginning to feel. After two hours an announcement crackled out over the PA system. It was so garbled I decided it must be in Ashanti, not English.

I carefully watched the reaction of my fellow travelers. It was instantaneous. They were on their feet and out the door, quicker than Ben Johnson on steroids. I joined the race as seats were not reserved and frequently overbooked. It was no time for a tortoise and hare routine.

I didn't do too badly in the one-hundred yard dash to the plane. I settled in a window seat as the throng milled about trying to get too much baggage into too little space. Very quickly the plane reached its saturation point and the door was firmly closed, in spite of the protests and pounding by those left outside. I smiled a satisfied smile as the engines started. My smugness was premature.

The plane idled for a few minutes before the pilot made an inaudible announcement which was met by grumbling from the passengers. The door opened and we were asked to leave.

My neighbor, an obese businessman, said with great authority, "This is a temporary problem. We'll soon be on our way again."

The stern stewardess said, "Leave your belonging on the seat. Then you'll be sure you have your place when you return."

We retreated to the lounge where I watched the proceedings through the dust

streaked window. Workers descended upon the aircraft like a swarm of black ants, then just as suddenly returned to their burrow on the far side of the field.

Immediately the engines revved up and the plane roared down the runway and off into the sky. There was shock and disbelief in the waiting room. My informant reassured me. “It’s just a safety test. They’ll circle then come back to pick us up. After all our carry-on luggage is still on board.

An hour had passed. Even my wise friend became noticeably nervous. He joined others to aggressively seek out the airline employees. They had mysteriously vanished. The truth eventually filtered out. My friend threw his hands in the air. “They say the plane has gone to Accra for repairs. It *might* return in the morning.”

The news started another chain reaction. There was a stampede for taxis. My fat friend explained. “If six of us shared we could rent a taxi reasonably, drive all night and get to Accra airport by morning. Then we could claim our baggage before it returns to Kumasi.”

This sounded logical. Of course there were many more people than taxis so the bidding was ferocious. The group I cast my lot with were very adept at bargaining. They pursued the game furiously, gesticulating, waving money, shouting endearments and abuse and calling upon God and Allah as necessary. The taxi drivers stood their ground, wrangled every extra cedi they could get out of the deal.

I stood aside, prepared to accept any bargain that was struck. It was in this melee that Comfort found me. Bush telegraph had alerted her that the plane had left us stranded.

“On no condition must you ride in one of those rickety taxis,” she said, wringing

her hands. “The driver will be on drugs to keep him awake, the road is a trail through the jungle and at night you could be set upon by brigands.” I saw her point when I observed more closely the beat up old taxis, now sagging with passengers.

“A gentleman has been very helpful to me. I’d better go and tell him than I’m opting out of the deal,” I said.

“Never mind,” Comfort said firmly. She propelled me out the door.

I spent the night wrapped in a sheet in a government Rest House. Comfort arrived very early in the morning. “I brought you some bread and a bottle of water,” she said as she deposited me on the 6:00 a.m. train for Accra.

I had a first class ticket and was ensconced in a small, private compartment. Very comfortable, I thought. The door opened and two large ladies entered with a mound of baggage and two small children. They spoke no English so I could not protest. I suspected it would be useless anyway as they were probably relatives of the conductor. We were well on our way before the ladies got their babes and bags satisfactorily settled. I clung to a thin sliver of seat by the window.

The train plunged into the jungle, green and hot and steamy. Occasional shafts of sunlight pierced through the trees like laser beams. The oxygen in our compartment was nearly depleted. One of the ladies opened the window. This let in a blast of warm air, also soot from the engine and all manner of bugs both flying and crawling. The occasional twig snapped through the open window as if the forest was reaching out to strangle the marauding train.

At the only stop a trader thrust a large leaf laden with shish kabobs through the window. I was hungry. I bought the whole lot and shared them with my cabin mates.

Not a wise move. The treats were fire on a stick. After only one shish kabob my whole bottle of water could not quench the fire in my belly. They did not agree with the toddlers either. They cried all the way to Accra..

The train arrived in at high noon. I tumbled out, wrinkled and frowzy, and immediately went to the airport to retrieve my luggage. “Madam, we not know you be here,” the baggage man explained. “It be gone back Kumasi.”

Subsequent trips back to the airport were no more successful. It seemed I was never there on the same day as my luggage. The errant bags continued to shuttle back and forth between the two cities.

Eventually I got lucky. “Your suitcase be right here in dis place.” The toothless attendant wagged his head at this remarkable coincidence. He handed me a well-worn piece of paper.

“Fo’ pay storage, he said. “ Dis be here long, long time.”

I paid the bill. I was grateful to have my bags back -- just in time to repack for my next trip to Kumasi.





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