

The Crucified One

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In Cameroon, West Africa, I was wanted by large numbers of men — the only time in my life I had been exotic enough for this to happen. I was traveling with my best friend Madeline; we were both twenty-one and were wooed wherever we went. When the chief of a small tribe offered his old ivory bracelet and a herd of good cattle for my hand in marriage, I told him if he wanted me for a wife, he would have to go to America to ask my father's permission. That was the custom, he admitted, but what Cameroonian could afford to go to America?

Secretly, of course, I was attracted to the Cameroonian men, but the prospect of falling in love with one and becoming one of his five or ten wives did not excite me. I could not envision myself breaking the fields, planting yams, bent to the ground with a baby on my back. I envied the women I saw ambling down the roads. Their feet were bare and their breasts moved freely. They were black jewels sparkling against the beige desert and blue sky. They made me glad to be a woman. But Madeline and I did not belong to the Cameroonians. On the rare occasions we encountered whites, we always felt at home.

One day, Madeline and I were trying to hail a taxi in the town of Mora. We were traveling with Herman, a young Belgian man. Suddenly, a small truck pulled over to the side of the road. The white man in the truck stuck his head out the window and in French asked me if we would like a ride. Impulsively, we accepted his offer. Madeline and I climbed into the front of the truck while Herman jumped into the open back.

The man had lots of hair, wild grey curls and a wrinkled face. He wore heavy black glasses on his straight tanned nose.

He asked where we were headed and I told him to the bank where we intended to cash our travelers checks. From the start, it was clear he fancied Madeline who sat in the middle stuck between the Frenchman and me. He glanced aside from the road to her blue eyes posing the questions: Where had we been? Where were we headed? Were we Americans? Ah, yes, he had guessed as much. Were we married? Something sly about the way he asked this told us both to lie.

Yes, Madeline said. Herman was her husband. I was her sister and we were traveling through Cameroon together with my husband, whom we would meet the next day in Rhumsiki, a tiny mountain town. Oh, he said, that was interesting. He had traveled the same territory in the course of promoting his business, the sale of Parisian perfume, but that was not his only business. He also ran the town's only bakery and specialized in cooking bread, fluffy and tasty as the stuff they made in France.

When we reached the bank, the Frenchman pulled into the parking lot, but before he turned off the motor, he scratched his head and said, "Ah!" as if remembering something important. Neither Madeline nor I spoke French very well, just enough to get by. I understood him to say that it had occurred to him what a help it would be if he could change our money, as he was planning to leave the country in a week and needed dollars. He happened to have a good deal of Cameroonian cash at his house and he'd give a better exchange rate than the bank.

He thumped his thumbs against the steering wheel, waiting for us to decide. He knew he had us. He could see from our clothes we were living on a tight budget, trying hard to be frugal. At the bank, our checks would be worth six hundred dollars. The Frenchman would cash them for fifty dollars more. Madeline had less money than I and I knew she would want to make the deal.

"Okay," I said and motioned to Herman to accompany me into the bank under the pretext of checking the exchange rate. Inside, I explained to him what we'd said and he agreed to pretend to be Madeline's husband. We returned to the car and left the lot, heading for the Frenchman's home.

The Frenchman halted before a bakery, across the street

from a white mansion. I assumed the mansion to be his. It was his khaki shorts that impressed me. The only Cameroonians who wear shorts are prisoners who are forced to do so by the wardens as a means of humiliating them. I took this to mean that the Frenchman had the wealth to exempt him from local customs and the contempt to wish to do so. He seemed like just the sort of man who would live in a mansion protected by an ornate black fence and half-hidden behind leafy mango trees.

After barking his way through the bakery, shouting commands at employees, complaining about one thing and another, he motioned for us to follow him. We did not cross the street to the mansion, however, but turned the other way, down a walkway to the back of the bakery. At the door, the Frenchman ordered one of his employees to go for a bottle of French wine. "*Le meilleur!*" he shouted, swatting his hand through the air. He was short and stocky, with a chest that reminded me of a refrigerator door. Although his employees didn't appear to be frightened by him, to me, at that moment, he seemed quite fierce. As soon as the order was delivered, his face relaxed, his wrinkles sagged, and once again he looked harmless. He pushed away some plastic strips hanging down in the doorway and stepped aside to let us pass. The small room had walls a little longer than the length of a normal-sized bed. Two cots, each made with clean, white sheets folded over blue blankets, filled much of the wall space. There was a closet, a desk and a bookcase brimming with food.

The three of us could hardly hide our surprise at the man's meager living quarters. Neither could we keep our eyes off the array of canned delicacies. It was so typical of the way our expectations had been dashed on this trip that I smiled. Our eyes met and the Frenchman turned away, begging us all to sit. Since there was nowhere else, we sat on the cots, while he opened his briefcase and gave us each a ballpoint pen.

Again, I felt a little frightened. Once we signed the checks over to him the deal would be irrevocable, even if he did not come through with the cash. He could simply refuse to pay. Then what? We could go to the police, but they were so corrupt, we would have to pay them to get anything done. Even if they accepted a bribe, they probably would not touch him.

No matter how simply he lived, he was the only baker in a town where the local people could hardly afford ovens. If they wanted bread, they had to buy it from him.

"Listen," I said in English, hoping the Frenchman would not understand, "I think we better get cash before we sign over any checks." Herman and Madeline had the same thing in mind. They nodded.

In French, Herman explained. The Frenchman shrugged. "*Pourquoi pas?*" he asked, reaching into his pocket and pulling out a fat roll of bills. As I wondered what kind of man carried a thousand dollars or so in his front shirt pocket, he let another arrow fly.

"*Mademoiselle,*" he said to Madeline and he handed her two hundred dollars. "*Pour vous.*"

We all heard it and realized that he knew we had lied to him. We had told him Madeline and Herman were married and he had not called her "*Madame.*" He handed over the rest of the money, a slight smile on his face. Then he sat down at his desk, his back to us, saying he had to look for receipt forms.

He shuffled through magazines in his desk drawer, tisking as he did, holding one, then another up, as if to get a better look at them. They were pornography magazines, colorful and crude, more explicit and lewd than the insides of any magazine I had ever seen. Herman and I exchanged worried glances. Madeline did not see them, as she was counting her money and placing the bills in her wallet. I made motion with my head towards the door and Herman nodded, but as he did, the plastic strips parted and the employee returned with the wine.

By now the Frenchman had located the receipts, but instead of filling them out, he took the bottle and shooed his employee out of the room. He opened the wine, sniffed it, and nodded, setting it on the table. Then he lit a small, propane stove. He placed a skillet on top and poured in some oil. Without warning, he turned and winked at Madeline, who returned the gesture with a look of disgust. This appeared to please him and he laughed loud, spanking his thigh. Chuckling, he opened a can of chicken fillet.

At the time, I was suffering from diarrhea, so the sight of food and wine held no appeal to me, but the effect on Herman

and Madeline was different. We had been eating Cameroonian food for two months now, white yams, plantains, and a cornmeal concoction called Fu Fu. Madeline and Herman moved to the edge of their seats to look closer at the chicken sizzling in the skillet. The sweet scent pervaded the room.

The employee reappeared carrying a white box and a loaf of bread straight out of the oven. The Frenchman cut us each a piece, spread butter on top and handed them out. Even I could enjoy the bread. The three of us ate quietly while the Frenchman began to talk. Later, after Madeline, Herman and I compared notes, it turned out I'd gotten the gist of what he said. One phrase, however, he repeated again and again, thumping his chest with his thumb, which I did not understand. "*Le seul qui est crucifié,*" he said. It seemed to hold special meaning for him.

He told the tale of how he arrived in Cameroon and how he had occupied himself since. He said he had come with his parents to the country before there were roads. They had traveled on horseback, crossing the Sahara with several other families, all from the same village in Northern France. Shortly after they entered the country, a tragedy occurred. Men from a local tribe surprised their party and murdered his parents, beheading them both. As he recounted this, his face took on a grizzly look and his wrinkles tightened, left and right. At the time of the massacre, he was fourteen years old. One of the families of the party adopted him, but he grew wild and on his eighteenth birthday, returned to the tribe and caught two of its members, a man and a woman, as they wandered down the road with five children behind them. He shot the adults, and while the children looked on, severed the corpses' ears. He did not say how he managed all this and came out alive. He did say he had strung the ears into a necklace.

"Would you like to see it?" he asked.

We refused his offer, laughing nervously, and shifting uncomfortably on the cots. Meanwhile, the wine had breathed sufficiently to suit him and he filled four glasses. He rose and handed a glass to Herman and another to Madeline. When he handed one to me, I politely refused.

"*Non, merci,*" I said, and motioned that I did not want any.

"*Porquois?*" he asked, as if he had never heard anything as strange.

"*J'ai mal au ventre,*" I said. "My stomach is bad."

"Bah!" he said, glowering at me. He raised the glass to his lips and drained it. Staring at me, he flung his arms behind him, threw it forward and smashed the glass against the floor. The glass lay shimmering against the floor. Seconds later, the Frenchman sat calmly, taking little sips of wine and fussing like an old chef over the chicken in the skillet. He opened a can of artichoke hearts and filled three plates with food, cutting fresh bread and placing it on the side. He insisted that I accept a plate. I tried not to look at the food and wondered how we could get out of the room, without provoking him more.

My friends, however, seemed to forget the Frenchman's wild action the moment they received their plates. I sighed, telling myself I had overreacted. The man was a performer, an eccentric, yes, but an important person in the town. He couldn't be all bad. Herman gulped down his food as Madeline sat on the bed, her long legs crossed, her blonde bangs falling in her face, savoring each bite.

The Frenchman drained a glass of wine, then poured himself another and began to talk. Yes, he said, he'd married the daughter of a Norwegian missionary, a beautiful, blue-eyed woman whom he'd abducted from her parents one stormy day as the three of them walked to church. He'd taken her into a remote part of the desert and charmed her into falling in love with him. Soon, she did not want to leave him. They traveled the country by horseback, then by jeep and he took her to Paris to buy clothes and silk scarves. She loved scarves and collected them the way men collect ties. At the age of forty-eight, she died of malaria and since then, he had existed without her.

"All there is to life is to eat and make love," he said, stealing a sidelong glance at me. I laughed nervously. He laughed, too, slapping his knee. Then he stopped and shouted, "To eat and make love!"

"I think we'd better be going," I said.

"*Attendez,*" he cried. "*Vous ne pouvez pas aller sans manger le dessert!*"

He opened the cardboard box. It contained four cream

puffs and four chocolate-covered eclairs. He displayed the box to each of us as if it contained emeralds and gold. Ruefully, Madeline looked at me, and then at the pastries. She chose a cream puff, studying it carefully before licking the whipped cream. Herman took an éclair. Again, I refused to eat and this time, the Frenchman did not insist.

Yes, he said, it was a tricky thing for a wealthy white man like himself to go about his business in a country filled with poor blacks. But he had no fear because he never went anywhere unarmed. At this, Madeline and Herman both stopped eating and we all exchanged glances. A revolver was under the pillow now, if we would like to see it, he said. He motioned to the bed.

"Well," said Herman casually in French, "thank you for the meal. We'll go now to catch a taxi."

"To Rhumsiki," the Frenchman said. "But when are you coming back?"

The only place to go from Rhumsiki was Nigeria. While Herman planned to take that road, Madeline and I did not have visas for Nigeria. We had to return to Mora, if we did not want to enter Nigeria illegally, or stay in Rhumsiki for the rest of our lives.

"We're not coming back," I said.

Herman looked at his watch. "Can we find a taxi in the street now?"

"No, no," the Frenchman said. "I'll drive you to the station."

"Don't be ridiculous," Herman said.

Three times Herman refused and each time the Frenchman insisted.

"Okay," Herman relented, "but we have to leave right now, or we'll be late."

"No problem," the Frenchman responded and motioned for us to follow him. He led us down the walkway to the front of the bakery where he had parked the truck. It felt wonderful to be outside again among the people in the street. We threw our backpacks in the truck. A smiling woman with a pierced nose tried to sell us some bananas and mangos out of a wide, shallow basket. Herman and Madeline bought mangos. Then

the Frenchman drove us to the station. I was both relieved and elated as I jumped out of the truck. I joined Madeline and Herman in thanking the man profusely for his "kindness." He simply nodded and drove away, without the slightest trace of humor on his face.

When we arrived in Rhumsiki, a large crowd gathered and many people offered us a place to stay in their homes. The hotel was closed. Herman located a guide, Christopher Columbus, who told us we could pitch our tent near his house beside a boulder where the chiefs usually met. Cows had dumped on the ground next to the boulder and, before we could stop her, Christopher's mother, shirtless, scooped up the pies into a gourd, smiling at us as she worked.

Christopher's wife built us a fire, bending over to poke it. Greenish tattoos covered her cheeks like tiny abstract paintings. She had a plump, happy face and a baby bundled on her back. That night, Christopher cooked us chicken, smothered in peanut sauce, peanut flavored Fu Fu and boiled potatoes. We ate in his home, a round hut made of rocks topped with a thatched roof. We sat on mats on the dirt floor, crossed-legged, talking softly. He told us about the Saharan wind, the *Harmatton* which blows in every year leaving a great cloud of dust in its path. It would gust in tonight, clouding the sky until the rainy season washed the air clean several months later.

After dinner, Herman, Madeline and I lay under the stars. At first, we laughed about the Frenchman and then tried to figure him out. Billions of yellow stars sparkled in the inky black sky. The stars seemed close enough to snatch. From Christopher's house came the sound of a baby crying, then the song of his mother lulling him back to sleep. I was ready for dreams when I heard Madeline say, "*Le seul qui est crucifié*. What did he mean?"

"The crucified one," Herman said. "He was calling himself the crucified one."

"You mean like Jesus. Does he think he's Jesus Christ?" Madeline said.

"All crazies think they're Jesus Christ," Herman said.

Wind howled that night, swirling leaves and shaking

branches. At dawn, the wind stilled, leaving sky and desert canyons filtered by Saharan sand. Herman left that morning. Neither Madeline nor I wanted to see him go, but he was determined to get to Togo where he believed he would find the most beautiful waterfall in the world. He kissed us good-bye. "See you later," he said, hopping into the back of a truck which drove away, leaving us alone on the red clay road in front of a hut that served as Rhumsiki's bus stop. We stood motionless, trying to blink the dust away. A goat bleated. A man knelt beside the goat by the hut. As he massaged the animal's balls, he stared at us. We left that spot as fast as we could.

We spent the rest of the day with Christopher Columbus, trying to locate horses. None of the men in town believed a woman could stay mounted on a steed, so for our own safety, they said, they could only rent us asses. Madeline and I bounced off on two fat ones. Christopher followed on his bicycle, pedaling hard. When the asses got bored and tried to stop to eat, Christopher struck them with a thorny switch. We stopped on a plateau, looking down into the canyon as the sun glowed orange and sunk down behind mountains and lavender tipped grass shuddered in the wind.

"Why go back to Mora?" I said, gazing out at the dull sky. "Let's stay here."

Christopher smiled. "Stay forever," he said.

"We have to go back," Madeline said.

"No we don't," I said. "Let's go to Nigeria."

"But we don't have visas," she said.

"We'll get in. Let's do anything not to run into that Frenchman again."

"Oh, ladies, not Nigeria," Christopher said. "Nigerians are bad. They steal ladies like yourselves. You must bribe them to get in the country. You must bribe them to get out. If you complain, they shoot you and throw you in the ditch."

"We should have gone on with Herman," I said, as we turned our asses back and climbed up the hill.

"Mora's big," Madeline said. "We're not going to run into the Frenchman again."

We arrived in Mora at twilight and asked a taxi driver to

take us to a moderately priced hotel. He chose a comfortable and clean hotel on the edge of town at the end of a long, unlit road. Stars glittered through Saharan dust. As soon as we got out of the car, a man appeared and took our backpacks to the office. I did not like the fact that the place was so isolated. If the man had not taken our packs, I might have insisted we move on. But I did not have the energy to retrieve the bags and neither did Madeline. We decided to eat at the hotel then go to bed. We were starving. We paid the taxi driver and thanked him.

The hotel restaurant consisted of several tables and a bar around which a crowd of young Cameroonians stood drinking. They toasted our health and begged us to join them. We were tired, we said, and only wanted to eat. Oh, said one of the men, then you have certainly come to the right place. He pointed to a long menu which hung from the wall, grinning and winking.

Madeline and I walked up to the menu and began to read. My mouth watered at the sight. Along with standard Cameroonian fare, the place served chicken, all kinds of omelettes, salads, bread and soup. We sat down at a table. After a long time, a waiter in track shoes appeared.

Madeline ordered a ham and cheese omelette.

"There is none," said the waiter.

She asked for a plain omelette.

"There is none," he said.

"How about some chicken?" she asked.

"None," said the waiter.

"I'll have some soup," I said.

"There is none," said the waiter.

"What else are you out of?" asked Madeline.

"We are out of eggs. We are out of soup. We are out of salad. We are out of chicken and we are out of bread. We have Fu Fu and we have plantains."

A loud round of laughter sounded at the bar. "If you want a good meal," said the man who had shown us the menu, "go to the Saint Hubert."

The Saint Hubert was a white hotel with brown shutters on the windows, surrounded by a tall white wall. Behind the wall sprawled a terrace filled with tables and chairs, one side

cordoned off for drinking and the other for eating. The clients were white, except for here and there a black man wearing the short sleeved double-knit jacket of the government *functionnaire*. Women wore fine dresses embellished with jewelry. Men wore well-pressed pants, their shirts starched and tucked neatly in. Squatting around one side of the terrace, trader men offered wares of ebony, ivory and gold. "Regardez regardez," they murmured as we passed. Madeline chose a table far away from them and I walked into the cabana which housed the bar to order us drinks.

His face appeared to me magnified in the midst of the crowd that stood drinking at the bar. Beneath his knit shirt, his biceps bulged. He leaned against the bar, holding his cocktail in one hand, using the other to stir it with a straw. His eyes darted around the room. He spotted me and straightened. We stared at one another. He seemed to grit his teeth.

I walked to the bar and from the corner of my eye, saw him go outside. On the way out the door, I passed him. Apparently, he had seen all he needed to see outside and was returning to the bar to order another drink. We nearly brushed arms. The thick hair on his arm swept the skin of mine.

"*Bon soir*," I said. In response, he said nothing, frowned at me and moved on.

I hurried back to the table.

"Did you see him?" I asked Madeline, clenching the beers. "The Frenchman," I said. "He's here."

"You're kidding," she said.

"I'm serious. I told him *bon soir* and he just looked at me."

He stood by the door, assessing the situation, jerking his head left and right. His eyes settled on the table behind Madeline. He strode to it and sat down. I sat down also, tipping my head toward him to let Madeline know he was there. He lounged behind her, his gaze fixed on her hair. It was the color of jonquils, pale yellow and wispy. It lay on her shoulders and fell down her back.

She studied her beer, tearing pieces off the label and rolling them into balls. After a while, she took a long drink. When she put the bottle down, she shrugged. "Let's eat," she said.

"Okay," I said, "one last meal."

"It's not our last meal," she said. But my mind raced, insisting that maybe it was. We rose from the table and walked to the dining section, me leading the way. The Frenchman got up to follow us.

My shish kabobs came on two sticks, juicy chunks of beef and onions, peppers and garlic deliciously marinated. It was the best food I had seen in weeks, but I could hardly enjoy the meal. Madeline ordered a steak and she carved into it with delight, but I knew her usual gratification in eating had been dampened by the man's presence. I could not see him now. He sat behind me where he could get a good look at Madeline.

The covers of his pornography magazines flashed though my mind. Would it be murder or rape? After he assaulted us, would he want to shut us up? Would anyone know or care in this town stuck so far from home?

Madeline ordered a Napoleon.

"Damn, Madeline," I whispered. "Let's get this over with." My voice shook.

"And you, *Mademoiselle*?" the waiter asked.

"Nothing," I answered.

Madeline ate the caramel frosted tasty in tiny bites. It seemed to last forever and although I tried to stare off into space, the cake demanded my attention. With each bite she took, cream spilled over the multi-layered edges and her tongue darted to the corners of her mouth to salvage it. Finally, she dabbed her mouth with a napkin and sighed.

"Let's get out of here," I said.

We walked out of the restaurant and hurried down the long dark road, our arms entwined.

"Good God," I said.

"What?" Madeline asked.

"There are people all along here."

It had taken my eyes a moment to adjust to the darkness. Once they did, I saw shadowy figures sleeping on mats at the foot of the white walls which surrounded the houses. Inside the thatched roofed huts, the rooms must have been sweltering and the men had come out to sleep in the breeze. I doubted they were all asleep, however, and soon a prostrate form confirmed

my suspicion. He sat up murmuring, "*Bon soir.*" After this, everyone we passed sat up and greeted us. "*Bon soir, bon soir.*" Normally, their friendliness would have touched me. Tonight, it scared me.

"They'll tell him which way we've gone," I said.

"We don't know that," Madeline said.

"We can guess. Anyway, there's nothing we can do about it. For heavens sake, let's keep walking," I said.

I suppressed an urge to run as a vehicle screeched into the road behind us. We halted and turned around. It was him. The motor of the truck whirled off and the door clicked open. The Frenchman stepped out, his white legs luminous in the dark. He shut the door behind him and stopped, glowering with bent elbows and hands gripping his hips. Around his thighs, his shorts bagged and in the vicinity of one of his pockets, I detected a bulge. The revolver, I thought, as he stepped forward. His face looked square with his big jaw set, his grey curls wild and tangled on his head. His black rectangular glasses gave him the ominous look of an insect with large eyes. His gaze focused on Madeline, who gripped my wrist so hard it throbbed.

He stopped a foot away and stared provocatively at Madeline. He reached into his pocket. I clenched my eyes, bracing myself for a blast. I heard nothing, I opened my eyes. Small white hairs bristled from his nose.

"Come with me," he said, gazing at Madeline, who squeezed my wrist even harder. His hand moved in his pocket. He pulled out a scarf and stepped closer to Madeline. He stared at her eyes, his own eyes widening, his hands kneading the scarf. My throat tightened. He wrapped the scarf around her neck.

"You're mine," he said in a far away voice, softly brushing the silk against her cheek. He took her other arm.

"Let go," Madeline said, glaring at him. She tried to shake him off, but he clung.

"Let go," I yelled in panic.

"Patron," came a voice from the shadows. "Go home." A tall, thin man with sleepy eyes emerged from the night. He placed a big hand on the Frenchman's shoulder. "Release her."

"Patron," another voice said, "the women will be coming in the morning to buy your bread."

"Patron," another voice said, "you must get some sleep." The evening filled with murmurs. "Patron, patron, patron. . . ."

The hushed cadence of voices lulled the Frenchman. He flashed Madeline a look that digested her in a glance, touched the scarf, her cheek, then let the tall man lead him away. "Take it," she cried, pulling off the scarf and thrusting it towards him, but the Frenchman did not look back. He climbed inside the truck, closed the door, and the motor whined on. Roaring around in a semi-circle, the truck threw up clouds of dirt and drove away. I could hardly believe our luck. The men walked away, blending back into the shadows.

"Let's go home," Madeline said, her voice quavering.

Inside our small round hut, Madeline flipped the scarf onto the bed. The naked bulb overhead spotlighted it.

"He wanted you to be his wife," I said.

Madeline pushed off her jeans and tossed them on the chair. Sighing, she inspected herself in a small square mirror over a tiny bowl-shaped sink. I sat down on the bed, then she dove under the covers and drew the sheet up to her chin. *Harmatton* wind rattled the roof, reminding me of Herman, and I climbed under the covers, wondering if he'd found his waterfall. From Herman, my thoughts turned to chiefs offering ivory to Cameroonian men whose wives worked the fields. I fell to sleep and dreamed of my father dressed in colorful garb treading a red clay path. I presented him with a herd of curling-horned cattle, when Madeline's hand grasped me by the shoulder and shook me awake.

"That hurts," I said.

"Wake up, then," she insisted, holding my shoulder.

I rolled out of her grasp.

"What?" I asked.

She leaned against the wall, staring down at the scarf placed neatly across her knees. She blew her nose on the corner of a sheet.

"You're crying," I said.

"Jesus," she shot back, her voice plaintive. "He thought he had a chance." Wind howled around the hut, as plaintive as her

voice. She tied the scarf around her neck, flopped under the covers and retreated into sleep, tossing and whimpering from time to time. I watched her and couldn't sleep. I imagined the wind shaking the mango trees, pictured him lying face up on his cot, conjuring his ghostly wife. His face would be grizzly, his curls askew. "To eat and make love!" he would cry out loud, but it would never be heard on such a fierce, windy night. 🐼