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OBEDIENCE

BY ERICA BLEEG

(essay)

That evening Solange and her two sisters had already gone around back to help their mother prepare dinner. It disturbed Mama's sense of hospitality when I tried to help. Telling her I enjoyed cooking did nothing to change her mind, so I stayed out front with the boys. They were hitched up on the porch banisters, listening to Roland recount some ordeal until he tired of hearing himself and stood, head hanging, shoulders slumped. He looked dejected and seemed to want sympathy. Instead of commiserating, they teased him.

So Roland turned to me. The boys had been speaking in Fon, the language most natural to them at home, so to clue me in, Roland translated the situation into French, all the while avoiding my eyes. His lips moved while he looked vaguely toward the ground. This was a sign of dishonesty where I had come from, and I felt the gulf between us. But he couldn't do things differently; in his country, if a younger person looked directly at an older person when speaking, it was considered defiant. So it was his smooth, narrow forehead I watched as he lamented about his girl troubles. "She won't obey," he said.

I raised both eyebrows sharply. The other boys looked away like bystanders. To make sure I had heard his statement correctly, I asked, "You're upset because your girlfriend won't obey?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed, as if I'd understood perfectly.

"What did she do?"

"She won't do what I tell her."

"Ah, she won't do what you wish."

"Yes!"

"And why must she obey you?"

He pointed his finger at the ground. "Because," he struggled, "because she must; she *must* obey *me*!"

Had Roland been a boastful, more self-assured young fellow, in all likelihood his words would have lit a fire up my spine. Offended as I might have been, though, these flustered declarations seemed more cause for amusement than alarm. He was gentle toward his mother and sisters. Toward girls we met in the neighborhood, his spirit shifted like waves on water, half-shy, half-friendly. That he could force a girl to do something she didn't want to do appeared unlikely. He seemed to be suffering from the atavistic ills of patriarchy. At age eighteen, Roland had lived his entire life in a country where men and women were not born equal, socially or politically. He spoke with a vehemence he had not grown into. "I'm the *man*," he insisted.

I asked him if a "man" is defined as someone who controls a woman.

The boys smiled and looked away.

Lanky and mild, Roland Gounon was the oldest of six living children, three boys and three girls. Mama and Papa had lost their first child, a girl, to a sorceress. Papa, Monsieur Gounon, was a police trainer ninety kilometers away in Cotonou and often didn't arrive home until sundown, so it was Roland Mama called upon when she was trying to communicate with me and couldn't. Mama spoke Fon. I was learning French. Struggling to find French words we both understood, she became completely disconcerted. Pain riddled her face whenever she

perceived any shortcoming in herself. If only she'd been able to appreciate how atrocious my French was, we could have laughed and bantered in gibberish all the day long, not a care in the world, but Mama could not be convinced that my French was indeed in a sad state.

Not knowing Fon was like being deaf for whole periods of the day. During those deaf periods, all my other senses opened up and concentrated hard on the scene, trying to comprehend what was going on. I felt at times as if I were living in a glass house, but the experience was shared by many expatriates, so it wasn't as isolating as it would have been had I been the only one. I thought about learning Fon but held off. Learning French was load enough. Where a Peace Corps volunteer gets posted determines the language the volunteer learns, and we had yet to find out where we were going. In Benin, as throughout Africa, so rich in languages, African people have lived with the obstacles of not understanding one another for centuries. My father would say that if something good came out of colonization, it was that it gave African people the chance to develop through a common language; common language is currency. But a colonizing language is still a colonizing language.

Roland's younger brothers and sisters were so reticent and well behaved that when I didn't understand something going on at the house, Roland was the one who would explain things to me. Personal questions, however, seemed to make the Gounons uncomfortable, so I tried to be aware of things they considered private matters and tiptoed around them. I noticed that they didn't ask personal questions of me.

Roland was the exception. Unlike his siblings, he generally didn't mask his frustrations or conceal the things he really loved. Roland was romantic. He got excited talking about airplanes. He'd never been on one, but flying was his dream. He'd asked me if I thought he could be a pilot, if it was easy to fly in America. That Americans could be or do whatever they wanted, that not a single person was poor or suffered in the United States, was common knowledge in Africa. In his imagination, the people of my country coasted through life on eternal deliverance. It annoyed me that he believed this, but how could I blame him and not be a hypocrite? For coming to Africa had been a dream to me: the place of origins and elephants, rain forests alive with birdsong, rugged as a safari, a place ever teetering between the eternal spring and endless desert. When I was a child in the 1980s, the images of Africa broadcast on American television exposed disparities between wealth and poverty that I could not ignore. In all the images I had ever seen of Africa, it was women taking care of children, veiled women looking away from the camera. It was women I wanted to understand. I wanted

to help where possible; I wanted to deepen my life with hard labor, and I believed African women could show me how.

"Obey." The presumption of power inherent in Roland's word was so disturbing that I couldn't help but fling the word around. "To obey, to obey. Would you like it if she demanded that you obey her?"

A bashful grin slid up his cheek. "No."

"And what if you obey each other?"

Julien and Jean smiled, waiting for Roland's reaction. Shaking his head as if I must be from an upside-down planet, he reasserted his position "*Ce n'est pas comme ça!* It's the woman who must obey the man." He couldn't keep his face straight, and we all laughed.

When the Dutch, the British, the Portuguese and then the French came to their shores by sea, the Fon people called them "*yovo*." Half a millennium has passed since the arrival of those first trader-explorers, but not fifty years have passed since the end of colonialism. These days, when a turn-of-the-century expatriate walks into a Beninois market, aisles of toughened *marché mamas* call out, "*Yovo*, buy my pineapples. *Yovo*, buy my eggs. *Yovo*, what do you want?" A Fon Peace Corps trainer tried to reassure us that *yovo* means "those who appeared on the horizon of the sea." An expectant smile crossed his face, and like a stage actor his hand made an arc through the air. Were we supposed to believe him? Later we would visit Ouidah, a coastal city in which the Portuguese had set up a fort where slaves were kept before they were shipped off. The fort is now a museum. On the beach stands a monumental archway to memorialize the Africans who were taken from their homeland. It is called "The Place of No Return." As tourists, we stood there, looking out on the restless water as the waves crashed down. What was it like when the Portuguese first appeared on these seas? Tall on the glistening water, the ships would have been majestic. Among Africans it was rumored that white men had to possess magical powers to build such magnificent ships. In the beginning the Europeans were said to have been friendly. They had come in search of gold and bronze and other treasures that might make them rich. They palavered with the ruling Oba king and his dignitaries, who had many slaves, members of rival tribes captured in persistent internecine wars. It didn't take long, however, before they were trading baubles and artillery for human cargo. Beneath those imperial sails, billowing on the forbidding sea, men, women and children were packed by the thousands.

In 1807 British Parliament passed the Abolition of the Slave Trade Act. At that time, the British, Dutch, and Portuguese ran well-established slave ports along the West African coast, a trade so lucrative that in spite of the act, it did

not cease. France, like Britain, was among the first Western nations to declare human commerce an inhumane practice. France abolished slavery in 1794. Later Napoleon had it reinstated, and after he lost power, slavery was abolished again. But Europe experienced a severe depression in the early nineteenth century, and Africa was rich in raw materials. So the occidental powers colonized all of Africa, using its people and land to grow and mine the raw materials that fed the industrial revolutions of Europe and North America.

By 1890 the French had claimed sovereignty in Benin, where Africans grew cotton and extracted palm oil, which the French exported to manufacturers in Europe, making a handsome profit, while Benin remained one of the poorest countries on earth. Even after independence in 1960, lacking capital and economic leverage, Benin continued to depend on France to import its cotton, pineapples and palm oil; without any established alternatives, it was forced to accept the substandard price France would pay for these goods.

The Peace Corps started sending volunteers to Benin in 1968. My own group arrived on the shores of the Gulf of Guinea by plane when Peace Corps Benin's thirtieth anniversary was just around the corner. One of the PC's goals is to become obsolete in the countries where it operates, to help countries develop the skills and resources that will make development agencies unnecessary.

With the Atlantic Ocean as a southern border and the Sahara Desert in the north, Benin's landscape turns from green to grassland to big-sky country and sparse trees within a day's travel, so specific plans could not be broadly applied but had to be tailored to the ways climate and access to roads had shaped the people's lives. Our lives would be shaped by those climates. Of the twenty-four rookies who arrived together, half of us would focus on helping locals launch and maintain their own business enterprises. I had grown up in a corporate family and had no interest in business, so I was among the other half, put into Rural Community Development. The title of the program was intentionally vague. In practice we focused on health and nutrition.

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Beninois called us "*yovo*." Having just arrived from a country torn by racial hatred and rife with racial epithets, whenever I heard that word, what I saw in my mirror eye, looking back at me, was a White Exploiter. Other Beninois trainers told us they didn't have derogatory terms as we did in the U.S., that "*yovo*" was a generic term for "stranger." All I know is that during the time I lived there, I never resolved whether my presence in Benin, as a representative of a former colonial power, was helpful. This was the world we lived in, nevertheless, and there was nothing we could do to erase where we were, where we had been, what we had done and what we were doing. The question remained about what we ought to do.

We landed in the port city of Cotonou in late September. Peace Corps Landcruisers took us up to Allada, an ancient town poised on a deep green hill. Carpentry workshops and a massive church lined the main road. A dozen of us piled out and got matched up with different Beninois host families for an intensive ten-week Peace Corps training. Figuring that less than 1 percent of the population owned a vehicle, I had expected to walk to my new temporary home. When Monsieur Gounon, my host father, put my bags in an old, dented Peugeot, one of the fellow trainees said, "Dang, girl, you got Daddy Warbucks."

He kept one hand on top of the wheel and wore a massive imitation Rolex on his wrist. We bumped along the dirt roads. Other trainees and other host families were straggling along on foot, all toting pieces of the Americans' luggage. The wheel kicked up dust as I waved to them through the window. Monsieur honked the horn to announce our arrival, and a big red gate opened. Inside the house was a complete set of living room furniture, facing an elaborate entertainment system and an extensive collection of *Kung Fu* and *Rambo* videos. In official letters, Peace Corps had stated that it was likely we'd be living in mud huts. At *chez* Gounon, the walls were concrete stucco, and curtains billowed over glass-louvered windows. The fluorescent lights buzzed, and the air was quiet. The luxury confused me.

But I got used to it. A day of training consisted of three-hour French lessons that after siesta shifted into three-hour seminars on diarrhea, AIDS, excision and other challenges compromising national health. On all health topics, we were instructed as to what we could and could not talk about. We were given wooden penises and condoms so we could demonstrate AIDS prevention; we learned how to filter water and bleach bacteria off vegetables; we learned to build latrines and plant lettuce. Because African men were not accustomed to independent, educated women, we were told that Peace Corps women had typically found African females and boys more receptive to working with them than men.

The advice to Peace Corps men was to avoid speaking with Beninois women about AIDS or family planning or other topics involving sexual health. Excision, the most extreme form of female circumcision, was a sensitive and controversial cultural practice that Peace Corps volunteers were advised not to discuss at all.

To arrive *chez* Gounon at the end of the day was a great relief. The kids came home from school about the same time, five-thirty or so, and we all went to the porch for refuge from the heat. The air had a weight like steam in a pressure chamber. All around us, humidity drenched the hours in a rich haze such that everything in view seemed temporary, like a mirage, while at the same time my awareness of every action as a means to stay alive became much keener. The effect was peculiar. That porch, our steadfast piece of shade, was the only place where I felt solid and at ease. The children, too, away from teachers, away from school, seemed at peace. We'd reached home after a long day.

The kids talked distractedly and played quiet games. I read and wrote. Their kid talk was a comforting music, and when a breeze swept through the yard, it was mercy, and when Mama Gounon greeted us on the porch with fresh papaya, she'd sit for a while, making sure everybody got a good chunk of it. After she returned to the kitchen, her charm lingered: a mother caring for her children.

Sometimes it felt as though we lived in a secret garden. A cemented cinder-block wall surrounded the house, like a citadel, and directly in front of the porch an extravagant vine of fuchsia bougainvillea climbed the wall all the way to the top and dangled its luxuriant flowers onto the other side, where people passed by on the quiet dirt road. The children spoke to each other in hushed tones, as if they couldn't speak any louder. The contained, seen-and-not-heard ways of obedient children fueled the secrets that we shared in a house on a quiet back street that got little traffic except on *marché* days, when women returning from *marché* created an ongoing rhythm of flip-flops and scuffing feet. Though from inside our citadel we couldn't see the actual people passing by, we could see what they carried, the wares piled atop their heads, just over the wall. Collections of plastic

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bowls, pineapples and tall sacks went ambling by like tugboats bumping on air.

The Gounons had a live-in servant, Clarisse. Roland explained that Clarisse didn't attend school, and that was how she had become their *domestique*. At training we had learned that it was common for girls to live as house servants in exchange for food and shelter. Often the girl was a family member. Clarisse looked older than a girl, though. She was also Mama's niece, but she didn't participate in family activities. While the Gounons ate together, Clarisse sat by and seemed to wish nothing more than to go unnoticed, which only made me notice her more. I wondered if she preferred to eat alone, or if the help didn't eat with the family. Peace Corps trainers said it varied: sometimes *domestiques* were treated like daughters; sometimes they were kept separate.

It was a curious dynamic to me because Mama hadn't attended school either. She was from a generation when most women were kept at home to help their mothers and learn how to become wives and raise children, a practice that continues, especially among poorer families. Still, not all unschooled girls ended up as *domestiques*; others became apprentices to master dressmakers and hairdressers so they could learn a trade that would give them an income. Why wasn't Clarisse learning a skill so she could make her own money? Did she not want to? Did she have a choice?

When I asked Roland why Clari ate after the family, he answered, "Yes, Clari eats later," and when I asked again why, he became flustered, so I let it go, sensing that what I learned I would have to learn by observation.

Like drawing water. Clarisse wouldn't let me draw water, but, wanting to learn, I watched her. She was brisk about the task. Pulling up the rope, her upper arms flexed into thick braids; her skin stretched tight against her collar bone. When the bucket was full, she hurried it to the shower stall. As soon as she set it down, she took the most circuitous route to get back to where she needed to go, just so we wouldn't cross paths. I didn't think I had done anything to offend her, but perhaps I had. Interaction with people seemed to cause her great distress. The family, too, stepped around her as if she were surrounded by an electric fence. The Gounon sons had spruce outfits for pictures, and the daughters had bright *complets* for church. Clarisse, however, alternated her outfits between two faded *pagnes* and two thin cotton T-shirts. It seemed hasty to suspect the Gounons of lacking compassion for her, but the pathetic state of her clothing did suggest negligence. It bothered me that she didn't seem to have any friends—and not for lack of visitors. Neighbors and family came by daily for the Gounons' gentle and lighthearted company. Laughter was the music of that house. Clarisse kept to herself, though. She had a guarded, proud streak that no one in the family

seemed intent on breaking. As an outsider, it was easy to see how her social isolation and resistance reinforced one another. And as an outsider, it was hard not to be able to say something about it.

To function seven degrees north of the equator, I had to make several physical adjustments. My daily water intake became voluminous. As a result, I was waking in the night with a full bladder. The first time it happened, I lay flat on my back, staring up into darkness. The room was sealed; almost no light entered. I dreaded getting out of bed. The darkness seemed boundless, as if I were in danger of disappearing into another dimension, unknown, and the walk to the latrine seemed like a long one into a quiet night, so I lay there frozen. But then I thought, if I waited until daylight the possibility that I'd wet the mattress while sleeping was fairly good. I could not wet the bed, and I could not fall back asleep. The only way out was to relieve the pressure on my bladder.

I emerged from the mosquito netting and felt around the tabletop for the matchbox. The match gasped to life. My lantern was lit. Mama and Papa were sleeping in the next room. Because there was no ceiling and the wall between us didn't rise to the roof, they could see light on my side and knew when I was awake, so I was afraid I'd wake them. Sometimes I'd read late into the night, and Mama would call out from the other side, "Sika work too much." (Sika was the name they'd given me. In Fon, it means "gold.")

Now, unbolting the door, I worried they'd rush out and ask if I was all right when I really just wanted to go to the bathroom quietly.

The air smelled like wet stones. A breeze sailed through the yard. I had wanted to live far away for a long time, and was happy. Beside me an orb of light from my lantern moved across the smooth dirt and my legs scissored through it. Rounding the back corner, I found the kitchen hut aglow like an open bread oven. It startled me. I slowed my casual stroll, taking cautious steps. Clari was tending a pot on the fire. She became aware of me, too, and concentrated harder on her work. Wanting to say "hello" but afraid this would disturb her, I proceeded quietly to the latrine.

On the way back to my room, I stopped by the small kitchen. Clari was seated on a footstool. The fire elongated her squatting shadow; it stretched far up the reedy wall, a tall, hovering figure. Standing there, I didn't know what to do and suddenly bowed. "*Bonsoir*," I said, mortified as soon as the word passed my lips. French was not her language.

She returned a demure nod, and I slipped away.

Over the next week, when I crossed by her firelight, I'd raise my hand and nod

with a smile. Clari would nod back, keeping her head down, waiting for me to move on. Sometimes I wondered if she preferred I not stop by at all, but when I thought about pretending she wasn't there, I knew it was wrong, and I'd return to bed admonishing myself to learn some Fon greetings, swearing I would do just that the very next day. Then the very next day I'd get to training, and the things I had to learn to survive in Benin rose like a tidal wave so overwhelming that I didn't want to learn another thing.

In time, routine eroded our guarded ways. Passing into the backyard, I'd call out, "Clari, *kabo*!" and she'd shoot my name into the air: "Sika!" Clari looked up and smiled. Liquefied ground manioc burbled in the pot. Mama sold fermented manioc at market. In Fon, I didn't know how to say "good work," so I said, "*Bon travail.*" Clari looked toward the ground, trying to hide her grin. Our greetings had turned playful. Our shared delight, I thought, had something to do with irony. In our parochial world, she was the servant and I was the princess—it was preposterous.

In a month, my living situation would change. As my supervisor considered where to post me, I hoped he'd remember that I was interested in working with a midwife. The previous year I'd been a case manager in a Yakima Valley maternity clinic for low-income mothers. Now I wanted to see how pregnancy and birth were treated in West Africa. The Peace Corps operates by approximation. We'd been warned by veteran volunteers that posts weren't set up for us, that we'd arrive in our respective villages and find we had no place to stay, or a place to stay but no latrine. So, lowering my expectations, I assumed my request had little or no chance of being met. Before making his final decision, my supervisor asked me a few questions: Did I mind being far away from other volunteers? Did I need electricity and running water? Could I rough it? Yes. I wanted no pampering.

When word broke that our supervisor was driving up from headquarters to tell us our assignments, all morning a glow of joy stirred within my chest. Late that afternoon, our supervisor arrived in a Landcruiser with Peace Corps decals. One by one he called each of us over to his bench. I told myself it didn't matter where I was posted. No matter where it was, we were all being flung out to start over again. When the APCD called my name, I prepared myself for no special treatment. As soon as he told me the name of the village, the name vaporized into a cloud in my brain: one syllable too many to grasp. He said, "Your host mother up there is wonderful. The volunteer who left just a few months ago adored her. She's a midwife."

The news filled me with light.

Pedaling home, I decided to wait a few days before telling the Gounons where I was moving and tried to keep any unusual ebullience from my face. Only recently had Mama begun to let me cut onions. She'd also taught me the fine art of making *pâte rouge*. I didn't want to interrupt our lives together by telling them that I'd be going soon—and not nearby, to the coast or somewhere in the southern Ouemé province, as Mama and the children had imagined. I'd be a day's taxi ride away, in the northern savannah, where they had never been.

A few days passed, and I was preparing to tell them about leaving when I arrived home for *repos* and found the house abandoned, or so it appeared. The porch was empty, though the front door was open; it was never left open if someone wasn't home. The Gounons believed that thieves were on the lookout for any opportunity. I sensed a presence I could neither see nor hear. It was eerie, like someone watching, but I saw and heard nothing. Why the children weren't home puzzled me, but it could be that they were all helping Mama at market. It *was* market day, after all.

The curtains were drawn, the living room dim. I walked toward the back door, thinking Clari was probably in the kitchen. I could hear someone grumbling, and soon that grumbling became a subterranean litany that crescendoed into angry shouting. It was Mama, and no one was shouting back. I wondered if one of the children was in trouble. But who? I stood by the window listening, but there was a long silence. The curtains billowed like day ghosts. Then the breeze died and inhaled the curtains against the louvered glass before letting go. It occurred to me that I might not have heard right, that the shouting might have come from another house.

Roland stepped through the front door. I asked him what was happening.

"Clari is a thief. That's what."

His strong words alarmed me. "What do you mean she's a thief? What happened?"

He struggled to frame a response. "She stole a sack of rice."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, the man came here himself."

"What man?"

"The rice man."

I found myself in a familiar state of incomprehension. Lacking an insider's impulses, I couldn't help but doubt the truth of his story. Mama started yelling again. We stood still, anticipating the next barrage.

"What's going to happen now?" I asked him.

"We can't have a thief in this house. That's it. She can't stay here anymore.

She'll have to leave."

"But why would she steal a sack of rice?" I asked.

Roland shook his head, "Because she's a whore. That's why. She's no good. She's no good."

I left early for the afternoon training session, pedaling hard on the dirt paths. Stealing rice? It seemed preposterous. A sack of rice is gigantic. Clari was smart—she couldn't hide that kind of theft. How could it be worth the risk? And for what? What could she do with it? She was constantly working for the family; if she was going to resell it, when would she have the time? It just didn't seem likely. The family had more than enough; they provided her with food. What would she need it for? Or if she had stolen the sack of rice, was it just rebellion? Was she trying to say something she otherwise couldn't, and couldn't they have sympathy for that?

At the training session, Jenafir, a former social worker from California, deplored the abuse inflicted on children and servants in Benin and argued that it was my role to defend Clarisse. "If we aren't here to show a different way to behave, then why are we here?" she implored. Patiently our Beninois trainers explained that for Beninois everything rests on family reputation, that what I saw was the initial reaction to a serious threat. Idriss, a trainer, asked what I thought I should do. I said I needed a fuller story and wanted to see what the family did next—if they calmed down or found a new piece of information. "I want to see if things change. *Maintenant, ce n'est pas mon affaire,*" I said, which translates to, "Right now, it's not my business." I meant that I wasn't a part of the family; I hadn't been here long enough, couldn't intuit the truth about the situation, but I didn't know how to say that in French. Jenafir rolled her eyes and sighed audibly. I glanced around to see reactions from the other trainees, but they only stared, blank-faced and daunted. The trainers nodded pensively. Idriss spoke: "*Tu as raison.*"

That evening the children did not come through the gate to quarrel amiably over who got to walk my bike the rest of the way to the house. The girls were preparing dinner with Mama. We exchanged greetings. Clari wasn't there, and though I wanted to ask where she was, I couldn't. Mama was gripping a potato, chuffing the skin off with quick jerks. I dared not push her. Solange brought out a chair for me. I thumbed seeds out of the tomatoes. No one said anything.

I woke in the middle of the night, hoping that everything had returned to normal, and went around back. The yard was empty.

The next day I asked Roland if Clari was gone. "No," he said.

"Where is she?"

He didn't answer.

"Did you find out if she'd stolen a sack of rice?"

Roland kept his eyes toward the wall. The silence intensified the discomfort. Was it none of my business? Was he ashamed? Portraits of his parents loomed over us. I asked him if she'd gone home to Ouidah. He said no. I was afraid of what might have happened to her. I hadn't seen her since the incident. Had she been put into confinement? How were servants punished here? Suddenly I became aware that I was standing between Roland and the front door. As I stepped aside for him to pass, I said, "Okay, see you later," and as I walked away, my disappointment and anger resurfaced over the insults he'd cast upon Clari. Any girl knows how easily she can be called a whore. Would he be held accountable for calling her that?

I was ready to leave for the north.

During the day, Clari reappeared. I tried to say, "Hello"; I wanted her to know that I didn't think she was a thief, that it didn't matter to me, but she had a strategy for avoiding people, walking wide parabolic trajectories from point A to point B and back again, straight-shouldered, looking at no one, a clip to her step. She snipped away at her chores. Throughout the house, everyone was careful.

That night Clari was back at the fire. I was afraid to approach her, as if there were a wall between the shadows and the glowing kitchen. I wondered if she would speak to me. She had seemed angry. There is a Fon greeting for after the sun goes down. Phonetically spelled, it's *A blo pa dia?* Clari taught me the pronunciation; someone else taught me what it meant. Literally, it means, "How did your sun go down?" It seemed absurd to ask her that now, so when I reached the little kitchen hut all I could think to say was, "Clari."

She stared at the wall. Her raised scars gleamed like spun-glass cocoons. The humor had gone out of her face, and she would accept no warmth from me. She was still the Gounons' servant, guilty or not, and she wanted to be left alone.

I walked to the latrine with an ache. Was she angry with me? I thought back to the things Jenafir had said, the fellow trainee who'd urged me to stand up for Clari. Her assumption that we as outsiders knew how to behave better than Beninois had struck me as an impulsive and presumptuous response. But maybe she was right; maybe I should have pushed for answers from Mama. How could that help, though? Maybe I was too cautious. Was it presumptuous of me to wonder whether Clari expected me to defend her? Did she expect defending from anyone?

Roland had called her a whore, and I had let it stand without protest. I hadn't

known the word for "whore" until I'd gone to the afternoon session and asked the trainers, "What is a *vagabonde?*" That was what Roland had called her, "*vagabonde*," in French; not a "whore" in English. I took it to mean "homeless person." He had said she'd be kicked out. "To call a woman a '*vagabonde*,'" the trainers told me, "is very serious." *Une vagabonde* is a loose, itinerant woman who sleeps with a man for a stretch of time, stays in his house whether he's married or unmarried, sex in exchange for food and shelter, until he gets tired of her and throws her out. "*Vagabonde*," Idriss had explained, "is a meaner way of saying 'prostitute.'" Now I wished I'd told Roland that his words were cruel.

On my way back, I stopped by the kitchen. It didn't seem right to go straight to my room and leave things stiff, though I feared my very presence annoyed Clarisse now and she wished I would just go away. "*E so*, Clari," I said. See you tomorrow.

"*E so*," she said.

I ducked out.

In the weeks leading up to the end of training, we volunteers languished in a holding pattern, moaning to ourselves and each other that we were done with training and ready to move. Then suddenly it seemed we'd skipped whole days and found ourselves on the other side of a week. Similarly, my grasp of things seemed far away and then so close.

We started new language lessons. Three of us had been posted in the Bariba region. Every morning Idriss taught us Bariba with such an exuberant spirit it was like starting the day with calisthenics. Meanwhile, at *chez* Gounon, the tension subsided like a passing storm. Mama returned to her genial manner. Clarisse, more guarded than before, focused on her work. Our greetings were abbreviated to scarcely a word.

Pointing to the short, vertical scars on her face, Mama said to me one morning, "This is my name. Same name, Clari." Drawing a longer, oblique line across her cheekbone, she asked, "You know Papa?" I nodded to indicate I understood she was drawing Papa's scars on her face. "In Papa's hometown, people see his face and say, 'Hey, Gounon.'" Mama let out a gentle laugh. Her eyes carried the pain of embarrassment. "Not for our children," she said, wagging her finger. That the children's faces were unmarked was one of the first things I'd noticed about the family.

"Why not?"

"It's not good," she said, "it's bad."

I wondered if she was telling me this because I had come from a place where

scarification wasn't an acceptable practice. International development organizations funded programs throughout Benin, telling the people that scarification could be dangerous mainly as a result of the methods used: unsterilized razors and rusty metal implements. Then I suddenly wondered if Mama was trying her best to explain what had happened between her and Clarisse.

Some lessons can only be learned by "stealing" experience. Mama and Clari would not allow me to draw water. I'd tried to explain that learning to draw water would help me to function better, hoping they would understand: I wouldn't be living with them forever, so I had to learn some things for when I was on my own. They didn't think it was necessary, though, so I lay in wait for a time when no one was around.

The moment came, and there was the *puissette*, the "little drawer" they used for wells and cisterns, a black rubber sack with wire mouth and handle, attached to a rope, and the rope was in my hands. Down the sack dropped and softly slapped the water, going under like a broad fishtail. It filled reluctantly. As I'd seen Clari do so many times, I tugged and dunked the sack under once more to fill it completely. The rope pulled against my palms, and it felt so good to have something in my hands.

The little drawer was halfway up the wall before Clari appeared, horrified that I'd been drawing water. "*Moi. Ici. Deux ans,*" I said, pointing to the ground. Clari shook her head and reached for the rope. I looked at her, and she looked at me. I wasn't going to let go. We were going to pull it up together. Uncoordinated and clod-handed, we hauled it up to the lip, which was when I realized how ridiculously sloppy it would be if we tried to pour it together, so I let go and she took over, poured it into the bucket, did a quarter turn and dropped the sack down into the cistern again. When the *puissette* had sunk all the way under, Clari poured forth her strength, pulling it up hand over hand, heaving the load out of the water, rope by stretch of rope. Her muscular arms pumped, and the brimming sack rose, drops spilling over and echoing as they struck below.

"Clari," I said, pointing to her arms, "I want to be strong like you," and tried to make a muscle out of my undefined bicep.

Looking as if she thought I was foolish, she shook her head, lifted the bucket and walked on to the shower stall. The heft made her walk lopsided. I stood in a confusion of regret and admiration. We were surrounded by walls. Looking at our small circle, the citadel surrounding the house, looking at where we were, in Benin, looking at me and looking at Clari, I felt lost in a dimension where nebulous rules shaped what we could and could not do, an invisible hand turning each of us this way and that, where one was to draw water and another not, where

one was the traditional colonizer and one the traditional servant. Roles were too defined—even preordained. It was frustrating. As soon as the metal handle hit the bucket, Clarisse was walking back across the yard, back to sorting wood, her flip-flops snapping like dull tongues between her heels and the ground. Beyond the wall the harvested maize fields stretched like emptied seas. As after a storm, when creatures return to their usual rhythms and do what they do, I stepped into the stall and removed my clothes. Bowl by bowl, I poured the water down my front and down my back, loving the cool sheets of water, loving the cascade down my shoulders. This was Clari's gift.

How the family resolved the alleged offense—whether Clari had actually stolen the sack of rice or there'd been a misunderstanding about payment or the rice man had wrongly accused her and then the family had wrongly accused her as well—I don't know. People steal all the time. What was at stake with Clari, however, did not involve the ethics of stealing. The threat to the Gounons' reputation brought to the fore a larger guilt hanging on the family conscience.

Months later I became so homesick I went back to *chez* Gounon for a visit. Before Papa got home, Roland told me Clari was pregnant. He was happy, and when I asked about the father, his mood shifted. "I hate the father," Roland said. "He says it's not his baby, but everybody knows it's his baby." He said Clari would be staying with them. They'd be taking care of the baby. Mama was cheerful and teased Clari about becoming a mother. Clari, bashful as ever, liked the attention and talked with Mama like they were friends. It was good to see her happy. I was no longer interested in explanations. If the rice sack and the pregnancy were at all related, it was not by logic; rather, the two scenes revealed something about our nature, shifting like wind.

And Clari seemed an entirely different Clari now. She engaged with the family and the family engaged with her. As it had been before, a spirit of youthfulness pervaded the house. Visits from neighbors and family, from aunties and cousins, checking in, sitting down and chatting it up for a spell, made for an air of generosity and acceptance that had drawn me back—only it was different. The strain that had been caused by Clari's exclusion was now gone. She was having a baby.

MEET THE AUTHOR

Erica Bleeg

Erica Bleeg earned an M.A. in Humanities from the University of Chicago and an M.F.A. in Nonfiction from the University of Iowa. This essay is her first publication. She is currently completing a proposal for a book, "Out of Obscurity," about her experiences working with Bariba women in Benin to form a cooperative.

About "Obedience" (not part of her book), she explains, "I hadn't intended to write about Benin beyond the letters I sent home, but during my second year of service that changed because of someone I met. Her name was Madame Celestine. For miles around, she was the only woman of her generation who had gone to school, learned to read and write, spoke French and held a professional job. She'd retired recently and lived on a modest pension, while her contemporaries, many of whom were widowed or abandoned, struggled to provide even basic necessities for their children and grandchildren.

"Mme. Celestine was determined to bring greater economic opportunities to the women of Bembèrèkè, a sprawling village in the northern savannah of Benin, West Africa, where I lived during my second year of Peace Corps service. 'I could've been like them,' she told me. In her teens Mme. Celestine had dropped out of school; by age twenty she had three children. As a young mother, she was so anxious about depending totally on her husband for support that she completed her studies without telling him and went on to hold a job as a postal agent for thirty years. A decade into her career, her husband died.

"She told me that women live in obscurity. Until that moment, I had only heard the word *l'obscurité* used in reference to a moonless night, when light seemed completely absent from earth. As a neighbor once explained, 'On these nights there is an unstated fear that the darkness will never end.'"