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Let There Be Light

by Efreem Sigel

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by Efreem Sigel

It was just an African cocktail party in a fading coastal town, but it gave Ev Stryker an excuse to buy another floor lamp from Gazhi, the hip Lebanese who owned the general store along the wharf. Who would have thought the problem in Africa would be too little illumination? There was blinding, searing light from dawn to dusk, the sun seeming to erupt overhead. Then, without warning at about 6:20, night clamped itself on everything: the low-slung weathered gray barracks with its three apartments (Ev occupied the middle one); the crumbling street where an hour earlier the woman squatted by her tiny charcoal fire, hawking slices of plantain fried in oil; the tall coconut palms in the sand behind the house; and beyond them the star-flecked surf, the limitless horizon stretching toward the new world. Ev imagined he could hop in a pirogue and paddle due west for a few weeks to reach New York, until he saw on the map that this course would land him at the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil.

When darkness came it was unforgiving; the single bulb from the ceiling in the all-purpose living room dining room hardly did the job. Ev couldn't bear eating in the gloom, his food before him in pools of shadow, listening to the monster cockroaches scamper from one dark corner to another snatching whatever crumbs of bread lay along their route. First Ev rigged up a wall lamp, buying the pieces at Gazhi's and doing the wiring himself; then he added a floor lamp, and, when he'd stopped laughing about the cocktail party, he brought home a second. Never mind the uneven cement floor, the splotchy walls, the raffia chair that was sinking lower and lower as termites ate away at its legs. Finally Ev had enough light to illumine the wooden table where he ate, read and corrected his pupils' exercise books. Without light you couldn't see to work. Without light there was no right or wrong.

The cocktail party came about because they'd been pushing Ev and the other Peace Corps Volunteers to make friends with the notables; they even circulated a list: the school principal, teachers, the sous-prefet, the head of the local Parti Democratique Ivoirien, the priest, the chef de la gendarmerie, assorted men of means. When Ev's list came by mail to Grand Bassam, the sleepy backwater where he taught, he called Rob Riordan, who was stationed upcountry in Adzope, pulled him right out of class. Making the call meant a half hour's walk to the Post Office in the blistering sun and it cost him about 700 francs, but it was worth it. Rob had got his list the day before and as they read the categories to each other, Ev fell against the glass door of the cabine and practically broke it, he was laughing so hard.

Assorted men of means, that was the clincher. Grand Bassam had no industry, no banks, no commercial offices; there was a tiny pharmacy, run by an overweight Frenchman, and two groceries, owned by Lebanese men with close-cropped curly black hair and ears that came to a point. The stores were each a block apart in Old Bassam, on a dusty street bordering the lagoon; there were always the green ends of cut sugar cane, the remains of dried fish and brown coconut husks along the wharf and, in the white heat of midday, a stench, as if from decomposing bodies. The Lebanese said horrible things about each other to their customers but it was rumored they were brothers or at least half brothers, so maybe the antagonism was just for show. Finally Ev asked Gazhi, was it true that they were brothers? Gazhi was young, with an engaging smile; he used a lot of American slang. Where do you get these stories, he asked Ev, grinning. That's Africker for you, he said, imitating Kennedy's Boston accent, people making up crazy stories.

Ev didn't think Gazhi and his rival (maybe brother) storekeeper were what Tom Robinson had in mind when he wrote assorted men of means. Robinson was the Peace Corps director in Abidjan. It was he who circulated the list of notables that the volunteers were supposed to get to know. A month after the list arrived, the principal summoned Ev to the office to take a phone call. Ev had been in the middle of teaching the lesson called The Burglar to

the cinquieme. It was the pupils' favorite, news of it traveling from class to class, a slapstick story of an incompetent burglar, told in comic book panels in an English textbook. Ev wondered what could explain this summons, had someone died, was there fighting in Abidjan, but no, here he was on a sweltering Monday morning listening to the Peace Corps director ask him to host a cocktail party next week. Thursday evening okay? Robinson asked.

Robinson had lost 50 pounds in his three years in Africa; everything sagged, his flowering short-sleeved shirt, the tanned, freckled meat on his forearms, the bulbs of flesh under his green eyes. He had sparse orange hair. His face was guileless. "Ca va?" Robinson asked when he got Ev on the line. Robinson's French was terrible. He delivered his hallmark "Ca va?" in the same inane squeak whether he was talking to a woman at the curb selling mangos or to the Minister of Education in his chauffeur-driven Mercedes.

"A cocktail party?"

"To meet me. That'll be the *raison d'etre*." In Robinson's mangled accent the words came out, *raisin-dette*. "Invite all the notables in town. Use the list as a guide. You have the list we sent you? Soft drinks only, no alcohol. Get some fruit, nuts, chips. Buy it all locally, tell the shopkeepers it's for a party for the Peace Corps director. I'll reimburse you."

"You want me to invite the notables to meet you?" He was yelling in English in the principal's office. The connection to Abidjan, only 25 kilometers away, was fine but Ev couldn't believe what he was hearing. "Men of means?" he asked. "You want me to invite men of means?"

Ev had been in the Ivory Coast six months. After the initial culture shock, he realized the only way he was going to make it through two years was to let fly with whatever came into his head, however outrageous, so long as he didn't malign President Felix Houphouet-Boigny, a dumpy, kindly dictator whose smile belied his keen sense of politics. Otherwise Ev said what he thought. If anything, it was Ev who was to blame for this series of bush cocktail parties. We're here to meet Ivoiriens, Ev had told Robinson, but as far as I can tell there are no Ivoiriens in the whole damn country: The teachers are French, the shopkeepers Lebanese, the bush taxi drivers

Ghanaian, the market ladies Togolese or Dioula. Even Ev's pupils, nominally Ivoirien, were from all over: Senegal, Mali, Upper Volta.

Of 11 teachers at the Cours Complementaire, the middle school where Ev taught, there were nine French, Ev and one African, a sad-eyed man named Dadie Tomas. Every morning when Ev shook hands with his colleagues, French style, before the start of class, Tomas gave him a limp sweaty hand like a corpse's. He invited Tomas to his house a few times but Tomas never showed up. One night a month after he'd arrived in Grand Bassam, Ev got on his bike and rode the three minutes to Tomas' house, a yellow concrete block next to the school. From the outside it was more modern than Ev's, with its faded gray clapboards and peeling paint. The door was half-open. "Entrez," Tomas said.

Tomas was sitting in an armchair, a bottle and glass on the table. He rose slowly and gave Ev his dead man's handshake. He wore a mournful grin. His breath smelled of scotch. Ev took the chair he offered and then realized it was the only one in the room. Sitting down, Ev noticed something else strange: the darkness. A light fixture dangled uselessly from the ceiling like a crippled arm; there was no bulb in it. More evidence for Ev's conviction: without light there was no civilization.

"Ca va?" Ev asked Tomas. In his ears he heard the echo of Tom Robinson's goofy greeting.

"Ca va," Tomas said. "Ca va bien."

So," Ev continued in French, "I came to greet you, see how you're doing."

"Thank you," Tomas said.

It was hot, Ev said, and Tomas agreed. Will it be like this long, Ev asked. Only another eight months, Tomas said, until the rainy season.

No point asking how Tomas spent his evenings, when Ev could see plainly enough: he sat alone in a darkened room, too cheap or uncaring to replace a light bulb, and drank himself to sleep. Well, said Ev, I'd better be going. "Bon soir et bonne nuit." He got up out of the chair and walked as rapidly as he dared through the open door. Ev

didn't look back but believed that Tomas was reaching for the bottle even before his feet crossed the threshold.

Had the incident with Tomas occurred after Ev had found his tongue, he supposed he might have said, Why sit in the dark? Why ruin your life with booze? But of course you weren't supposed to talk to Ivoiriens like that, you were guests in their country. As it was, that encounter had thrown Ev into the prickly embrace of the French, a race that seemed to have been put on the earth to detest everyone. From the opening staff meeting in September, presided over by M. Gaspinard, a proud Breton who unaccountably had spent 20 years in Algeria, to a pre-Christmas cocktail party 12 weeks later chez les Cahns, all he heard was vituperation. They hated the Germans for occupying them during the war, hated the Brits for not surrendering, hated the Americans for liberating them. Now they hated the Africans for employing them to teach hopeless pupils in this rundown coastal town, forcing them to work for twice the salary they would have earned in France, with paid leave, servants, cars and the tennis club. Not all of them, of course: Bernard Cahn, who taught science, seemed to hate no one. He spoke kindly to his pupils, greeted Ev like a colleague not an interloper. Bernard, a short man with very hairy legs, was married to a blowsy brunette with fading looks. Mathilde, a history teacher. There was something awkward yet tender about the way they were together.

The lone single woman teacher, skinny Monique DuPrix, hissed to Ev in her malicious way, He's a Jew, you see. A Jew who married a Catholic. His family has tons of money but they disowned him. They have to live on two teachers' salaries. What a scandal, Monique said, as if sorry to have missed the scene in which Bernard's parents had shown him the door. Monique taught math; the other single teacher, 37-year old Robert Mallaret, taught French. Robert told Ev that he knew better than to get involved with a colleague, even a single one. Women were trouble, said Robert, who coached the school soccer team and lived for his weekly sports newspaper from France.

There was another couple teaching at the Cours Complémentaire, the Lamberts. Marie, with her strawberry blond hair and her white halter tops, had a penchant for suggestive remarks. Her

husband Philippe was six foot seven, with a strong serve but no backhand; Ev always beat him two sets to one.

It was Marie who brought her collection of records to the Cahns; the first one turned out to be a woman singing dirty lyrics in a falsetto, very distinctly, as if talking to kindergartners. Ev pretended not to understand the words as the French smirked and giggled. "Who can explain that to me? Madame Gaspinard?" he asked ingenuously. Madame Gaspinard, wife of the principal, had the girth of a water tower; like DuPrix she taught math. Her voice shook the classroom as she scolded the pupils, calling them ignorant, lazy, useless. She gave Ev a hoarse laugh. "Not me," she said. Marie sidled up to Ev. They were standing on the balcony of the Cahns' house, peering through the coconut palms to the moon-lit surf. She looked boldly at Philippe as she placed a hand on Ev's flank but her husband paid no attention. "I'll explain everything," she said. She had an earthy, swampy scent and there were tufts of brown hair under her arms. Ev thought of Mallaret: Women were trouble. No need, Ev told her, smiling. I get it now.

These teachers whom he saw everyday would be the nucleus of his cocktail party. Tomas would come, but as always he would be mute in the presence of his French colleagues. Robinson's list said a priest, so Ev asked the only one in town, a great bearded Eastern European fellow who ran the orphanage.

Ev dropped by the office of the sous-prefet to issue an invitation. He was often there, pestering the sous-prefet about illumination or researching the history of Grand Bassam. Bassam had been the first colonial capital at the turn of the century but it had been devastated by a yellow fever epidemic and had never recovered. The cemetery half a mile north of Ev's house on the old coastal road was full of cracked tombstones from those days, men in their 20s and 30s and 40s who had come to Africa to make their fortune and instead left their bones in this sandy equatorial graveyard, under the palm trees, one of the few spots in town where there was always a breeze.

The sous-prefet, Ouandreougou Kacou Pierre, was a northerner, whose head was shaped like the head of a croquet mallet, cylindrical and blunt. When he opened his mouth there was a large

gold tooth that dominated the landscape of his upper gum. The sous-prefet was fond of long lunches at Les Palmes, a restaurant on the outskirts of town beyond the cemetery, where you dined at outdoor tables facing the ocean, each with its own palm-thatched canopy. He had no political or economic program, no knowledge of administration, but it was his ambition to sleep with as many female nurses, social workers and primary school teachers as possible before he was reassigned to an even more remote post, which he feared would be in the west near the Guinea border.

The sous-prefet's secretary, Edouard, was an ex-army sergeant who sat ramrod straight in front of his rusting Royal typewriter, his eyes burning with malaria. It was Edouard who did all the sous-prefet's work, organized the mail, filed the monthly reports with Abidjan, ushered in the Lebanese storekeepers and other visitors bearing envelopes with cash gifts. Once when Ev was in the building Edouard hopped on his bike and peddled the thousand meters to Les Palmes because a personage had arrived unexpectedly from Abidjan in the heat of the afternoon, demanding to see the sous-prefet. The sous-prefet hurried back in his car to endure a harsh scolding from the Director of Administration for the Eastern Region, repeating over and over again like a schoolboy, "Oui, Monsieur le Directeur, oui Monsieur le Directeur."

When Garan Kofi, one of Ev's pupils in the quatrieme, dropped by the house, Ev had just returned from a frustrating effort to get the sous-prefet to listen to his ideas for developing Bassam. All that Garan knew of the sous-prefet was that he had a white Peugeot. Look around, Ev said, look at all that needs doing. What do you mean? Garan said. To the kids the way things were was the way they were meant to be. The main street was eroding into the side ditches as weeds and brush began to sprout in the middle of the asphalt; there were few public water faucets in the old quarter where the pupils lived with local families. Most of the street lights under which the pupils studied did not work. When Ev went for a stroll at night there were his pupils in clusters of five or six, clutching their books under the street lamps, trying to memorize the dim and muddy text at a distance of 14 feet from the source of illumination. Round and round they

walked under the rusting poles, in a slow rhythm reminiscent of a mid-summer night's ritual in a land far away from equatorial Africa.

The matter of the lights infuriated Ev. By this time he'd already fashioned the wall lamp in his own house, and was haggling with Gazhi over the floor lamp. First Ev went to the ramshackle public works department in town; the street lamps were not their responsibility, they said. Who's is it then? Ev asked. They shrugged; maybe the electricity company, maybe the sous-prefet, if all else fails maybe the Parti Democratique Ivoirien, the PDI, whose local boss lived in a two-story house on the other side of the lagoon, its lights blazing. Ev went several times to see him but was always turned away. When it came time to invite the notables to the cocktail party, Ev said screw you and crossed the PDI chief's name off the list.

Each time Ev visited the sous-prefet's office to complain about the street lamps, Edouard spread his hands in apology. "Il n'y a rien a faire," there's nothing we can do. Exasperated, Ev accosted the sous-prefet himself. Why won't you fix the light bulbs? The pupils can't study, it's bad for their grades, bad for their health. I don't know anything about it, the sous-prefet said. Well, make it your business to find out, Ev said. Don't you remember the story of creation in the Bible: let there be light. The sous-prefet looked at him blankly. What do you do if the light bulb burns out over your desk? Ev demanded. Edouard takes care of it, the sous-prefet said. Well have him take care of the street lights, Ev said. But Edouard gave him the same rueful smile. "Il n'y a rien a faire." Undaunted, Ev sat down to write to the Ministers of Education and Public Works, with a copy to President Houphouet-Boigny.

At the cocktail party for Tom Robinson, the sous-prefet was forced to sip pineapple juice. There was no wine or whisky, not even a Brasserie de Cocody, a watery local brew. He stood a bit unsteadily on his feet, swiveling his mallet-shaped head as he tried to follow the simplistic questions being posed to him by this freckled, orange-complexioned American. The sous-prefet was the only person who had showed up to the party in a suit; someone born in this brutal climate should have known better than to wear black trousers and jacket, but here he was decked out like a funeral director.

When Ev introduced the sous-prefet to Robinson, Robinson's green eyes glowed like a cat's spying an open can of tuna fish. After a high-pitched, "Ca va?," he quizzed the man: How long have you been in this town? Is this a poor area? What is the main industry? The sous-prefet, his tongue thick with the sugar of pineapple juice and the perspiration enveloping his neck and wrists and ankles, could only dimly remember how long he had been in Bassam. A year, more or less, he said.

Robinson was asking how people in Bassam earned their livelihood.

This question had never occurred to the sous-prefet. How they earned their livelihood was their own affair and certainly nothing to do with him. But this American in the white trousers and blue and yellow polka dot shirt, looking like some kind of butterfly specimen, seemed to require an answer.

Fishing, the sous-prefet said, a lot of people earn their living from fishing. Of course the real fishing was about 10 kilometers closer to Abidjan where the water wasn't quite so rough, but yes, there were fisherman in Bassam, Ev saw their long nets on the beach right behind his house where he went running at noontime. All these French and Africans taking their siesta and here this crazy American was loping along the beach, three, four, five miles, barefoot, as the surf nibbled at his toes. Ev liked the solitude of it, a lone white man running along the littoral of a continent. He'd be back in school by 2:30 as the pupils straggled into the airless classrooms. He had the older kids in the afternoon, the quatrieme and troisieme. There were hulking young men in these classes, some must have been 20 or 22, dull-witted fellows who'd repeated each grade a couple of times. Now in school with kids seven or eight years younger, they clung to those undersized school desks, desperate for a chance to escape the village. These afternoons in the dead air, before the breeze from the sea came up, the heat, the odor of those large unwashed bodies, the stolid resistance of minds to thought, that was when you earned your keep, Ev thought.

Oh, Robinson was saying, I thought they grew pineapples around here.

What? the sous-prefet asked. His attention wandered to Madame Lambert, with her yellow hair and provocative halter top.

At that moment Gazhi showed up, greeted the sous-prefet, admired Ev's wall fixture and floor lamps (eighty dollars worth of his merchandise) and began talking to Robinson. From his office in Abidjan, Robinson was responsible for 57 volunteers all around the country, there must be business to be done with him. There were 11 Peace Corps Jeeps, three in Abidjan, eight in the bush. Gasoline, Gazhi figured triumphantly, gasoline is my best bet. "I can save you 10% on your gasoline," Gazhi proclaimed. He had no idea if this was true but felt sure that he could get anything cheaper, whether it was sugar, coffee, condoms, cars, farm workers from Upper Volta. Gazhi worked his way around the room, saluting the teachers, spending a few minutes with the Polish father from the orphanage. Gazhi could imagine just what he needed: robes, bowls, missals, plantain and manioc by the hundred-kilo weight for the refectory; weren't there dozens of kids to feed? Every aspect of human need and misery in Africa could be reduced to this common denominator, in Gazhi's view: something to buy, something to sell.

Who is that fellow? Robinson asked.

A man of means, Ev said, trying not to laugh.

The knock at the door took everyone by surprise; no one in Africa rapped on a door like that. Ev went to see what it was and found two gendarmes in uniform, insisting on seeing the sous-prefet. I'm having a party, Ev told the gendarmes, and none of my guests is to be disturbed. Who are you?

The shorter of the two men introduced himself; he was the chef de la gendarmerie in Grand Bassam. Ev had tried to deliver an invitation to him but had no way of getting to the quarters, which were several miles out of town at a strategic point where the road from Abidjan forked east and north. Look, Ev wanted to call to Robinson, another notable. Can I get you a fruit juice? Ev asked but the chef said no, just send out the sous-prefet if he's here.

Ev got angry. "You don't have to do your job by invading my house. I'm an American citizen, Ev Stryker, a guest of your government."

At this the man's eyes grew wide. "You're Monsieur Stryker?"

"Of course I am."

"But we have a letter for you. An important letter." He handed over a large white envelope, with Ev's name done in elaborate script.

Thank you, Ev said, now if you'll excuse me I have to get back to my guests.

Ev owed the sous-prefet nothing, but he felt impelled to draw the man toward the kitchen, backing him against the little kerosene stove with its two burners. The gendarmes came for you, he told the sous-prefet, and as soon as you step out the door they'll be there.

"Came for me?" the sous-prefet asked.

"Yes. Do they want to arrest you?" He spoke bluntly. What other fate could await an official so incompetent, so negligent even about providing illumination to school kids, Ev thought.

"Me? Arrest me? My God."

"Look, there's another way out," Ev said, and he pointed to the rear exit, a screen door with holes that Ev had patched as best he could with squares of wire mesh, bought at Gazhi's store. He showed the sous-prefet a path through the soft sand, up the incline to the dune overlooking the ocean. Go left and you're heading back toward the school, Ev explained. Go right and you'll reach the cemetery and restaurant.

"The restaurant?"

"You know, Les Palmes."

The sous-prefet, in his heavy shoes and his black woolen suit and his white shirt stained with perspiration left the party without saying goodbye. As he plodded toward the top of the ridge he looked like a band leader heading toward the sea to drown himself after a disastrous performance. He moved slowly and Ev could hear his panting as he struggled uphill. The sand was filling his shoes. He turned right, picking his way between the stinking piles of human feces that were deposited on the beach every morning and evening.

The sous-prefet arrived at Les Palmes as the last light was in the sky. It was 6:18; in two minutes the African night would submerge everything in an ocean of black. There under the trees was his favorite thatch-roofed table. As he looked toward the bar he could

see the rows of gleaming bottles, Dubonnet, white vermouth, absinthe, gin and scotch, old friends waiting silently for his appearance. He ordered a gin and tonic, and then, 15 minutes later, another. It was when he was draining this second drink that the gendarmes came. Instead of arresting him they gave him a letter with a red wax seal.

The sous-prefet had to leave rather suddenly, Ev told Marie Lambert. The sous-prefet? That's who that ugly man was? I'd have never known.

He may not be the sous-prefet very long, Ev said.

What a country, Marie said, drawing her breath in sharply through her teeth the way the French did when they were indignant about some other nationality. Ev feared that that was the signal for his colleagues to start in on the Germans and the British, but now that night had fallen they had had enough of pineapple juice. They said farewell and went home to a real cocktail.

Gazhi stayed behind to have a last word with Robinson. As Ev's boy Victor began to clean up, Ev remembered the letter. He peeled the red wax seal from the envelope.

Inside was the answer to Ev's diatribe of two and a half months earlier to the Ministers of Education and Public Works: a personal letter from President Houphouet-Boigny. He thanked Ev for alerting him to the situation of the street lamps; Ev's solicitude for his pupils was most affecting, the president wrote. And he enclosed a copy of a Presidential decree addressed to the sous-prefet, ordering him to immediately replace any missing bulbs.

Gazhi went flying out the door to find the sous-prefet. I can have those bulbs installed for him tomorrow, Gazhi said. Whatever they cost, I can get them for 10 percent less.

Ev taped the decree to the wall under the lamp he had fashioned, a memento of his cocktail party for Robinson. Come September he'd have to start all over with a new sous-prefet but that didn't spoil his victory. Every time he gazed at the words he laughed. Let there be light in the quartier Old Bassam, the decree read. Let there be light.

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