

When I Became a White Girl

by Julia Mary Lichtblau

“How's that for a welcome?” said my father, as we dragged our overdressed bodies toward the terminal. My eyes could barely follow his pointing finger across the shimmering tarmac. The West African sun jabbed like a hot poker each time I tried to open them beyond a tight squint. A troupe of dancers and drummers in matching yellow and black robes gyrated and stomped right up to us. We put down our bags and coats to watch. My father had to be joking. Had they really come to meet us, an American foreign service officer's family arriving on assignment?

The crowd around the terminal exploded into wild cheers; people inside pounded on the windows. We turned to see a short, elderly man the color of black tulips in a dark suit and sunglasses and a tall, coffee-colored beauty in turquoise robes and turban waving and smiling from the door of a jet behind us. The drummers thundered away double-time, and the dancers' backs rippled like eels as the pair descended the gangway, a retinue of young black men in dark suits and sunglasses trotting behind. “Who's that man? Why are those people dancing?” my six-year-old brother, Charlie, asked. “He's the president of the country. It's his birthday,” Dad answered.

“How do you know?” Charlie asked.

Dad pointed to a banner stretched across the rust-streaked white front of the terminal: “*BONNE ANNIVERSAIRE, M. le Président!*” he read. “Happy Birthday, Mr. President.” That much French I knew.

“What's the rest say?” I asked.

“Let's celebrate the 75 years of our Beloved President Pierre Diouodonné Coulibaly, Nov. 15, 1968.”

My brother yanked my sleeve. “Karen, he has the same birthday as you!”

“Let go,” I said. “I told you. I'm not having a birthday this year.”

“Actually, children, none of us will be having birthdays this year,” my father sighed, his moustache tips fluttering in the little gust he made.

“Not even me? Why?” asked Charlie, eyes round.

“Son, this is what's known as a ‘one-party democracy.’”

“What's that mean?”

“The president is the only one who gets a birthday party.”

My mother giggled. I wasn't about to dignify my father's dumb humor with a response. He looped his arm over my shoulder. “Joke. I know it feels lonely to turn 13 on the day you move halfway across the world...”

“...the *Galaxy*.”

“...the *Galaxy*. We'll celebrate tonight. Lucky 13. I promise.”

The president and his lady, their minions, and the dancers and drummers had moved on, so we picked up our bags. At the terminal, soldiers in camouflage on tall stools jiggled their machine guns irritably as several planeloads of passengers elbowed and shoved their way through the only open door.

“Kids, let's not get separated,” Mom yelled, grabbing Charlie's hand and reaching for mine. Too late. A huge woman carrying several bundles tied in print cloth barged into me. I slammed into a woman with a baby in a sling and just barely missed banging heads with him. The baby started to wail. The mother butted me back hard, her infant's droopy little canteloupe bottom adding to her clout. Down I went. A wave of body odor and this weirdly pungent perfume that seemed to come from everyone washed over me. My winter-white arms flailed against a forest of brown shins and ankles. A gun barrel waved over my head. The forest shuffled back, and I saw myself in the mirror sunglasses of a guard.

“Karen!” Dad shouted. He pushed through to me, dragging Mom and Charlie behind, and stuck our diplomatic passports under the guard's nose. “*Allez-y*,” the man grunted, jerking his head toward a side door. He waved his gun around some more to make a path for us. An indignant chorus of “*Yééééé!*” and sucked teeth erupted as

we stepped forward. Mom, Charlie and I froze. "Just go!" Dad shouted.

We popped out of the terminal like corks from a bottle. "Why were all those people mad at us?" Charlie asked as we collected our luggage.

"Because we're V.I.P.s now," I explained.

"Don't give yourself airs, honey," Dad snapped. "We 'da Man,' and *they* don't like it."

"Huh?" said Charlie. But Dad was already shaking hands with Mr. Jeff Davis, the admin guy from the Embassy, who'd come to pick us up in a shiny black car with a chauffeur.

The road into town ran along the ocean, with palm plantations on the inland side, and empty huts made of palm fronds on the other. "Beach cabanas," Mr. Davis said. "Gotta get yourself one. They're great." We hardly saw anyone for miles. Then the palms thinned out and corrugated-tin shacks surrounded by racks of stinky, smoking fish replaced the cabanas. Herds of stubby goats browsed through piles of garbage. Skinny children with big bellies and strange lumps under their belly buttons waved at us. "Umbilical hernias," Dad said, waving back. "Cord wasn't tied right. We have a new prevention program for that. Right, Jeff?"

Mr. Davis told us we were going to live in a place called *Les Sept Villas*, The Seven Villas. I got all excited and whispered to Charlie that a villa was a mansion, but when we turned into the compound gates, we saw that the seven villas were just seven identical white stucco bungalows.

"Karen, I thought you said we were going to live in a *mansion!* This place is dinky," Charlie whined as we got out of the car. I wanted to kill him, but Mr. Davis didn't seem offended: "Sorry, buddy-boy. A villa is a one-story house here. Fooled me too at first."

Mr. Davis gave us a speed-of-light tour: Living room, bedroom, bedroom, closet, bathroom, kitchen, cupboard, fridge, stove, water filter. "Boil and filter, y'all, or '*Bonjour*, amoebic dysentery!" The thing that really got him going was the zebra-print upholstery on the living room furniture. "Whaddya think? I pulled a lotta strings to get

the latest style from the Department, Mrs. Frankel. Nice, huh? Like it? ” Mom nodded.

He tapped his watch: “We better go, Mr. Frankel. I know you don't want to keep the Ambassador waiting on your first day.” Dad got back in the air-conditioned car like a good soldier. Mom stared as they roared out the compound gate—her peach suede spike heels sinking into the lawn, bra strap visible a mile away through her sweat-soaked silk blouse. Then she turned and staggered into the house like she'd been sentenced to Alcatraz: “Karen, Charlie, find something to do. If I don't lie down this instant, I'm gonna die.”

Charlie and I rooted around in the luggage till we found our bathing suits and went off to swim in the compound pool. We met a couple of seriously built Marine guards, who asked us if it was true what they read in *Time* Magazine that you could see long-haired hippies pretty much anywhere in the States these days—even Mississippi and Arkansas, where they came from. How should we know? We were from Washington, D.C. The farthest south we'd ever been was Luray Caverns, Virginia, four summers ago, and when Mom saw they'd never taken down the “Whites Only” signs on the bathroom, she said she sure wasn't going back that way any time soon.

Charlie started getting a wicked sunburn so I made him get out of the water. We wandered around to the back gate of the compound to watch the traffic on the red dirt highway that ran past it. Hundreds of packed busses, mammy wagons, tinny little French cars, bicycles and mbyettes streamed by. Men in long robes shouted and swung sticks to keep their herds of sheep and goats from straying into traffic. Most of the women were carrying huge loads on their heads—pots, chickens, bananas, firewood, suitcases—and babies on their backs. A lot of little girls were carrying babies, too, helping their mothers out, I guessed.

Watching all those people going somewhere else made us feel lonely—but we were afraid to wake Mom, so we walked around to the front gate. Mamadou, the *gardien*, came out of his booth and shook our hands. He had four scars on each cheek and no front

teeth. He didn't speak English, and we didn't speak anything else, so whenever we asked him a question, he just chuckled "hyuck-hyuck" like a dry faucet.

Charlie got stuck on those scars: "What happened to his face, Karen?" he kept asking. I didn't know. When Mamadou sat down under a tree to take a rest, Charlie walked over and pointed to his cheeks. Mamadou took my brother's little pink finger and touched it gently to the shiny, lumpy stripes. He sat very still while Charlie stroked them. Then he opened his eyes wide and, pulling his knife out of his belt, pretended to slice his cheek. He showed off his biceps and laughed: "Boo-hoo-hoo!"

Charlie went very pale. His big brown eyes shrank back into his face. "I don't like this place. Let's find Mommy," he whimpered.

"Wait." I grabbed his sleeve. Mamadou had gotten up. He was waving to a man down the road who appeared to have a trained dust cloud following him. As the man got closer, we saw that he was dragging a two-foot-long orange and black lizard on a rope. The frantic creature fought him every step of the way, scratching wildly with its claws to get a footing in the dry road bed. After Mamadou and the lizard man shook hands, they stood talking with their pinkies linked while the lizard darted and danced around them.

"Karen! They're holding hands," whispered Charlie.

"I don't think it means anything here. Shut up." I elbowed him to make sure he got the message. He elbowed me back and stuck his tongue out. The two men stared at us. The lizard man said something in what didn't sound like French. He and Mamadou slapped each other on the back. Then they screamed and rocked with laughter.

Like Mamadou, the lizard man was tall and skinny, but he was much better looking. He had all his teeth, for one thing. And unlike Mamadou, who wore a torn t-shirt, baggy brown shorts, black plastic flipflops, and a leather string with a little leather box around his neck, the lizard man was a snappy dresser. He wore black pleated pants, a shirt made of some shiny polyester, and the pointiest shoes I'd ever seen on a man. He had a gold necklace and a silver ID bracelet. His skin reminded me of purple velvet. His eyes

were steeply slanted—not like a real Chinese person, like when we pulled our eyes way up with our fingers and pretended to be Chinamen--and his black eyelashes curled all the way back till they touched the lids. The only ugly parts of him were the whites of his eyes, which were pus yellow, and his two-inch long pinky fingernail.

After some more laughing and back-slapping, Mamadou went into his guard house and came back with a ragged brown bill. He handed it to the lizard man, who passed him the rope. The lizard tried to run away, but Mamadou reeled it in. “Is that gonna be his pet?” Charlie asked.

“I don't think so,” I answered.

Mamadou wound the string around his hand over and over till the lizard was dancing in thin air. Then the other man grabbed it by the neck and pinned it down while Mamadou pulled his machete out of his belt. With one blow, he chopped its head off. Blood spurted out of the body, which was writhing like an out-of-control garden hose. We jumped back too late. The decapitated lizard sprayed blood across our bare knees. The two men laughed hysterically as we tried to wipe the mess off with our hands. Mamadou held up the body and rubbed his stomach. Then he snatched the head out of the dirt and pretended to eat it.

“Mommy,” Charlie screamed and took off through the compound. I figured I'd better be there to explain things, so I ran after him.

We banged and screamed for a good ten minutes before Mom staggered to the door. By then, all the houseboys and gardeners in *Les Sept Villas* had drifted over to see whether the new American kids would ever see their mother again.

We tried to tell Mom what we'd seen but she was too groggy to pay much attention. She tottered back to bed, and Charlie and I read the comic books we'd bought for the plane for the 100th time.

Mom was looking considerably better by late afternoon when one of the embassy wives came over with a Care Package, which thoughtfully included the fixings for gin and tonics. Now I have to say this for my mom: She can be pretty nice sometimes. Mom

actually borrowed cake ingredients and some pans from the lady so she could make me a birthday cake.

Around five o'clock, the doorbell rang again. This time it was Mamadou with the lizard man and another fellow. Mamadou went down on one knee and saluted Mom (Charlie and I nearly died laughing)—then pointed to the lizard man, who bowed and said: "*Bonsoir, madame*. I am Cyprien. I can be your cook."

Mom squeezed my shoulder. "What a stroke of luck," she whispered. She'd been sweating about all the dinner parties she was going to have to give for important people ever since Dad got his assignment. She extended a hand to Cyprien, who gave it a limp tug. Then, in her best Foreign Service Wives' Course French, Mom invited the men into the living room. Mamadou in his dusty, ragged clothes perched on the very edge of our brand-new zebra-striped couch, holding the long pole he used to chase stray dogs or goats or burglars from the gate, while Cyprien and the other man ogled the place as if it were the White House.

Mom tried to interview Cyprien, but her French wasn't good enough, and he'd already exhausted his English. By then, the perky thing that gin and tonics do to grownups had worn off. Her breathing had turned quavery, and a red blotch had popped out on her neck. She seemed just about to cry when the friend popped up: "*Madame*, I will be very pleased to translate for you."

"Thank you, I can manage fine," she sniffed. She took another look at Cyprien's purple velvet face, his yellow eyes, and his monstrous pinky nail and let out a deep sigh. "O.K. Ask him what he can do."

That was the friend's cue. He jumped to his feet. "*I will tell you. My brother Cyprien is a grand chef. He has worked for ambassador of France in Ouagadougou!*" Cyprien lifted his beautiful curly eyelashes and tossed us a shy smile. Mom smiled back. Suddenly, I got a bad feeling they were all in cahoots, but Mom was already sold, I could see.

Dad had promised we'd celebrate my birthday that night when he got home, but I wasn't optimistic. My friends were 3,000 miles away.

Everything we owned except our clothes was on a ship in the middle of the Atlantic. And Mom was fading. But she managed one more question: “Can Cyprien bake a birthday cake for my daughter—tonight? She turns 13 today.”

Cyprien's friend waved his hands as if he were doing a magic trick.

“Eh oui, madame! Pâtisserie is his specialty.”

“Alright, tell Cyprien he has a job.” Mom winked at me. “Daddy will be so pleased.”

The friend leaned over as if he had a secret to tell me. His hair reeked of that overwhelming perfume I smelled in the airport. *“Mademoiselle, do you know you have the same birthday as our président?”*

“I know. We saw him at the airport.” I didn't like the hungry expression on his face.

After Mamadou and the friend left, Mom took Cyprien into the kitchen and showed him the ingredients and utensils. Then she closed the door and left Cyprien to do his magic.

An hour later, no cooking smells had emerged. I was dying to see how my birthday cake was coming along though, so I stuck my head into the kitchen. There was Cyprien, squatting on the floor in nothing but his undershorts, a bowl of yellow goo between his bare feet. I didn't want to get him in trouble on his first day, but I knew Mom would never go for cooking on the floor. “You better come quick,” I called.

Mom raced in. She grabbed the bowl and banged it on the counter so hard I thought it would shatter. *“Non, non, non, Cyprien!”* She rushed out of the kitchen, her face in her hands. We were all afraid to go in after that. Eventually, however, we started to smell things cooking, and by the time Dad came home, Mom was giving herself attagirls: “Pretty good, huh? Right off the plane, and I hire a cook!”

That night, Cyprien started us off with a local delicacy: chicken floating in a blistering hot puddle of red chile oil, peanuts, and some kind of white mounds that looked like raw bread dough. He seemed

particularly proud of the mounds. “*Foutou*,” he said, motioning me to try some, but I couldn't stand to look at it. I wondered where it came from. Certainly not from the embassy wife's care package.

All through dinner, my parents tried to keep morale up. Mom raved about how lucky I was to have a birthday to celebrate on our first night in Africa.

“Right, except it's number 13,” I pointed out.

“Oh, come on, sweetheart. Don't be a pill.”

“We wanted a change from boring old Washington, right?” Dad pointed out. I rolled my eyes.

Cyprien cleared the plates and returned brandishing the cake. No icing—which wasn't his fault since we didn't have confectioner's sugar. To make up for it, he'd used an entire box of candles. My brother started snickering. “How do you say: ‘Call the fire department’ in French?” I kicked him under the table.

“*Voilà, madame.*” Cyprien set the cake plate on the table with a sigh. We thanked him over and over—“*merci beaucoup*” being one of the few French words that even my clueless brother knew. His face the picture of chef-ly dignity, Cyprien watched me blow out the candles and wave the smoke away. Then he handed me a knife, and I cut into his masterpiece. Raw yellow goo oozed out. I spooned a little onto my plate and tried to eat it. Salt was the dominant flavor.

As soon as Cyprien left the room, I made silent screaming faces. “I'm sorry, sweetheart.” Mom patted my arm.

“It's O.K.,” I gulped, feeling pretty weepy all of a sudden.

Cyprien cleared the table without looking at us. None of us knew what to say. After dinner, Dad went into the kitchen and closed the door behind him. Mom and I grabbed our books and retreated to the zebra-striped living room. Charlie fell asleep on the couch.

Dad and Cyprien were gone for at least two hours. When I heard the door from the kitchen to the garden bang shut, I figured that had to be the end of Cyprien's cooking career—except Dad was taking an awfully long time to fire someone he'd only known for six hours.

When I awoke the next morning, I found Dad explaining to Cyprien, who was wearing shorts, an undershirt, and flip-flops, how to serve instant coffee and canned orange juice while Mom stared at her coffee cup.

It turned out the guy had never cooked for anyone before. He was the student of his family (that's why he had that monstrous pinky nail—he didn't work with his hands.) Practically his whole village was counting on him to get a fancy government job and support them. But he'd just flunked his Baccalaureate exam for the third time. So his future was cooked, so to speak. Ashamed to go home, Cyprien thought his troubles had ended when his “brother,” Mamadou, told him that a new American family had moved in and needed a cook. I guess they figured it was a job anyone could do. Dad had meant to let him go, of course. He and Mom still had all those fancy dinners to give. But Cyprien cried when he broke the news so my softy Dad gave him another chance.

Now someone had to teach him how to cook, which takes time, as my mother pointed out—and her French wasn't up to snuff yet. Dad promised he'd teach Cyprien the basics. He tried for a few days, but the ambassador really needed him at the embassy, so Mom had to manage as best she could.

The other Americans in the Seven Villas thought my parents were nuts. “He's just taking advantage of y'all,” Mr. Davis's wife told Mom. “We see a lot of this with newcomers.”

“Doubters. Ignore them,” Dad told her.

Lo and behold, Cyprien began to get the hang of the job after a few weeks. He used the counter, not the floor. He learned how to make chicken without peanuts or chile. Mom bought him a khaki uniform like the ones the other cooks and houseboys in the compound wore. She stopped putting her head down on the table every time he left the room.

One evening, about two months after we arrived, Cyprien came into the living room and asked to talk to “Monsieur Frank.” They went out for another walk. This time, when Dad came back, he and Mom got into their biggest fight ever.

I was already in bed but I heard it all through the wall. Cyprien was engaged, it turned out. When his fiancée's family found out that he worked for Americans, they upped the bride price to three month's salary. He wanted Dad to lend him the money.

"God damn it!" Mom yelled. "He may be a lousy student, but he can sure smell a sucker a mile away."

"It's only \$100, for chrissake," my father yelled back. "We can afford it."

The next morning at breakfast, Dad pulled a fat wad of greasy, brown CFA francs from his pocket and handed them to Cyprien. He made him sign some kind of paper. Mom would barely look at either of them. "You watch," she said, after Cyprien left the room. "He'll be off to Ouagadougou or wherever he's supposedly from. We'll never see him again."

Cyprien was still there when I came home from school, puttering around the kitchen. He avoided looking at my mother. Dad gave him an extra day off that week because the bus trip to his fiancée's village took twelve hours. That made Mom even madder, and I began to wonder if Cyprien could break up their marriage.

On Saturday, Dad took us all to a fancy Vietnamese restaurant downtown to make up for everything, but Mom barely touched her food. She went to the bathroom for a long time. "I don't care how much you gave him or what it amounts to in dollars," she said when she came back. "You're a fool. I don't know how you expect me to make a nice impression with someone for whom canned juice and instant coffee is an accomplishment."

Dad barked that if she thought anyone was a fool in this situation, she might look in the mirror—since she hired Cyprien in the first place. "You could have at least waited till I got home to talk to him, considering your limited ability to communicate." Mom knocked her chair over as she ran out of the restaurant. Charlie started to cry. On the way home, I felt so awful because I knew that my birthday was the real reason Mom jumped the gun and hired Cyprien.

That night, Charlie climbed into bed with me, which he hadn't done in several years. "Karen, what happens if Cyprien steals Daddy's money?" he asked.

"I don't care. I hope he never comes back," I answered. "I hate him."

"You said a bad thing, Karen." Then he turned his back to me and cried himself to sleep.

On Monday, Cyprien was back with a surprise. His in-laws had given him a big party when he showed up with the money, and everyone in the village was very proud of his new job. They sent their daughter down to the capital with him to thank us personally. She was waiting outside the kitchen door.

"Wonderful. Show her in," Dad said.

Cyprien led his fiancée in by the hand. "*Voici Aminata*," he said, proudly. I couldn't follow the rest of the introduction. His guttural, West African accent was too thick.

"Her name's Aminata. She's sixteen, and she can read," my father translated, without looking at me.

I tried to imagine being married to anyone, let alone Cyprien. She didn't have a long pinky nail, so she probably wasn't a student anymore. I thought of her plodding along the road under basins of fruit or bundles of wood, and I wondered if Cyprien would ever cut his nail.

Like Cyprien, Aminata was tall and skinny and had purple velvet skin. She was also the shyest person I'd ever met. All we ever saw of her eyes were her slanted lids and curled-back lashes. She never looked up once. While my father and Cyprien talked, she fidgeted constantly with her long skirt and tie-dyed shawl, readjusting and tucking and yanking the folds. My father asked her some questions, but either she couldn't understand him or was too embarrassed to talk. After a few minutes, Cyprien led her out.

"I don't get it. He's just a cook. He waits on us," I said to Dad that evening after Cyprien had cleared the table. "What's so special about that?"

“Beats the hell out of begging, don't you think?” Dad answered. “I thought I'd done a better job of educating you kids.” He walked out of the room. I sat by myself on the couch for a while feeling pretty stupid.

Then I wandered into the kitchen—I don't know why. Cyprien was pulling a dish towel out of a drawer. He smiled at me for the first time since he'd come to work for us. I tried to find some French words to say something nice about Aminata, that she was pretty or had a nice dress, but I wasn't sure I said it right. Suddenly, Mamadou's face appeared at the door, greyed out and flattened against the screen. It looked like a mask. “Cyprien,” he whispered—the mesh buzzed when he spoke—then he said a few words in their dialect.

Cyprien pivoted. His eyes bugged out. With a wild scream, he threw himself on the cement floor, writhing, clawing at his skin, banging his head, sobbing and shrieking. Dad raced in. The houseboys and cooks from the neighboring houses came running, too. Eventually, five of them managed to subdue him, but it took quite a while.

Cyprien lay stiff as a corpse, staring up at the ceiling while the other men held his hands and feet. After Mamadou got some water in him, they carried him outside and laid him on a bench under the mango tree in our garden. Every so often, his chest would heave, and he'd start thrashing again. But mostly, he was quiet.

Charlie and I watched from the kitchen door until Dad shooed us inside. Mom hustled us into the car and took us for a moonlight drive along the lagoon boulevard. When we got back, Dad told us the story he'd gotten from Mamadou. Cyprien's fiancée had another suitor who figured that when Cyprien failed his Bac again, her parents would prefer him. So when Cyprien came home with all that money, the man was furious. He turned to black magic. The man bought some charms and potions in another village and got someone to cast a spell on Aminata. They had found her dead in her bed at her uncle's house, where she was staying, just before Mamadou came by.

Cyprien tried to work for a few more days, but he was a ghost himself. He wouldn't cook. Mom would go into the kitchen and find him staring at the wall. Finally, Dad gave him more money—a lot more, he said--and let him go. This time it didn't take very long.

Afterward, my father walked around the house for a long time muttering about what a bad start this was for his first African assignment. He'd ruined Cyprien's life when all he wanted to do was to give the poor guy a break.

I felt worse than ever. Not only had my birthday caused the whole mess to begin with, I'd had a bad feeling about Cyprien from the beginning. But I never told anyone. That was my first big mistake of my life as a diplomat's daughter.

Then I wanted to show Dad I understood how he felt. Instead, I made my second big mistake. "You know, Dad," I said. "You can just tell about people." I thought he was going to smack me right then and there. He raised his hand. I ducked. He stood over me, arm frozen, fire coming out of his eyes. "You cannot, you hear me!" he roared. "And don't you ever forget it!"

