

Rwanda Suite: Gasoline

by Steven Gowin

I judge. I cannot help myself; I must judge.

In Kinyrwanda, Swahili, French, and English, the Fina has posted *No Smoking* signs at its pumps and around the station.

But when I arrive to fuel my motorbike, the station kid ignores me and draws deep on his smoke. Over a dull face, he sports the newest Butare youth fad, a logo bicycling cap.

I'm astraddle my Peace Corps moto. Finally he approaches. He twists the cap off my fuel tank, peers inside, flips the pump lever, and shoves in the fueling nozzle. As the flow streams fuel into the tank and gasoline vapors stream out, I realize the kid is still smoking.

Shocked, I tear the blazing cigarette from his mouth, throw it to the earth, and grind it to death with the heel of my boot. My rage could ignite gasoline, and, I cry in his face, *Defense de fumer! Defense de fumer! On aura du feu*. But he only grins a weak bovine smile.

The fill up complete, he pulls out the nozzle and cradles it business end down, dribbling gasoline onto my bike and its hot motor. And then nothing. He stands motionless, dumb, as if contemplating some hungry void, sucking my anger, emptying me of that, my only recourse to his idiocy.

Furious, I scream and point for him to clean up the spill. But when he finally dimly understands, he's nothing handy to mop it up. *Clean it*, I cry again, and now desperate and bewildered, he snatches the new cap off his head to soak up the accelerant.

When he's done what he can, mostly smearing the fuel about, the cap's colors have run, its logo blurred, its bill flops down twisted, the cap ruined. And although this devastation calms me, I begin to wonder what I've done. This is not my country, not my culture. What kind of bully am I?

I replace the fuel cap myself, kick start my bike, and pass the kid a guilty thousand franc note. Pushing back from the pump, I circle around to head away and give him a last embarrassed glance.

Still grinning, he's pocketed the one-k note, re-donned the ruined cap, and is about to light a new cigarette.

Although I know not how or what to judge, in white hot impotence, I judge nevertheless.

