

Rwanda Suite: The Congo in Me

by Steven Gowin

I scratch a red welt onto the inside of my white knee. The knee itches like crazy. Pain too, down to my bones. The Congo calls.

Lake Kivu water splashed cold and clear. Eighteenth deepest lake in the world. Swim the lake, schistosomes be damned. No bilharzia, maybe. Thirty five years later, that knee stings.

Backwards thirty-five. Long dortoirs. The children of Leopoldville colonials, Belge. I was that age. Now houses Americans. Volunteers. "Good" Americans. Everything in *Franglais*. French language. ESL training. Six days a week. Learning grammar after a Master's in English. Shameful.

Thompson gun bullet holes in the stucco. *Merci Bob Denard*. Torrential rains in Eastern Zaire Eastern Congo. lighting cackles, crackles. Tin roof walkways, dortoir to *réfectoire*... rickety, 20 foot trestles. Complex on a hillside. Water spouts on the lake. Up early for a hot shower with *Savon Zaire*, sandalwood. Lather works up hard. After seven AM, the water runs cold.

Friday night. Walk around the lake road towards ville, past the Belgian villas... the *diablerie*... humiliations, beatings, rape. Lac and ville still exclusive for Congo Big Men, the stray European. Mobutu compound across the inlet. Helicopter pad, fences. Nothing changed. On to town in the dark. Electric torches under the *jacaranda* canopy. Dogs bark.

Odors of charcoal smoke and *brochette*, and palm oil from above. Reefer smoke from *stagiaire Cisco's* fatty. Bukavu ville. Art moderne wonderland. Parallel lines, rounded corners. Now a splendid decay, broken *trottoir*, potholes and orange mud. Sketchy electricity. Sewage in the lake. Everything cobbled over to keep running. *Tout cassé, tout en panne*. Civilization in decline? You hope not.

Cabaret Bukavu. Overhead lights, third world illumination, long fluorescent tubes. Goat brochette and arachides from the bar. Strong Primus in liter bottles. Silk screened logos. The brewery always works. Primus brarudi. Les citoyens laugh, smile; bright souls shine. Friends hold hands as they enter.

Dance, dance. Scratchy records, over amplified, clip clipping. Franco's lazy lazy lead, OK Jazz, the Congo Rumba king. Bar girls in batik turbans. Matching dutch wax pagnes sway at the ass. Africaine cheeks and breasts, smooth and coal-black. Femmes libres, gentle girls. Almost prostitutes. Not quite prostitutes.

Some boys go with the girls. Most don't. The wee hours. Give les femmes a little matabish. No itch from that for me, though. The girls take Cisco's glasses. Cisco can not see. Word over the Congo grapevine. Whispers down the lane.

The bright morning. Saturday. Back en ville. A girl comes forward to present the glasses. Cisco produces a few Zaire notes. Our girl smiles. Lovely and hopeful; she is hopeful. How can that be?

A warm Sunday. Hiking hills above the Ruzizi. Rwanda across the Ruzizi, across the bridge. The countryside buzzes. Africa hums. Locusts, I suppose. Some flies. Was it an itchy hill bug?

Invited for urwagwa, banana beer. Immaculate Congolese house. Very small. Concrete floor and corrugated roof. Steel. Magazine photos on the wall... Bobby and Ali.

Years later in California. Knee swells to twice its size. Oozing. Something viscous, yellowish. Only shorts for walking. In the Haight, a street person, "Looks bad man, real bad."

Famous university dermatologists. An examination. Diagnosis impossible. "The tropics, no?" Prednisone injections. Prednisone. Prednisone knocks it back. Cowers it, beats down the African.

I use my bones again; I am cranky, mean, and cranky. The affliction passes. But occasionally, even now, stinging knee, itchy knee. A deep burn. Africa will out.

