

Love and Hate in Cameroon

Clancy Hearst had been the patriarch of his own clan and the caravan leader of five other families. A caravan that had been travelling in covered wagons on a quest to the goldrush. Now, under the moonlight, he lay face first on the ground. His colt .45 was enclosed in his hand, and both he and his gun were cold to the touch. His thumb was on the hammer of the revolver but had not cocked it yet. He had a spear in his back and had been dead for nearly three hours.

Strewn around the immediate camp site and its surrounding area, the rest of the prospecting party including the horses lay in varied positions attained while suffering similar fates. The ambitious prospectors and their families would now be forever quiet, but there was still great activity in the campsite.

A young goblin they called The Little Grey One walked by Clancy's remains then stopped and turned. A quick look around, then she picked up his gun. Warnings were strict and punishments severe for disobeying orders in goblin life, but still, kids will be kids. Or whatever goblin kids were called.

The steel of the gun was smooth and felt comforting. She rolled the cylinder with first one tick, then a second. She knew enough not to touch the hammer on the thinking end. Everyone knew that. She took the revolver and held it under her poncho so nobody could see it. The chamber was easy and she rotated it again and again. Tick tick tick

It wasn't long before all of the smallest goblins were rounded up and sat on a cluster of logs where just hours before, Clancy Hearst had been playing his harmonica and telling tall tales to scare the caravan kids of the prospecting party into being quiet.

The Little Grey One walked up to and sat beside the One They Call Ingrid as she did every chance she had. The One They Call Ingrid was a bit older, and The Little Grey One thought her wise and pretty with her narrow face and longer than average ears. Plus she could run faster than a horse.

The One They Call Ingrid barely took notice of The Little Grey One as she sat beside her. They were the first two sitting and until the others sat on the log and surrounding ground it just looked awkward. But the Little Grey One didn't mind.

Once she was satisfied all the kids were accounted for, Grandmother also sat. She was one of the very eldest and as such had the very best stories. With a bloody hand she brushed her white hair out of her face, then stooped down further to grab a handful of blueberries as she prepared herself to speak.

Away from them, the adult goblins continued their ransacking of the campsite and wagons and harvested the meat for salting and smoking. Tarps were cut into strips, and blades resharpened if they cut into too much bone.

Grandmother had told Grandfather he should help the others, as he often tried too hard to scare the kids. This sometimes made it hard for them to get to sleep and even goblin children need their rest. She then explained to the kids that they were to sit and give her "eyes and ears" until each was ready for bed. When asked if she had a story, Grandmother smiled and said, "Maybe, if you can listen quietly."

Then she began.

“Ibrahim Tumi sat on the ground and looked up at the group around him. To say he was nervous was an understatement. He was downright scared. The stoic glances that met his told him he would not get any sympathy.

Ibrahim’s pant leg had been rolled up past his knee. His exposed leg was now covered in a thick white bandage that had been smeared with honey and pig’s blood.”

The Little Grey One licked her lips at the thought of such a delicious treat. As she did so, she continued to play with the gun’s chamber under her poncho. tick tick

Grandmother never heard this, and she continued.

“Ibrahim looked up at the boy named Manu. Manu was two years older, which is a lot at that age, and Manu was Ibrahim’s rival in many things in the village. Manu was the son of the village accountant, and would some day be an accountant himself, but for now he was just a boy like Ibrahim. And like Ibrahim, Manu was sweet on a girl named Shandra. But she was already Ibrahim’s girlfriend.

‘Do it, you said you would. Unless you are scared,’ Manu taunted him.

‘I’m not scared,” Ibrahim answered. This was a lie. He wasn’t even sure he knew how he of all people came to be the one chosen to lead the attack on Gregoire, the massive anaconda that had just moved into the area. Gregoire had tried to be friendly, but sometimes his snake side got the best of him and he would asphyxiate then eat a

precious pet or even worse, a small child. Losing pets was a pity, but this happening to the small children was inexcusable.

Gregoire had to be dealt with, and the parents of the village were drawing their own names to see who would come out and mete justice to his menacing. The kids, hearing of the riot squad forming, had come out ahead of them to show their courage.

‘Just- just make sure you guys don’t let me go, Manu. I mean it.’

Manu looked down at Ibrahim. ‘We won’t. And if you do this, you’ll be the bravest of us all.’

Ibrahim crab-crawled to the hole in the ground where Gregoire was believed to be living. Gregoire was known to enjoy his Friday nights, and often came home from the bars very late, so it could be hours before he would even wake up and see Ibrahim’s leg as bait. And perhaps even more hours after that before he decided if he wanted to eat it.

Now that the hole was up close, it looked much larger and much darker.

Ibrahim took one last look at the four boys around him. They all carried clubs and machetes-some had one in each hand- and were all school mates. Ibrahim swallowed a big gulp and put his bandaged leg in the whole as far as he could. The other leg he left out along the top of the ground as a brace to help keep himself from getting completely dragged inside the hole.”

Tick tick

“As luck would have it, Gregoire was up getting water to try to get his snake hole to stop spinning, and he immediately noticed Ibrahim’s wrapped up honied and bloodied leg. Even though the thought of food made him sick, and he didn’t even really know what it was he was attacking, Gregoire wasn’t one to be threatened with a good time and almost immediately chomped down on Ibrahim’s leg.

The pain was negligible to Ibrahim, but the pressure of the bite felt severe, and Ibrahim immediately called for his friends to pull him up. Three of the four immediately dropped their weapons and turned and ran. The thought of dragging Gregoire out and facing him in a fight to the death had sounded much more appealing in the safety of the village than out here in the bush. This left just Manu looking down.

‘Manu- help me. Even with just the two of us we can take on Gregoire and help the village.’”

Click The Little Grey One realized with a drop in her heart that the click that came from under her poncho meant the hammer was now cocked. She froze and didn’t know what to do.

“Manu had terror in his eyes and for a moment Ibrahim thought he was actually going to help him. Then, Manu’s eyes shifted and his face grew dark. He threw his club so it landed beside Ibrahim.

‘Nah, you can do it on your own, Ibrahim. Maybe now I can go make biscuits with your girl Shandra.’ Manu said as he walked away while Ibrahim begged him to stay.

It was now just Ibrahim and Gregoire. Ibrahim would not allow himself to fall into the hole, and Gregoire wouldn’t let go. This went on for hours.

Finally, Ibrahim had had enough.

‘Gregoire. Can you hear me?’

‘Ibrahim?’ Gregoire tried to speak properly with his mouth full but it didn’t come out quite as well as he had intended. It was more “Ibaheh?”

‘Yes, Gregoire, it’s me. I propose a truce.’

Gregoire gave his best version of ‘It’s a truce? I didn’t even know we were fighting. Wait- are you guys going to club me if I come out?’

‘Yes- I mean no- come out, and we’ll talk about this as civilized beings should.’

‘I trust you, Ibrahim. Maybe I shouldn’t, but I do,’ Gregoire could enunciate much better now as he had loosened his grip on Ibrahim somewhat.

Still joined, the two wiggled their way out and away from the hole. Gregoire regurgitated Ibrahim’s leg. The acids from his stomach had damaged the bandage extensively and Ibrahim took it off.

‘This is disgusting,’ he told the snake as he wiped his hands against the earth.

‘You’re the one that put your leg in,’ Gregoire pointed out. He then spied the club on the ground beside Ibrahim. ‘Well. This doesn’t look good, does it? Why would you guys

try to do this to me?' Gregoire thought for a moment and looked down at the ground. "It's the children, isn't it," he asked quietly.

Ibrahim was tough, regardless of his age, but sometimes tough people have to cry too. He shed his tears that needed shedding and told Gregoire about the plan to club him and how everybody had left Ibrahim in the lurch to die at the last minute. And now, even worse, Manu would likely be with Ibrahim's girlfriend Shandra and baking biscuits with her after concocting some lie like Ibrahim was dead because he challenged Gregoire to a duel.

'That Manu- he was the mastermind in all this, was he?' Gregoire asked with contempt. He had never liked Manu but had always spared him because of Manu's father the accountant.

'He always is,' Ibrahim replied. 'The adults would likely have just banished you from the area, but Manu always takes things further. I have no idea how to fight him. And even if did, and I took him on one on one, he always has at least two guys with him. That is too much for me to handle.'

Gregoire thought for a moment.

'Well, I'll point out to you, Ibrahim, that I happen to know karate,' Gregoire said as he pronounced karate like ka-ra-tay. He recoiled and sprang out in what Ibrahim imagined was intended to be an ominous karate striking pose. The move would have likely been more intimidating if Gregoire had arms to intimidate with, or even legs to enhance his fighting position. Still, he was a fifteen-foot-long anaconda and he intimidated just fine as

it was. 'I would be willing to teach you a few things and help you with this before I sneak out of the village.'

'You would do that for me?'

'Of course,' Gregoire answered. What he didn't tell Ibrahim was that he was craving for one more dog in the village before leaving.

Gregoire spent the next few hours teaching Ibrahim a few basic karate moves. No easy task for a snake without arms or legs. Ibrahim was a natural and Gregoire gave him an honorary grade of green belt, which is not quite halfway to black but well on the way regardless.

They walked back to the village, and even though Ibrahim could now consider himself semi trained in one of the martial arts, he still had a sizeable knot in his stomach.

By the time they got to Shandra's, it was almost dark. They could hear voices inside. Young voices, much too young to be adults.

'Shandra and Manu....' Ibrahim whispered. His fists were clenched.

'This is where the jack does the lifting, kid,' Gregoire whispered back.

'Huh?'

'It's an idiom. An expression. Like, if I say, 'bite the bullet'-'never mind all that-all I'm saying is, time to get in there and make your stand.'

Ibrahim nodded.

Gregoire then said, 'On the count of three. One, two,-'

'Wait,' Ibrahim stopped him. 'We go in on three, or wait till after you say three?'

'No offense, Ibrahim, but I think sometimes you make things much harder than they have to be. Just follow my lead.' With that, Gregoire went towards the door with the intent to smash it open, but Ibrahim thought of how nice Shandra and her parents were and didn't want to break their door. He tried the handle at the last second and the door opened easily. The two rushed in at the same time with the best karatay stance they could muster under the circumstances.

'So, as you see, one doesn't need much yeast for the dough to rise,' Manu was explaining to Shandra from the opposite side of the table as the other two burst in.

"Oh, hi, Ibrahim," Shandra greeted them with a smile. The smile faded when she realized it was Gregoire. 'Manu is here showing me how to bake bread. He suggested biscuits but I want bread to go with the blueberry jam I'm going to make. He said you were on an errand and gone to the next town, Ibrahim.' Shandra then heard her two cats fighting in the next room and excused herself to chase them outside.

Manu stared at Gregoire and Ibrahim with his mouth open. 'I, uh-'

'I do not want to hear anything from you,' Ibrahim cut him off. 'I think we are going to have a duel. Just you and I.'

Manu sized Ibrahim up. Ibrahim was larger than Manu had given him credit for. And Ibrahim was fast and lean. It didn't take Manu long to decide to jump out an open window and run for his pride.

Ibrahim watched him leave. 'That's it?' he asked Gregoire.

'Often, it is,' Gregoire answered. 'So long, kid.'

'Ibrahim, come help me knead this and get it into the oven,' Shandra came back into the kitchen and directed him. She cared so little about Manu she did not even notice he had left. Ibrahim walked over to her. By the time he looked back, Gregoire was already gone. And so was the village dog he came for. And I am sad to say one of Shandra's cats."

"THEN GREGOIRE CAME BACK AND ATE THEM A-!"

BANG

The One They Call Enid jumped so much her elbow bumped into The Little Grey One. This caused her revolver to go off and almost shoot Grandma as the bullet whizzed by her head. The yelling had been Grandpa who had crept up behind the kids to scare them. One had such a fright he soiled himself on the spot.

The grandparents looked at The Little Grey One, and at the new hole in her poncho that now smelled of burnt sulphur. The Little Grey one timidly took the gun out from under her poncho and put it on the ground.

Several of the other goblin kids gasped when they saw it.

'She had a gun...' one said in awe.

All activity in the camp had come to a halt when Grandpa yelled and the gun went off.

Grandpa looked at the crowd and waved them away. "Ah, get back to your work," he exclaimed as he reached down and took a few of the blueberries from Grandmother's hand.