Letters from Togo · *Susan Blake*

September 2, Clear Light of Day

Things looked different this morning after a sweaty night sunk in a foam rubber mattress on sagging springs. I think the drumming kept up till the birds took over.

This apartment is in a block of six in a gardened development built by the Caisse Nationale pour la Sécurité Sociale as a source of income. Most of the residents are foreigners. It's called the "Résidence du Bénin," but Simon and Lee Ann referred to it as the "cité."

The apartments are two-storeyed and side by side, like townhouses. The bedroom, bath, and *cabinet* (toilet cubicle) are downstairs (the *cabinet* just on the inside of the carport wall, right next to the entrance door); the living and dining areas and kitchen upstairs. The Togolese, Simon Amégavie told me yesterday, find this arrangement as bizarre as the Americans do. They believe the bedrooms should be upstairs where it's cooler (because of the breezes through the treetops) and safer from intruders. The only windows are on the front and back, and on the first floor, they're just transoms—I suppose for security—so the bedroom is dark. Because Americans have lived here before, all the windows have screens. The dining room window looks out into a tree, full this morning of the bright yellow birds that got me up, and beyond to the street, where you can just barely see a couple of the one-storey "villas" behind palm and rubber trees. The living room windows look out into coconut palm fronds. All the rooms, except the living room, which is open to the stairwell, have doors with locks and old-fashioned skeleton keys.

In the living room, a sofa and four armchairs, cheap Danish modern in teak with foam cushions covered in a faded red print, are arranged in a rectangle around a formica-topped coffee table. Tacked to the kitchen door is a yellowed, dusty kitchen towel printed with a map of Togo. At the other end of the kitchen, a door covered with a violent red cowboy poster screaming "USA" leads to a utility room, with laundry tubs, the water heater, wire clotheslines, and an assortment of mops and rags. The furniture, Simon explained, dates from the days when the apartments were rented furnished. The appliances were provided—several Fulbrighters

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back—by the embassy. The furnishings are an accumulation of embassy welcome kits and Fulbrighters' contributions.

Yesterday I noticed the apartment's high ceilings, the teak beams criss-crossing the living room ceiling like a Japanese screen, the American refrigerator, the Ethan Allen chest in the bathroom. This morning I saw that one whole wall of the apartment, upstairs and down, is discolored from a leak in the roof. The leak has been fixed, but not the wall. Sheets of paint are flaking off the wall onto the living room couch and the kitchen counter. The knobs on the doors of the cupboards below the kitchen counter came off in my hand; the nuts holding them on have worked through the rotting wood. The cupboards have no shelves and no floor; the bottom of the cupboards is the cement floor of the kitchen. Tiny ants were crawling over the counter and under the cellophane of an unopened package of cookies in my box of groceries. The faucets in the laundry tubs and kitchen sink drip. All the dining room chairs wobble. The formica top is lifting off the table. When I opened the door of the closet under the stairs, mouse-sized cockroaches sprang to life. The closet is full of more broken chairs, damp cardboard boxes, and the overpowering essence of mildew.

I found the dishes and kitchen utensils in cupboards under the windows in the living room—the dishes (beige plastic) covered with dust, the dishtowels spread out under them mildewed. In another section of the living room cupboards are piles of books and pamphlets: a couple of Ewe grammars, *The Age of Innocence, Highlights of American Literature,* mysteries, *Europe on $5 a Day,* the Peace Corps Medbook—all mildewed. There are mildewed sheets on shelves in the bedroom closet, sprinkled with what looks like mouse droppings, and mildewed towels in the drawers of the Ethan Allen chest. The bathroom sink has separate hot and cold water faucets and no stopper. The tub stopper doesn't fit the sink. When I turned on the shower, nothing happened. I brought the showerhead (on a flexible pipe, European style) down into the tub and got a drizzle. It took half an hour for the drizzle to run warm. I "took a shower" squatting in the tub and holding the showerhead as low as possible, congratulating myself on the short haircut I got before leaving, wondering how one washed sheets and towels in a drizzle.

Over breakfast, I perused a leaflet called "Housekeeping in the Tropics" from the pile of mimeographed notices and embassy directives in the living

room cabinets. To combat damp, this Foreign Service Heloise advises, do not use wire hangers; they'll rust on your clothes. To prevent mildew, keep a light bulb burning in the closet, but be careful that it doesn't touch any of the clothes, or it may start a fire. Mothballs also help prevent mildew and have the additional merit of repelling cockroaches, which will eat your clothes.

Right then I started a list for the housewares and hardware sections of SGGG: mothballs, plastic hangers, sink stopper, washers for the kitchen cupboard doors. Then a list for the carpenter: glue the table top and chairs; make a bedboard, kitchen cabinet shelves, a bookcase.

The doorbell rang. Two women wanted to know if I had any work for them to do. Yesterday, when we dropped my luggage at the apartment, Simon Amégavie asked me when I wanted Martin to come this morning. I didn't think I wanted him to come at all. He had supposedly cleaned the place, and I thought I'd like time alone to put things away. "You'd better have him come," said Simon. So to be agreeable but give myself time to reconnoiter in private, I said okay, how about ten o'clock. Now, I wished I'd said eight. I couldn't put a thing away until all the cupboards were scrubbed and aired, and Martin was not expected for another couple of hours. In fact, under the door I'd found an overdue electric bill with dire warnings of what would happen if it weren't paid immediately. When he came, Martin would have to go pay the bill. I'd been about to wash the dishes I'd found in the living room cupboards, but not only was the water pressure discouraging, the kitchen sink hit me at mid-thigh. Should I let them do something? Was it dangerous to let strangers into the house? My cautious predecessor Flint had spoken of giving people odd jobs. These women looked okay. So I said, "Well, yes, you can wash some dishes." One washed, the other dried. I didn't know quite what to do myself. I wanted to clean the bedroom closet so I could put my clothes away, but I didn't want to let these strangers far out of my sight. On the other hand, I didn't want to stand over them. I started going through the mildewed books in the living room.

When they'd finished, I was relieved. I gave them each a hundred francs. At the door, the older one said, "Madame, do you need a maid? I can clean; I can cook. I will come back tomorrow?" "No," I replied, feeling stupid not to have realized that this was the inevitable follow-up and trapped, too, because I might rather have a woman work for me but I really

have no choice. "I have someone; I just needed a little extra help this morning." "You will need some extra help again?" At this, Martin wheeled up on his bicycle, and the two women retreated.

Martin was not pleased. "Ça je n'aime pas," he said, shaking his head, "non, pas du tout." I should never let strangers into the house. They might have been staking it out to rob. And besides, this was his job. How did I think it made him feel to see strangers doing his job? And if something turned up missing, wouldn't I blame him? If I needed something I should ask him. I was the one who had said don't come until ten.

So, by ten o'clock in the morning on my first full day in Togo, I'd already offended the person it is most important I get along well with. I tried to explain that I had had no idea how much work there would be, that while maybe it hadn't been the best idea to let the women in, they had done a good job, hadn't done any harm, and hadn't taken anything away from him, that I wouldn't do it again, and that now that he was here we would see how much needed to be done and how often he should come.

This seemed to work. Martin relaxed. But I myself had raised the question, foremost in Martin's mind, that I wanted to postpone. How many days a week and how many hours a day would I want him? And, of course, you can't talk about time without talking about pay, and I don't know the going rate. Flint's experience here is useless because he ate beans out of a can standing up in the kitchen and had Martin come only two mornings a week. I told Martin frankly that I didn't know how much time it would take to keep the apartment in order, that at home I took care of my own house, but conditions were different here, but that in any case I hoped to lead a larger life than Flint had. I asked him if he'd like to learn to cook, told him I hoped he'd help me with my French, agreed that, yes, I'd teach him some English. We agreed that he would come tomorrow and every day next week while I settle in, then we'd see about the future. He studied the electric bill in his new role as my confidential adviser and agreed that it should be paid immediately. We parted co-conspirators in the protection of the apartment against mildew, strangers, and the electric company. But I hope I haven't promised too much.

I was glad to lock the apartment door when Lee Ann pulled up at eleven to take me to meet other English Department members at Elise Atayi's. My professional role couldn't be as strenuous as the domestic one.

September 9, Buying a Car

This week I've learned how to take taxis. The cité is four or five miles north of town, and the embassy people made me think it would be next to impossible to get taxis out here. Tuesday Meg had the Cultural Center car pick me up so I'd be sure to arrive in time for my courtesy appointment with the ambassador. Wednesday I followed embassy advice and sent Martin out to the Route d'Atakpamé on his bicycle to bring a taxi into the cité. The fare was 500 francs, and I felt ridiculous. Thursday, Martin and I both walked out to the main road, carrying bundles of sheets and towels to be laundered at Meg's; this time the fare was 400 francs. Thursday afternoon I returned by taxi with the carpenter and the plumber Patrice (the Togolese supervisor of maintenance on the embassy houses) got to help me fix up the apartment. They had to make a preliminary visit to see what needed to be done and how to get there. With John the carpenter negotiating, the fare was 350. Simon Amégavie had told me the fare from the cité to town should always be less than from town out because a taxi driver had less chance of getting a fare. This morning I walked out to the Route d'Atakpamé by myself and told the driver I never paid more than 300. He told me to hop in. The Togolese fare is 200, but it's accepted that *yovos* (whitefolks) pay more.

My initiation into taxis accomplished, I found a car. To buy a car, you put the word that you want one on the grapevine and check out the notices on the bulletin board at Marox, the German grocery on the sea road about a half mile from the Cultural Center. Here the outgoing expatriates pass on their cribs and air conditioners and cars to the newcomers. I worked out the code for car ads ("climatisée," air conditioned; "break," station wagon; "dédouanée," tax already paid), copied down the information on three possibilities, and hiked back to the Cultural Center to call. At ten in the morning, even a half mile walk is an undertaking. You can feel the sun sucking up the moisture from the last night's rain. Although most people walk, there is no accommodation for pedestrians—no sidewalks, no crossing lights. You walk in the sand along the irregular edge of the pavement, skirting puddles, garbage piles, and vendors' tables, dodging mopeds and other pedestrians stepping straight and fast under headloads, and wondering how to respond to the frank stares of the women sitting behind the piles of oranges, Marlboros, and chewing sticks, and arrive damp and gritty.

Back at the Cultural Center, perched on the edge of Sylvestre's desk to telephone, I rehearsed my opening line for my debut on the phone in French. I was startled to hear my first call answered, "Hôtel de la Paix, bonjour." Where people don't have home phones, they use company phones for personal business. Two of the cars had been sold in June; the other turned out to be a truck.

Meanwhile, everyone I've met got into the act. Simon Amégavie had two friends with cars for sale; he'd get in touch with them. He also advised me to see his brother at the Renault dealership; sometimes new car dealers had used cars, too. Philippe Ekoué, a friend of Meg's I'd met at her house Sunday evening, knew someone selling a nice small Peugeot. Ted Macdowell, the Joint Administrative Officer at the embassy, took a special interest. Ted seems well-suited to his job of looking after the practical side of the embassy operation—the houses, cars, and water filters. He's well fed, friendly, and down to earth. Where the other embassy officers swelter in three-piece pin-striped suits, Ted wears a safari suit. He has a Marine citation for valorous service in Vietnam over his desk, a bowl of Hershey's kisses on it, and apparently plenty of time to get to know a newcomer. Meg cringes at the traces of Richmond ghetto in his speech, and I get the impression some other embassy people consider him not quite *pukka,* but I like the way he negotiates between American and African options. He shops at the Commissary and has Togolese tennis partners. He said he'd call one of his Togolese friends, the service manager at the Honda dealership, who was fixing up a Civic for sale.

Simon's brother was not a salesman, but a bookkeeper; he introduced me to a salesman, who asked me to wait for a few minutes in the showroom while he finished with another customer, a huge woman impressively robed in a purple and green print, to whom he was showing a top-of-the-line model. I realized she was a "Nana Benz," one of the women who have achieved wealth and power in the cloth trade and show it, stereotypically, by driving Mercedes Benzes.

The Renault salesman had two used cars—a Citroën "deux chevaux," a forerunner of the VW beetle that looks as though it's made out of molded plywood, and a barge of a Renault. Neither was what I wanted, but since I hadn't seen anything else, I drove both. As I got into the Renault, I reached for the seat belt. "Don't worry," the salesman said, "they're not *obligatoire."* Then he started discoursing on the recklessness of Togolese

drivers, who are not as bad, however, as the Beninois, or, of course, the Nigerians. In the Citroën, I knew better than to expect seat belts. The doors opened backwards, the windows pushed out rather than rolling down, and the gear shift was on the dashboard. When I'd gotten it going more or less steadily on the sea road, the salesman directed the conversation to general topics.

"Where is your husband?" he asked.

"In the United States," I lied.

"What does he do?"

"He's a teacher, too."

"And your children?"

Children aren't really necessary, but they add to the verisimilitude, and he had made it easy to have them. "They're home with my husband."

"And he lets you go off alone? For a whole year? He is very trusting."

Simon's friends said they would bring their cars to the Cultural Center at four o'clock on Thursday. I called Philippe at his office—he has no home phone—and he said he had not yet been able to get in touch with his friend, who also lacks a phone and lives too far out of town for Philippe, who has no car, to go to see. Ted Macdowell said that as his friend at the Honda dealership described the car he had for sale it wouldn't be a good buy for me. On Wednesday, Marox had the same ads. On Thursday, Simon told me his friends couldn't come that day; they'd come on Friday.

Today, Friday, Marox had a new ad, for a 1982 Honda. My phone call was answered by the switchboard at the BIAO bank and the ad traced to a Mr. Douti who said he'd bring the car right over. There seems to be no distinction between company time and personal business. A little man with a limp, Mr. Douti was the picture of the embattled petty bureaucrat. He looked sewn into his dark pants and black velour jacket, gagged by his tie. I was disappointed to see that his car was a sleek white Quintet, a hatchback similar to the Accord. I'd pictured myself in something more basic, like a Civic.

"How much are you asking?" I asked.

"Do you like it?" he replied.

"It's more deluxe than I was looking for."

"Let's go for a ride," he said, "then we'll talk."

The car was comfortable and drove well. It had air conditioning, which after a week of traipsing around Lomé was beginning to seem more like a

necessity than a luxury, and a tape player. Mr. Douti was asking 1,400,000 CFA, or $3,500, and I realized he'd probably go down to 1,200,000. This was 200,000 CFA or $500 over what I had considered my top price, but the price I paid was really irrelevant if the car was worth it because I knew I could recoup most of it when I sold the car at the end of the year. The real reason for rejecting this car would be that it seemed ostentatious. I thought that when I drove this car I'd want to tell people, "Look, I really have an old Volkswagen at home; I only bought this car because, believe it or not, it was the one that would cost me the least in the long run." If I wanted the car, I had to decide today because, by Monday, Mr. Douti would be on vacation—that is, home in an unnumbered house on an unnamed street without a phone—for a month.

"The difference," said Ted Macdowell, "is between having a car and not having one. Once you have a car, it doesn't much matter what kind." He thought the car sounded like a great buy, and besides, he had another friend at the BIAO bank who must be Mr. Douti's boss, which fact should lower the price even more, so he called the bank and asked his friend to ask Mr. Douti to bring the car back in the afternoon for the embassy mechanic to look at.

At noon in Lomé, everything stops. Traffic clears off the streets, vendors doze in their stalls. Whatever business or anxiety you may have been immersed in goes on hold. I had a lunch date with Patrice's daughter. Patrice has been so helpful to me that when he told me earlier in the week that his daughter was "good in English" and wanted to go to college in the United States, I jumped at the chance to do something for him by inviting her to lunch and seeing if she really was a good candidate for American education. We took a taxi to the Mini-Brasserie, the only restaurant I know, and for the next hour, over chicken provençale, I tried to draw out a shy, giggly seventeen-year-old, who, if she knew any English, was unwilling to speak it. What she really wanted was to escape to the Kung Fu matinee at the Opéra.

We walked back on the noon-quiet streets. After Albertine turned off, I found myself passing the Honda dealer. Out front was a white Civic with a for-sale sign. Just what I'd been looking for—and in the nick of time. The business was closed, but one of the men sitting on the curb told me he would bring the car to the Cultural Center when it opened at three o'clock.

The Civic showed up promptly, but I soon realized that it was in poor shape and not worth 800,000 CFA, which its sponsor assured me was the "last price" because it was being sold by "une blanche" like me. When I returned from the test drive, Mr. Douti had arrived. Ted and the embassy mechanic looked over his car and approved its condition. I told Ted I'd buy it. He undertook the bargaining, laying great stress on the fact that he could turn over the cash "right now." Ted had to bargain through an interpreter, and he settled at the figure I'd predicted, but he put on a good show. When the price was settled, he sent one embassy employee to the safe for cash, as I wrote out a check to the embassy and another employee began typing up an *attestation* for Mr. Douti to sign acknowledging that he had sold the car to me. Mr. Douti sat there looking stunned. I sympathized. "When things happen at the American embassy, they happen fast, don't they?" "Ah, oui," he said, "the Americans are strong."

Only then did I remember that Simon's friends would have arrived at the Cultural Center with their car. While the paperwork was being completed, I dashed across the street, embarrassed to be late and to have to tell Simon's friends I'd already bought a car without seeing theirs. They were sitting patiently on the curb next to a white Honda Civic—the same one I'd just tried out, which also turned out to be the same car Ted's friend at the Honda dealer had mentioned. The other car Simon's friends had to offer they hadn't been able to bring over; Mr. Douti was showing it himself.

In short, I was destined to have one of these two Hondas. Apparently, when you want to sell a car, you tell all your friends, and whoever finds you a purchaser gets a cut. We all laughed at the coincidence and shook hands, and I promised to send any other prospective car buyers I encountered to them.

I drove Mr. Douti back to the bank. He went home in a taxi with $3,000 in his pocket and a plastic bag of the things he'd kept in the car. I soloed home in my new car, knuckles white on the steering wheel, eyes straining for potholes, pedestrians, and the unfamiliarly positioned traffic lights, right foot ready to hit the brake. The left turn across taxi traffic onto the Route d'Atakpamé felt like a blind leap into the abyss. In front of the taxi park, the cyclist in front of me wobbled and went down. "We'll get you some insurance next week," Ted had said. "Until then, I wouldn't do much driving."

Sept. 12, Tam-Tam Funeral

Saturday morning, while John the carpenter was here building shelves, Carol Bruckner dropped by on her way home from shopping—with two-year-old Christopher strapped into his car seat and cartons of groceries from SGGG in the way back—to ask if I'd like to go to a tam-tam society funeral in the afternoon.

Would I? Could I take my camera? I never expected that traditional culture would be this accessible. Carol was blasé. Oh sure, bring your camera, they'll love it. Kurt has already taken lots of pictures and had a slide show for the society. There are lots of tam-tam funeral societies in Lomé. They are supported by membership dues and perform funerals for their own members. They amount to a kind of funeral insurance as well as a social club. I already knew that funerals were a major social activity here. The obituaries are read every night on the radio, and Elise has complained that she never has time on weekends to do anything she'd like to do because she always has to go to a funeral. In this small country everyone is related in some way to nearly everybody else, and if you don't go to some distant cousin's or friend-of-friend's funeral, it's held against you in perpetuity, she says. (When I saw her today and told her about going to the tam-tam funeral, she said she didn't know about *that* kind.) Carol and Kurt became honorary members of the tam-tam society after attending a few funerals with their Togolese neighbors. Now they feel obliged to go to a certain percentage of the society's funerals. They hadn't been to one in a while, so they really had to go to this one, and—she didn't put it quite this way—having a wide-eyed newcomer along would make it more interesting for them.

They and the neighbors picked me up a little after three, and we drove to a neighborhood not more than a mile from here, just off the Atakpamé road. We were early, so Kurt inquired about the shop of a ritual sculptor he'd heard was in the neighborhood. The shop had a row of traditional stools painted on the front as a sign. The sculptor, a middle-aged man missing most of his front teeth, seemed delighted to see us. He and his older children brought piece after piece out of the dark little room where they were stored into the courtyard to show us. Meanwhile, a woman squatting on the packed dirt washing dishes in an enamel basin glanced at us only occasionally, and two toddlers sat bare-bottomed on the ground

putting bits of debris into their mouths. The carvings, in light unpainted wood, were human figures, some up to five feet high, with various startled expressions and animal features. Several had long ears, long tongues sticking out, and yard-long penises. They represent spirits in the voodoo religion, which is not a joke but a real and strong religion all along the coast from Lomé east into Benin. Kurt said this man was considered the best ritual sculptor in Togo and was pictured in a book on voodoo by a German anthropologist.

The sculptor walked back with us to the site of the funeral. The funeral seemed to be in part a celebration of the rich-toned, strong-patterned Dutch-wax fabric that fills the markets and brightens the streets. The canopy over the site was a huge patchwork of *pagnes,* the six-yard lengths in which fabric is sold and, often, worn. I located a number of patterns I've seen on women in the streets. As we arrived, women with chairs on their heads (the ubiquitous Danish modern and flat-seated wooden kitchen chairs) walked up the street in a free-form procession. Groups of half a dozen or so wore dresses in the same pattern. The women's outfit, called a *complet* is striking and becoming—a fitted bodice with a variety of neck and sleeve detail including ruffles and tucks, a long, very straight skirt, and a *pagne* wrapped around the middle to hold the skirt and blouse together (and carry a baby). It must also be hot. It emphasizes the bust and buttocks to create an almost Edwardian silhouette. A street full of women, mincing and erect, creating flowing patterns of red-and-purple and green-and-gold against the lowering sun looked more like a ceremonial procession than the transport of furniture. A boy of ten or so under a tree in front of a house across the street watched the procession while he gave himself a shower by dipping water out of a bucket.

We were seated outside the canopy in the shade of a building in the Danish modern chairs. On our left was what I took to be the bereaved family, two men in kente cloth *pagnes* with the end thrown over their shoulder like a toga, two women with gold chains draped over their hair and extravagant rose and purple make-up, all of them with perpetually stony faces. In front of them was a little table on which sat one of the sculptor's carvings, a small seated mother and child, flanked by a bowl of plastic flowers and a covered dish containing membership booklets. The carving was painted realistically (though with pink skin); whether because of the small size, or the relative realism, or the paint, it lacked the power

of the unpainted pieces we'd seen in the sculptor's studio. At right angles to us, on our right, were seated men who by their kente cloth draperies and dignified expressions appeared to be elders. Behind us were kitchen chairs for other spectators. I was wishing I could sit in a kitchen chair because I wanted to take pictures and the living room chair was low, but one of the men in charge came over to us and told me to feel free to walk around and take any pictures I wanted.

The performers filled four rows of benches set in a square under the canopy. They faced each other to make two aisles. On one side of the square were the musicians, who played the tam-tams, that is, drums, and shook rattles made from calabashes covered with nets laced with cowries. In the center of the square, a couple of men led the singing and dancing and a tape recorder provided more music. The dancing started slowly and gradually increased in intensity. The dancers swayed back and forth at their seats and filed down the aisles between the rows. The leaders shook horsetails and sang to various people in the audience including the bereaved family, the elders, and us. As the rhythm quickened, a clown appeared, a short plump woman with bare shoulders, feathers tucked into a turban, and sunglasses with one lens missing, carrying her own horsetail and an empty flashlight case. She danced on the benches, tickled people with her horsetail, hammed for the camera, flirted with the elders. Eventually one of the elders stood up and pressed a coin to her forehead, where it stuck in the sweat. Periodically a couple of women came over to the bereaved family and repowdered the women's impassive faces and reperfumed their underarms. There was nothing funereal about the atmosphere. I got the impression that the purpose of the ceremony was to cheer up the bereaved, who, however, remained unresponsive.

At first, despite the invitation, I was diffident about taking photographs, especially direct portraits of the more ceremonious-looking individuals. I focused on the colorful mass of dancers and children hanging on the fringes, a couple of girls of about four and six dressed like their mother and imitating her movements, a man in a wraparound *pagne* and a T-shirt that said "J' (heart) le Togo." When I'd taken a couple of shots of some young boys carrying vegetable oil tins strung on ropes hanging over their foreheads (to sell as water buckets), one of the elders I'd been shy of got up in exasperation and gestured that I was wasting my film on riff-raff and it was time I took a picture of him before I ran out. He had looked as though

he were glowering the whole time. Perhaps he was simply squinting, as though he normally wore glasses but didn't think they went with his ceremonial robes. I pulled an extra roll of film out of my pocket to reassure him, then turned my lens on him. He settled back, adjusted his kente cloth and his expression, and held out his wrist to show off his Eyadema watch. This watch has a striped strap in red, green, and yellow, the colors of the Togolese flag, and a black face on which every thirty seconds appears the portrait of the dictator, Gnassingbé Eyadema. I smiled my thanks, and he acknowledged me with the faintest flicker of his eyelids.

As the sun dropped low and the dancing reached a climax, the women who had been attending to the toilette of the bereaved women came around and showered everyone with confetti. As they came around again, one patted your face with a towel, the other poured a little perfume into your hand, which you were supposed to splash on your face, then marked your left forearm with two fingers dipped in a white paste of, I think, powder and perfume. Then the dancers began to break from their rows and dance on their own. They thrust their shoulder blades, elbows, and buttocks back, their chests and knees forward, and looked like nothing so much as chickens. The sculptor and a toothless man in a faded Dutch-wax toga and checked wool driving cap competed, laughing, to see who could squat the lowest. The members of the bereaved family allowed themselves to be pulled up, and made dancing gestures, without ever changing their stony expressions. An old woman pulled me up and laughed at my efforts to dance. Next time, she says, she'll teach me.

On the way home in the car, I asked the Bruckners' neighbor about what we'd seen—who had died, how long since, what the songs were about, what the carving of the mother and child signified, what the two-fingered mark meant. But I didn't learn much. The person had died "some time ago." The carving was the society's symbol. I don't think he was deliberately withholding information, because the people at the funeral were so open. Perhaps the fact that neither of us was used to talking about these things in French blocked communication. Perhaps he just wasn't used to thinking about the separate parts of a traditional ceremony as having meaning. Kurt said later that this had been the ceremony to close the one-year period of mourning and I'd been right that its thrust was to cheer up the bereaved.

When I cleaned up to go to a party at Meg's afterwards, I was careful

not to wash off the two-fingered white mark. But at the party either no one noticed it or everyone was too polite to remark on it.

Sept. 22, Chez Martin

Martin is proud of the car. When I brought it home, he said, now I will come at seven every morning to wash the car before you go out. Heavens no, I replied, the car doesn't need to be washed every day. And eight o'clock, I was thinking, is early enough to be intruded upon. We compromised on seven-thirty.

Then he said, now that you have the car, you can come to my house for dinner. I was immensely flattered. This invitation meant that Martin was taking seriously my efforts to establish a friendly employer-employee relationship. But I was also a little apprehensive. Just how far was he taking it? Of course, I accepted, and I went last night.

Martin came on foot to get me about seven o'clock. I had never seen him before in anything but his work clothes, dark pants and a white shirt. I didn't even realize they were his work clothes. Now he was wearing short shorts that barely showed under a dashiki, a pork pie hat, and a big grin. It was like being picked up for a date. He had to guide me to his house because there was no way to explain how to get there. We went through the university to a *quartier* of unpaved streets behind it. "Comme ci, comme ça," Martin kept saying by way of telling me to turn left and right. In the dark, with no street names and no obvious landmarks, I quickly lost all sense of direction. At first we snaked around and slogged through thick red puddles. The farther we got from the university, the more seriously the streets were eroded. They became a network of rocky chasms. At each intersection, I had to look ahead and figure out how to get through. "Doucement, doucement," Martin coached, "slowly, slowly." Chickens strolled out of the way and children stared. The sleek white car, proudly polished by Martin that morning, seemed more and more out of place. The motorcycle parked in front of the door where we finally stopped looked much more at home.

As soon as we pulled up children poured out of the house, a compound with a central courtyard surrounded by rooms. More reticent adults waited inside the courtyard. As Martin showed off me and the car, I real-

ized I should have brought my camera and something for the children. I hadn't been thinking of this evening as an occasion for reciprocal cultural encounter, but of course it was. Martin is the aristocrat of the compound. Most of the rooms are occupied by an entire family; he has his all to himself. He is the one who divides up the electric bill and collects from each family. This is a good deal for him, he pointed out, because each household pays according to the number of electrical appliances they have, with no distinction between a light bulb and a refrigerator. Some of the families, I could see, had a television, but Martin was the only one with a refrigerator, and as he said, "Ça consume." The refrigerator itself is a money-maker because it enables him to sell ice and cold drinks to his neighbors. Then with the profit he makes on this business, he lends money by the month.

The room was perhaps ten feet by twelve. To the left of the door, a bed was curtained off. On the far wall stood the refrigerator and cases of soda. On the wall to the right was a small bookcase with a few books and a radio. Above it, a National Geographic map of Africa, given him by an earlier Fulbrighter. The table, in front of the door, was neatly set with a cloth, a jar of frangipani flowers and bougainvillea, and two places. The plates were turned upside down, and a Bière Bénin coaster covered each glass to keep out dust and bugs. Martin switched on the radio, a bit loud to talk over, and opened the refrigerator. What would I like to drink? The expansive host had everything. I took advantage of the opportunity to try *sodabi,* the liquor distilled from palm wine (rather like gin). I admired the arrangements. One of the books was Ferdinand Oyono's *Une vie de boy* (translated as *Boy* or *Houseboy*), the story of a houseboy in Cameroon that exposes the ironies and injustices of the mistress-servant relationship. We were each surprised that the other had read it. Martin also showed me notebooks from the night courses in economics he has been taking at the university for the last ten years. He said quite forthrightly and humbly that he hasn't passed a course yet. This year, he says, he is going to take law instead.

When we'd completed the tour of the room, we sat down and Martin summoned his twelve-year-old cousin Gabriel to serve the meal. Gabriel lives with Martin (sleeps on the floor) so he can go to school, serves as houseboy and cook, and minds the beverage business while Martin is at work. Martin directed him to serve just as Meg's cook does. We had

grilled chicken and *djencoumbé,* cornmeal pâte (a stiff cornmeal mush) made with chicken broth and flavored with bits of tomato and usually hot pepper, though Martin had had Gabriel omit the pepper for my benefit. The neighborhood children had followed Gabriel as far as the door, where they hung watching the spectacle. When Martin dispatched Gabriel the four feet between table and door with some bread and instructions for the children to disperse, they did.

With dinner, Martin wanted me to drink "wine." I was inclined to prefer beer, as wine was imported and relatively expensive and not in evidence. But he insisted. This wine was local. What was it made from? *"Raisins,"* that is, grapes. I had certainly seen no grapes growing in Togo. Where do the grapes grow? On the grape tree. It turns out that the grape tree is a common one I've noticed in the cité with pinkish berries from which people here make a rough wine, rather like the homemade stuff a high-school janitor used to give my father every Christmas. I'd never heard of this wine before, and neither has any of the Americans I asked in the Cultural Center today. Drinking it was tasting another world most of us don't suspect exists, a world where words we take for granted have different meanings and things we think can't be done are. Martin kept pressing drinks on me, calling attention to the loaded refrigerator that testified to his identity as businessman rather than servant. But since in an African compound there's no question of retiring discreetly to the bathroom while the company moves to the living room for coffee, I kept declining. So we remained in tension, as though I refused to admit what the refrigerator proclaimed.

While Martin is a big man in his compound, he feels a bit marginal in general. He is from a small Ewe sub-group, the Adja, in Notsé, while most of the people in Lomé are Mina. Here his only family is Gabriel, and even in Notsé, he has only distant relatives. His father was elderly when he was born and has long since died; his mother has gone back to her people in Benin. So he has to rely on himself, and his self-reliance separates him further from the people around him, for he doesn't have time to socialize and most of them owe him money.

When we left, the neighbors came out again to bid me farewell, and I promised to return with my camera. As I renegotiated the criss-crossing chasms, Martin said he had brought me to his house because he knew I was a stranger, far from my people, and if I ever needed help he wanted me

to know where to find him. I think he was sincere, though he flatters me to think I could find his house again. At the same time, I know he also wanted his neighbors to see him on social terms with a white woman in a fine white car and for me to see that he had a radio and a map and a servant and knew how to set a table and be a host.

When we reached paved roads and I knew where I was, I urged Martin to start back. I thought he was being too protective and I didn't want to lengthen his walk. But he stayed till we got to the main road so he could get a taxi back. This morning he washed the evidence of the night's expedition off the car.

Feb. 12, The Doorbell

In Togo the ringing telephone is replaced by the ringing doorbell. The typical middle-class Togolese house is surrounded by a high wall with a locked gate and a bell. But the apartments are vulnerable; the bell is right at the door, and it rings all day. Produce vendors call; cooks, maids, houseboys, and gardeners ask for work; unemployed university graduates offer to give my children lessons; the representative of the domestic workers' union comes to collect my quarterly contribution (he doesn't ask whether I employ a domestic worker, but whether I'm sure I have only one); an old woman collects bottles; vendors try to sell carvings, hand-painted tablecloths, furniture (which they carry around on their heads); the neighborhood madwoman brings my "mail" (advertising circulars dropped from the garbage truck).

At first, I didn't realize that answering the doorbell was part of Martin's job, and besides I was curious. Now I'm only too glad to leave the door to him. The trouble is that he's not here most of the time. I'm trying to learn to call from the dining room window, "C'est qui?" but I usually forget until I'm halfway down the stairs. It's much easier to say "no" from the dining room window than face to face in the doorway.

The only ones I really mind are the beggars. Flint made it seem easy to deal with them. They're mostly alcoholics, he said, have them sweep the driveway for you, or clean up the area around the garbage baskets, and pay them in food, not money. But it hasn't worked like that.

One evening last fall a friendly, self-assured man came to the door.

"Don't you know me?" he asked. He said he was a *gardien* at the house across the street and also collected garbage in the cité. His employer had gone to Nigeria without paying the help, and now they had run out of money to buy food. Would I lend him 3,000 CFA just till the end of the month, when he would get his garbage man's pay from the Caisse?

"You can see, the whole house is dark," he said, by way of proof.

Food would do no good here; the sort of food I could come up with on the spot—bread and cheese and a few cans—would be too little and more expensive than lending the money. "Well, I'm sorry your employer is so irresponsible," I said, "but I can't pay other people's employees."

"But, *mama,* it's just a loan. We are neighbors. You see me every day on the garbage truck. I will pay you back in two weeks without fail. And I will take extra care with your garbage."

"Why do you come to me? I just moved here, and I don't know you. Surely you have friends in the neighborhood."

"Because you are good, I can see. You'd be surprised, people know. Now, that *mademoiselle"*—he gestured toward Régine's apartment—"Her I know from head to toe. I won't have anything to do with her." Poor Régine; just as likely, *she* knew *him.*

In the end I lent him the money. There was really no question from the beginning. I was just stalling to preserve the fiction of my autonomy. The last person you want to alienate is your garbage man, who can pick up your garbage or strew it about. And you want the neighborhood staff, who know everything that goes on, to be on your side. And, perhaps, since we would see each other often, he would pay the money back.

A few weeks later, a pathetic man came to the door and said, "Don't you remember me?" His pants were gathered at the waist by a too-long belt. His shirt was dirt-gray and ripped along one side seam. His bare toes, dry and caked, curled under nervously as he talked. He was a friend of the man who lived here before, he said. That man helped him often. Now he was desperate, and had nowhere else to go. That man would have helped him. His daughter was sick, the doctor said she needed medicine that cost 2,500 francs and he needed 375 more to take her back to his village in a *taxi brousse,* he'd walk back to Lomé himself, he would get work, he would pay back the money, but he needed it now or his daughter would die. He snuffled and sprayed through the gaps in his teeth and wrung his hands and seemed on the brink of tears.

When I could get a word in edgewise, I said, "But the hospital treats people for free, doesn't it?"

He had spent his last 200 francs on the entrance fee, but medicine was extra, and. . . .

I didn't know the details of hospital policy, so couldn't challenge him on that. "But I don't know you at all. You must go to someone you know. I have enough to do to help the people I know," I said, thinking of my neighbor the garbage man.

His mother-in-law would help, but she was sick herself, and that man before was his only friend in Lomé, and. . . .

I wonder if Flint was really as cool with his callers as he claimed. And I wonder what makes me so angry about them. At home I write checks willingly for much larger amounts. In a way, the doorbell beggars are like the people who telephone at dinner time at home to ask you to buy lightbulbs to benefit the blind or tickets to the policeman's ball. Like the Lomé beggars, these callers feign a personal relationship: "How are you this evening?" But the Lomé beggars insist on one. To them you can't say, "I'm sorry, but I never buy anything over the phone; send me something in the mail and I'll consider it," or, "I'm sorry, but my charity budget is already allocated." It's no good saying you can't help; it's obvious, as you stand there in the doorway of a 40,000-franc-a-month apartment, next to a million-plus-franc car, that you can. It's no good giving reasons for refusing; for every reason they have a refutation. You can either comply—and get known as a sucker—or slam the door. And I have trouble slamming the door.

My neighbor the garbage man waved and smiled when he saw me after I lent him money, and the litter around the apartment block's garbage basket disappeared. He did eventually repay the loan, though not in two weeks, for which delay he had a lengthy explanation. He has since borrowed the same amount again. The pathetic man came around later with a basket of eggs—not, he hastened to assure me, to try to sell me eggs, but to show me that his mother-in-law had given him eggs to sell so he could repay me.

This week the pathetic man came back, more abject than ever. He couldn't repay the loan, he snuffled, he'd tried to earn money, didn't I remember the eggs? But now he had TB and couldn't work (which could be true, he looked sick enough) and his wife in the village had no food (which

could also be true, food supplies are running out for subsistence farmers), and he was desperate, he hadn't eaten himself since yesterday, he had nowhere else to turn, I was his only friend in Lomé, he'd do any job I wanted, but I had to give him 3,000 francs to buy food for his wife.

This time I was going to be smart and firm. "I can't give you any more money," I said, taking advantage of the unrepaid loan, "I haven't got endless money to give away. And there's no job you can do for me that is worth 3,000 francs. But if you sweep the driveway, I'll give you some food."

No, that wouldn't do. What he had to have was money to buy yams for his wife.

"Okay, okay, sweep the driveway and I'll give you a thousand francs. That will buy three yams. If you need more, you'll have to go somewhere else."

He pushed the broom around the driveway awhile looking as though he was about to expire, and I brought him a thousand francs. "But what about the food you promised?" he whined.

Beyond words, I went upstairs, made him a sandwich, handed it over, and closed the door. Somehow this man who had no claim on me beyond previous capitulation had made me feel manipulated and mean at the same time.

When another stranger showed up at the door yesterday and said "Don't you remember me?" I was not encouraging.

"Don't you remember, I came here last September to ask for a job, and you said you didn't have a job for me, but you wished me luck. Now I've found a job and I've come to thank you for your good wishes." He gave me a card with a photograph of roses and a quotation from *Le Petit Prince,* which I recognized because I'd recently seen a stage adaptation of it at the French Cultural Center. The quotation was the "secret" the Fox tells the little prince to sum up a lesson on what creates bonds between persons: "On ne voit bien qu'avec le coeur. L'essentiel est invisible pour les yeux." We see well only with the heart. What counts is invisible to the eye.