

Gangrene I – Black Venus

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p 1-16

*Thy navel is like a round goblet,
which wanteth not liquor:
thy belly is like an heap of wheat
set about with lilies.*

THE SONG OF SOLOMON 7:2

God in heaven, here it is already the seventies and what I'm about to tell took place at the very start of the heathen holy age, in the year 1955, the year of the basalt virgin, ha, she had just turned thirteen and her nipples still jutted up and out in warm lands such things don't last long, but all four of those goddamned months slid by in a daze of artful oriental pleasure even though, miracle of miracles, all we lay on was a cot, but then of course a cot's narrow and leaves you no choice but to be intimate, enormously intimate, and thus, although we played full many a game, we did not sleep together (in the ordinary euphemistic hypocritical sense of the word) and later – with others of her race – it naturally happened that frequently no sleeping at all was done (but then in the utterly literal sense of the word), and the place where this came to pass was called Bodedemoke, which is to say Little Bodede (population: 47), a cluster of slanting huts in the shadow of the impenetrable, nearly two-hundred-feet-high rim of the forest, an unwilling virgin through which I had to make my way for six miles with the help of three hundred somewhat less than wildly enthusiastic blacks whom I did my casual best to keep hard at work, and I had, luckily, an iron trunk full of books with me so that on days when I did not hunt or when it poured I lay on my cot, naked, tense, unsure. Occasionally, when the wind suddenly sprang up, I rushed outside, sweating with terror, and gazed up at that black wall of lianas, dead limbs, leaves, mushrooms, snakes, spiders, all hooked up to something high, nearly two hundred feet high, above me and just waiting to fall and crush me as the whole thing came down in a storm while I lay by my woman as snug as a boa, and I smoked my way through entire days, drugged, amorphous, no man, and read and let myself be borne along by the sluggish hours of eating, sleeping, feeling evening coming on and thus starting to think of what games we would play when it was night. She was called Marie-Jeanne and she was very dear, playful as an antelope, and young and beautiful, oh so beautiful, and she laughed a lot and talked more and her teeth were like a flock of sheep that are evenly shorn and up from the washing and she bound her hair in pigtailed that stuck straight out like the antennae of a weather satellite and she had thick curls on her Venus-mound and firm pubic lips and cool snug buttocks under her thin cotton dress and after the first long, slow, all-embracing, world-enveloping kiss, a single greedy suck, her clitoris was a drop of quicksilver trying to elude the top of my middle finger

and after three nights she, young as she was, was a skilled partner in practices which would astonish and delight most so-called experienced, older women, and her father, a cultured quiet carpenter (named not Joseph but Cyprien) rejoiced in this relationship and instead of working on the road, as was his duty, went off hunting for his new-found son-in-law as well as for himself on occasion, and my boy Mohongu – a sly scoundrel if ever there was one – also profited from this liaison since he too promptly found himself a girl and Marie-Jeanne and Martha got along remarkably well, a singular event since the Budja proverb says that no two women are every truly fond of each other and proverbs never lie, and only rarely did the two young ladies have to be pulled apart; it never came to anything vicious or bloody, though there are always countless reasons for one woman's lighting into another, and daily the piercing screams of jealous women going at each other with their manioc scrapers echo through the Budja villages while the men watch grinning or urge the fighters on by shouting and clapping, and in the evening or around nine when the village, lit here and there by a still-glowing heap of ashes, lay still in the night, reabsorbed into the forest and its deafening sea of crickets, Marie-Jeanne, that warm weasel, slipped into the hut and I sprang out of bed and barely had time to flip my cigarette away before she embraced me passionately and "*bési*," she said, and we kissed expertly while I pulled down the panties which, among other things, I had bought for her, and she smelled very nice, like kittens, like ground almonds and sugar, and she washed herself with expensive soap and I had also bought her a set of bathtowels, wine-red with a black ivy design, in which she often paraded through the village, and while, at the start and still standing, I had to finger her off, she gave me precise instructions because she was very demanding, and "*elengi, elengi, elengi*," she said, time and again, which in all languages means delight, and when she came her knees buckled and her arms gripped me like branches and I had to lay the whimpering bundle in under the flung-open mosquito net on my cot, and while I undressed she lay staring up at me with wide eyes and when at last I lay beside her she bent over and skillfully began to lick my scrotum and to suck the tip of my penis, the Lybian slave of the Roman conqueror, and when, sometimes after an hour's pleasure and pain, I came, she came too, in shuddering waves, and afterward she was generally thirsty and I brought her white wine and she let me drink from her glass and tenderly, almost ashamedly, she asked me to do the same for her, and one night I knelt there, my hand on her buttocks, kissing, eating raw oysters, when suddenly I felt her whole body stiffen, she was no longer breathing, and I stopped and by the yellow gleam of the lantern I saw rising up steeply above me an Egyptian sculpture in dark-red basalt, cold, polished (and breathlessly I looked: the sources of Greece lie here, the Nile is the vein, I thought, and with ancient, sacred gestures I began to worship my origin), and as she – wormed close up against me, breathing like a glistening beast, clutching my penis, her weapon, in one hand – fell asleep, I lay relaxed, contentedly gazing at her, from time to time stroking her skin, which was fine as polished walnut, or sniffing her like a hound, and I was, at times overwhelmed by the thought that some day she would be old and as wrinkled as all the other shapeless, sniveling, fat women in the world and then it was as if the hand of a corpse gripped my penis and would not let go and I felt cold and had to drink whisky in order to think again as unconcernedly and superficially as usual (as always, out in the sun, dreaming of fresh conquests) and to be able to fall asleep, to shudder or pant through strange dreams and in the morning, shortly before five, when the sun was just up, she woke me by pinching my nose shut and Mohongu could tell by our talk that we were awake and with downcast eyes he brought in first a kettle of hot water, then a cop of strong coffee to prevent the day from getting off to a bad start, wished me a ritual good-morning, and vanished, and then I was soaped from head to foot by my slave, carefully rinsed, dried off and powdered, and after that she left without a word so that I could breakfast all by myself as befits a man, and every two weeks I covered the hundred miles that lay between me and headquarters in Yandongi and each time I left I had to swear on an infallible charm – a bunch of leaves – that I would not sleep with my wife and if I broke my oath I would suffer an agonizing death, and I didn't either, which is to say, didn't sleep with my wife who was, moreover, very pregnant and in that

state the act of procreation is spoiled by something unspeakably morbid, the all-too obvious association between the powerful jet of sperm and the soft fontanel of the infant's skull made me gag (Marie-Jeanne explained her own unshakeable conviction thus: white women *bazali na masoko na maimai*, a particularly cutting insult which euphemistically translated, means that they ought to wash themselves a bit more carefully in certain places, after which she would spit on the ground, a sign of the utmost contempt) and oh, after roughly a hundred and twenty days of almost unbearable joy, the hour of departure arrived and Marie-Jeanne too had undergone various important changes, for now she wore lots of nail polish, used lipstick and mascara, wore miniscule panties, Maidenform bras, expensive sandals, blouses, flowery sarongs, sunglasses, and her movements were liquid and languid and her eyes slanted and around her mouth hovered the great inner calm of La Gioconda, that eternal wanton, and as a farewell present I gave her a shiny bike with drum brakes, gears, two lights, and ribbons all over the spoked and our farewell was formal and a bit breathtaking: my darling promptly jumped on the saddle of her brand-new bike and, dinging the bell, rode waving and shrieking with glee down the hill.

And perhaps in those days I took to heart the words of *Proverbs 5:20*: "And why wilt thou, my son, be ravished with a strange woman, and embrace the bosom of a stranger?" except that it wasn't nearly as romantic as that, the cause for my stupefying fidelity to my wife having been one of my visits to my esoteric, erudite friend who lived in the cloudland of science, Dr. Clément, the only person within a radius of some hundred and twenty miles who possessed any culture since, in that respect, the Congo was not much better than the motherland, and after hours of talk devoted to astrology and kindred sciences he let drop the fact – without, I know, any ulterior motive, since he took me to be as civilized as he himself was – that there was an incredible amount of syphilis in my district, and there are only two things that really terrify me in this world, namely, being burned alive and catching syphilis, the mere thought of the grim word "syph" and a chill skids down to my kidneys, and if my balls felt ready to burst I would dutifully discharge some seed somewhere or other in the marital bed, but aside from this I lived as chaste as a monk or an archangel, which is saying a lot, but it came to pass in those days that my spouse was absent for a few weeks, no doubt in connection with her ovaries as always, and that one evening in March 1955 when I took a shower the towel hung there after I had dried myself off – a phallic symbol if ever there was one – and since I find jerking off in a land like the Congo worse than casting pearls before swine I said at supper to Mohongu, who always served like an English butler when we were at headquarters, that I would like to see Orderly Epapa who, besides being an orderly, was also a magician, moonshiner, and crook, all of which also enabled him to accept dowries for his marriageable daughter three times over from the hands of the various fathers-in-law, and no wonder, because Epapa was after all one of those rare magicians who can call down the lightning whenever and wherever they wish, and I came right out and told him that I wanted a woman for the night and Epapa nodded that he understood, and when I said she should be young, beautiful, pleasant, and free of lice and the itch he looked crestfallen, clapped his hands over his heart and said had he not served the state for forty-two years and could I not therefore trust him to come up with the very girl of my dreams? But it was rather late in the day to look very far, he added, fingering one ear, and there's a cousin of mine on the mother's side of the family who's otherwise very attractive and, besides, she goes to the mission school where the nuns are teaching her how to read and sew and the like but the nuns are so awfully strict that I don't see much hope there except during vacation but for tonight I'll fix you up with another, not nearly so well-educated but more experienced in other areas and a fine strapping girl too, well-built, sound, in a word a gem, and with that he made an about-face and vanished, and I looked to see if I had any cold beer on hand, set out the glasses, brushed my teeth, waited, and after a quarter of an hour I hear a cough out on the veranda, Epapa shoves the girl into the room, she stumbles in giggling, holding a piece of her sarong in front of her mouth, and by God if it wasn't Monica, one of his many marriageable daughters, a real workhorse or a whore who,

whenever I was staying at headquarters, paraded past my office in her high heels and gaudy turban and always flashed me the same conspicuously friendly smile, and I knew she'd had almost as many abortions as she'd had white, black, and half-breed clients, but then a starling must do if you can't have a thrush and thus I decided to go through with it after all and cheerfully asked her in broad lingala (she giggling at first, then suddenly silent, staring uneasily at the armchairs, the flowery pillows, the carpet) if my dearest would come over to the government white man, and she let her butt be pinched but, above all, the fact that I had an erection seemed to please her, the beer foamed up in our glasses and we clinked, she belched and suddenly asked, alarmed, if "madame" were at home and I laughingly told her where madame was (in the municipal hospital a hundred and fifty miles away), which seemed to relieve her, and after the third glass she at last loosened up and did nothing but snicker, rustle, roll her eyes, and rearrange her sarong and I stroked the inside of her thigh and she spread her legs and started to knead my penis until the tears came to my eyes and after three bottles she was completely at her ease among the flowery pillows and she stood up to remove the traditional loincloth herself, then pulled and pushed everything back in place and after the fourth bottle she asked if she could pee somewhere and I let her out into the yard where she promptly squatted and pissed unbelievably long and strong on the gravel and when she came back in I asked if she would like a glass of something really strong but no, she wouldn't, and, well then, maybe we'd better get down to doing what she'd come for, and in the bedroom she stared suspiciously at the huge bed, the white sheets, and the wardrobe and when I had pulled the drapes shut and was starting to undress, her sarong slid down off her body as the cloth off a statue at the unveiling and she stood there stark naked, solidly built, a bit heavy like an Olympic swimmer, with big breasts and a splendid triangle, the daughter of an ancient race of fearless hunters and warriors, and when I dropped my shorts she screamed "*leieie*" and, snickering, clapped a hand to her mouth, and I jumped into bed and she scraped her feet on the floor a couple of times like a dog that's just done its duty and once she was in bed too she went right after it, shoved it inside between thumb and forefinger and starting bucking under me like mad, and when I asked her if I should stop – because frankly I was alarmed – she quickly nodded no, and when I ejaculated like a bull she grunted but went right on pumping away like a steam engine, and when I could do nothing more she dried everything off with her sarong with the casual expertise of a housewife drying the dishes, then shoved in as much of the sarong as would fit and lay perfectly still and what didn't fit in stuck up like a napkin tucked into a wineglass, and she asked if I was tired and casually spat over the side of the cot on the floor, and beast, I thought, hot bitch of the woods, I'll mount you like an Arabian stud all night long, I'll stick a razor-sharp knife in your knee till you scream and struggle and fight for your life because I felt destroy-destroy-everything-I-can-lay-hands-on-destroy welling up in me, as unbearable as hate or tenderness, and she smelled of wood-ash, a wild scent compounded of earth, fire and air which suddenly roused me and she could feel it, she pulled the wad out and it started again and she grunted just like the first time and jolted and bucked and I hunted for her clitoris but it seemed to have vanished and when I fingered the usual place she didn't react and it was the same all over again: limp, out, dry off, wad in, silence, spit, and "are you tired?" with a sigh, and I asked her where her *anzenze*, the native word for clitoris, was, looking away she said it had been cut out, as the Gwaka custom requires, and she asked did I want to smoke hemp, since that made men indefatigable, or did I want to try it a different way, and I asked how and she flung her legs over my shoulders and crossed her ankles and I asked if that gave her more pleasure and she said I should go in as deep as I could, all the way in to the place "as thick as two cola nuts," and she asked if she could go outside to pee again and I in my shorts and she stark naked went through the living room where it stank of monkeys and once again, outside, a gush that lasted more than a minute and I said: "You're just like the okapi, he holds it in for seven days and then stands there defenseless for a full ten minutes and the pygmies wait for that time to *gbâââ* and cut him down," but she didn't even seem to hear me and we started up in bed again and it was the same thing all over again: "Tired?" and I: "Excite me," and she started pulling and squeezing me as if she were

milking a cow and I cursed with the pain and “You whites are awfully soft, our men love a strong hand,” she said and I furiously replied that I was no goddamn native and was ready to throw her out but instead I slapped her and grabbed her so tight she had to pant for breath and, flip, she cheerfully wrapped her legs around my neck, I rammed it home like a black man and this time instead of bucking again she began to sigh and to twirl her butt and I went in very deep and the throat of her uterus slipped back and forth over my foreskin and we worked and pumped and sweated like horses and then she suddenly started to hiss like a pressure cooker, she screamed “*nègwi, nègwi!*” farted and fell still and I came like a pump and it was if I shot whipped egg-white and she mumbled all sorts of incomprehensible monosyllabic sounds, Ngwaka, and forgot to dry me off, just stuffed the wad in and let me drop off, and after I’d dizzily dried off my chest I went to the bathroom, staggered into the living room, and started drinking cognac out of the bottle until I’d put enough away to sleep like a beast, a king, and when the bugler woke me at half-past five the place beside me was empty and where she had lain it looked as if somebody had emptied a bottle of olive oil, I nearly vomited, and when Mohongu brought my coffee into the bedroom, where I stood shaving with a caved-in face, I chased him out, nauseated by the sight of his black skin.

And this convulsive repulsion at being initiated into the mysteries of heathen mating lasted until the high festival of Maundy Thursday since on that day Yandongi station teemed with well-fed, brushed-and-scrubbed mission girls dressed in sky blue, the color of the school run by the venerable sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary, and I asked Epapa how things stood with his lovely, lettered niece on the mother’s side of his family because after that wild night with his daughter Monica I had not touched a single woman and besides she had run off with some man or other, and Epapa hesitated, because in spite of all he would much rather have trotted out Monica for reasons of prestige and for many other reasons as well, but I said that tomorrow was the day we were to start taking a census of the canton and that we would, in fact, be starting with the village in which his niece lived, and Epapa, being an orderly of the old school – i.e., as obedient as a corpse and a dutiful busybody to boot – set his personal preferences aside and promptly set to work and an hour later he was already on his way with twenty prisoners on a rope, five policemen, and he himself on his bike, his fez cocked jauntily over one ear, an impressive rifle tied onto the frame, Epapa-the-Government-Orderly who would turn the whole village of Yamisakolo upside down in no time at all, you could bet your life on it, but my wife raised objections on matters of moral principle, because it was almost Easter and the paschal lamb had to be roasted over the fire and this must be done, according to tradition, within the confines of the family circle and with soft-boiled eggs and flowers on the table and high mass + a lavish midday dinner with all the trappings of a feast, but, alas, I have no stomach for such collective celebrations, on Sundays I’m only too glad to run around looking like a bum and the only time that caviar and champagne taste good to me is when I know that everyone else is busily slaving away at the day’s business, and thus I eagerly set out for Yamisakolo and there everything was as it should be: Epapa stiff as a ramrod, the police, the prisoners, the notables, and the village heads all formed up in ranks, and, behind them, the so-called complete population lined up in front of the table where the clerk sat hard at work with his spindle-cards, and after the ritual breaking of the cola nuts I sat down beside the clerk and burned with impatience to lay eyes on the civilized daughter of the Sacred Heart of Mary (Epapa had already told me that everything had been arranged) and in the evening he came to tell me that she would come to me “in the dead of night” because it all had to be kept hush-hush, if the mission got wind of it there would be hell to pay and, besides, the village catechist was not to be trusted, and, Epapa whispered to me, the catechist was a sneaky telltale, a spy for the father superior of the mission, but that he wouldn’t dare try anything in *our* case because he ran a flourishing still of his own and was making a pretty penny out of it too (yet I knew that Epapa, as an open-and-aboveboard magician, couldn’t stand “the men in women’s clothes” whom he justly regarded as unscrupulous competitors, and that he habitually blamed all administrative difficulties on the

Catholic missions), and that evening I had fallen asleep on my cot with a book on my stomach and the Coleman was sputtering out when I was jolted awake by a knock on the door and “*Ingila*,” I called out, it was already one and Epapa came in leading by the hand a girl dressed in a light-blue uniform, and I recognized the stamp of all mission schools: the tight, glistening skin; thick legs; no calluses on the heels; a shaved head; two stout breasts under the rather close-fitting dress, a metal cross on a string, and she stood there, her eyes downcast, obviously ill at ease (not much over fifteen), and I gave Epapa a bottle of beer which he tucked under his arm and then he started to explain things to the girl in Budja, concluding his lecture with a stern shake of his index finger, and when we were alone at last she still just stood there in the middle of the room, looking down at her toes, I took her chin in my hand, she looked up, smiled and sighed – “Hello” – she lifted her eyebrows in reply – “What’s your name?” – “Thérèse, *missië*” (almost in-audible) – “Would you like a beer?” – no – “A cookie?” – a cookie, yes, and after every other word a polite “*missié*,” and she nibbled like a mouse, unusually dainty for a black girl (culture’s been stood on its head, I thought, how sweet she is), she took another cookie but politely declined a third with a “*merci, missië*” and, faced with such fine manners, one is left powerless, I didn’t have a clue as to how to proceed and just then, without a blush, she said: “When are we going to bed, *missië*?” and I thought: goddamn, the sky-blue little whorelet, so the Virgin finally loses out! and I embraced her but she resisted in the manner of all frightened, repressed, Christian women and said: “Only *sleeping* is permitted, nothing else, *missië*” (with something like panic in her eyes) and I thought: and now she’s going to play the refined little bitch as well, what’s this holy virgin going to spring on me next, and I unbuttoned my shirt and “Would you please put it out?” she said, pointing to the Coleman – “But then we won’t be able to see a thing!” – “If you want me to lie with you...” – and I could clearly hear the French turn she gave her phrases (she also spoke a school dialect with *mwa* and *ya*), goddamn, I furiously turned out the Coleman and took off everything except my undershorts and she slipped in beside me naked as an eel and put her arms around my neck and right off I had an erection because she was a real woman but when I tried to feel her cunt she grabbed my hand – “That’s not allowed, *missië*” – “And why not?” – “I confessed for Easter, I’ve got to go to communion on Sunday and I have to be in a state of grace...”

Totally baffled, I sat up.

I: But lying naked in bed with a man, that’s allowed?

She: Just to *do* it, *missié*, but nothing else.

I: So *doing* it is all right?

She: Yes, *missié*.

I: Who said so?

She: Father superior at the Yambuku mission, *missié*.

I: He said you could go to bed with a man?

She: He hasn’t talked about that yet, *missié*.

I: Then what *is* forbidden?

She: Being touched in forbidden places, *missié*.

I: And if somebody touches you there anyway?

She: Then one cannot go to communion, *missié*.

I: Have you ever slept with a man?

She: Yes, *missié*.

I: Often?

She: Not very often, *missié*.

I: Have you ever slept with a white man before?

She: Oh no, *missié*!

I: And if you go to communion anyway after you’ve been touched in forbidden places?

She: Then we would go to hell, *missié*.

I: We? Me, too?

She: Yes, *missié*.

I: But going inside isn't?

She: With the prick it's permitted, *missié*.

I: Hahaha, and if I do it anyway – with my hand, I mean?

She: Then I would have to confess again, *missié*.

I: To Whom?

She: To our father superior, *missié*.

I: And what would you tell him?

She: That you touched me there with your hand, *missié*.

Stunned, I lay down again because I knew the father superior well enough to see the dangers that lay ahead – he was a man capable of doing the weirdest things for the sake of his faith, especially where chastity was concerned – but all at once she pressed her face against my chest and clasped me tight – “Come, *missié*” – she had firm breasts and splendid skin and I shoved down my shorts with one hand and the Turkish erection unfolded, which is to say three or four wobbles and bang! and without holding out much hope I asked when she'd bled last – “I don't know, *missié*” – “Long ago?” – “—” – “This week?” – “—” – “Sweet girl” – and she began to wriggle her hips and I lifted myself and she slid under me and her cunt was narrow, muscular, oily, but suddenly I had to pull out and I came and she didn't move and I tucked the towel between her legs and shamefacedly squeezed my penis and she still didn't move, all I could hear was her tranquil breathing – “When do you leave to celebrate Easter?” – “Saturday, *missié*” – “Tomorrow then?” – “The day after tomorrow, *missié*” – “It's already Friday, it's half-past one” – “Yes, *missié*” – “Excuse me a minute, I'll be right back” – and I hunted around for my shorts in the dark and when I'd pulled them on I clicked on my flashlight and she lay below me looking up at the mosquito net, the sheet pulled up over her breasts, her dress neatly folded on the chair, and I went to the shower cubicle, laid the flashlight on the chair, poured water from the bucket into the wash basin, soaped my crotch, rinsed it all off and pissed pensively into the drain, squeezed once more but nothing more came and I suddenly thought about the permitted prick and the forbidden hand and burst out into uncontrollable laughter – “Another cookie, dear?” – “No, *merci, missié*” – and took the bag of cookies into bed with me and started eating.

I: So, Thérèse, my darling, you're going to slaughter the lamb in the great mission post of Yambuku.

She: Whatsay, *missié*?

I: So tomorrow you're going off to Yambuku?

She: Yes, *missié*.

I: And if they find out at the mission that you've been to bed with the assistant regional gouvernor?

She: I'll leave when it's over there, *missié*, and there'll be no palaver.

I: What can I give you?

She: Whatever you want, *missié*.

I: A dress with a head scarf and a pair of bracelets?

She: I'd rather have money, *missié*.

I crumpled the cookie bag into a ball, tossed it out into the room and once again slid under the blanket (my coy mistress, I thought) but a second later she hugged me again as if I'd pressed a button, she sighed deeply when I thrust into her and this time it lasted longer and when I pulled out and it all ran into the towel I said, overcome by a peculiar tenderness: “My dear little nibbler, my mousey...” and pressed my nose between her breasts, it was pitch-dark but she was lying with her eyes wide open, staring, and my back was dripping with sweat, it was all very sad.

She: Isn't it day yet, *missié*?

I: The lying cock has yet to crow, Thérèse.

She: No, *missié*, Uncle Epapa told me to be very sure that the catechist doesn't see.