

# LA VIE ABATI

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A BORED POLITICAL OFFICER IN A WEST AFRICAN BACKWATER VOLUNTEERS TO INVESTIGATE A REGIONAL PROBLEM AND, ULTIMATELY, LEARNS A THING OR TWO.

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BY HANSCOM SMITH

**T**he mud-brick room somehow smelled of lavender and mothballs. Cole's relief at escaping the blazing Sahelian afternoon only partially offset his frustration at another unexplained delay. His driver, Mr. Oumarou, had taken the sputtering Land Cruiser to ... to wherever vehicles are repaired in the West African desert.

Almost as an afterthought, Cole was left to an indefinite wait. He tried not to think of the relative comfort of the provincial capital's frayed Hotel Sofitel, over three hours away by rutted dirt piste: air conditioning and satellite television, cold beer chilling serenely in the minibar.

Cole's eyes adjusted to the shadows of the forlorn village restaurant. He'd be lucky to find a warm bottle of Coke here. The few rickety tables were bereft of settings. The entire back wall was fronted by a wooden bar, although any alcohol to be had was apparently kept out of sight. Cole

installed himself on a stool and waited for someone to emerge from the door behind the bar. As if to taunt him with his unraveling schedule, the electric timepiece watching over the room captured Cole's gaze.

The clock advertised Abati, the ubiquitous national brew hawked with the slogan: "La vie Abati. On vous attend." *The Abati life: We're waiting for you.* On billboards, the slogan complemented beguiling spreads of slick professionals relaxing in nightclubs or lounging on beaches. Here, the words seemed surreal as they beamed their promise to the dull earthen walls.



Cole was surprised by the quiet appearance of a woman behind the bar, and even more startled that she was Asian.

"Bonjour, monsieur." Her French was heavily accented.

Taking his cue from the clock, Cole asked for an Abati and was relieved when the woman swiftly produced a frosted brown bottle. She looked to be in her 40s, and was dressed modestly in a jacket and trousers made of faded local fabric, the vibrant prints now dulled to muddy red, green and brown. Lank hair was gathered at the nape of her neck. The woman was striking only by her very presence, presiding calmly over this mudhole of a saloon.

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Cole pulled on his beer and smiled. He produced a cigarette and left it poised briefly on his lips. When the woman made no display of furnishing a light, he fumbled for matches and did it himself, exhaling impatience in a torrent of smoke.

"Your vehicle is being repaired, no?" she said.

Cole decided not to be aghast that she already knew of the limping Land Cruiser. The smaller the village, the faster everyone seemed to have the news. His reporting instincts stirred.

"Yes, we're hoping to have repairs done so we can get back to the city by sunset. I'm from the American embassy, visiting a few of the Lutheran missions."

Cole didn't mention the other reason for his desert foray. The local ridwan, or clan chieftain, had been terrorizing the region for weeks. Shedding even the pretense of operating under central government control, his forces were commandeering commercial convoys, raiding private houses and, reportedly, even detaining villagers in private jails. Although none of the area's smattering of Americans had been affected, the embassy was worried by the implications of eroding government control.

Eager to break the routine of a JO political tour in a West African backwater, Cole had volunteered to investigate. After three days of notary services, tedious meetings with local officials and diarrhea, however, he was chafing to go home. No one seemed to know anything about the ridwan. Or, more likely, no one was foolhardy enough to talk. Even the missionaries changed the subject when he broached the issue.

"Are there any security problems I should worry about when we drive back to the city?" he asked.

"Everything is good here." The woman grinned in a way Cole found almost foolish.

"How long have you lived in the

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area?" Cole opted for an indirect tack.

"My husband brought me here three years ago, when we married. I am from Korea." A readiness for conversation seemed stymied by the woman's meager French. She stared at Cole earnestly.

He considered a barrage of questions: Why did you leave Korea for this mud-brick purgatory? How can you possibly be happy here? Can you tell me where to find some information about the ridwan so I can finish my work and get back to the capital?

He snuffed out his cigarette. He could hear the dull hum of the clock behind the bar. "Do you have any children?" he asked.

"I have no children. My husband found me this place. This is my work."

Cole tried to imagine local shepherds and shopkeepers at the empty tables, nursing Abatis beneath the Korean's benign gaze. He attempted to conjure a vision of her husband, and came up blank. Perhaps they met online, he mused, barely suppressing a smirk.

"Do you ever get homesick? Can you cook Korean food here?" His questions made her smile even brighter. The woman touched her forehead.

"My home is here. I know how to make Korean food. I do not need to eat it." Cole tried to steer the dis-

cussion toward the ridwan. He thought he remembered that Christianity is common in Korea.

"Have you met any of the Americans at the Lutheran missions? They tell me the ridwan's men have been very active lately. Do the foreigners have a way of contacting each other if there's a problem?"

Only yesterday, the ridwan's forces had stopped and briefly detained a Scandinavian missionary convoy, and Cole was trying to track rumors that some of the missionaries had been physically attacked. He had a hard time picturing his new friend chatting with the doughty Minnesotans at the Lutheran mission, tucking into a casserole and borrowing tattered copies of *Ladies' Home Journal*.

"My husband is from this region. I see his family. There are few foreigners here. I do not know them."

The hands on the Abati clock approached 4:00. As if responding to his gaze, the woman produced another brown bottle. Cole welcomed the fresh beer, even as he grew increasingly anxious about getting back to the provincial capital before dark. Where was Oumarou? Were there no other patrons? Perhaps the woman was a lousy cook. He laughed under his breath, and decided on a direct approach.

"You must have heard about all the attacks by the ridwan's forces. Some Scandinavian missionaries were stopped yesterday. It is becoming dangerous here." He lit another cigarette and waited for the woman to speak.

"I am safe here. The ridwan protects us." After a pause, she added: "The American embassy is concerned about our security."

Cole could not tell if the sentence was a question or an observation. Beer, heat and dehydration were conspiring to make him feel lightheaded. The clock seemed to glow. His mind drifted to the Abati billboards in the

capital ... lush beaches and chic night-clubs. *On vous attend.* He emptied the second bottle.

"All I can say is" — and as he spoke he knew his tone sounded more ominous than he intended — "the ridwan should be careful. If anything happens to an American, then we'll get involved."

Of course the embassy would have to get involved if anything happened to an Amcit, he thought. But Cole had no idea what the embassy might actually do about the ridwan. He had another sudden overpowering longing to be in the Sofitel. Air conditioning, a drink with ice, a room-service club sandwich and, maybe, another Abati ...

The Korean woman watched Cole intently, a flickering smile still playing across her lips. He hesitated to meet her gaze and instead found himself staring at the tired print on her jacket. He quickly shifted his eyes to the clock above her head. Nearly 4:30. If Oumaru returned now, there might barely be enough time to make it to the hotel by dark.

"You are staying at the Sofitel."

Again, Cole could not discern if this was a question or a statement. He was considering going out to look for Oumaru when another Abati appeared before him on the bar.

"No, please. No thank you," he stammered as what looked like disappointment registered on the woman's face. Fear of boredom must have made her so quick on the trigger, Cole decided, and out of pity he tried to revive the conversation. "Where are you from in Korea?"

"Pyongyang," she replied artlessly.

Cole took a gulp of the beer. As if magically aware that he was needed, Oumaru arrived to announce that the Land Cruiser was repaired and ready to complete the day's journey. Cole dropped some crumpled bills on the bar and affected a careless demeanor as he walked toward the door. In her

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composed but rudimentary French, the woman wished him a safe journey.

"We will wait for you," she added as Cole followed his driver out the door. My God, he thought, did she learn her French by parroting ad campaigns?

Cole turned and saw the Korean's absurdly grinning face. Against the somber mud brick, it appeared suspended between the bar and the clock.



The normally garrulous Oumaru was unusually subdued, which was just as well. Cole felt no need to mention that he'd been discussing their trip with a North Korean bartender. As the Land Cruiser sped down the narrow road into gathering twilight, Oumaru began to share his own intelligence. Cole was faintly embarrassed to find that he had gleaned more information on the ridwan's activities than Cole himself.

Understandably, the spate of roadside ambushes by the ridwan's men made Oumaru especially uneasy. Stories of violence against the Scandinavian missionaries were apparently more than just rumors. Cole nervously ran his fingers up and down the taut seat belt as he tried to con-

centrate on the lavish dinner he would soon enjoy at the hotel. Oumaru was studiously vague on the question, but Cole knew they would make the last part of the journey in the dark.

The Land Cruiser rounded a corner into a small cluster of buildings, the last hamlet before an unpopulated stretch of the trail led to the provincial capital, still nearly an hour away. A final sliver of sun doused the horizon. Cole could faintly make out a battered roadside billboard. "La vie Abati. On vous attend."

Oumaru finished recounting what he had learned around town and clenched the steering wheel with atypical ardor. After a long pause, he stole an expectant glance at Cole.

"So, monsieur, what did you learn from the ridwan's wife?" ■

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