

Dana De Greff

Spanish Guinea, 1938-1939

Spain's most urgent need during the years of the civil war was food. Not cigarettes, not arms, not morale, but food. In those years, flour was mixed with tomato juice to create a stew into which organs, bones, and leftovers were thrown. If it was a special occasion, the stew might be seasoned with paprika or saffron. Animal fat was no longer saved for slow processing and delicacies such as *foie gras*, but cut off in slabs and tossed into *caldos*, or breaded and fried in watered-down palm oil. Before 1938, most Spaniards, including Major Almendra, wouldn't know where to locate Spanish Guinea on a map. Now he was headed toward that country, assigned to oversee cacao production of a plantation owned by a certain Don Guillermo of Madrid, on the small island of Matapa.

On the plane he read through the packet that had been hastily assembled, pieced together with information by some professor on the crop's characteristics, growth patterns, and complexities. A few pages in, the Major grew dizzy and shifted his body toward the window; the ocean's dark waters stretched on and on like spilt ink, dotted here and there by iceberg-shaped islands. He checked a map, hoping to land soon, to escape the steel and metal trap—it was difficult to be in closed spaces, it was rare that his nails did not throb with the memory of his stupidity, of what had sent him to Guinea with only two fingers on his left hand. There had been questions before the amputations:

Are you an atheist?

No.

Are you a homosexual?

No.

Are you an anarchist?

No.

Are you a Communist?

No.

Pliers appeared, rusted and marked with someone else's blood.

Why would you run then, ¿maricón de mierda?

I don't know.

Are you against Franco?

No.

¿Y la madre patria?

I would die for the madre patria.

Three comrades stepped close. One pushed him to his knees, one grabbed his left arm, one grabbed his right. The comrade with the pliers clutched the index finger on the left hand. It's not that they didn't believe him, they said. But just in case, because you never really know, they agreed that his unfortunate mistake should serve as a lesson. His finger was squeezed, the lips of the plier clamped down, a sharp *navaja* was unsheathed, bone was sawed. A biting, digging, hot and cold pain, pass out pain, but somehow he remained conscious through it all. Next, the ring finger and lastly, the pinkie. They left his thumb and middle fingers whole, his left hand forever in the form of a pistol.

The plane shuddered, announcing descent, and the Major stuffed the papers into his case, which contained the bare minimum: shirts, pants, underclothes, toothbrush, razor, a few books, and a photograph of his wife. His gun had been confiscated, another dark joke; he was expected to oversee a plantation without the proper means to defend himself. As the pilot steered the plane lower, the Major removed his jacket and unbuttoned his collar. The bored-looking stewardess sighed and flipped through a newspaper. The second they landed, she jumped out of her chair and opened the door.

“*Que vaya con dios,*” she called over her shoulder.

The Major waited a moment with his case in his lap, but when the door to the cockpit remained shut, he walked to the door. A thick whip of tropical air struck his face and torso, forcing his mouth to open and tongue to wag like a dog's. Across the airstrip, a small, stocky man sat perched atop the hood of beige car fringed with rust.

“*Señor Almendra?*”

The Major waved in confirmation and the man trotted over. Before extending his hand in salute, he wiped his forehead with a white rag.

“*Señor Almendra,*” he repeated. “Let me take your trunk. Please, follow me to the automobile.”

No more than a minute passed between the walk from plane to car, yet the Major's face and neck were covered with the balmy morning like a wet, lace cloth.

“*Vaya calor,*” he said.

“Sorry, señor?”

“You don't speak Spanish?”

“I can, but my English is better. Unless you want to speak French?”

The Major shook his head and Maele peered at him with concern. “You are quite late. I was concerned something had happened.”

“I could not control the plane,” he replied. “Who are you?”

“Ah, yes, *señor*, I am Maele. I work for Don Guillermo. Please, get in the car.” With the case balanced on his head, Maele opened the back door. Behind them, and on either side of the airstrip, long, yellow grass grew in uneven clumps, crackling softly against one another in the breeze.

The Major climbed inside and rolled down both windows then rolled up his sleeves and pulled out a handkerchief to blot underneath his eyes. All he could think about was taking off his shoes and shirt, taking off his wedding ring which dug between knuckle and stump. Maele drove the car away from the grasses, headed for a group of green volcanoes in the distance.

“Where are you from?” Maele called over the wind.

“Palacios de la Sierra. Are you from here?”

“No, *señor*. I’m from Nigeria. I needed work.”

“What does everyone else speak?”

“It’s mixed up. Spanish, French, Bioko. Other tribal languages. We’re all messed up here.” He laughed. “It’s a different world. We’re cut off. Used to be part of Cameroon, but this part got sliced away when the sea level rose many years ago.”

The car slowed and Maele detoured onto a wide path covered with small rocks; with one hand he turned the wheel and with the other he rolled up the window. They jostled from side to side for a few minutes, breathing in a grainy, orange colored dust that crept in through the holes and cracks, along with the occasional mosquito. As if on an impulsive whim, the path abruptly smoothed and the dust dropped like a curtain, revealing kilometers and kilometers of cacao trees, heavy with fruit, stretching as far as the sea, and headed for the volcanoes. All was green; the bark was green, the dirt green, the water green, the fruit green, and the Major thought of Lorca: *verde que te quiero verde*. Maele stalled the car in front of a group of workers guarded by two uniformed men, their fingers tapping and flicking against their rifles.

“We need help,” Maele said. “The cacao needs care, spraying, trimming. The weeds are taking over. We have the machetes, but not enough workers.”

“Why doesn’t Don Guillermo hire more?”

“Ah, sir, I cannot say.”

The uniformed men bent over and peered into the windows. Once they saw that there was a white man in the car, they stiffened and saluted. The Major nodded and looked past them, wondering if the volcanoes were dormant or not.

“We’ll take a shortcut through the village.” Maele reversed and cut away from the men, negotiating the car to a small square which seemed abandoned. At the sound of the tires, a rush of children and dogs appeared, running after the car, waving and screaming. The car, followed by the children and dogs, passed houses with clay walls and tin roofs, passed

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trash burning in large piles next to banana trees, passed cats with patches of pink skin gaping through crusted fur. The children ran without shoes, held onto the door handles, the side mirrors, the bumper; they ran frantically, their heads back, chins thrust skyward. Maele tapped the horn once, twice, three times, and was met with a wave of high-pitched cheering.

It was August and the heat hung heavy, swelling the Major's fingers and stumps. By contrast, all of the men and women they passed bore no semblance of discomfort—life on the island kept their buttons unfastened, shoes unlaced, hair shorn to the scalp, and they fanned themselves with open palms, half-heartedly, as they stood under leaves as big as a human head. The shades of green on the island were those of fairytales—emerald, midnight, jade, harlequin, and India.

"We are coming up to the house." Maele parked under a tin awning and stretched his legs before balancing the trunk on his head. It was an old house and weather-whipped; white paint peeled and cracked along the edges of a long porch and many of the columns had holes punched through them. The wooden planks were unsanded and some were simply torn out, crooked nails protruding dangerously. From the outside, the house looked sunken and dejected, as if it knew repairs were needed but had lost the heart to even care.

"The Don should be waiting in the patio," said Maele, pointing down a long hallway beyond the door. He led them quickly through a sudden darkness, heavy with the scent of peanuts and mold, to an open patio full of sunlight. Modeled after Moorish architecture, it looked to have been taken straight out of the Alhambra in Granada with its red, blue, and green *azulejos*, hand painted floor, immaculate carvings in marble, and a slow dripping water fountain in the center. Most of the flowers and plants had a rich, velvet quality, leaves and petals spread open, buds of fuchsia and violet exposed. It was a space in which iced fruit juices and platters of mango, dates, and *marcona* almonds soaked in olive oil passed from jeweled hand to jeweled hand.

"Are you thirsty?" Maele asked. "I will call Buika." He hurried away and the Major discovered a gilded cage in one corner of the garden full of wild, grey African parrots. In another corner was a red silk pillow, indented, as if someone had recently meditated. Each flower begged to be smelled and each had an impossibly exquisite and yet recognizable scent—like moss underneath a cliff, the nape of a new lover, the sheets on a mother's bed. A

door slammed and a young woman appeared at the base of a wooden staircase on the other side of the room, a detail the Major had skimmed over. The woman wore a blue housedress, her thick hair held back with a braided cloth, accentuating a skin the color of roasted groundnuts. She held up a pitcher.

“Water,” she offered.

“Yes, I—”

“The stalks say trespass against us!” A fat bellied, golden skinned, white-haired man in a linen suit interrupted. As he descended the rickety stairs he gave a flimsy salute. “And they look like these men, thirsty! They grow to lethal lengths, they wilt down, they scratch our legs!”

“Don Guillermo?”

“*Hombre*, don’t look so surprised.” The Don sandwiched the Major’s bad hand in both of his large, sticky palms. “Come, come, none of this water; let us have a real drink. Buika, rum and ice!” He squinted at the Major’s hand for a second, raised his eyebrows, then dropped it, and pulled out a cigar. Inhaling deeply, he collapsed into a cushioned chair and winked at the Major, who lowered himself onto a wicker chair.

“So, how do you like my house?” he said between puffs.

“Very nice. Impressive size.”

The Don grunted then stayed silent until Buika returned with a bottle of *Brugal* and a plate of cheese. He helped himself to a tapa, then prepared another and finished off a glass of rum.

“*Ron y queso manchego* . . . some things we just do better, eh?”

The Major shrugged. He did not like the Don’s loud voice and sweaty face; the man was a glutton, lucky to have deep pockets and lucky to have invested in cacao before the war.

“*Por la patria. iPor cacao!*” the Don shouted, blowing a black stream of smoke into the air. “*i Viva España!*” He let out a cough thick with phlegm. “*Compadre*,” he spat, “what exactly are you to do on my plantation, if I may ask?”

The Major tasted the rum. “I am here to improve productivity.”

“Well, to be honest, we’ve been productive,” the Don said. “Quite productive. But, I suppose Franco, or Spain, needs a little bit more.” He drank and touched his glass to his heart. “I understand, of course. Of course! Who doesn’t need a little more?”

He stood up and went to a window, pointing toward the fields. “There are piles of cacao waiting to be shipped and flown. Thousands waiting to be picked. I am working my men, but they are dying. We need more.” He spun around. “We need more to cut, to chop, to sort, to dry those blessed beans of their blood and the earth.”

“So we need more men. I will take care of it,” the Major said.

The Don pursed his lips. “Maybe. Yes, maybe you can do that, but can you end the drought?”

The Major reached for a piece of cheese. “I can pray.”

The Don frowned. “*Hombre*, what the hell happened to that hand?”

Startled, the Major eyed the half-eaten cheese in his bad hand. He often forgot that three fingers were missing, for he still felt arthritis in the joints, still felt a throbbing life in the phantom limbs. A creaking of floorboards from overhead sounded and the Don instantly forgot his question.

"Unfortunately, I have business to attend to. We'll discuss details later." He poured one more glass of rum before mounting the stairs, two at a time, like a little boy.

Swiftly, as soon as the Don was out of sight, Maele stepped out from the shadows.

"Should you like a nap, sir?" he asked. A piece of furniture knocked over upstairs, followed by laughter and a hungry moan.

"No. I would like a tour," the Major said, slipping his hands into his pockets.

"A glass of water?" Buika materialized behind him, close, but out of arm's reach.

"She cooks and cleans," Maele stated. "You need anything in the house, you ask her."

Buika remained expressionless, holding out the glass.

"Yes, well, nothing now," the Major said. Buika nodded and threw the contents into a pot of African violets before vanishing into the pitch-black hallway.

In the fields, the sun meted out a beating that was overwhelming and brilliant. All was still except for the leaves, which occasionally shook if a strong sea breeze picked up. The Major had been informed that the summer season would be thick with Matapa bees, a particularly large species with iridescent, green wings, each the size of a grown man's fingernail; he could expect to see them buzzing in cloudlike formations, glinting like shards of crystal.

Maele led the Major over to one of the trees and pulled off a pod the color of roasted corn from the trunk.

"The problem is the seed," he muttered. Crouching down, he smashed the pod over a rock. "Look sir, the seeds are flaky, ashy colored. They should be pulpy, moist." He threw the fruit away and ran his hand along the trunk. "And there are not many flowers. Without flowers, no pollination. It is late in the afternoon, and not a bee in sight."

"And of course, without pollination, less fruit," the Major said.

"Yes, sir. Much less." Maele pinched a bit of dirt between his fingers and placed it in his mouth, chewing, then spitting it out. "Too dry," he said, shaking his head.

"Well, what do we need to do, then? This can't be the first drought ever in Matapa."

"Yes." Maele held up a fist. "One: rain. Two: pollinators. Three: workers to cut down the fruit. Start with that, and life is better. But rain is hard to ask for. We have been trying..."

"Not trying hard enough!" A shrill voice rang out and both men turned

to see an older woman with thick blond hair piled on top of her head marching their way. She wore a white button-up shirt, linen pants, and knee-high rubber boots. Though her cheeks were pock marked and her eyebrows nonexistent, she was an attractive woman.

“Maele knows about the problems, but he can’t fix them all himself,” she said, touching his neck with her fingertips. She turned to the Major and leaned in close. “I am Sofia,” she said.

He kissed her on both cheeks. “I am Major Almendra.”

“Ah yes, our new officer.” She looked him up and down, a satisfied smile on her face. “As you can see, Maele is the real one in charge around here. Lovable as the Don is, he’s *un cabrón de mierda* when it comes to numbers.” She winked and pulled out a cigarette, waiting for Maele to light it for her. “But don’t tell the Don I said that, *vale? Nuestro secreto.*” She brushed past the men, one hand on her hip, the other extended in the air, cigarette between her lips. “Off to explore,” she sang and wandered deeper into the fields, the scent of sweat, soap, and black tobacco lingering for a moment.

The Major glanced at Maele. “*Que coño es eso?*”

“That is the Don’s wife, sir.”

“She just wanders around the fields all day by herself? Doing what?”

Maele did not answer, just stared at the spot where Sofia had stood moments earlier, the earth stamped with the rubber soles of her boots.

Days passed, the drought continued, and as the Major spent more time with the Don and Sofia, the more confounded he became by the terms of their relationship and the terms of his station. The Don was the kind of man who knew economics, history and politics, yet chose to focus only on the anatomy of the local women. Everyone knew this, Sofia knew this, yet her words and her posture revealed not a shred of rage or humiliation. Rather, she seemed emboldened; she wore men’s clothes and was often seen barefoot; she cursed and told dirty jokes that made the Major blush; she roasted her own coffee beans and traveled the country in search of new fertilizers, growth methods, and workers. In short, she was nothing like his own wife, and for that he both relished and shunned her, admired and feared her, for what if his own wife was turning into a version of Sofia back home?

Living in Matapa was akin to life in the trenches; a foreign environment where the enemy was invisible, hoarding precious elements, mocking the men and their useless tools, their useless prayers. Again he strained against his mind, fighting boredom, fighting the climate, fighting the urge to sever his bonds. This time, his body was not covered with lice, but with mosquitos and their extracting bites that bled and swelled, keeping him up at night. Instead of extreme cold, it was extreme heat—some days were so excruciating, he contemplated skinning himself; at night, when he could sleep, he dreamt of a breeze skimming over his muscles and membrane.

For the Major, the only viable means of escape was the kitchen. There he

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could smoke and watch Buika cook, surrounded by wooden counters, hanging herbs, and the long iron stove identical to that of his childhood kitchen. When the flames lowered, Buika placed her lips to a lead pipe and coaxed flames from embers with her exhales, just as his mother had. The only sounds in the kitchen those first few weeks were blades on wood, meat, and plantains sizzling in palm oil, the patter of dough between hands, light dust of flour rising and setting on her wrists.

Eventually the Major asked questions, to which Buika pondered and politely answered in a straightforward yet opaque manner: Yes, she was born in Guinea, yes she knew Spanish but preferred English. No, she had never read a cookbook, her mother taught her everything from memory. Yes she knew how to read, no she could not write well. No, she never cooked Spanish cuisine because Sofia refused to eat what she had eaten every day for forty years. No, no children. No husband.

Buika's cooking revealed more than her words; the plates were dominated by yams, plantains, coconuts, rice, fish, and occasionally meat. Each dish had a yellow or green tinge and somehow, even when she removed the eyes of a rabbit or the gall of a catfish and wiped her scale flaked hand across her forehead, she had a tender manner of execution. Buika's fingertips and palms were permanently stained red from the slippery palm oil she used generously; from a distance, her hands seemed to glow. Starches were mashed and served with peppers that singed the Major's tongue, but which she popped in her mouth like sweet berries. The names she spoke, the names of the dishes, meant nothing to him, but sounded like a chant: *fufu, ata, pili pili; fufu, ata, pili pili; fufu, ata, pili pili*.

And then, without any foreshadowing, she asked him if he was married. The direct acknowledgement of his existence, an inquiry into a specific part of his life, set his cheeks ablaze.

"Curiously, yes," he replied.

"A funny word to use," she said, her back to him, threading slices of meat onto wooden skewers.

"Well, I have not seen my wife since the war started."

"Hard times," she acknowledged, but still kept her face out of sight.

"How long have you worked here?" He moved to stand next to her, near the stove.

"Almost five years. The Don came before Sofia did."

"I'm surprised she followed him here."

At that, her face rotated to the left and she glowered at him. "They allow me and my family to survive," she said.

"I, I, just meant that it's hard to understand their relationship," he stammered.

Turning back to the stove, she shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe they don’t want you to figure it out.” She struggled with the lid of a glass jar and sucked at her teeth. “Can you open this, please?”

The Major took the jar with his bad hand. With his thumb and middle finger he gripped the bottom and turned the lid with his good hand. The sounds of the flame’s crackle studded the air between them; the banana tree outside the window swayed in the wind; the lid of the jar gave with a satisfying *pop*.

“Here,” he said, keeping his gaze steady.

She took the jar and her fingertips brushed his. “Thank you.”

“*Nada*,” he said, scratching at the mosquito bites on his hand.

“You should leave those alone.” She gently squeezed the stumps and he jerked his hand back.

“I should go wash up before dinner,” he said.

“Wait.” She handed him a skewer of meat. “Tell me how it is.”

“What is it?”

“*Suya*. It’s meat with a rub of spices, groundnuts, chili powder, ginger, and salt.”

He brought the skewer close to his nose and inhaled, then bit off a piece. Instantly, he tasted fire; he closed his eyes and saw what he imagined to be West Africa, a land of coconut trees and black sand beaches, where the women all smelled like Buika, spicy and jam-sweet.

“Good,” he said, finishing the rest. “Very, very good.”

She smiled at him. “Go wash,” she said.

Upstairs, in his bedroom, the Major spread out on top of the sheets and rolled his tongue across the roof of his mouth. I am a man, he thought, who is no longer a whole man, but one with a black heart like fried plantain, fried and then fried again. He felt all ten of his fingers moving, bending at the joints, although they were not all there. He placed his left palm on his stomach and pressed, let the hand travel down. He took himself with his left hand, although he was not left-handed, and thought of Buika, of his age and his grotesque rotting.

PALOOKA PRIZE

WINNER

“Spanish Guinea, 1938-1939” by Dana De Greff

FINALISTS

“Everything Goes to the Sea” by D.E. Lee

“Creek Bait” by Richard Lutman

“The Water Is Lava” by Cody Hayhurst

“How It Works” by Alan Tracey

ABOUT THE PRIZE

Hundreds of stories were submitted, and the editor chose five finalists to be considered by an outside judge. Our four finalists received \$25, and the winner received \$100. The winning story was selected by fiction writer and novelist, Todd Mitchell.

WHAT TODD MITCHELL HAD TO SAY ABOUT THE WINNING STORY

The thing that initially blew me away about this story is how completely and vividly it transports the reader to both another time and another place that is wholly unfamiliar and original. The details depicting Spanish Guinea are stunning, lush, and sensual. Add to this well-drawn eccentric characters, who either embody the landscape, or teeter on the edge of madness because of it, and you’ve got fertile ground for a riveting story. But perhaps the most compelling thing about this story is that, despite all the crisp, clear details, and the smoothly delivered character backgrounds, at the core of each character lies an enigma that causes readers to lean forward into the story and listen harder. “Spanish Guinea, 1938-1939” deftly inhabits the crepuscular territory between the said and unsaid, where beauty and horror intertwine, and readers are simultaneously intrigued by a new experience, and enticed to imagine more. In short, it’s a story that takes root in the reader’s mind, vigorous as kudzu, demanding contemplation long after the last word is read.

DANA DE GREFF ON HER WINNING STORY

This story is part of a larger work in progress (a first novel), which I have been working on in pieces over the last year. The idea for this particular section came from a class that I took during my studies at UT, entitled, “African Diaspora in Latin America.” I started to wonder what it would be like to reverse the roles, to have a Spaniard forcibly sent to Spanish Guinea, completely out of his element and without power during an extremely volatile time in Spanish history—the Spanish Civil War.

When I write, I tend to focus on food, language, and issues between foreigners and locals, and I tried to pull that out in this particular story with the tropical climate, the cacao fields, Buika’s kitchen, and her cooking. Along with that, the story is also about guilt, about fleeing, and about the way a foreign environment can affect one’s physical and mental stability.