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NIGHT RIDE

by Jon Krantz

Yaasarke, Kiteabo, Feb. 24, 1978

The following account comes from the author's experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Liberia, West Africa.

The air is suffused with a thick, swirling sense of motion. The red earth rises up to my wheels and, with the images of a day's encounters dancing before my eyes, I swing into a shallow curve and throttle down. It is nearly seven. The sky approaches lavender and my senses are enthralled with the encroaching night. I've thirty minutes to totality perhaps and the promise of darkness, the clutching figures of dahoma and the miles of my passage are as descant or dreamsong.

The road dips a bit, narrows, then ascends, snakelike, up a long escarpment of gravel and clay. Deep valleys of daylight green are now dark, silent chasms. Beyond the deep-throated sound of the engine there is a living forest. Leaning back the chatter grows louder, and the grating sound of a billion unseen insects rubbing their wings fills the air. Dark forms scatter as I pass the marbles of emerald green, surely eyes without bodies, glow beyond the throw of my lamp. For a spell I ride through a cloud of moths, paper-thin wings everywhere, filling my nostrils and beard. But they are gone with the last hues of evening, and I pull the denim of my jacket close and hunker down into the silence

of my thoughts. It is night.

In my mind the images of a heady afternoon are running riot, confused in order and brilliant in color. I have come from Yebor after a meeting with the elders, chief and township commissioner of the Glaro tribe. Young men and their stoop-backed fathers swarm the piazza of the town chief's compound. Sharp fingers of light from chinks in the mud and bamboo pierce the room at crazy angles. I sit beneath a window off to the side and watch the large, dust-choked space fill with humanity. The wizened, leather faces of the old men gaze out past the black-surfaced Doubwe, whose shallow draught I have risked in wooden canoe.

After introductions, plates containing large, bitter chunks of kola are passed, then followed, by three heavy earthenware jugs of bamboo wine and sasswood bark. The rounds are made severally, and my head swims with the liquor and the heat and the distance and the promise of a large soft bed many hours away. Expressions are lost as the faces of my hosts come in and out of focus. I am slipping off when a faint, barely audible ripple of notes drifts in through the window. Hard on the wind comes a drum-beaten rhythm and I find myself stretching, with eyes closed, towards the source of these magical sounds. A reed flute, bamboo perhaps, and a drum taut with animal skin are wending their way into town.

Soft ululations of words, first whispered then sung, join chorus with the instruments and I am thrown away by a sudden pounding in my chest. My impulse is to run outside but I am held by ritual compliance to the conventions of our

gathering — no one else is rising so why should I? But the music, mysterious and enchanting, grows louder by the minute and I feel the impulse of Odysseus to run insanely after.

Six young women, like an apparition, appear before the window and as quickly turn a corner, fading out of sight. They are orange haired and black-skinned, quite fantastic to behold and, I tell myself, just as improbable. By this time I cannot sit any longer and excuse myself, as if to pass water, from the room. Quietly I follow, turning the same corner and trusting the sound in my ear to its source.

Strangely it is not the beating of drums I encounter but the sputtering of my own engine. Out of gas. Pulling in the clutch I am gliding downhill, the engine dies and the trees are at once familiar. I am passing the teak plantation and have drawn to within ten miles of home. Still moving I bend down and switch over to reserve, let out the clutch and the machine jerks back to life. My muscles ache and my bones hurt, I am not feeling the road and the air runs cold against my face. But the day, as if to relieve my long and lonely night, comes back to mind.

The girls, fourteen of them, are swaying in C formation and waving small wooden voice carvings, while two young men attend to the drums and flute. I am joined by the men whom I left so recently sitting indoors. We stand at the edge of the open plaza and watch in silence. The girls (I am told) are early teenaged initiates of the local Sande society. Cowrie shells are strung across their ankles and waists. Each dancer wears a necklace of carved ivory or bone,

bracelets of copper and freshly inscribed diamonds of white clay painted upon her breasts, stomach and legs. The initiates dance uncovered save for two strips of cloth run on a string which covers their buttocks and genitalia.

Long waves of combed hair have been plastered orange with vegetal dye. Bare feet slap against the hard, dry earth as the girls sing, very beautifully, their goodbyes to family and friends. The ground seems to tremble as each dancer steps into the center of the C and begins a long, complicated pattern of movements which follow the polyrhythmic drums.

It is a breathtaking performance. I do not perceive a hint of sadness on the part of the dancers or their people. The air is charged with an energy as awesome as it is timeless. If trepidation is experienced it is not expressed, for the initiates must enter bush school with courage. Though some might not return from the bush, not a smile of fear is seen. After each dancer has had a turn the group sings on until a very old, white-haired woman enters the plaza. Her spare, naked body has been dusted with white clay. The drumming tapers off and the singing stops. The woman steps forward and calls the girls into line. She begins a soft, quiet song, turns twice on her feet, and leads the initiates out of the town.

Overhead I hear thunder. The wind picks up in the trees and the stars are obscured by the gathering clouds. As I turn down the road which leads to the small village in which I live the voices of fourteen young girls, by now well off into the forest, ring loud in my ears. It has started to rain.