

The Stranded Latrines

September 1983

A month has passed since I have arrived in Gbarma, a small town situated on a hilltop, in the lower west end of Lofa national forest, in Liberia, West Africa. Days are getting shorter while nights draw in about 7:30pm. My two-room dwelling lights up with the help of a few candles and a kerosene lamp. I am the new kid in town and the object of curiosity for most in this village. At dusk, my window paints with little faces of children and adults who press their noses and mouths through the wooden slats trying to peep at the menagerie of a new female specimen who has arrived without an invitation.

I am on display and it is very uncomfortable to break the barrier of introduction with my new environment. I feign head ache and withdraw to my room. I sit on the bed, hold my knees to my chest and pull the white cotton sheet over my head and body! Then I hear the little human creatures who have been watching me for hours from the window say: “ohhhh! Tha’ look like a ghos’!”

For the past several nights I have locked myself in this confinement I call ‘home’. I am homesick and nothing could help to distract me from a boredom and anxiety that have been bubbling inside my head. The world outside of my window engulfs me with repetitive lyrics of Michael Jackson Thriller album jumping out of a scratchy tape deck. The boom box is Zanele Varney’s most treasured possession. Zanele is my neighbor and his father is the town chief and the principal of Gbarma’s John F. Kennedy School. Mr. Varney is an important man in this town.

A sense of nausea accelerates in my guts as I think about the row of gray latrines built across the road a quarter mile away from my house. The latrines sit in a distance without ever having been used. They look like a row of prisoners condemned on death row. Years back before I arrived here, someone from the United Nations Development Program had arrived here to assess the public sanitation of Gbarma town. People tell me here, the UNDP project began with a lot of support and excitement. Money was abundant at the time for rural water and sanitation projects. The white men who came to Gbarma for the Latrine project spent nearly less than two months to write a proposal, received monetary resources, construction material and hired town’s people as laborers. They built the latrines after three months. There was a beautiful opening ceremony to dedicate the latrines to the public. After the pomp and circumstances of this event, the men left Gbarma and all that was left were the lonely latrines standing in a row on the opposite side of the road to Gbarma like children left behind in an orphanage.

The thought of these latrines has been occupying my mind since I have arrived here. I am conscience of them looking at me afar. Their gray cement suit and corrugated tin roofs are depressing signs of abandonment.

Gbarma's superintendent, Mr. Karpay Barclay, the most prominent figure in this township, with his impeccable English, has given me enough reason to stay in his remote village to figure out the reason 'why his people in Gbarma avert from using the latrines since the white men came to build them here in 1982?' He insists that he personally likes to use the white porcelain toilet at the government compound! Barclay cannot imagine why his people haven't shown any interest in using the facilities down the road! He admits that if people used the latrines instead of the river it would be a good sign of public health. His own children go to the creek; they fetch and drink the water. Karpay Barclay is aghast with ignorance abound in his village!

"My people are uninformed oh! You! Peace Corps lady (stressing the P)! Now you come here. You stay and watch and go out why this business of latrine is no good for our people!", Mr. Barclay exclaims, sweating profusely as beads of salty water forms on his upper lip and forehead. He gulps on big cup of ice cold water. "That's your first assignment, my young friend!", he smiles at me with his gold bicuspid sparkling through.

I sigh, thinking, 'what now? How on earth am I going to figure this out? If those men couldn't care less why should I?' My head is hurting. My first thought is to leave this village immediately. I want nothing of it. I have no interest in owning their problem. I do not belong to this place. For the next several days, I try to come up with some excuse to give my resignation to Barclay and call it quits. I do not see the virtue of rotting in this place with the latrines watching me from a distance. A thousands and one valid excuses race through my mind: my mother has died; an earth quake with magnitude of 9.1 has demolished my home in the States (you haven't heard the news because all communications have broken down), I have terminal cancer and will die soon...etc.

Seeing Barclay in town daily is a mental challenge! The man is unavoidable! He is a fixture at the local store where I buy my bread, butter and cheap African hand rolled cigarettes. He is the specter of anxiety for me. He is a nagging final exam for an incomplete grade I yet to have to pass.

I received my Peace Corps training while in the States four months before I arrived here. We were 27 volunteer trainees in Colorado Springs, Colorado. A group of training instructors helped us evolve into readiness. The staff educated us with cultural as well as technical training. We trained in physical fitness atop mountains in the Rockies. We survived wilderness training and camping with limited supplies by ourselves. We learned to construct latrines, wood, mud and metal stoves for cooking, solar food dryers, digging holes and lining wells with cement culvers. We even learned how to climb a tree and jump from a wall and rappelling a 12 feet deep well with the help of hooks and rope.

The most valuable training I received was technology assessment techniques. Not in a scientific sense, but in a cultural sense where a new technology may be introduced without disturbing the balance and norms of the community's day to day life. It seemed that the men who had come here in early 80s had intended to introduce latrines as an appropriate technology for improving public health care of the Gbarma village but

they had under-assessed the existing ways of public sanitation, albeit with the best of intention in their minds.

After much agonizing over the idea of where to start my fact finding, I decide to ask the local carpenter to make me a chair! James Siake is only happy to provide his services for the 'bright' girl. I am bright! Not that bright! Just not white nor black; in Liberia, I'm bright! Within 4 days, I have a nice comfy chair. I decide to commence my work by doing it the Malcolm way--process history! Oh! how very exciting. I feel like a mechanical toy!

...Ok! Let's see. I put my newly crafted chair in front of the latrine structure, somewhere shady! Next to a wall perhaps. Out of the way, where I don't have to smell it! I bring my notebook with me. I notice its legal size and touch its stiff blue vinyl cover. My pen works nicely. It is brand new from my stash of goods brought forth from the States!

Now that I have started the process, looking at the latrines closely and upfront, I have no idea where it will take me. I situate my chair next to the low end of Gbarma town's living quarters, where the less fortunate Gola tribe lives. That's where they built the latrines! At the far end of the town.

Some 6 or seven miles away there is a moslem village, Tahn, whose town chief once invited me to meet and discuss the possibility of a hand-dug well. However, the idea never moved forward. There were not enough resources to get there. The Ministry of Rural Development was not too interested in that part of Gola land. After all, that's where Belle Yalla prison camp was located quietly in the dense bush!

...The numbness of this daily puzzle begins to grow on me as I make my quarter of a mile journey every day to the chair next to the mud wall across from the cement latrines! Each day, I sit there quietly watching people pass by. They make their comments at me, smile at me, offer food to me, children rush up to pull my notebook or ask me to give them my nice BIC pen!

Each day, I grow more tired of being in Gbarma than the day before. "I am like a Marriot Hotel doorman", I write in my notebook. But the letters to my friends back home have made up stories of adventure and thrill in Africa. My friends do not know it. I receive many replies wishing they were in my shoes or wanting to come visit me at some point. None of which would ever materialize. My notebook pages remain untouched.

The grid I have drawn on my first page remains empty! No count of people going in or out of the latrines! Not a soul ever bothers using the facilities!

Then, one day, I suddenly notice Mummado, a little pekin, about 5 or 6 years old, comes out to the opposite corner where I have been sitting. He squats, relieves himself, pull up his pants and runs back to his house. His mother Zahara is busy making palava sauce on a small fire. She cooks her food on a small metal stove in the open courtyard. A couple of small basenjjs skimper around the yard. Zahara's family keep a few chickens, a goat and a

monkey in their household. I have been watching them for a while now since I have assumed my position as the latrine keeper three weeks ago.

They seem to be curious about my business here yet they have politely avoided any questions. Mummado goes to Zahara and tugs on her bright kinte cloth. He pulls her away from her work. She follows him to the corner where he has defecated on the ground. Flies are swarming around the heap. Zahara picks up a stick from the pile, lowers herself to take a closer look at the specimen her son has left behind. She stirs the pile, taps on it a few a times. She picks up something long and wiggly, then drops it to the ground.

She goes back to her fire, sweeps up some ashes from it. She carries it over to the pile and empties on it. She returns to her open kitchen, reaches an old broken cabinet on the corner and takes out a white glass bottle. Then she picks up Mummado and administers him a gulpful of the red medicine! She then carries out her work and Mummado is off to chasing the emaciated basenjjs in his merry way!...and suddenly... I see! An epiphany!

I get up my courage and I walk up to Zahara to start the conversation. She is a smart girl. She knows I am going to admonish her for letting her child defecate in the street. She knows better. "...Sorry ya, missy, we can't use tha' latrine business...but wha' I wan see tha hook worm in the poo, I can't see in latrine!" "I'll be darn! And it took us two, three freaking years to figure this much!...I am astounded to see the taboo surrounding defecation and private business.

I want to find Barclay and tell him what I had discovered! But he is no where to be found. Later in the evening, I meet his youngest daughter on my walk about Gbarma town. She tells me her Pa is in Ivory Coast visiting his fourth wife!!

In November, Mr. Barclay returns to Gbarma! There is much celebration on his arrival. I get an invitation to dine with him and his family on Friday night. He is most generous. There are over 18 people invited to his house, including me and a Japanese volunteer who is almost through with his service in Gbarma. There are a number of dignitaries at this party.

Superintendent Barclay is a popular man. We eat our big meal from individual plates and sit around to talk after dinner. "...Maryama, did you find out anything about the latrines? why my people can't use these latrines? that's the big question!", he laughs out loud and the chorus accompanies him. I feel my face get hot. I am blushing and they can clearly see it. Even with all the palm wine, I can tell they are looking at me wide eyed!

"Intestinal worm! I think is the main problem! They can't see their stool once it's released in the hole of the latrine; they need to inspect it and take medicine. Otherwise how would they know?" I say, looking down. I hear him say: ehennnnnn! And they all give out a hearty laugh at my expense!

...Two days later, on a muggy gray afternoon, I hear footsteps getting closer to my front door. It is Peter Jallah, the RN at the infirmary. He knocks at the door. I get up from my armchair and I put down my book, turn down Voice of America on my radio. When I open the door, Peter delivers his beaming smile and flashes his shiny teeth. Beads of sweat cover his face. He comes right up announcing that Mr. Barclay has brought a roll of medium grade chicken wire to cover the latrine holes!