

REGINA AND THE BOGEYMAN

The dust of fresh skirmishes between Monrovia's militias is drifting sunwards as the bogeyman rounds the corner of Taylor Street. Monrovia is a study of impressionistic dots before his boozy eyes. The bogeyman does the cha-cha-cha, the bogeyman shuffles, the bogeyman swings. He is convinced yet again that he will survive his foolishness: he has his drunken giggle, he has his Bowie knife in his boot, he jiggles a camera he borrowed from his photographer who absolutely refused to accompany him to Monrovia. His photographer was categorically right to stay in Sierra Leone, but the bogeyman, as always, had to prove himself in his own eyes as a top class war writer.

The bogeyman wants to shout an out of character *f..k*, but he figures it might be a bit reckless in the ominous silence that presently cloaks the streets of Monrovia, with the dust of battle still to settle completely. The mortar fire and the AK-47 fire have died down for the moment, but the bogeyman knows that the sparks in the hearts of the Liberian militia, fueled by the indigenous drug *qhat*, are as unpredictable as Saint Elmo's fire: you never know when or where they'll strike next.

The bogeyman has totally lost his sense of direction, but worse still, he's also lost contact with the American marines who gave him a ride from Freetown, Sierra Leone, with the promise of a guided tour of the streets of Monrovia, haunted by yellow hyenas and their master the grim reaper. In search of inspiration for his gruesome thrillers, the bogeyman paid a serious price for this American 'service'. Before they left in the helicopters, the green berets had told him so many blood curdling stories that a gallon of Dutch courage wouldn't have been out of place. The marines relied more on ephedrine and speed tablets than on liquor, but the bogeyman is the old-fashioned type. The marines could have been his kids in terms of age, and they proved it during the first attack in Monrovia: they ran like hares, much faster than the middle-aged bogeyman could manage. A maze of small streets, flashes of green, yellow and black, and abracadabra: he had lost the marines. Fingers snapping, rock 'n rolling, boogying, jiving and popping and locking to the rhythm of the salvos that suddenly made the city judder like a nervous horse with their heavy funk, the bogeyman gallops further and further into the maze, in search of his protectors. Desperate to keep his khaki shorts clean, he mumbles to himself that nature always gives living organisms a chance before concluding that they are worthless and ripe for slaughter. The sun, nature's purest emanation, burns his neck with utter contempt.

An ear-shattering burst of Ak-47 speed metal chases the jiggering bogeyman into a nearby, half derelict house that once had proud colonial dimensions, its wooden veranda giving it Californian allures. In the distance, around the corner, he hears voices, screaming, and it's getting closer. Before stepping into the coolness of the seemingly abandoned house, the bogeyman looks over his shoulder: everywhere, in spite of this being the most blinding moment of the day, he sees shadows

and slithering movement. He quickly steps inside, without taking a proper look at the gloomy interior. His nervous, sinewy body slams to the ground when he trips over an obstacle on the floor. In the confusion he sees dreadlocks winding down in an intricate pattern from the skull to the small of the back. The girl's forehead glistens immaculately as if polished, her eyes are shut tight. Her ample lips are hanging open, as if ready to produce a tone loud enough to drown out the music of the bullets on the street. The bogeyman reaches for her leg, the obstacle that made him trip, and then he touches the lump on his forehead where he hit the floor. He feels her leg a second time. It's inhumanly smooth and hard. Her eyes fly open, the pupils are wide and glassy. The bogeyman sits up, rubs his head. The girl doesn't move. Her eyes are fixed on him. She opens her generous lips even further and her scream reaches a pitch that would have earned Ella Fitzgerald a fortune, in another time, another place. Out of the corner of his eye, the bogeyman catches sight of a door opening in the half-light. A shape in a black cloak hobbles inside. Before the bogeyman can regain his composure, the girl with the plastic leg struggles to get up, like the puppet of a drunken puppeteer, and a big old pistol is being pressed against his nose.

"As the Lord is my witness," the nun says, "don't touch my children or your brains will be fodder for the street dogs." She shoves her face, surrounded by a nun's cap, almost into the bogeyman's nose. The bogeyman can see that she's old and sporting a serious moustache. "I'm one of the good guys," he says. In his confusion he uses Dutch, his mother tongue.

"What did you say?" The nun's face gets even closer and the face of the girl appears at her shoulder, like a dark balloon announcing that it's a bad time of year to be alive and that this is a place it would be wiser to avoid.

Death in the Afternoon

Sister Sponza still has coffee. The bogeyman drinks gratefully and tells her that he's a famous author in Europe, searching for inspiration in war-torn countries, and how he had landed with the American marines only to lose them again in the old town. Sister Sponza listens, nods impatiently. Her only wish is to leave Monrovia with the dozen or so kids she's managed to save from the streets. They're all ex-child soldiers, bought back from the militia with funds she receives from a Christian Ngo. She tried to get them by land to Ivory Coast, but had to give up: Liberia is a patchwork of fiefdoms, each with its own militia. They're constantly at each other's throats and they hold the power of life and death for those who pass through their territory. Sister Sponza is stuck in Monrovia with her wards until help comes from outside. But when it arrives, it might be too late. The militias' *juju* is becoming more bloodthirsty by the day. They fire more bullets and more grenades every hour, convinced of the invincibility of their ancestral magic. Does the bogeyman perhaps have a solution? Before the

bogeyman has the chance to agonize over the question, his thoughts are interrupted by yelling and shouting outside.

He goes to the window – the room smells of old starch, mouse droppings, and sweaty feet – and peers through the cracks in the boards hammered over the glass. Some militia members have gathered outside, watching a young boy – the bogeyman figures he’s twelve at most – point his gun at someone they’ve taken prisoner. From this distance, the bogeyman can see that both the kid and the prisoner are scared to death. The bogeyman knows all about warlord Taylor’s gangs and their rites of initiation. The militia loudly spur him on, drum their chests with their fists, jump up and down like chimpanzees. The bogeyman looks up to the sky. The sun is as blinding as a burst of gunfire. Its light transforms their fuzzy hair into steel wool, their features into sharply honed crests of mica. He smells a weedy odor and glances to his side. The girl with the prosthetic leg, the smooth face and the hooded eyes, is standing beside him, watching the spectacle with a twisted grin. One of the militia pushes the child soldier and gesticulates wildly. The prisoner succumbs to the desperate rage of total fear. He leaps at the boy, his eyes rolling and hands and arms outstretched. The circle of men appears to be having a great time, jeering and shouting. Nobody makes a move to help the boy soldier. Child and captive meet in a tangle of thrashing limbs. The bogeyman barely hears the shot going off. He sees the kid scramble to his feet and puke on the twisting, howling body of the prisoner. Someone gives the boy a knife. Someone else bares the wounded man’s genitals. The girl at the bogeyman’s side kicks the wall with her plastic leg and keeps on kicking. Sister Sponza appears behind her, pushes a worn-out doll into her arms and hugs her warmly. Focused on the bogeyman’s frown, her owl-like eyes speak volumes: “For six years I have worked in Liberia. How long do I have to go on like this? Evil spirits rule this country, and I am only a poor, lonely old woman in the service of the Lord.” Outside, the bogeyman can hear droning. The militia are dancing a jig around the child soldier, who spits in a daze on the corpse in front of him before stuffing the man’s severed genitals into his mouth.

“It is their belief in *juju* that keeps this hell alive,” Sister Sponza Beltram sighs, caressing the head of the girl with the plastic leg. She stoops towards the crack in the boarded-up window. “Regina knows that I can see the demons that are glued to them like evil shadows. They think they’re full of magic, but we know better, don’t we Regina?”

Regina peers in silence at the bogeyman over Sponza’s shoulder as if he’s the devil incarnate, sticking to her like a shadow.

Majestic African Buttocks

What is bogeyman’s task in life? Doing his jitterbug, his circle dance of words, hoping that others see what he has seen, feel what he has felt, think what he has thought? Although this may be true, it

doesn't affect the facts, and the facts are as follows: in two days time, at 14.00 hours on the button, the American helicopters will leave town. If he doesn't show up, the bogeyman will have to escape Monrovia on his own. All he needs to do is keep his head down for a couple of days, here in a house full of children with blood on their hands. Afterwards, on D-day, he'll need bogey-luck, bogey-guts and a bogey-bribe to get to the helicopters. He reckons he has enough of these ingredients in stock. But until he gets the chance to use them, he's doomed to march fidgety circles in Sponza's yard. He avoids the rooms: they're semi-dark but the eyes of the children glisten like jade in the tea-colored light. It's hard to read their expressions. Before long, Regina with the plastic leg is following the bogeyman everywhere. Tick tick tick on the wooden floor, flosch flosch flosch in the garden. When the bogeyman looks over his shoulder, she smiles timidly with one hand covering her mouth. Sister Sponza regularly ventures out onto the streets, accompanied by a local guy who has connections with the militia. Foraging for food has become a delicate dance with death. When the sounds of battle dwindle, usually in the heat of the day, the children flock to the garden. Sister Sponza organizes games. Sweat flows abundantly, but everyone joins in. The bogeyman learns to distinguish faces and guess ages. He hasn't forgotten they're murderers. Their forefingers are crooked, as if they're still carrying an AK-47, too heavy for their tiny bodies, ready to fire at will. They speak a guttural English and want to know everything about the bogeyman: where he comes from, what he does for a living, which kind of car he drives. They gesticulate wildly when his answers are evasive or vague. Sister Sponza exercises authority with distinction. But in this colorful swarm of wriggling limbs, bobbing faces and glistening teeth, he meets Regina's eyes again and again, soft as silk, sulky, hungry.

The bogeyman takes the missionary apart, explains his plans. Sister Sponza understands that she can't join him when he flies back to safety. She would be airsick in the helicopter anyway. But her children? Can't they fly with the marines? The bogeyman stammers: military directives, mandates, lack of space.... So sorry.

Sister Sponza interrupts him, her mighty moustache trembling: "Then at least tell them about us, tell them they have to come and rescue my children."

Oh, she's so brilliantly dramatic! The wide sleeves of her habit flutter as she gesticulates. "I'm staying as long as I can," she continues. "There are many more where these came from, more wretched creatures to make my heart bleed, and I have to save them. Did you know, mister writer, that they would kill each other for a doll?" She grabs Regina by the arm: "When I found her, more dead than alive, she was wearing a rucksack with a doll. She had lost her leg, the poor thing, but in her left hand she was clutching her rifle. We nearly had to break her fingers before she handed it over. But look at her now!"

As if following orders, Regina hugs her doll, sensually kisses its tiny pursed lips. She holds it out to the bogeyman and gestures. The bogeyman obediently sticks out his head and kisses the doll where Regina's lips had rested seconds earlier. Sponza's eyes narrow behind her thick glasses: "Regina was a street girl before the grenade ripped her leg apart. She can't read or write, but she had other gifts, didn't you Regina?" Regina responds with a surly nod. She licks her lips, she smiles at the bogeyman. Her polished skin gleams, her dress is too small, she already has the curves of a woman, the majestic African buttocks. Shame about the leg, the bogeyman thinks, only then reminding himself that Regina is in fact still a child.

"She was a naughty one," Sponza continues, tapping her walking-stick on the ground. "She hadn't a clue about love, hadn't even heard the word. Does she have to grow up in this hellhole? No sisters or brothers, no mother, a step-father who... well.... you know what he did. She's a wild creature, but so precious." The nun shakes her head like an old tired horse. The bogeyman eyes sister Sponza. He's annoyed, wants to tell her he's only a bogeyman, stumbling through life, high-fiving and mind-fucking, crashing into people as if they were furniture, bouncing from one street corner to the next. What can he do, how can he get her message across?

A wild soul with no experience of love

Nights in Monrovia are savage and yellow, like the flames of a blast-furnace. The bogeyman on his back in a storage room where he has set up camp, staring at the ceiling. Where did this madness begin? This is the problem he has to deal with. For years he has visited war-ravaged countries, taking crazy risks, in order to return to his luxurious writer's mansion on the Belgian coast and stuff his bestselling thrillers with atrocities that critics call "unprecedented". His thrillers are set in various cultures and are widely read in most European countries. The European media, licking their lips, called him "extreme", even "deranged". His ten-year-old daughter Moran was horrified by the books he wrote, but the bogeyman enjoyed his success immensely, strutting like a proud rooster. Every year he became more brazen. He nursed the conviction that nothing would ever happen to him. But Monrovia is the hardest nut he has yet to crack. Will he succeed, or has his luck finally evaporated after all these years? Sister Sponza's radio has announced that the brutal warriors of a militia referred to ironically enough as *Liberians United for Reconciliation and Democracy* are planning to invade the capital. The soldiers of LURD chalk their faces white and paint their nails red before going into battle. There are cannibals among them, who boil the intestines of their defeated enemies and eat them with great gusto.

So the bogeyman's thoughts play ping-pong until the wee small hours, until dawn, until the roosters start to crow. But it's not the roosters crowing, it's the coughing of LURD's mortars. 'Have I gone too far?' the bogeyman asks himself. If the rebels conquer the city, they'll inflict a proverbial bloodbath.

The bogeyman doesn't think about "women and children first", the bogeyman thinks of himself, that's his nature, the way he is. When did the obsession with violence as fuel for his novels start? When did he discover the market for horror? Wealth was not longer a motive: bestsellers in various languages made it unnecessary for him to have to work another day in his life. Was he trying to exorcize his fear of death by challenging it?

It's too late now to analyze his actions; the sweat of fear corrupts the synapses of his brain.

A tiny sound between giggling and moaning triggers the bogeyman's nerves, throws him into a state of acute alarm. Fear is about to pop a crucial vein in his body. He sees shining eyeballs in the doorway. The explosion of a mortar-grenade nearby makes the house rumble like a kettle drum. The shadow in the doorway moves, shuffles inside, sits with legs apart opposite the bogeyman against the wall. Regina has oiled her long braids and changed her dirty dress for a clean one, again too small for her voluptuous body. The moon, swollen and sallow, casts light upon her legs, makes her naked crotch dark and brooding, fearsome and alluring. In this light, her plastic leg has an unearthly color. Their eyes meet. *Take me*, the whites of her eyes whisper. *Am I not pretty*, her dark irises scream. *I am a wild soul who has never experienced love*, her belly drones. The bogeyman motions her to go away. He clears his throat and explains to his silent visitor that she is still a child and that she had better close her legs. "I can't give you love," the bogeyman stammers. Regina shrugs her shoulders and thrusts a hand between her thighs. The bogeyman feels himself drawn into a vortex, where all the things he believed in, everything he has learned, no longer exist. He has been traveling in Africa for weeks on end; his life in Europe, his home in Belgium, his daughter Moran, everything suddenly seems a fantasy. If this twelve-year-old child with her incredibly sultry body is asking for it, why shouldn't he...

"She aborted her own child," the old woman's voice croaks from the doorway. "Can you imagine, mister Belgian writer? One of Taylor's soldiers raped her. She was *the chosen one*, you understand? She knew what would happen when she was a few months pregnant. Taylor's men would take her to White Flower, Taylor's beach-house. They would force her to kneel on the beach and they would cut the fetus out of her belly to use it for powerful *juju*. Can you imagine that, white man? Every time an important battle is about to take place, they need a sacrifice. Oh yes, Regina knew what was coming. She stuck a knitting-needle deep in her womb. That same night, her tribe came under attack and Regina fought alongside the others, losing more and more blood by the minute, and finally her unborn child. The militia left her, thinking she was dead." Sister Sponza's voice squeaks breathlessly as if she is exhausted. Regina listens, seemingly without emotion. She has withdrawn her hand, but her legs are still wide apart. The nun comes into the room, stooped as if she is carrying a heavy load. Regina shuffles away from her until she reaches another moon-spot on the wall. Without closing her legs, she points outside: "When I die, I'll go to the moon," she says in her hoarse, almost masculine

voice. The bogeyman wants to ask Sponza where precisely she sees the hand of her God in this grim and bitter suffering, but before he can open his mouth, the hand of war strikes. In spite of their wooden fortifications, the windows shatter and the house itself seems to lift itself into the air. Sponza bolts out of the room; crying and screaming children are gathering in the corridor. Rolling eyes, cries for help, tear stained cheeks. "Run!" the old nun bellows. A stampede towards the front door is the result. Sponza is carried along by the pack, with Regina and the bogeyman at her heels. Fear drives the children crazy; they thrust and push and shove. The front door opens with a bang. Staccato fire; automatic weapons. Children somersault through the air like rag dolls. The bullets seem to be coming from every direction. To make the chaos complete, it suddenly starts to pour with rain, a tropical shower. Like a frenzied rat, the bogeyman runs to the left towards a couple wide-skirted trees, leftovers from Liberia's once omnipresent rainforest. Regina is right behind him. Wrong gamble: hidden beneath the trees are the government troops, firing wildly left and right, with no distinction between young and old, enemy and civilian. They are under attack from a group of naked, body-painted warriors, ferocious followers of Joshua Milton Blahyi, aka General Stark Naked of the Krahn tribe. Bobbling penises firing from the hip; isn't that enough to make you laugh your head off? The bogeyman trips over a corpse and crashes with a high-pitched cry. Could he have been any more stupid? The naked warriors turn their heads smoothly like leopards. A white man: interesting booty, can yield a huge profit, even when badly injured. Three naked warriors approach him. The bogeyman is lying on the ground and buries his head like an ostrich between his hands. He senses movement very close to him. It's Regina the street girl. She's lying beside him on her back, legs wide apart. Out of their minds on a mixture of weed, which they call *yamba*, and *den kélé démé ba*, amphetamines imported from Senegal by the Lebanese, the Krahn warriors freak out and point at the gateway to heaven between Regina's legs, their genitals bobbing up and down with the frantic movements of their drugged bodies. Regina has an AK-47 in her right hand, taken from the corpse that caused the bogeyman to trip. She fires at will. The naked warriors thrash obscenely back and forth in a final orgasm before crashing to the ground. Numbed by the shots, the bogeyman turns his head towards Regina. Their eyes meet. Regina's lower body jerks as if –

Am I not worthy of love? her tears sing.

Dreams don't come true

The corpses in the streets stew in the sizzling midday sun. The mosquitoes are waiting, the militia are waiting, the government troops are waiting. It's 13.45 hours sharp. The government soldiers have managed to repel the nighttime offensive and it's quiet in the city. Small wonder. It's hot enough to melt mortars in this heat, send bullets flying in fantastic hyperboles as they leave the barrel. The skin is so sweaty in this heat that a machete intent on severing one or other limb would just glide off. So Monrovia is quiet, waiting for evening and night, for the dust to gather and smother the light.

This is the moment the bogeyman has been waiting for. He is ready to say goodbye and chase his wobbly legs through the streets of Monrovia, to the waiting American helicopter. Sister Sponza stares at him inscrutably. Does she never rest? The children who survived the attack are back in the house, safe for now. Regina the street girl is asleep in a corner, clutching her ragdoll against her perky breasts. The bogeyman glances at her body, which shudders now and then and moans, which sighs and groans.

“Go,” says sister Sponza. She taps the ground with her stick one single time. The bogeyman stands in the doorway and takes a deep breath. He ensures sister Sponza that he will describe the situation in this city, in this country, in his new novel, which is guaranteed to be a huge success. Sister Sponza only narrows her eyes, nothing more. The bogeyman knows that she’s trying to save the children from the militia. They charge her 250 dollars a head: “They want to get rid of certain children when I persuade them they’re possessed by *juju* that can hurt them. But they’re not stupid or afraid enough to give the children away for free.”

The bogeyman has 1500 dollars in his pocket. Maybe he needs the money to bribe prowling warriors. If they defy the midday heat, they’ll either be crazy or immensely greedy, most likely both, so the money might be his only chance to reach the helicopter. The bogeyman thinks about his own skin first, that’s the nature of the beast, his nature. He caresses the fully automatic Canon X-15 hanging round his neck. The camera is new and cost his photographer 900 dollars in Ivory Coast. The bogeyman removes the film from the camera and thrusts the device under Sponza’s nose: “How many children can you free with this?”

Sponza shrugs: “As many as I can.”

The bogeyman hands the camera over. Sponza accepts it without any hesitation. This time she’s standing tall and straight, face to face with the bogeyman, a woman at the end of her journey, but unaffected, fearless, mighty and imposing. The bogeyman glances back at Regina the street girl. *Why don’t you take me with you?* her dreams whisper. The bogeyman has known that dreams don’t come true for a long, miserably long time, and yet he feels deep regret, without really knowing why. Sister Sponza steps towards him, blocking his view. With her lips pressed tightly together, she raises her right hand and makes a gesture of blessing over the bogeyman’s head. It scares him so much he turns around and runs away, boogying through the sick streets of Monrovia, cursing through the gasping streets of Monrovia, praying through the soulless streets of Monrovia, vroom-vrooming through the corrupt and deadly streets of Monrovia.

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