

Their Countries of Origin
Ron Singer

An inveterate traveller and a retiree with disposable income, before Ngongo I had already visited Malta and Kosovo. These were the countries of origin of three of our building's superintendents. But perhaps our most memorable hireling was Super #4, Michael, a slacker who once had the temerity to announce, 'Me Plumerian, you Chew. We same, no, Meester Bob?'

'Thanks a lot,' I replied, but he was impervious to sarcasm, a super-duper.

Historically, it is true that Plumeria, a small island in the Black Sea, has been a football for the Greeks, Turks, Russians, and other bullies in the region. But the Plumerians have given as good as they get: their hands are stained with the blood of other weak nations and ethnicities.

A far more sympathetic super hailed from Ngongo. His name was/is Pierre Tshombe – like the Congolese dictator. Tall, thin, coal-black, agreeable and industrious, but with a modicum of skills, Pierre was only with us for six months, in 2010. He invariably addressed me as 'Monsieur Sheh-*pard*.' When he disappeared one day, I assumed he had been picked up by the Citizenship and Immigration Services. At the job interview, he had produced a green card, but our Board is careless about things like forged documents.

'I wonder what happened to that African guy,' I mused one evening, looking up from the paper. My wife turned toward me from her desk.

'Pierre?'

'That's right, I forgot his name,' I lied.

'I liked him, too. Everyone did.'

'I was thinking of visiting his country.'

She shrugged, raised her eyebrows, and turned back to the report she was writing. I took her non-response to mean she would not try to talk me out of a quixotic trip to Africa.

While she was at work the next day, I googled *La Republique Federale d'Ngongo*. I discovered a landlocked place the size of Luxembourg, tucked between the DRC (Congo) and Zambia. News items emphasised economic development, many involving coltan, which is used in cell phones. The country's deposits are grossly disproportionate to its size and population (5.2 million, according to a 1992 census).

Ngongo seemed exempt from the wholesale violence that dogs Central Africa, perhaps because it has been ruled for decades by an ancient dictator, who began life as a freedom fighter. Several times in recent years, this small nation has been flavor-of-the-month at Human Rights Watch. I speculated about the dictatorship's longevity. The capital, Fort Chaltin, is named for a major from the Belgian Congo. Why has the dictator not renamed his capital something more palatable, like *Lumumbaville*? Perhaps the old name inspires fear, at least among his minions. More to the point, the city is perched on an escarpment, which must discourage coup-makers.

By early October, having obtained my shots, visa, and plane ticket, I was ready to

go. Despite the distance and airfare, \$1400, I planned to stay in Africa for only a week. I would fly via Paris to Fort Chaltin, then either spend the week there or make a side trip to Lake Tanganyika, which is just across the eastern border, 110 miles by road from the capital.

I pre-paid for a room for three nights at a *pensione* I also found on the internet. Having learned from previous red-eye experiences, I left NY at 12:35 pm, had a two-hour stopover in Paris, and arrived at 12:15 pm the next day. Even so, I was so tired I was glad I had not booked a rental car. I found a Citroen diesel cab to haul me up the narrow hairpin road from the airport and through the dusty town. It was the dry season.

Hidden by trees and flowering bushes, the *Pension Saint-Louis* looked lovely. When I signed the guest book, 'for security reasons' my passport and most of my money were put into their safe. I was given keys to my room and to the high iron gates in front, which would be locked between 7 pm and 7 am.

My second-floor room was kitschy, but spacious, clean and comfortable, with tile flooring, big windows, and a ceiling fan. To skim off the jet lag, I took a two-hour nap, followed by a cool shower. After that, I wandered into Fort Chaltin.

My first impressions confirmed things I had read. The market kiosks were short of goods, prices were high –100 francs Gb., or about \$3.50, for a small loaf of bread. The dirt streets were rutted and full of axle-shattering potholes, and clouds of dust and pollution from ancient vehicles made breathing difficult. It surprised me that I did not encounter any of the beggars I knew to be endemic, or the muggers and con men who brazenly accost tourists in places like Nairobi, a.k.a. 'Nairobbery.'

As I roamed around, I began to understand this apparent absence of unfortunates and undesirables. Lurking in the shadows were men in dark, baggy suits, sunglasses and black Fedoras. These, I assumed, were members of the feared secret police, *La Force NKN*, said to number in the tens of thousands.

More blatant was the stark contrast between ubiquitous poverty and the few pockets of wealth, presumably created by the coltan economy, presumably controlled by the octogenarian kleptocrat & Co. Clustered in the *District Centrale*, a five square-block area, were skyscrapers, luxury hotels, and upscale restaurants. *Pension Saint-Louis* was situated on a quiet street just south of this oasis. On the way back, I stopped at a kiosk for a meal of bread, goat meat and beer.

At the front desk of the *pension*, the *patron* stood reading a newspaper. 'Alors, Monsieur ...' he began, his eyes twinkling through his bifocals. 'Ca va?'

'*Bien, merci.* So far, I like Fort Chaltin.' My schoolboy French came back easily, so we continued in that language.

'Thank you. Are you here, *Monsieur*, on business, or for tourism, if I may ask?'

'Neither. I'm here to re-connect with someone who used to work for me.'

'How interesting!' He sounded wary. 'And is this ...reconnection your sole motive for visiting our poor, out-of-the-way land?'

'Well, mostly,' I replied. We smiled and nodded at each other. 'But tell me, *mon patron*, how might I go about locating this man?'

Again, he eyed me suspiciously. 'What is the name, please?'

'Name? Robert Shepard. But... '

‘No, no. *His* name, please?’

‘Oh. Patrice – I mean, Pierre-Tshombe.’

‘Well, *Monsieur*,’ he said carefully, “‘Tshombe’ is a common name here. If I were you, I would check for an address at the Post Office.’ He pushed his bifocals up on his nose. ‘This will be easier than trying to obtain a phone number, which would entail a big palaver at the *Ministrie Telephonique*.’

He stood up and stretched theatrically. ‘And now, *Monsieur* Shepard, if you will excuse me, I must see that the children are asleep, then go to my own bed. At what time would you like to take breakfast, please?’

‘Seven-thirty okay? I’ll probably wake up early from jet lag.’

‘Of course, *Monsieur*, I am at your service. Good night, then. Please turn the lights off when you leave this room. There is a night light in the stairwell which you may leave on.’

‘Good night, *mon patron*.’

We shook hands, and he went upstairs. I sat in the parlor a few minutes, my mind a welter of impressions. Then, I went upstairs. Probably because of my nap, it took me hours to read myself to sleep.

Luckily, I had remembered to set my phone alarm for seven, because it woke me from a deep, apparently dreamless sleep. I was the only guest in the small dining room. After the *patron* had served my continental breakfast, I wandered back into the empty parlor, where I found a paper to read while I digested the meal. Then, I went up to my room and used the toilet. Putting the things I would need for the day (cap, cell phone, etc.) into a backpack with a small lock, and slathering myself with sunblock, I went back downstairs, ready to walk to the Post Office.

In the vestibule, the *patron* lay in wait, polishing his glasses with a white handkerchief. After we had exchanged pleasantries about the forecast – hot and dry, chance of afternoon thundershowers – he snapped his fingers. A thin, light-skinned young man materialised from the parlor. Perhaps seventeen, he wore neat, but worn clothing, and bore a marked resemblance to the *patronne*.

‘*Monsieur* Shepard, allow me to present my wife’s nephew, Joseph.’

I offered the young man my hand, and, with a small bow, he softly shook it. We said how glad we were to meet each other.

‘I have brought Joseph here,’ the *patron* explained, ‘because he can be of assistance in the search for your former employee.’ Before I could protest, he continued. ‘Please. Joseph will be most useful, *Monsieur*. The Post Office is difficult to find, and Joseph will be of assistance in communicating with the employees, who speak only *Ngongienn*e, with perhaps some Swahili, but little or no French. Assuming you succeed in acquiring an address, he can then help you to find the place. If your friend is absent, Joseph will be able to communicate with the other residents. Fortunately, he is free to serve you all day. You see, *Monsieur*, the lack of school fees has forced Joseph temporarily to abandon his studies. If you like, when you have completed the day’s business, you will give him a small *pourboire*, to assist him in returning to the *lycee*’ – just a few *francs*, you understand.’ The *patron* looked embarrassed, as did Joseph.

Before I could reply, Joseph chimed in. ‘You see, *Monsieur*, as my uncle has explained, not only will the location of the Post Office be difficult to find, but the employees will speak mostly our own tongue, *Ngongienn*e.’ The *patron* solemnly

nodded his agreement.

Fuelled by two cups of espresso, my mind raced dizzily. In a dictatorship like Ngongo, citizens and visitors alike must live under a cloud of uncertainty. To evade my host's ministrations might stoke his paranoia, or that of the authorities. While I ran through these thoughts, Joseph and the *patron* gazed at the ceiling.

'Very well,' I said. 'I accept. *Monsieur*. Joseph.' Another round of handshakes. 'Shall we?' After a moment of 'after you' farce, I preceded Joseph out the front door, which the *patron* closed behind us. We went through the gated entrance to find a big, old, black American car waiting at the curb. I was glad to get away from the officious *patron*.

'I have taken the liberty, Monsieur,' Joseph said, gesturing to the car. 'The Post Office is far.' I got into the back, and Joseph took the passenger seat. The fact that he did not tell the driver our destination reinforced my growing sense of being managed.

After the preliminaries, the Post Office proved anticlimactic. Since there were few customers, there was almost no wait, but all that I – we – learned from the polite clerk was that they had no current address for a 'Pierre Tshombe.' As we exited the colonial-era white stucco building, I began to wonder whether someone might not want me to find him.

Our car was waiting. The driver had turned the motor off and sat dozing behind the wheel. By now, it was ten-thirty. Suddenly, I bridled at all the control.

'You know, Joseph,' I said, 'I think I'd rather walk back to the *pension*. I mean, all I've accomplished this morning is to eat breakfast, take a car ride, and spend ten fruitless minutes at the Post Office. Why don't I pay the driver and have him drop you somewhere? If I get tired, I'll find my own taxi.'

Joseph became agitated. 'But, Monsieur, this is impossible. It will be a too long walk, and my uncle will be very angry with me if I allow you, our guest, to lose yourself in this, our city.'

'No problem.' I opened my backpack and extracted the guidebook. 'Look.' I showed him a map that included the Post Office and the *pension*. 'You see,' I added cheerfully, 'I'll be fine. Go on, please.' Reaching for my wallet, I gestured to the car.

But Joseph would not be shaken so easily, and after some more back and forth, we reached an understanding: I would get my walk, but he would accompany me. After he had exchanged a hurried word with the driver in *Ngongiienne*, I handed over what seemed a fair price, 150 francs GB, or about \$5.25. The cab made a cautious U-turn and headed back toward the *District Centrale*.

'This way, Monsieur Shepard.' Joseph smiled, setting out along the edge of the road. 'You will get to enjoy your constitutional, and I will preserve my uncle's good will. We can – how do you say it? – use one stone to kill two birds.' I forced a smile of my own and, careful not to fall into the drainage ditch, followed him in the direction my map said would lead us back to the *Pension Saint-Louis*.

The day had grown very hot. Glad I had worn my lightest pants and shirt, I put on my cap and sunglasses. The blocks around the Post Office were a sort of suburb, quiet, with little traffic. Although the small one-story bungalows, made of stucco or whitewashed cement, were modest by American standards, they all had high iron fences with razor wire, and intimidating signs announcing that security companies

patrolled the neighborhood.

Joseph saw me looking at the signs. 'I think those are only for ... how do you say it... *dis* ...?'

'*Dissuasion*,' I said. Deterrence.

'Ah, yes, of course.'

'Are there burglaries?'

'Not many. But the property owners fear them.'

'What of *La Force NKN*?'

He flinched. 'Well, of course, there are those people.'

I did not pursue the point.

After several blocks, the street on which we had been walking, the *Rue de la Liberation*, brought us to a long row of small market kiosks like the ones I had seen the previous day. Between them wound unpaved paths leading back to mud huts roofed with thatch or rusty corrugated metal. Inside the open-fronted kiosks, men and women dozed on stools or chairs. In one or two, people appeared to be haggling. A few feet up one of the paths, lounging in the shade of a kiosk was a man in a dark suit with a Fedora hiding his eyes. If Joseph saw him, he did not comment. Unconsciously, I moved my hands toward my pants pockets, and realising I had neglected to do so, zipped them both shut.

'Don't worry, *Monsieur*, there are no thieves – very few, anyway.'

'Good.'

But, as if to contradict Joseph's assurances, a few minutes later a tall, thin, ragged, dust-covered figure suddenly sprang at us from a path between the kiosks. Before I could jump back, the man, who was somehow vaguely familiar, brushed against me. I felt a hand at my right pants pocket.

'Shaa!' shouted Joseph, adding what sounded like a furious imprecation in *Ngongiennne*. Several proprietors materialised, waving their arms and shouting similar imprecations.

'Sorry, sir!' the ragged man cried in French. 'Please forgive me!' He spun around and sped back up the path, eluding the mob.

'I, too, am sorry,' said Joseph. The merchants, some still muttering, wandered back to their kiosks. 'I am afraid you have encountered one of our madmen. Very, very sorry.'

'That's okay, Joseph.' My heart was beating fast. 'Not your fault.' With trembling hands, I patted my pants pockets. In the left one, I could feel my wallet. But, in the right one, which had held only a few coins and a roll of mints, the zipper was half open, and I felt something like a crumpled piece of paper.

In such situations, people do not often notice much, but, for some reason, I had observed my accoster closely. His hair was filthy and matted. He wore ragged khaki shorts and a torn, once-white t-shirt. He was barefoot, and his face, arms and legs were covered with bruises, cuts and abrasions. I realised, then, why the madman had seemed familiar: it was Pierre. The image of our polite, meticulously clean super flashed across my mind. Instinctively, I patted the piece of paper in my pocket.

'Nothing missing,' I said.

'Such people are not usually thieves. Would you like to sit down for a moment, *Monsieur*, perhaps to take a cold drink at a kiosk?'

'No, thanks,' I said. 'I have water.' Unlocking the backpack, I took out the

bottle. 'Would you like some?' He shrugged and smiled. Taking a few long swallows, I put the bottle back and re-locked the backpack. 'Shall we?'

We walked on, until, half an hour later, the tall buildings of the *District Centrale* loomed ahead. By then, I was exhausted. The intrepid traveler had never before attempted a long trek beneath the midday African sun.

'I give up, Joseph,' I said, at last. 'You were right.' With a polite smile, he hailed one of the ubiquitous rattletraps. In ten minutes, we were back at the gates of the *pension*. I paid the driver and gave Joseph his *pourboire*, to which he responded with effusive thanks.

As soon as I was in my room, I locked the door and splashed tepid water on my face. I unzipped my pocket and took out the piece of paper. It was a dirty, wrinkled, lined sheet torn from a notebook. In spidery handwriting, it read (in French):

Please, *Monsieur* Shepard, I am so sorry to impose on you, but this is a matter of life and death. Could you be so kind as to meet me tonight at the statue of Major Chaltin, which is on the road inside *Parc de L'indépendance*, near the northeast border of the city? If you will call 23-004-91 at exactly 11 pm, you will be picked up and driven there. The driver will be one of us. Your presence will indicate your willingness to help with an urgent matter. I will meet you with a packet containing literature documenting the struggles and sufferings of our group. I will ask you to carry these documents home with you in your luggage, then take them to the address indicated. When we meet tonight, I will explain more completely. In case I am not there, you may assume I have been apprehended. The driver will drop you someplace where you can have a drink, and you will return by taxi to your *pension*. This should provide you with an adequate cover.

The letter was signed:

Your former employee and (still, I hope) friend, Pierre Auguste Modupe Tshombe, *Secrétaire Générale, Cadre Pour La Libération d' Ngongo (CPLN)*.
P.S. Please memorise the contents of this note and destroy it immediately.

Relying on memory for the other details, I memorised the phone number, then tore the note to bits, flushed it down the toilet, and flopped onto the bed. I imagined being stopped at the airport by *NKN* thugs, who would discover the packet. I would be thrown into a foetid cell, where demands to speak to my consul would be met with derisive laughter.

I filled the rest of the afternoon napping and trying to read. For lunch and supper, I made do with some fruit and crackers I had brought along from New York, in case the airline food was inedible. In the evening, I e-mailed my wife. Trying to be circumstantial, I provided some local color and reassuring noises about my safety. Since I knew she would expect me to mention Pierre, I said that I had unsuccessfully tried the Post Office. After that, I stared at the same page in my book for over an hour.

At 10:30, in their apartment down the hall, the *patron* and his family turned out the lights. The *pension* seemed to have no other guests, at least none that I had seen. At exactly eleven, I called the number from Pierre's note, tiptoed downstairs and, as quietly as possible, un-locked the gates. Re-locking them behind me, I waited in the shadows. A quarter of an hour later, Pierre's man appeared, driving a battered old sedan. He carried me through the city to the statue in the park. No Pierre.

With growing anxiety, we waited forty minutes, until the driver suggested we leave. He dropped me at a bar in the *District Centrale*, where I had my drink, then took a cab back to the *pension*. As quietly as possible, I once again unlocked and re-locked the gates. Creeping up to my room, I re-read the Lake Tanganyika chapter in my guidebook.

After a restless night, at seven the next morning, I ate breakfast, paid the bill, and booked a room for the night before I was scheduled to fly home. When I asked whether I might leave some of my things at the *pension*, the *patron*, polite, but wary, agreed. He had already ordered the same car as the day before, which now carried me to the bus station on the eastern edge of the city.

Purchasing a round-trip ticket, I squeezed onto a crowded bus that carried me to a resort town on Lake Tanganyika, just across the Zambian border. There, I spent four nights at an upscale lodge in Sumbu National Park. It was a lovely lodge in a lovely location, but I was so distracted I could hardly enjoy the spectacular shoreline scenery, or even the blue duiker, a small, rare antelope I was fortunate enough to glimpse from the lodge's Land Rover during a game-spotting ride.

On the fifth day, I returned to Fort Chaltin, arriving in the early afternoon. The car met me. Back at the *pension*, I still saw no other guests. When I asked conversationally after Joseph, the *patron's* reply was monosyllabic. When I said I wanted to stretch my legs after the bus ride, he shrugged.

Deciding to keep on playing the tourist, I spent a couple of hours at the small *Musé d'Ethnographie* at the south end of the *District*, six blocks from the *pension*. On my walk to and from the *Musé*, I could tell I was being watched: the men in black were obvious. After returning to my room for a nap and a shower, I went down to the lobby, where I asked the *patron* to arrange for the car again, and to reserve a table at the *Gril Lapin*, an upscale place I had found in my guidebook. I waited while he impassively made the calls.

The car soon arrived, but with a new driver, short, silent, and scowling. Without a word, he drove me to the *Gril*. Not responding to my overgenerous tip, he said he would return in one hour and sped away. Not fifty feet from the restaurant, two *NKN* agents stood side by side on the pavement beneath a streetlight.

It was now seven-thirty, and the place was about a quarter full. As far as restaurants go, the *Lapin* looked like a good choice: immaculate and chic, with white tablecloths and black bentwood chairs. The waiter, a nervous older man, seated me at a table for two in front of the window. As soon as I was seated, he took my order. I hardly noticed what I chose. A glass of red wine appeared immediately, along with a basket containing two huge rolls.

Five minutes later, as I was crumbling the second roll into pills, a massive black stretch SUV pulled up in front of the restaurant. Trotting around the rear of the car, the liveried driver opened the back right door, and out came... Michael Milevski, my Plumerian super! Or someone very like him. Illuminated by the restaurant's red sign, this Michael wore a shiny, tailored safari suit with a dark fisherman's cap. Like his suit, Michael was shiny, smirking radiantly and glowing with health and confidence.

As he strode into the restaurant, his driver disappeared back into the SUV, which had tinted windows. I have never seen a bulletproof vehicle up close, but there was something tank-like about the side panels of this one. Scanning the room,

Michael spotted me. After a theatrical double take, he approached my table with a shark-like grin and outstretched hand.

‘Well, well,’ he said, ‘of all people! Long time no see.’

I stood up and returned his firm handshake. He exuded an expensive smell. The safari suit was light green and, I guessed, silk.

‘Michael?’

With a perfunctory nod, he sat down at my table. His backside had barely touched the chair when the waiter appeared, now wearing an anxious smile.

‘The usual,’ Michael pronounced, in heavily accented French. ‘But no food tonight, Alain.’ The waiter ran back to the kitchen.

‘Well, Mr. Shep – Bob?’

I nodded.

‘You look well. A little older, of course, but who isn't?’

I kept kneading the bread pills. A few seconds later, the waiter returned, holding aloft a silver tray with two glasses and an open bottle of what looked like champagne. Filling one of the glasses, he set it down in front of Michael and waited.

‘Join me?’ Michael asked.

‘No, thanks.’ I lifted my own glass.

‘Well, here's to ... success.’

I sipped my wine, and he drank some champagne.

‘Ah, delicious. You sure...?’

‘No, thanks,’ I repeated. The waiter withdrew with the bottle. I hoped my coolness would prompt Michael to leave before the food arrived.

‘Still travelling, I see.’ His remark had a sneering undertone.

‘Sort of.’

‘Some day I hope you'll come to Plumeria, my country. Much nicer than this place, which, if I may say so, is the arsehole of the world.’

I jumped at the opening. ‘Well, these days the world is full of arseholes.’

Rather than taking the sarcasm personally, he laughed so hard that several heads turned. ‘Very true. I've been to – and met – many of them.’ He drank more champagne.

‘Not to be rude, Michael, but what are *you* doing here?’

He laughed mirthlessly. ‘Certainly not mopping floors or delivering packages!’

‘I can see that. But what *are* you doing?’

His expression became a caricature of thought. ‘How to put it... let's just say I've been spending a lot of time in Africa lately. I'm a ... businessman.’ He seemed pleasantly surprised by his cleverness in coming up with the word.

‘A very successful one, at least from the look of you. But what *kind* of business, Michael?’

‘Well ... *Bob*, let's just say I deal with several African leaders whose names you could recognise from the news.’

That gave me a good enough idea: probably guns for diamonds, or here in Ngongo, guns for coltan. I dropped the subject, and for a few moments we sat in silence. The waiter re-appeared, carrying a steaming plate of food and Michael's bottle. Consulting his smart phone, Michael waved him off.

‘Sorry, Bob, I'm due at the Defense Ministry an hour ago. I'll leave you to

your dinner.’ He made no move to get up. ‘But before I go – *Bob* – I have a little message for you. Actually, it comes from the President of this country.’ He looked me in the eye, enjoying my fear. ‘Unless you want to sample his special brand of hospitality, you should make no attempt to re-establish contact with that guy who accosted you the other day.’ He laughed harshly. ‘Who, even as we speak, is enjoying the President’s hospitality!’

With a look of false concern, Michael switched from heavily accented French to heavily accented English (which I won’t try to reproduce): ‘*Bob*, as someone who wishes you well, I really hope, *Bob*, you won’t be stupid enough to meddle in things that are *none of your fucking business!*’ To punctuate this rude peroration, he jabbed a finger at me. This time, no heads turned. He stood up and, without shaking hands or even saying goodbye, strode through the door, slamming it behind him. A moment later, the SUV sped off.

Only then did I notice my food, a French stew served central-African style, still hot enough to exude a delicious aroma. I ate what I could, washing it down with a second glass of wine, and paid the bill, which arrived just as my car pulled up to the curb. As I exited the restaurant, I looked to my left. One of the *NKN* men saluted.

Back in my room, it took me a while to calm down. I imagined a second conversation with Michael. ‘Hey, if I didn’t do this, someone else would.’

Had Pierre really been arrested, or had he failed to keep the *rendezvous* for a different reason? What would I do if he, or someone from his group, tried to contact me again before I left the next morning?

At about ten, to escape these unpleasant thoughts, I booted up and checked my e-mail. There were only two messages. My wife’s was short and sweet. She missed me, hoped I was still okay. She would see me soon. Love, xxx.

The second one was a follow-up threat from Michael, this one texted from his phone. ‘BBQ at rsdnce of Jstce Mnstr Sndy pm. Wld lve hve yu for dnr (ha ha). Pstpne flt, see the real Ngng!!! Wll snd car. Chrs, M.’

I e-mailed my wife that I would take a taxi from the airport and see her the day after tomorrow. I also promised to shop and cook dinner before she returned from work. To Michael, I wrote: ‘Sorry, urgent NY business, maybe next time.’ With a forced laugh, I signed it, ‘B.S.’

In the morning, I breakfasted, paid the new bill, and exchanged cool farewells with the *patron*, who was busy checking in some Chinese business types. I was driven to the airport in a random taxi. During the forty-minute ride down the escarpment, I worried obsessively that I would be detained.

Arriving just in time to check in, I entered the small terminal. Wearing the best smile I could muster, I wheeled my suitcase across the air-conditioned lobby to the check-in counter. The moment the perfumed, immaculately uniformed clerk, who was as beautiful as a model, began to process my ticket, her cell phone rang. For perhaps thirty seconds, she listened in silence, her perfect forehead beading with sweat.

‘*Oui, Monsieur Le Capitaine, entendu,*’ she finally said, and closed her phone. Then, to me, also in French, ‘I am so sorry, Sir, but certain formalities require me to direct you kindly to proceed with your luggage to the grey door over there, the one marked “SECURITY”.’ She pointed a long manicured finger.

‘But ...’

‘Please, *Monsieur*, it is necessary. I am sure you will not miss your flight.’

With a sense of doom, I wheeled my suitcase to the door she had indicated, and knocked.

‘Come in, Bob, it’s open,’ Michael called through the door, in English.

Dressed in another shiny safari suit, this one sky blue, he sat staring at a computer screen on a metal desk in a tiny, windowless office with fluorescent lighting. The only ornament was a huge, framed portrait on the wall behind the desk. It was the dictator as he might have looked fifty or sixty years before, wearing black framed glasses and a camouflage uniform. There was no chair for visitors, so I walked up to the desk and stood there. Without a word, Michael gestured for me to come around to his side. Complying, I saw on the screen several thumbnail photographs of a man under what I assumed was extreme torture. In one, he was dangling by his ankles from a meat hook with his hands tied behind him, his entire body covered with blood. In another, a close-up of a silently screaming face left no doubt who the victim was.

Barely able to keep myself from swooning, I leaned both hands on the edge of the desk. Michael’s face displayed a look of false concern with an undercurrent of delight. He play-acted jumping from his seat and clasped me very hard by the shoulder.

‘Please, Bob. Sit down! Sorry there’s no audio. Can I get you a glass of water?’ He gestured to the desk chair. I shrugged him off, and he smiled. ‘No? You’re okay? If you don’t mind, then, I’ll just have a quick look through your bag.’

Not trusting myself to speak, I gestured to the suitcase. He popped the snaps and cursorily riffled through the contents, then snapped the suitcase shut again.

‘Good to go, *mon ami*. *Bon voyage*. Please give my very best to your lovely wife and to all the kind neighbours.’

Hardly aware of what I was doing, I staggered from the office and wheeled back to the counter. With an apology, the clerk escorted me through a door that led out onto the broiling tarmac. In Paris, there was a three-hour layover, during which, still dazed, I sat by a window as the planes landed and took off.

During my first weeks back in New York, I told the story of Pierre and Michael to anyone who would listen: my wife (several times), friends, neighbors, complete strangers. When I began to feel like the ancient mariner and she suggested I ‘give it a rest,’ I subsided.

Two months after my return, a torn, smudged Manila envelope arrived, covered with cancelled stamps and containing incendiary materials. There was a slip of paper with the address of a Human Rights group, but no note. I brought the packet to the address, where an earnest young woman took it, earnestly shook my hand, and uttered an earnest speech of thanks. Since then, six or seven more months have floated past, as time does for the elderly. Hardly a day goes by, however, when my liberal heart does not bleed for Pierre Tshombe.