

## *Dinner at Olympia's*

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No sooner would we get the courage to pick up speed, we would hit a bump, and everything—including us—would fly through the air and rearrange. We had given up traveling on the highway, the lack of maintenance had finally ended in the potholes outnumbering the smooth. But the barrow ditch was not that much better. And from the ditch, I could not see the harvest of maize and sesame, or the livestock headed to water. We were, however, in a hurry. For we were invited to dinner at Olympia's and when you are invited to Olympia's, you don't arrive late.

At the price of some discomfort and a broken mineral water bottle, we had made up for the late start. Ahead I could see, on the underside of the low formless clouds, the rose reflection of the sand dunes. Once we reached the source of that reflection, we would turn left and follow the narrow road that finds its way through the dunes to the sea.

No matter how many times I have seen it, the sight of the blue Indian Ocean, edged by the white beaches of East Africa makes me catch my breath. The contrast between the formless monotony of the flat Somali bush, through which we had just been subjected to an uncomfortable ride, and the cheery bright waves breaking on the reef gives the impression of not being

in the same place.

And in a sense we are not. The coast of East Africa belongs more to Arabia—a strip three kilometers wide and five thousand kilometers long. The demarcation is a ridge of sand and clay that the sea breezes have built to a height of 100 meters. The newest sand to arrive on that ridge collects into dunes that march into Africa. But they fail when the ocean breezes fail, and Africa claims them with flat topped acacias.

From where the road feels its way out from between the dunes on the ridge above the ocean, I could see Merca. An ancient town. The explorers Ibn Battuta and Vasco deGama both walked its streets. Many others walked those streets—shackled—on non-voluntary one way voyages to the slave markets of Arabia.

Merca is a jumble of two and three story homes built of coral blocks and mortared with lime baked from the same coral reefs. Small dunes drift in very narrow streets where only donkey carts can pass. The men dress in white nightshirts, their heads covered by turbans or elaborately embroidered white fezzes. The women in black with black veils. They descend from the sailors and merchants who traded on these shores for centuries. It is a city devoted to the international trade of ivory, gold, and slaves; cargo for the dhows that no longer sail these seas.

But we don't enter the town because Olympia's villa sits high on the ridge. A large brick block. It is not

a villa that a real estate developer would recognize. Not a cute little seaside resort home. No, it is a very solid Italian country house, built to be both a home in which to raise a family and the center of a financial empire.

Olympia met us at the door, a good looking woman of 85 years, dressed in a low cut tangerine mumu. Perhaps a little incongruent in a woman her age but loose fitting, cotton clothing makes sense when you live so close to the equator. Around her neck was a string of huge pearls.

I was introduced, since I was the only one of our little company she did not know. Yusif was a weekly guest and he brought Joe with him a number of times. Joe and Yusif were close friends. They looked like brothers: the same height, the same build, the same hair style. Just a different shade of skin.

Joe and I first came to Somalia twenty years before in the Peace Corps. But he returned in the early 1980's to work in the camps for Ethiopian refugees. During those years he had perfected Somali which is one of the harder languages to learn.

After the introduction we settled into the guest bungalow to shower and change. There was not much time because cocktails are served promptly at six. We sat at a little table on the south side of the house; the sun was settling over the sand dunes; the tide was coming in over the reef where the waves were pushed on and encouraged by a pleasant breeze. Gin and tonics;

gentle and interesting company; a very civilized and an idyllic way to start an evening.

Dinner was served promptly at seven. The long table in the main hall was set with china, crystal, and silver. Three forks on the left, two knives on the right, and a pyramid of five spoons climbing in the center above the plates. The five spoons have bothered me for years. There was a great big spoon to help the big fork twirl up the spaghetti. There was a big spoon for the soup. There was a regular spoon for the dessert and a teeny little spoon for the coffee. But why the fifth spoon?

Olympia apologized for the serving girl's ineptitude. The maid of forty years had retired, too crippled to keep up this big house. This girl was skinny and awkward. Her white smock was too big and her large black bare feet stuck out from under the hem. She kept trying to serve from the right and clear from the left but would remember at the last moment. This added to her awkwardness, embarrassment, and perplexity. I don't blame her for being perplexed, formal dining is a strange ritual. Olympia dined formally every evening whether she had guests or not.

The cook brought in the spaghetti and hovered around for a little while and bantered with Olympia. They were the same age and he had been her cook for nearly 60 years. He wasn't intimidated by a formal dinner party. Olympia was widowed, her children had

scattered around the world, her friends had died or retired back to Italy, and Merca was no longer a center of colonialist activity. Just her, her old cook, and her big house. The spaghetti was the best I ever ate, and I come from a family of Franco-Italian good cooks.

Olympia and I conversed in French. I learned that her mother was French and father Austrian. She grew up in Paris. In 1925 she married an Italian who was newly appointed the physician for the Governor General of Italian Somaliland. I asked if she often visits Paris. “Mais non!” she sighed, “Paris is not like it was.” I wondered if my grandparents had the same impression of Paris in the 20’s. Italian immigrants—my grandfather working in the Citroen factory spraying lead-based paint on automobiles he could never afford. But after the Great War, Paris must have been a magical exciting place for the children of the rich.

Then she reached over and slapped Yusif’s hand. “Hold your fork right!” She snapped. To me, in French she explained, “It is impossible to teach Somalies table manners.”

“They grow up eating with their fingers, you know.” I almost spit out a mouthful of food stifling a laugh. Yusif, forty years old, Sultan of his tribe, vice president of the national bank, owner of a large and prosperous banana plantation, apologized and held his fork correctly.

Theirs was a warm and close relationship.

Every week when he visited his plantation, he stayed in Olympia’s home. He brought her things from Mogadiscio and shepherded her affairs through the labyrinthine Somali bureaucracy. In the early 1970’s, just out of school, he was a bank administrator in Merca. The Italian-controlled banking system had been nationalized by the new dictator. Scientific Socialism was the Somali way to the future, and Olympia needed someone to help her circumvent the currency restrictions. Yusif, unlike most Somalies, felt a need to master the mysteries of European society. Through the years they developed a grandmother–grandson relationship.

She confided to me that not only do Somalies never master the fork, “their water glasses always end up on the left side of their plates.” “They eat with the fingers of the right hand, so they drink with their left.” “No manners!” In sixty two years in Somalia she had been invited many times to eat Somali fashion under a tree in the bush. Somehow she had managed to avoid the indignity. “There are standards to maintain!”

At eight o’clock dinner was over and we moved to the sitting room for brandy and conversation. We were four people each speaking two of four different languages. Conversation worked—but slowly. Olympia and Yusif would speak in Italian. Then Yusif would translate to Joe in Somali. Joe and I would discuss it in English. And finally Olympia and I would speak in

French. Than the conversation would flow the other way, from French to English to Somali to Italian like a slow moving alternating current caught in a loop. But always beginning and ending with Olympia.

I was fascinated by this woman and wanted to know more about her and her life, but etiquette restricted direct interrogation. “Isn’t it something” she commented “Flora leaving her husband for a younger man?” I knew Flora and had met her husband, Bubolini, when I visited their plantation. They both were expert farmers. Everything grew—all kinds of crops and trees, flowers of all colors festooned the edges of the lanes and irrigation canals. Flora marketed vegetables to the ex-pats in Mogadiscio. Twice a week, for five dollars, each subscriber received a two bushel basket of fresh vegetables. Sometimes included in the basket would be a bundle of flowers that would release its fragrance only at night—in pulses—that would spread through the house to surprise you.

“My husband brought Bubolini from Italy to be our mechanic.” “His land is part of the plantation we developed.” “Still,” she added, “who can blame her, he is such a coarse man, and so much older.” “But it is difficult for the children.”

Olympia and her husband cleared and developed 5,000 hectares of bush and jungle along the river and pioneered banana cultivation in Somalia. Every

morning Olympia’s husband would ride a mule across the dunes to oversee the work. He stopped practicing medicine and started a construction business. He built the highways in Somalia and he built a kiln to fire the bricks for their villa.

“The dunes” I asked, sensing an answer to an unrelated question that had been nagging me, “since you have lived here, have they spread?” “No,” she said, “the dunes have always been like they are.” It was as I suspected. The development agencies were spending an inordinate amount of money and energy planting trees to stabilize the dunes. Experts were flying in from the capitals of the world. Four-wheel-drive vehicles were bouncing along the no longer existent highway system. Reports were issued and important meetings held. All to stem the desertification of southern Somalia. But the dunes were no more a problem than they had been 65 years before.

“My husband spent nine years as a prisoner of war in Kenya and was not released until 1949.” “We were fascists.” “Everyone was, you know.” “Those were very difficult years, the children were little, but we survived.” Many years before, while traveling in Kenya, it was pointed out to me that the highway that descended into the rift valley, and a little stone chapel along that highway, had been built by Italian prisoners of war. Could Olympia’s husband have been in charge of that construction?

I never found out because at nine o'clock Olympia excused herself. She told us she was too old to stay up, and unless we told him not to, the guard would turn the electrical generator off at ten. I got the impression that she was not recommending that we stay up any later.

That night I lay in bed mulling over the ironies. A young aristocratic couple—colonialist and fascists—cleared farmland, dug irrigation systems, planted bananas, and built highways. In the process they forced entire villages of recently emancipated slaves to work the fields. The Somali dictator, a fascist of a different color, depended on the export of bananas for hard currency. To keep his government cronies from destroying banana cultivation, as they had ruined all of

the other industries, the dictator cut a deal with Italian organized crime. Bananas grew in organized rows and ship loads of green bananas left for Italy at organized intervals. The workers, however, lived in the mud and filth of unorganized villages, just as ignorant and just as exploited as their ancestors.

With the money, the dictator imported Toyota Landcruisers as rewards for his lieutenants. But the vehicles were quickly destroyed by a road system that never received maintenance because the Minister of Public Works pocketed all the money. Meanwhile, foreign experts, with degrees in Social Forestry, were earnestly endeavoring to fix an ecological disaster that didn't exist. As I fell asleep that night, I was still bothered about that damn fifth spoon!