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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

“BLACK PASSIONARIA” BY EVE BLOUIN

CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.



When I first heard on the news that a Yazidi girl and a Congolese doctor were the recipients of the 2018 Nobel Peace Prize, I was overwhelmed with bittersweet jubilation.

Television channels were broadcasting the same brouhaha of interviews and praises, but the bitter part comes from a closer look at history. Wasn't it pain and sorrow that were being crowned as well? A thorny crown built over decades of conflicts.

Yet, that day, listening to Doctor Mukwege, I did hear a faint voice of change. Sitting on the sofa across the blasting screen I was transfixed by the cacophony that tailgates celebrities. Amid camera flashes, black suit security officers hovered around the newly elected nominees. It looked like everyone was beaming with the thought that integrity had prevailed in our world of greed, violence and vanity. This made for a beautiful evening in Queens, NY where I was staying: the Hindu light festival Diwali illuminated the southeast street corner where the community had settled. The music, joyful and syrupy, only interrupted by the honking of frustrated drivers, so loud that I had to shut the windows.

"But how long will the goodwill last?" wondered the skeptic in me: Nobel prizes don't stop wars. The whole thing felt like good news that bears the threat of a letdown somewhere down the road. I turned off the vacuum cleaner and raised the volume on the TV.

For the past few years, I have been experiencing a swaying of fortune as recession took away most of what I owned. I have thereby joined the convoy of the expendable, middle-aged woman living in times of economic decline. Ever since that time, domestic chores have become my unexpected way of dealing with internal chaos. A once rote and bothersome task is now an appeasing practice that gives me a sense of relevance.

Denis Mukwege, "the doctor who repairs women," is from the mighty basin of Congo where my mother was born. Despite the brutal conflicts that have plagued the region for years with almost 6 million victims, Lake Kivu is one of the most beautiful sights in this world. You can see it if you close your eyes. Mounts and meadows surround the transparent waters while the deep and misty forest canopies stretch their limits between earth and sky. Now the region is best known for being the home of systemic violence against women and girls.

As it turned out, a few days before the Nobel ceremony, I watched *City of Joy*, Madeleine Gavin's stupendous documentary about Denis Mukwege's Panzi hospital for survivors of rape. Since 1999, Panzi hospital has cared for more than 30.000 women. The harrowing scenes that its head doctor must have witnessed have probably left their ugly trail somewhere in his memories, but that didn't stop the compassion in his gaze or the smile on his face. His tireless team stood at his side, along with his hospital director Christine Schuler Deschryver. Then something remarkable happened: It was a long time coming but at last victims spoke out and the world over people were listening, their horrendous stories told in tiny and sweet voices. They were radiant and looked as if something in them had forever conquered evil.

Those Survivors of Sexual Violence (SSV) are the daughters and granddaughters of the women who had rallied for freedom when the Congo won its independence in 1960. "This is the best present," says Christine Schuler Deschryver. Dainty and wrapped in a vibrant colored super wax fabric, like a traditional Congolese woman. She is unambiguous when she claims, "These women are the revolutionary sowing seed that will change the DRC."

Rape has always been a weapon of war and women the first recipients of rage and destruction. But their traumas overlooked, many African women have no choice but to carry on, caring for their families, their souls crushed and their bodies wounded. They are now called SSV, or Survivors of Sexual Violence. Why is it that we still need the Denis Mukweges of this world? Why is the black continent providing a steady stream of tragedies that feeds the narrative?

Most importantly for me, what would the Black Passionaria say? She, who longed to free Africa. The independence fighter Andrée Blouin, otherwise known as my mother.

I was a little girl at the time but I remember that 'she too had a dream.'

Growing up on the continent from Guinea to Congo to Madagascar to Algeria, was a joyous and mellow affair back in the 60s and 70s, the post-independence days. We Africans had taken the reins of our destiny, the future was ours and Pan-Africanism was a handshake away.

Misery came with the wealth buried in the mineral rich African subsoil such as corrosion resistant gold and the tantalum that is to be found in every cell phone on the planet. Endless accounts of predation hide in the mud and blood surrounding Congo's mines. But it was not always like that. In the 50s my Dad used to run Siguir gold mine in Guinea, where I was born. Like King Solomon's, these mines had been there forever and in the open. Since the thirteenth Century, Siguir has provided gold to the Mandingo empire. Sometimes entire families, would walk from neighboring countries to the high plains at the border with Mali. They would dig a hole and collect some gold, as simple as that. Thereafter, the collected gold value was shared three ways, one third would go to the mining company that provided management and tools, one third to the local traditional chief and one third to the guy who found the nuggets. Sometimes a dapper Sierra Leonean dealer would come over and buy everything on behalf of some Anglo company.

Once the proceeds equally distributed, women would cook goat stew with fonio grains and the celebration could start.

A far cry from today.

The circumstances and turmoil of my mother's personal life are as riveting as her political involvement for she was beautiful, rebellious and aware of the imperative of decolonization. As African-Americans were only beginning the strenuous fight for civil rights, she had already emerged as a pivotal figure freedom fighter in Africa.

She had also stood beside the late president Sékou Touré for Guinea's liberation against the French, making it the first sub-Saharan African country to proclaim its independence in October 1958.

In Congo, with a few trucks and her dedicated team of militants Andrée Blouin heroically led Lumumba's MNC (Congolese National Movement) in coalition with PSA (African Solidarity Party) electoral campaign convoy through the savannahs and jungles of Kasai, Maniema and Kivu. She managed to rally tens of thousands to the cause, among them 45.000 were women, giving a landslide victory to Lumumba over the King of Belgium.

A formidable orator, my mother took the lead of the Mouvement Féminin pour la Solidarité Africaine (Female Movement for African Solidarity), her megaphone in one hand and a torch in the other. Standing on a makeshift podium in the bush, with no electricity but a couple of hurricane lamp, she would galvanize into action the illiterate and subjugated African women of the Congo basin.

Her nickname 'Black Passionaria' was inspired by Spanish civil war heroine, Dolores Ibárruri, founder of Spanish Women's organization against war and fascism. But UN Secretary General Dag Hammarskjöld—with whom mum had a few differences—had his own nickname for her: "Congo's 'Madame de Stael'" referring to a prominent and witty French aristocrat who played a key role in the French revolution. Hammarskjöld was executed in 1961, his plane was shot down above the jungles of Ndola, Rhodesia; his assassins were never found.

On the day of June 30th 1960, the day of DRC independence, I climbed up the tamarind tree shading our courtyard to witness the madness in the streets. Crowds of Belgians and Congolese had gathered to see the youthful King Baudouin the First who had come to the Congo for the occasion.

His epithet was "Bwana Kitoko" (The fine young man.) From the highest branches, we could see the convoy of official black convertible cars following King Baudouin to the Sainte-Anne cathedral for the Te Deum celebration before heading to the Palais de la Nation, where the official and solemn ceremony of Independence would take place.

The speakers in the streets of Leopoldville blasted the popular song 'Independence Tcha Tcha' by Grand Kallé and his African Jazz band. Written for the occasion, the song still stands for the revolution anthem.

My mother was born in Central African Republic, more than 850 miles north of the sweeping forests and steppes of the African Great Lakes region. But she knew Congo well, she spoke Sango, Lingala, Kikongo and Swahili, dialects shared by some 290 tribes.

A mixed-race child when they hardly existed in 1920s colonial Africa, she confronted the cruel ignorance of her times: born from a Banziri tribe's girl mother and a French businessman father, she was placed in a Congo Brazzaville orphanage where she was kept out of sight as 'an embarrassing evidence of the commingling of races. The nuns confined biracial children like her to religious penance for their sinful origins. she bore the scars of humiliation like a vile brand and it took her a lifetime to come to terms with her past, if she ever did. "All my life I had to define myself, I am not white I am not black, I am African," she would later say.

At that time, the Cold War was still in full swing and the scramble for Africa's wealth all too ferocious. Throughout the world, Lumumba became the champion of decolonization and human rights, the messianic Martin Luther King of the black continent. But there were forces outside of Congo unwilling to let its vast natural resources remain under Lumumba's control.

On January 17, 1961, when he was only thirty-five years old, Lumumba was kidnapped, tortured, and killed. His body was dissolved in acid.

His assassins have always presumed to have been the Belgians, the CIA, and MI6. International outrage led to worldwide riots, there were fights at the United Nations building in New York City 'about the handling of the Congo situation.' My mother wrote *My Country Africa*, a memoir that her scholar friend Jean Mackellar adapted in English and was published by Double Day in the US in 1983, primarily as an academic book. Reading it, I was privy to her untold story as a trailblazer leading a largely feminist revolution in a segregated colonial society. Her story embodies all the struggles of women, race and identity in the context of racist colonial domination. It is the astonishing story of a woman who was born an outcast and lived to become one of the most daring African revolutionaries of all times. She was criticized for her boldness and because she was never afraid to own her femininity in a sexist world. "Our enemies attack her all the time. Not for what she's done, but simply because she is a woman, and she is there, in the thick of it," Patrice Lumumba once said about her.

"They've promised that dreams can come true, but forgot to mention that nightmares are dreams too," wrote Oscar Wilde, his words sadly best describe Africa's corruption tragedy. Sentenced to death, Mum fled the Congo. She was almost murdered twice by the opposition. My Dad and my brother were thrown into jail, while my sister was thankfully sent to boarding school in Europe. My grandmother and me, on the other end, were kept hostage by the military until they beat her to death in front of me. Regrouping in Switzerland with the help of loyal friends and activists, what was left of our family took refuge in Algiers, as did the African and International independence movements, from the South African ANC to the Black Panther Party. Later, we settled in Paris, France. During the 1970s and 1980s, my mother ceaselessly continued to promote Pan-African ideology through her writings, and was the adviser of numerous African politician-activists and of newly independent African countries first Heads of States.

Andrée died in 1986 in Paris.

Night has fallen in Queens and the rain has started its impatient battering on the windows. I turn off the news and silence falls on me bearing the grimacing mask of a tough reality to return to. Like a protective railing above the pit I hear my mother's voice saying, "Chin up, kid! Victory starts with ourselves winning over hardships and fear." And the fight goes on.



