

THE LABADI SUNSHINE BAR

BY BILLIE McTernan

Labadi

The Labadi *boola* collectors drive around town from as early as four or five a.m. during the week, bandannas covering their noses and mouths, barely keeping the smell of days-old bean stew from being caught in the back of their throats. Their tinny music rings from the wagon, piercing through the area, attracting customers, an alarm for those who have yet to rise and begin their day. As the minitruck circles around, residents, like dutiful ants, scuttle to the roadside to hail the crew with bags of refuse. After a few hours the truck is full. Often the driver dumps the waste at a landfill site on Mortuary Road, close to the Korle Lagoon. Everything from fridges and mattresses to car parts and cholera can be found in it. After paying a fee to the minders of the landfill, they drive off. And as one job ends, another begins. The salvagers take charge of the refuse. They wade through the junk to make sure there is nothing of value left to rot away, then set the junk alight; flames burn through the rot, licking the stench-filled air around them.

It's not uncommon to find dead bodies there: men and women, young and old, surface. The blowflies and maggots always find them first, crawling around lips and poking out of nostrils. The salvagers groan, hand on head. What happened to these people for their bodies to have ended up in this fill? Bankruptcy? Divorce? Depression? Betrayal? A makeshift

burial is given, a short prayer spoken: *In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

But they end it there. No need to get the authorities involved. After all, no one wants to be suspected of a crime they didn't commit.

When Priscilla arrived in Circle, along with all the other travelers venturing into the city, Accra became real. It was loud and obnoxious with cars, commuters, and hawkers vying for space. As the passengers from across the country poured out into the bus station from vehicles big and small, layers of the city's stress settled onto their skin.

Before leaving Aflao, the busy border town between Ghana and Togo, some of the girls had advised Priscilla to look for work in Labadi.

"Osu busy o. Dey get plenty Liberian girls for there," Gifty said, gnawing on a chewing stick. "Dem fill de place."

"Abeg no go East Legon. Too much police wahala," Yomi added.

"Labadi town dey between Osu and Labadi beach," Gifty continued. She spat out wooden splinters from her chewing stick. "You go still find obroni for dat place."

By way of Ghanaian beaches, Labadi is fairly unremarkable. In fact it was quite dirty, the ocean gray with accumulated filth.

Priscilla was directed to Madam Joanna, one of those older women with a perpetual *I am not amused* face, the mouth poised ever ready with a quip should you step out of line. Her darkened knuckles were a telltale sign of regular skin-bleaching rituals. Her hair was shaved low and she wore large gold-hoop earrings, gold bangles, and a collection of necklaces. Her chest heaved in the tight midlength floral dress she wore. More was more for Madam Joanna.

“Good afternoon, ma,” Priscilla greeted.

Madam Joanna, while in repose on a sun lounger, shifted her eyes from her diary toward Priscilla. She peered at her over her sunglasses. The young woman was tall, and she wore her hair in long braids that fell down her back. Her eyes shone.

“Yes?”

“Please, my name is Cici. I am looking for work. I was told you can help me.”

Madam Joanna raised herself from the sun lounger in a bid to create balance between her and the towering Priscilla, who, she noticed, made no attempt to reorder the space between them. “What can you do?”

“Well, I have experience, ma.” Priscilla adjusted the bag so the strap sat firmly on her right shoulder, then ran her hands down her midriff and adjusted the waistband of her skirt where it dug into her skin.

Madam Joanna understood.

During the day, Madam Joanna set up her kebab stand on the beach in front of her bar. All her servers were girls and roughly the same age. Some were slim, others were thick and round. There were short girls and a few taller ones. All were fairly attractive.

Cici would fit right in, Madam Joanna concluded. Madam Joanna offered to set her up. She could live with the others and pay Madam Joanna a portion of her earnings. There was space at the house since one of the girls had recently moved on.

While washing plates at the beach a week later, Cici asked a girl she came to know as Kukua what happened to the previous tenant; she received a shrug in reply. Then a few minutes later, the girl said: “Sometimes it happens like that, a girl just leaves.” Kukua sighed, her shoulders rose then fell. “And that girl, Chrissie, she was my friend. She didn’t even say bye.”

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Of all the chores involved in her work, it was cutting onions that Priscilla hated most. As a child she would often get scolded by her mother for her haphazard chopping skills. The pieces would be all different sizes, as if she were waging a fight with the onion and the chopping board, the knife her weapon. And then her eyes would sting, as though bees had planted themselves in her sockets. But she would continue to chop and slice, averting her gaze, using only her sense of touch. When it was all over, the onion would be in pieces, but in a way, so would she, with tears streaming down her face. She could never tell who came out as the victor of these confrontations.

When customers arrived, Cici's fingers would still be stained with the odor of onions. Madam Joanna said some of them liked that. One regular would give her ten cedis just to sniff her fingers and that would be it. It wasn't too much to ask, she supposed, but some days she resented the work, feeling as though she'd taken a step backward. These new customers were really no different from those she used to receive at the border: truckers with slabs of cement on their trailers and crates of dollars, euros, and pounds hidden between them; travelers with just one bag in tow searching for work along the coast, looking for some comfort for a night; and immigration officers. The pay was a pittance and she'd gotten tired of that life, particularly the officers, the pretend "big men" with false bravado, who were always answering to someone else. Although now she was getting better pay, she was eager to reach higher heights. A nice apartment, a car, trips to Dubai. She wanted more.

It was Wednesday, the day Mr. Boakye would almost always come to the beach with two or three of his employees, usu-

ally the younger ones, to drink a couple rounds of Club beer. He would then order some kebabs for the “boys” to chew on, before heading off to the nearby Labadi Beach Hotel where Madam Joanna would be waiting for him in their regular room, cleaned up from the day’s beach debris.

This had been their routine for over fifteen years. They were much younger then. Those were the days before the hair at his temples completely gave way to his balding scalp, admittedly later than most men. She would tease him about it, but secretly enjoyed watching the granules of sweat cling to his last remaining follicles during sex. She told him that once. Soon after, he began shaving the whole thing off.

Having Mr. Boakye as a client was a smart move that saw her open the bar in the first place. She prided herself on that move, on him. She had specially imported sun loungers and umbrellas—the type you see on beaches in the south of France, the supplier told her—and a regular stock of the most popular foreign brands. Mr Boakye’s connections rarely failed. She called her place the Labadi Sunshine Bar.

The business had changed since Madam Joanna first started working and then taking in girls. In those days it was mostly the Ghanaians who used her services, but in the last ten years there were so many more Europeans, Americans, and Arabs that came to Ghana with all kinds of demands. But Madam Joanna liked to think of herself as a flexible person, able to change with the times to keep her head above water. And like any good businessperson, she learned how to keep the police at bay.

On any given day the crowd at Jokers built up quickly. Priscilla and the other girls spent late nights at the club. Men came to meet women, and women came to make money. Couples sat

outside smoking and people-watching over beer and Smirnoff Ice. You could always tell the new girls. The ones who were more used to wearing slippers than stilettos, knees knocking as they walked. Inside, Jamaican dancehall had women bent over, legs straight, the strobe lights catching the twists and turns of bum-shaking on the dance floor. Groups of young men would shout in chorus to American hip-hop anthems, hands tightly gripped around bottles of liquor.

The Brits and the Europeans, who prided themselves on the fact that they worked on the country's oil rigs, were often drunk and obnoxious. The Indians would sit quietly by the pool tables, watching intently as scenes unfolded before them. The Lebanese were also seated, but with a confidence the Indians lacked; after all, this small space in Labadi belonged to them. And of course there were the Africans. Besides the regular Ghanaians there would be businessmen from Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Cameroon, South Africa, Kenya, and others too.

Priscilla quickly discovered that learning a few words in a prospective client's language helped him warm up quicker, and earned her a few extra cedis for the effort. The other girls had advised that she stick with the whites; they were usually only in town for a short while so were prepared to spend more. Best to find the ones who were on their own too. Avoid large groups.

Madam Joanna warned the girls not to get too close to the clients. "Love can be dangerous," she'd say. But love was never an option for Priscilla. Why have love when you could have freedom? Love was what kept her mother pregnant; recycled promises and pleas for forgiveness always inevitably led to a new baby. Love was what made her grandmother, who'd lived

her whole life in the village, keep a decades-long hope that her childhood sweetheart would return to her after his studies in Accra, and then later Europe as a young graduate, to make “an honest woman” of her. Love was what kept her aunties serving Sunday after-church akple and soup to their drunken, hot-tempered husbands who left them with Saturday-night bruises. If there was one thing Priscilla had learned in her short time on this earth, it was that love can slow a woman down and hold her back.

That’s why she had left home for Aflao, and then Aflao for Accra. Labadi was a good step for her, closer to the life she felt she deserved.

Priscilla took her time getting ready for the night. She wanted a hot bath, so she boiled two pots of water on the stove to fill up her bucket. She lathered her sponge so thoroughly it became a cloud in her hand. This was her time. She allowed herself to feel her body with all its dips and crevices and folds. It was hers. It was important to affirm this daily, to make herself remember. Because, before long, some man might attempt to make her forget.

It was Friday. The sun had just laid itself to rest and Labadi was easing into the night’s life. The sounds of Afrobeats, hiplife, and reggae blasted through the neighborhood, sliding through the louvers, filling the room, and bending the walls until the entire space became a bubble.

Two girls from the beach ambled into the house. “Good evening,” they said in unison.

“Evening,” she mumbled back. Now that they were here they would disturb her.

“You hear say dem deh find annuda person for Dansoman? Weh dey cut am up. Commot ein breasts and tinz.”

“Kai! All dese sakawa boys, na demma rituals b dat.”

Priscilla had heard stories about women going missing after picking up customers on the roadside. The rumors went that groups of young men would abduct these women and make sacrifices for their online fraud activities. The connection didn't really make sense to Priscilla. They were cutting up people? What did they do with their body parts?

"I need some girls for a party," Mr. Boakye said as he got up and reached for the checkered shirt he'd laid carefully on the office chair by the desk. It was the type of shirt afforded to CEOs; those lower on the chain of command tended to opt for a safe white or blue. "I have a new group of guys coming into town," he added, pushing his arms into the sleeves of the shirt. "I need to make sure they are comfortable as they settle in." Mr. Boakye left the top button undone. He had remained slim after all these years, rebuking the bulk of the "big man."

"Okay, how many?" It was Madam Joanna's turn to dress. Unlike Mr. Boakye, time had settled on her stomach, molded by the loss of babies that weren't permitted to stay.

"Ten should work. And Jojo, they should be fine too. Strong. Healthy."

It had been awhile since Mr. Boakye had called her Jojo. She hadn't realized how much she'd missed it.

"This one is serious business. A lot of money can come."

"Of course, darling. I will arrange for it."

"And you will come. To keep an eye on them. Nothing can go wrong."

"I will make sure everything runs smoothly for you," she purred.

"For us," Mr. Boakye corrected. He put on his suit jacket and kissed the crown of her head.

"For us," Madam Joanna repeated.

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“Give me a Savanna,” Priscilla said to the barman at Jokers, who silently obliged. She generally had a rapport with the waitstaff and often got free drinks until someone offered to buy her one. But this was not her guy, so she’d probably have to pay for this one.

“Eight cedis.”

She reluctantly handed over the money, picked up the bottle of cider, and took a sip. After a quick scan of the room, Priscilla observed a few regular faces. Tina, the po-faced girl who came to her aid last week after an altercation with a taxi driver; long-legged Hawa, who swore that her incense was a sure way to get clients up and out in less than ten minutes; and Serwaa, the girl who never came out on Saturday nights, because she needed to be up early for church the next morning.

She didn’t want to get too close to the other girls. Yomi and Gifty had told her that Accra was not like Aflao. “Na so everybody dey carry dem matter,” one of them had said. She nodded at Tina before returning to her drink, tapping her white acrylic nail on the side of the bottle, tracing lines between the sweaty droplets.

“Can I take this seat?” a voice from behind asked.

Priscilla turned to face a tall white man. His hair was gray and spiky; she imagined it might prick her if she ran her hands through it. His mustache looked just as sharp. His skin was blotchy, not yet used to the sun, she assessed. He wore cargo trousers and a pastel-green shirt, tucked in and belted. She put him in his fifties.

“Oh, yes. Of course,” she replied.

“So what’s your name, pretty lady?”

“Cici. Yours?”

“Stuart.”

“Akwaaba, Stuart,” Priscilla welcomed.

“Medaase,” he responded in Twi. “Do you like to dance, Cici?”

“Yes, I like to.”

“Let’s dance.”

Cici dreaded dancing with the white customers. Their arms and legs were never in sync. But this guy smelled expensive, even if he didn’t look it. So Cici took the lead, leaning herself into him, guiding his hands around her hips and thighs.

“We don’t have to stay here, you know.”

Priscilla didn’t like going to her customers’ hotels. Most of the time it was obvious she was working and she preferred to be more discreet. Now, anyone who knows of the Grace Jones Hotel knows that it is a place for short times. Priscilla frequented it often enough for management to keep a room reserved for her—room 102.

“What would you like to do first?” Priscilla asked.

Cici was getting too comfortable, Madam Joanna thought. Once they start to get comfortable they start to lose respect. And that was one thing she would not stand for.

“Cici!” Madam Joanna yelled from her front porch, clipping her toenails with concentration and precision.

“Yes, ma?” Priscilla rushed to her side. Although she was getting tired of living under Madam Joanna’s roof, she was still far from being able to live in an executive apartment in Labone. The ones with the preinstalled kitchens with glossy cabinets and counters, and floor tiles you could see yourself in. For the time being, she had to do as she was told.

“So you’ve been with that same man every day this week again, ehn?”

“Oh. Yes, ma.”

“Don’t forget what I told you. You are here to work.”

“Yes, ma.”

“And Cici, your rent and repayment will soon be due.”

Priscilla was growing accustomed to Stuart’s company. She’d not had such close contact with one customer so intensely before. He was actually quite polite and kind, not something she was used to. This had to mean something. If she was smart she could get some good money from him, enough to rent a nice apartment and maybe even start her own boutique for women’s clothing. She’d always felt she had a good eye for fashion. She could travel to Dubai and China to buy bags and shoes and dresses; it would be a good business. This could be her chance. And if he was smart, she could be his forever.

“She reminds me of you, Jojo,” Mr. Boakye reminisced. “From back in those early days.” He took a sip of the translucent brown liquid, whiskey probably. The ice was melting in the tumbler. His eyes followed Priscilla as she poured glasses of nondescript alcohol for a group of guests. She made a joke and they all laughed. The man with the mustache, laughing longer and harder than the rest, placed his hand on her back and kept it there a moment.

“She’s sharp, like you were.” He leaned in and placed a hand on her shoulder. “Ambitious. I want her.”

Madam Joanna’s skin pulled to a tautness. The time had come again, she thought, mistaking Mr. Boakye’s intentions.

Madam Joanna hadn’t received any clients for several years, not since she started taking in other girls. Mr. Boakye was all she had left. He was more than a client. He was all she had.

“Hmm?” Mr. Boakye pushed.

“I can arrange it for you,” she whispered. “You don’t worry.”

“Wonderful.” Mr. Boakye got up and walked over to speak with the crowd that was being entertained by Priscilla. Madam Joanna felt her stomach contort into a hollow cave.

In room 102, Priscilla and Stuart were wrapped in each other’s arms. It had been like this for weeks. Sometimes they would go for a drink at a spot on one of the other beaches in town. They’d even eaten dinner together a few times; it was Priscilla’s first time tasting Chinese food.

Stuart lifted himself from the pillow and rested the side of his head on his hand. He poked his chin over Priscilla’s shoulder. “Cici baby, I might be able to stay here with you for longer. My time is getting extended,” he said gleefully.

“Stuart, I need to get out of here.” She turned to face him.

“What’s going on, baby? Talk to me.” His wet breath on her lips made her nauseous.

“I just have some trouble, that’s all. And I need to fix it quick.”

Stuart sat up. “Okay, okay, what do you need? What can I do?”

Madam Joanna sat by her bedroom window listening to the praise and worship songs her church neighbors would carry for over an hour. Their haunting voices always filled her with melancholy and memory.

*Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes;
Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven’s morning breaks, and earth’s vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me . . .*

As the singing came to an end she picked up her diary and flipped through it. Three months. Tomorrow it would be three months since Cici arrived, and she was still waiting for her money. Madam Joanna didn't like to feel as though the wool was being pulled over her eyes. She would not be made a fool of, she affirmed. She provided a good service in this business. There had been enough waiting around. Madam Joanna stuffed her feet into her slippers and marched to the Grace Jones.

"Where is Cici?" Madam Joanna barked at the receptionist.

"Erm," the receptionist held his breath, "I'm not sure, madam."

"What of the white man? Have you seen them? Where are they?"

"Maybe check her room, madam."

"Her room?"

Madam Joanna rushed down the corridor to number 102, her will moving faster than her body would allow. She banged her fist against the door, her bangles clanking with every thump. "Cici, open this door! If you're not careful I will deal with you, ehn!"

After several moments, Cici opened the door.

"So you people are together again."

Madam Joanna regained her composure and looked past Cici to Stuart, who sat on the bed with his pale legs poking out from the cover. As he stood up, Priscilla backed into the room and sat on the bed. Madam Joanna and Stuart locked eyes, then both turned to Priscilla. The air shifted.

Madam Joanna had noticed Priscilla when she first arrived at Labadi Beach. A lonely, pretty little thing who walked with a slight air of arrogance afforded to the young. She seemed

plain, but that was good, she'd be easy to work with. Before Priscilla had even approached, Madam Joanna could tell she wasn't new to this game. She would keep an eye on her if she was going to work. A girl like that could bring in good money, and there were high-bidding customers to appease.

The day after Madam Joanna went to the Grace Jones Hotel to look for Priscilla, it was almost business as usual. The kebab stand had been set up. The bar was stocked. The girls were chopping up slivers of gizzard and goat meat. But Madam Joanna wasn't there. Cici was. Making directives, as the body of the previous owner of the Labadi Sunshine Bar washed up into the Korle Lagoon.