

Episode 2: *Obruni Ko Skuul*

By Amber Lockridge



Though my alarm clock begins singing "Get up. Get up, it's morning" at 5:30 a.m., the roosters have usually woken me first. The goats soon follow with their terrifying screams and retches. It's dark out but I take solace that in ten minutes the sun will be up. It's the middle of November and the sun rises at 5:45! I love Ghana!

Stumbling first into my house sandals and then into the kitchen, I retrieve the straw hand-held broom and head for the living room. Then, like every morning, I bend over and sweep the floors in all the rooms of the house and the outside steps. Afterwards, I dust the windows and chairs. When I first arrived, this took me forty-five minutes and left me panting. Now I do it in thirty without skipping a heartbeat, the muscles in my arms standing out as they never have before.

At 6:00 I drag a bucket of cold water into the shower to take my bath. There are taps in the house but the water runs sporadically, never heated, and never in the morning. So bathing consists of *cold* water, plenty of soap, and a cup. On a good day, I've cleaned and primped and ironed my school uniform by 6:30.

The rest of my family is now up and about. My younger sister, Boatema, has left boiled oats on the stove and is probably out buying a loaf of fresh bread. My youngest sister, Abena, is a vivacious two years and is generally walking around screaming for my nineteen-year old sister, Maameaba, to come and bathe her.

The eldest sister, Ama, is a seamstress with wild crazy hair that stands straight up from her head in the mornings. My mother seems to spend most of the morning yelling at Boatema to hurry up. There are six of us all together, and all female. The house is alive with activity and I've never felt so fortunate.

At a quarter to 7:00 I walk down the road to meet my friend Anita and we head off for school. We walk a good 10 minutes to the nearest junction. People are everywhere. Women are selling *cocoo*, ballfruit, and fried plantain. Children are playing in the street and a long parade of men has lined up outside of the public toilets. As we pass, the children call out "*B'roni*", a shortened form of *Oboroni*, a term for white foreigners. At the junction we board a tro-tro to

school. This is a kind of small bus into which the driver packs passengers like sardines. The fares, however, are cheap and it's the most popular way to travel.

My school, Archbishop Porter Girl's Secondary School, is a Catholic boarding school, though I am a day student. Consequently, there is mass for 45 minutes every morning, which always includes a bible reading. Each class lines up in the courtyard. We must look like stalks of corn in neat even rows with our golden colored skirts and cream cotton blouses.

"Our father, who art in heaven..."

As I mumble along, I wonder for the hundredth time if my hypocrisy is ruder than my abstinence would be. I'm similarly ambivalent about the national pledge. Do I really pledge myself to the service of Ghana my motherland? As a result, I usually mouth the words without saying them. Somehow, that seems like a good compromise. After prayers, the headmistress or headmaster will spend no less than ten minutes berating us on a seemingly endless list of misbehaviors. When that's through, we are permitted to leave, a row at a time, while marching in place to the song of the day.

Back in the classroom, I glance warily at my desk. I know I will be here for at least eight hours and most of it will be spent sitting on that hard chair. I keep hoping my buttocks will somehow gain calluses but, as always, my rear is sore by midday with four hours to go. The classroom itself is large but most of the space is consumed by desks. There are twenty-six girls in my class, all black with hair cut within half an inch of their heads. Though it's been two months, I'm still their Barbie doll. Inevitably, one girl or another will plait and make-up my hair for me by the end of the day. We are the Form 2 Visual Arts girls, with a notorious reputation for garrulousness. And without doubt, these girls like to talk. Ghanaians, in general, gossip more than Minnesotans but this is the furthest I've ever seen it.

"Such and such a girl looked sideways at such and such a teacher and the headmaster saw it but hasn't said anything yet..."

The rumors never seem to stop and I've had to correct facts about myself more than once.

Ideally, the teacher should arrive at 8:00 but then we're on African time. No one is worried if he hasn't arrived by 8:20 and it's at least not surprising if he doesn't come at all. There are never substitutes and the teachers seem to pick their own hours. I have yet to see an entire class held on a Friday. Fortunately, our math teacher arrives this morning sometime after eight. As he walks in, the class rises to attention and greets him formally. He demands chalk from the school prefect before telling us to sit down. Mr. Kofi is a small man with red eyes and a lot of energy. When he talks, it's as though he has so many words and thoughts bouncing

around in his brain, it's all he can do to force them out of his mouth. The words tumble out rapidly on top of each other while he stutters and makes wild gestures with his hands. Unfortunately, he's easily irritated and the girls' have great difficulty with math. He spends the lessons jumping around, throwing chalk, and shouting.

"Don't you know anything? I don't know what's wrong with you girls! You don't use your heads!" At first I was shocked that he insulted the class so often but, in fact, most of the teachers behave that way. We counteract it by laughing constantly. The worse the offense or punishment inflicted, the more we laugh. It's the only way to avoid being completely discouraged.

The next class is Agricultural Science. The teacher is older, more subdued, but also more dangerous. He's liable to hit a girl for not paying attention. In all, there's far less laughing in his classes. However, he has a manner that commands respect and I enjoy his classes more than any other. He starts by delivering a short lecture on, for example, poultry housing. You are not allowed to take notes during this time, on the principle that you should be listening intently. Next, he answers general questions on the lesson. Finally he gives word for word dictation, which we copy into our notebooks. This is necessary because there are so few available textbooks. Everything you learn comes straight from the teacher and your notes.

All of the classes proceed with this general format but their order changes each day of the week. The system works in such a way that the science classes come once a week and the art electives, two or three times. School closes at 2:50 p.m. but day students are not allowed to leave until 4:00 p.m. I usually slip off to the air-conditioned computer lab to relieve myself of the intense heat and humidity. There are ten computers, recently donated, with no Internet access. Solitaire, however, never quite loses its appeal.

When the bell rings for closing, I meet Anita at the gate and we board a tro-tro towards home. As we walk from the junction, I admire the colors of Africa. The dirt is brick red with trees everywhere. Bright green fronds and tall leaning palm trees. My town, Takoradi, is on the coast so a good ocean breeze is usually blowing. Young and old alike greet the two of us as we pass them lazily on the road.

Anita and I gossip about the day or often discuss politics. Ghana will hold its presidential elections on December 7th, 2000. Since President John Jerry Rawlings is stepping down for the first time since the country gained its independence from Britain, it will also be the first time Ghana will change its government through a democratic process. Conversations are usually heated.

At home, I wash the dust off my feet and change into a brightly colored skirt and tank top. If there are dishes in the kitchen, I wash them before settling on the verandah for a quiet moment to watch the sellers pass by with buckets balanced on their heads. Eventually I am dragged into a game by Abena and we both practice Fante by pointing at objects and naming them.

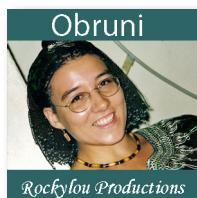
A meal is ready around 6:30, though it was started long before them. Tonight it is *fufuu* and *abenkwan* (Palm nut Soup). The soup is made from the juice of pulverized palm nuts together with crab and fresh fish. The *fufuu* is made by boiling cassava root and plantain. These are laboriously pounded with a large stick and mortar until they form a dough-like substance. The final product is divided into balls and dipped into the soup before swallowing. I eat with my hands like the rest of my family, though we never eat together at the table. It's not my favorite meal, though a Ghanaian specialty. I prefer *kinke*, a sharp tasting paste-like ball wrapped in banana leaves. Ghanaians tend to alternate between a few main dishes. Most of these consist of a carbohydrate, such as cassava or yam, eaten with a variety of tomato-based stews. Fish is a part of almost every meal. My mother and I share a special tradition of watching the news at 7:00. We're the only family members that never miss a night. My mother likes to talk at the TV and the laughter is continuous. Abena never fails to point out the white people who appear on the screen.

"Mama, look it's Auntie Kukuwa"

Kukuwa is my African name, meaning Wednesday-born. Abena has adopted this name for all white people.

My evening activities vary. Often I study or work on a drawing for my art classes. Occasionally, I visit my friend Ato for a lesson on Fante. At 9:00 I bathe and head for bed. The sea breeze blows through the windows and I can hear people out walking or dogs barking. The hum of the sewing machine never stops and I'm rarely awake for long after my head hits the pillow.

I don't keep a diary in Ghana. I don't want to be reminded of the bad memories. Instead I find that each day is full enough to live continuously in the present. It's an African way of life and I only hope there's no turning back.



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