Wesleyan University The Honors College

Bayelemali

by

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Bayelemali

"Transformation"

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For my two families

Mɔgɔ tɛ so fin a fenkin ma.
—Bambara Proverb

One does not buy a horse just from hearing the sound of his legs.
Translation by Mahamadou Lamine Bagayoko

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Doctor without Borders

They tell me I didn't kill him, but my eyes have seen his eyes turn red, bloodshot from lack of oxygen. My ears have heard his choking gasps, his final breath. None of this was my intention. My purpose was simple, my motives clean. I only wanted to work, have a job, be as successful in life as I was in school. I am a precautionary tale. Learn from my mistakes, so that when you return at the end of your journey, you will be able to go home to your cabin in Nebraska, your condo in Iowa City, your cardboard hut near the on-ramp to Route 6… anywhere but here. I am in hell. Until I received a letter from my ex, I didn't even know my own address. In case you take pity on me, here it is: Dr. Len Brommel (Box 134), Bloomfield Gardens Psychiatric Ward, Iowa City, Iowa.

* * *

The morning I met with the Dean, I woke up to the faint aromatherapy scents and gentle light of the Progression Wake-up Clock I had ordered from

SkyMall. I listened contentedly to the machine's ocean surf and birdcalls, dreaming of the beginning of my new life. In a matter of hours, I would be a Psychiatry Attending at the University of Iowa School of Medicine. With my new salary, I would be able to move out of the basement of my ex, Lynda. I would have a secure job and, finally, a place of my own; I had lived with my mother until moving in with Lynda during my intern year. Now, Lynda allowed me to stay until the moment I finished my residency, *whether they're nuts enough to give you a job or not.*

My alarm roused me from my reverie, and I showered and dressed. I had laid out my clothes the night before: brown leather loafers I had just shined, a brown leather belt to match, pressed khakis, a starched white oxford and a beige sweater vest. I blow-dried and combed my hair into place. I thought I had come to terms with my age several years ago at my thirtieth birthday, but now I barely recognized the man reflected back at me in the bathroom mirror. I had lost weight since the break-up, eating mostly frozen dinners and ramen. My chin protruded sharply from my long face, and gray hair, creeping forward from the cowlick on top of my head, mixed unevenly with the dark brown until thinning away to nothing around my temples. A deep vertical wrinkle divided my forehead in two. When I was a baby, my mother's friends thought I had had surgery, and my mother was so ashamed that she had not taken me out in public until I was two and had grown into the cleft a little.

Although my meeting with the Dean was at eleven, I allowed myself a glass of red wine in anticipatory celebration. In my eagerness, I pulled the cork out of the bottle too vehemently and sloshed wine onto my beige sweater.

"Shit," I cursed under my breath. This spoiled my plan for a flawless morning.

I arrived at the Dean's office early, and after a brief wait, he invited me to take a seat opposite him in his office. He sat with his trademark posture, his back so straight that just looking at him made you uncomfortable. Instinctively, I slouched a little in my chair. The Dean had had spinal surgery back in the Stone Age when they still implanted metal poles in people's backs. This cured his scoliosis but left him walking like a penguin in a straight jacket.

"I think congratulations are in order," the Dean said, forcing a smile. "How do you feel, Doctor Brommel?"

"Stupendous."

"Look, Len," he said, slumping back in his chair as only a man with metal bars flanking his spine can. "You've been here for quite some time, as an undergraduate, too, if I'm not mistaken. Don't you want to explore the world before settling down to teach here?"

"I don't."

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this." The Dean grimaced. "Len, the thing is… well, the thing is that we had you teach here during your residency because that's the policy in a teaching hospital, but Len…"

"I did everything I was asked to do!" The panic in my voice infuriated me.

"I'm sure you did, Len. I'm sure you did. Let's talk honestly, let's be real, Len, what do you say? Get down to the root of the matter. Let's talk about this rotation's student evaluations. Have you read them?"

I said nothing; a feeling of dread spread in my stomach.

"Let me share a few snippets we've put together, alright?"

"We?" My palms felt clammy.

"The Board and I. Not to worry, Len, not to worry. Let's just have a listen."

The Dean read aloud for a few minutes: *He practically recites the textbook during rounds… he's stubborn, doesn't listen to us, uptight—everything has to be just the way he likes it… hardly talks to the patients before diagnosing them… I learned more watching Oprah's psychology special… has he ever left Iowa?* The Dean hunched his shoulders, cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Len, I know that must've been rough to hear. But you see our problem, don't you?"

"You're not giving me the job." This couldn't be. "What am I supposed to do?"

"Len, we're not leaving you out to dry," the Dean said.

"She'll never let me stay. I've got nowhere to go." I barely understood my own words.

"You're not listening to me, Len." The Dean waddled over to my side of the desk and grasped my shoulder. "There is a job for you; it's just not here."

"What?"

"The board has a connection in Africa, in Mali. It's a… unique opportunity. There's a Psychiatrist there now from the University of Wisconsin… no, Indiana. Jeb Mossurt. He's just about done with his six months now, and you could take his place. Just think of it, Len. He runs his practice right out of his home in the capital. The program director will set you up with a translator right away. Just go, Len. Get some real-world experience. Then, if you still think this University is the place for you—of course don't feel pressured to, we won't be offended if you find your calling over there; so many people do, you know, find their calling abroad—well, then you can reapply for a position here."

Africa. I felt the wind knocked out of me. My mouth went dry. Africa… the farthest I had travelled was a trip to Nebraska for Christmas with Lynda's family. Africa. My breathing quickened; blood pounded in my temples. I had to get out of this office. My face must have turned red because suddenly the Dean was bending over me, his back inflexibly straight. His face was closer to mine than anyone's had been in a long time.

"It's a good opportunity, Len," he said, backing away abruptly. "Why don't you sleep on it?"

Silence hung in the room, thick with my suppressed panic and his guilt that crushed all pretense of a good opportunity like a heavy blanket on a fire.

"I have to go." My chair scraped loudly across the floor as I pushed it back from the desk. I followed the circular corridor from the Dean's office aimlessly, resentful of the people around me carrying on with their normal lives. Passing the Dean's door again, my vision blurred with tears; a burning lump rose in my throat, and I swallowed it back painfully. Quickly, I found an empty bathroom and locked the door behind me. I stared at myself in the mirror. How could I look the same as I had this morning? I noticed a small stain near the hem of my second beige sweater of the day; wine must have splashed onto it as I had cleaned up the spill. "Shit." I choked back a laugh. None of this was funny, but I couldn't help it; the more I tried to catch my breath, the funnier everything became. I had made it through four years of Psychiatry residency, but I had scared away my girlfriend in the process, had no job and no way to afford my own place! Tears streamed down my face as I erupted into hysterical laughter.

I looked back at my reflection through blurry eyes. My furrowed brow deepened the vertical wrinkle in my forehead, and my face looked as if it had cracked in two. Suddenly, nothing was funny anymore. My head fell into my hands, and I tasted the tears pooled in my palm. I knew I had no choice. If I didn't have a job, I would be back with my mother or on the street. Lynda was serious; I had squatted too long. I had to take this. I walked back to the Dean's office and, without looking at his face, told him to set up the job in Mali then and there.

That night, I told Lynda about the position and persuaded her to let me stay in her basement for the three weeks preceding my departure.

"Why on earth," she asked. "Why on earth?" I told her I wanted to do something more important than teach medical students in Iowa.

She laughed cynically. "It just seems so unlike you. Things will be very… different there. You know that, right?"

"Lynda, I'm aware that the continents differ. But really, I imagine they'll be lining up outside my door for a taste of real medicine."

"You're insane," she said. "You just don't see what you're getting yourself into."

"I'm more than qualified for this."

"You're out of your mind."

Eventually, she agreed to let me stay if I promised not to ask to move back in upon my return. I could even store a few items in her basement.

* * *

Three weeks passed as one, so occupied was I with preparations for the trip. I zipped my life into three suitcases: one for clothes; one for antiseptic and

antibacterial scrubs, wipes, hand sanitizers, Band-Aids, ointments and air purifiers; and one for antipsychotic drugs for my future patients. The night of my departure, I threw a frozen lasagna into the microwave and watched it circle until the swirling lump of orange cheese made me dizzy. I tried to appreciate good old American cuisine for the last time, but I was too nauseated to eat, and I threw the lasagna away. I folded my Murphy bed into the wall and taped up the last of my storage boxes: albums of my baby pictures from my mother, my first place ribbons from middle school science fairs, my college cap and gown. I was taking several Psychiatry textbooks with me, but I stored the rest of my collection reluctantly in two big bins. Aside from my college and medical school diplomas from the University of Iowa, both of which I was taking with me, I possessed two framed photos: one of my mother that I put in a box, and one of Lynda and me, my arm over her shoulder, standing in front of Chimney Rock in Nebraska. Lynda looked beautiful in the picture; a bush of curly brown hair fringed her face, and you could just make out the amber highlights she had had done for the Christmas party. She wore whitewashed jeans, and the red collar of a polo folded over her sweater. I stood next to her in pleated khakis and a black knitted sweater from my mother. Lynda looked up at me; her cute pug nose—I stuck my face closer to the photo—was scrunched in an adoring smile.

I shoved the photo next to the portrait of my mother and brusquely sealed the box shut. I collapsed into the non-reclining armchair that I had had since college, touched its felt seat, smelled its old smell—too familiar to have a real scent. Suddenly exhausted, I made one last push to cover my chair with a Dust-be-Gone

plastic hide and triple-checked that my windows were locked. Finally, with nothing left to do, I went upstairs to say goodbye to Lynda.

She was cleaning the kitchen; a tie-dyed scrunchy held her hair in a disheveled bush behind her head.

"You look awful, Len," she said, leaning tiredly on the handle of a mop.

"You look lovely, yourself."

"You're such an ass. But I mean it, I'm worried about you. I don't think this job is a good idea."

I told her that was nonsense, that is was too late, anyhow. I kissed her on the cheek, lingering a moment too long. She pulled away, undisguised pity on her face.

"Just try to get along with people over there. Don't micromanage everything, okay?"

"You're going to miss me."

Lynda grunted and resumed mopping the floor. She was right, though, in the end. We had meshed well for the first two years, until one day, the rose-colored glasses fell off her nose, and her boyfriend's organization was suddenly obsessive-compulsive, his confidence obstinate and narrow-minded. Only now, looking back, do I see just how well she knew me.

* * *

Later, Lynda would testify that she had known it wouldn't go well over there, that with me, it couldn't have gone well. The judge said, *Clearly it wasn't the right job for someone like you.* But they weren't there. They don't know what I saw. They don't know what *he* was capable of, what *he* was trying to do. At the hearing, Lynda cried. The Dean lowered his double chin to his chest and waddled toward the

courtroom door. On his way out, he turned his whole torso to throw me a backward glance, pleading for forgiveness, I think. I haven't seen him since that day. And now here I am, an inpatient in a psychiatric ward. My roommate drools and hollers about his feet turning into claws.

Sometimes, when they clean the hallways at Bloomfield Gardens, all I can think of is the stale lemon scent of airport cleaner. I cringe when talk radio comes on in the recreation room, for all I hear is the loudspeaker announcer from the airport: *Can Mister Brommel please report to gate three, Mister Brommel to gate three please.* And when I smell that stale lemon or hear that grating voice, anxiety rushes in like floodwater. I keep a brown paper bag on my nightstand and another behind my bathroom sink. I see Dr. Fill-me-up-with-Lexapro twice a week, but we have gotten nowhere. We will get nowhere, because he was not there and he does not and cannot understand. I should not be locked up in this place. I am not dangerous. I am not crazy. It was self-defense.

* * *

Everyone looked sickly in the harsh blue glare of Terminal C's overhead lights. The filthy waiting area of Iowa's Quad City International Airport was crammed with several hundred impatient people. My flight delayed an hour, I sat at my gate, watching the infuriatingly disorganized airport staff create utter chaos among the hoards of frustrated passengers. When finally I boarded the plane two hours later, I waited in the aisle as a very large blond woman tried unsuccessfully to fit her dog cage under her seat. I offered to help, but the large woman yelled something in French—incomprehensible but clearly unappreciative—and continued holding up the line. At last, I collapsed into my seat. As the plane took off, my

heartbeat quickened, and my hands slipped off the chair's armrests, painting the plastic with streaks of palm sweat that glimmered in the cold fluorescent beam of my personal reading light.

According to the mink-clad grandmother next to me, whose corpulent thighs had slowly overtaken my seat, edging their way under the armrest and spreading out like a cancerous growth so that I ended up cross-legged and leaning as far to the right as possible without disturbing the ever-sleeping young man beside me, the landing was *so very, very smooth.* I disagreed silently, clamping my lips together and praying to the God I did not believe in that I would not get sick until I was off the aircraft. As the plane taxied for what felt like an eternity, I concentrated on breathing and kept my eyes on the airsickness bag in the seat pocket in front of me. I vomited the moment I stepped onto the metal steps that led down to the tarmac. I sat down unsteadily on a step and closed my eyes. My limbs felt like deadweight in the heat; I thought I might drown under its pressure. The plane slowly emptied around me, but I could not find the will to stand until a flight attendant helped me up and into the airport.

The baggage claim was deserted by the time my three black suitcases appeared on the whining conveyor belt. I watched my only pieces of home circle slowly around the barren room. Filthy, white tiled walls dripped with condensation, and a broken metal bench rested in a corner, its seat splintered in two. My head throbbed with exhaustion and dehydration. I sat lightly on the cracked bench, waiting for the Indiana doctor, Jeb Mossurt, to arrive. I had planned to overlap with him for a week, but he had fallen ill and had needed to return to the States early. He

had kindly arranged to fly out the night of my arrival so he could meet me in the airport.

"Len?" A weak voice echoed around the tiled room. Jeb Mossurt walked feebly into the baggage claim, toting a small carry-on behind him. He was very short and dangerously thin. His almost six-month stay in Mali had not treated him well; his skin hung from his face as if it had been stretched and then released. "So sorry I'm late," he said softly.

"Not at all." I reached to shake his hand.

"Jeb," he introduced himself. His hand drooped into mine. Up close, I saw dark veins running down his neck, and even in the bluish light of the baggage claim, I could tell he was jaundiced. "Let's sit. I've only got a minute before I board."

I knew I should have had many questions for him, but facing this ailing man who was supposed to tell me how to live here, I could think of nothing except: What had made him so ill?

"You'll live where I lived," Jeb said so feebly that I had to lean in to hear him. "It's a nice house. I ran the practice from the office in the back. I advertised a lot in the beginning, so there's been a pretty constant flow of people coming by to be seen. You shouldn't have a problem with that. I saw a lot of cuts and fevers, malaria and the like. Psychiatry, well, it doesn't really exist here…yet, of course. That's what you and I are here for, right? So that'll be fine. You'll need to use a translator unless you speak French or Bambara?"

"Bambara?"

"Right, well, my translator's about to move to the North with her new husband, but she said her cousin would do it and I left his number on your desk. I've

asked him to meet you at the house at eight tomorrow morning to show you the hospital; it'll give you a good feel for the medical scene here. Oh, and the director's been quite sick. I saw him once in the beginning, nice fellow, very old, but I haven't been able to reach him since. Might've died, I suppose. You can keep trying, of course. Well, that's it, I think. You'll be fine. This place is great."

"Jeb—" I couldn't help myself. "I heard you've been sick. Do you know what you have?"

Jeb's face dropped. "Don't have a clue. I'm going back to Indiana for some tests. I was doing really well, meeting lots of people. Everyone's so friendly here. Mali's fascinating. Then about two months ago, I got sick: fevers, chills, vomiting, you name it. At first I thought it was something I ate, because I improved for a little while, but about a month ago it all came back, just worse." Jeb paused; his eyes seemed to retreat from me and the outside world. "Sorry, sometimes the nausea hits hard for a second." He shook his head. "Anyway, I think it must be in the water. I just installed a filter in the house, so you should be fine."

At that moment, the loudspeaker crackled to life. *Monsieur Mosteurt, aller à la porte deux s'il vous plait. Monsieur Mosteurt à la porte deux.*

"That's me," Jeb said. "Here's for the front door—" he fished an old-fashioned iron key from his pocket. "Good luck, Len. Have fun here; I'll miss it."

It took everything I had, not to run after him and fly back to New York. Jeb's sickly appearance left me spooked. Perhaps he had just been out of his element here and had forgotten to take some necessary health precautions. Well, I was far too prepared for that to happen to me.

I exited the airport into what felt like a sauna. A haggard old man limped over to help me with my bags as I made my way toward the line of taxis. I waved him off, but he followed, speaking loudly and shaking his hands at me. Fed up, I handed him a suitcase. He hobbled ahead and hailed a taxi that should have been turned into scrap metal a decade ago, loaded my bags into the trunk and extended his hand for payment. I shook my head and made for the cab.

"You pay; he help!" the taxi driver called out of the broken passenger-side window.

"But I didn't ask for help," I argued. "I never wanted—"

"You pay; he help!" the taxi driver shouted again.

The swindler grabbed my arm and shook his hand in front of my face, yelling *i ye wulu ye! i ye wulu ye!* His intention to insult me was clear.

"Fine! Jesus! I'll give you your money!" I pushed his hand away from me as I reached for my wallet, but his arms flew wildly still and one of his chipped, black fingernails scratched my arm. I froze, watching as a drop of blood rose in a perfect hemisphere to the surface. "Shit!" I poured hand-sanitizer on the small cut until it stung sharply. The old man watched me, confused. I pulled a 10,000 CFA note—about twenty American dollars, the smallest bill the money exchange had given me—from my wallet and threw it into the man's hand as I pushed by him into the taxi.

I handed the driver the written address Jeb Mossurt had given me, and the taxi sped off, weaving through traffic as if in a video game. As we drove across the Niger River, the field of lights on the other side made the capital look like a real city, and I felt momentarily hopeful that Bamako might resemble Iowa City, after all. But

from the height of the bridge, I could see where the cluster of small flickering lights died away into total darkness outside the city limits. I felt a pang of nostalgia for the existence of suburbs. The streetlights disappeared the moment we turned off the bridge, and I could see only the edges of buildings illuminated by the taxi's weak headlights. We drove slowly, for the potholes were so deep and the ditches so wide that the driver was forced to swerve constantly from one side of the road to the other. The taxi's shock absorbers had all but worn out, and every so often a bump in the road bounced me so hard that I lifted off the seat and hit my head on the ceiling.

After some time, the taxi turned onto a small dirt road and parked in front of a small house barely visible behind the broad leaves of a monstrous coconut tree. Its peeling façade was sickly green in the taxi's sallow headlights. The house looked vaguely like what Jeb Mossurt had described, and I wiped my head in relief. The back of my hand came away dripping with sweat.

The inside was poorly decorated and not air-conditioned. Even on high, the dangerously rattling ceiling fans hardly lifted the stifling heat. The front door led directly into a living room with hideous mustard-colored floor tiles. Two bamboo couches flanked a leopard-print rug, and a tiny kitchen was visible behind an almost-empty bookshelf. A narrow, windowless hall, smelling of crumpled wet towels never hung out to dry, led to the rest of the house. In the office, a large black chair—not unlike the Dean's—sat behind a bare wooden desk, and two metal chairs for patients were stacked against the wall. I arranged my textbooks in alphabetical order and locked the antipsychotic drugs that I had brought in a drawer. I placed my two framed diplomas on the desk to add a touch of home.

The off-white paint on the bedroom walls had chipped and yellowed in the corners beneath ancient spider webs. A detached fan blade rested against the wall, and a fractured mirror hung over the bed. I chuckled dismally when I noticed that, from where I was standing, one of the cracks in the mirror aligned perfectly with the long wrinkle in my forehead. I saw—or I might have imagined, for when you stare so hard at something for so long, it is impossible to tell whether that thing is truly there or whether it is a trick of your searching eyes—that the vertical cleft had deepened significantly since I had left America.

I unraveled the lime-green mosquito net that hung in a knot above the center of my bed and tucked myself in. The net smelled like mothballs and must, but I was too weary to care. Too tired even to remember to turn on the ceiling fan, I fell asleep instantly on the thin sheets patterned with toucans and palm trees.

I was yanked from sleep hours later by loud, melodic chanting. I pulled the mosquito net out from under my mattress and stumbled out of bed, stubbing my toe on the fan blade as I crossed to the window. I slid open the glass pane, and the room filled with humid air and the sound of three tenor voices calling the devoted to prayer: *Allahu Akbar*, *Allahu Akbar*. I glanced at my watch: four o'clock in the morning. I shivered with exhaustion, closed the window and crawled back in bed.

Three hours later, the shrill beeping of my alarm clock startled me awake. At a quarter to eight, I sat down in the living room with a mug of instant Nescafé to wait for my translator. At a quarter after eight, I flipped through the one book on the living room shelf, *Physician's Desk Reference: Infectious Diseases.* At nine o'clock, I made a second cup of coffee, now terrified of going outside after reading about the local strands of guinea worm. Finally around nine thirty, I cracked open the front

door and peeked into the road. A tall man leaned against the hood of a rickety black Volkswagen just outside my house. He stared at me intently, silent and completely still. I could tell that under his long, blue-black tunic, his body was slender and strong. His teeth were stained distinctly yellow, and the whites of his eyes, too, were faintly golden. Morning sunlight shone from his shaven head, giving him an eerie glow. Although I had never been one to take to strangers easily, his silent presence made me particularly anxious.

"Hello," I said, my voice betraying my discomfort. "Are you my translator? I'm Dr. Brommel, but please call me Len." I stepped toward him and extended my hand.

The translator regarded me as if I offered him a vial of poison. My hand trembled as I lowered it, irrationally ashamed; he was the one who had been rude, making me wait over an hour and then refusing to shake my hand. I decided to attribute his unfriendliness to a cultural difference.

"Leen," he said, staring as if he saw through my face. "I am Alassane. We go to the hospital now if you are ready." He motioned toward the passenger side of the Volkswagen.

"Did I mistake our meeting time?" I asked as we stepped into the car. "I thought it was for eight."

"I have been here since then. It is you who let me in later."

Feeling slighted and confused, I decided to let the matter drop. As we sped along the winding road up the mountain to the hospital, I looked out over the capital city. The light of day revealed the ugliness of Bamako. Monotonous low brown buildings and fields of red dust spread for miles, broken only by the Bank of Mali—a

burnt orange attempt at a skyscraper—and the slow-moving, mud-brown river that bisected the city. At the riverbank, tall marshy reeds mingled with low brown grasses until all vegetation died away and only finger-shaped peninsulas of mud reached out into the tawny water. Boatmen pushed painted pirogues with long, wooden poles, marking the water behind them with arrow-shaped ripples. Just beyond one muddy finger of the bank, topless women waded up to their waists with large plastic buckets full of folded clothes balanced on their heads. Nude children splashed around them in the shallows.

"The river's filthy. Should those people be swimming in it?"

"The Niger is our river, Leen," Alassane countered gravely. "It is the only one we have, and we use it for everything."

"Len," I corrected.

"Leen," he repeated. "You will see how we do things here."

I grimaced at the foreboding edge in his voice. We pulled through a dilapidated gate plastered with the letters HÔP T L, and Alassane parked in a small lot where tree roots broke through the splitting concrete. There to meet us was a smiling young doctor in a starched, white lab coat. He was short and rotund; rectangular, wire-framed glasses sat crookedly on his nose, and a thin but well-groomed layer of black hair covered his head.

"*Alassane! C'est un plaisir de te voir. Comment vas-tu*, my friend?" The doctor shook Alassane's hand enthusiastically and winked at me, evidently proud of his English. "*Bonjour mon ami, bienvenue au Mali. Je m'appelle Docteur Sekou Diarra et c'est moi qui vais te montrer notre hôpital. Viens avec moi.*"

Dr. Sekou Diarra started to walk away. When I didn't move, he looked back at me, bewildered. "*Viens*!" he repeated.

I turned to Alassane for a translation. He stood several paces behind Dr. Diarra, avoiding my eyes with a coldness that I did not appreciate.

"You do not speak French?" Dr. Diarra asked, interrupting my resentful rumination. "I am sorry my English is not so good, but I hope good enough. I say before, hello, be welcome in Mali. I am Docteur Sekou Diarra. I guide you around the hospital today." Dr. Diarra looked immensely proud of himself. "Follow me."

The hospital was a complex of small buildings, each housing its own specialty, connected by covered hallways. Red dirt caked on the plaster exteriors, climbing the walls like ivy so the teal paint was visible only at the very top. Patients idled in makeshift waiting rooms, sitting in the walkways or under particularly shady trees.

Dr. Diarra led us into one of the hospital's few overnight rooms. Rusted, metal beds were crammed together along every wall. Tattered sheets with pictures of Barney or Big Bird scarcely covered the thin, brown plastic mattresses. A few patients slept with IVs in their arms, drool dribbling from the corners of their open mouths. An old man with bandaged stumps where his calves should have been reached out his bony hand to grab me as I passed. Darting to the side to avoid his grasping fingers, I accidentally knocked over a stack of bedpans. The crash of metal on tile boomed through the building. Patients shouted from parched throats, and an exasperated nurse swatted us out of the room. I apologized profusely to Dr. Diarra as we left, but he only repeated *basite*, *basite* and walked on, waving for me to follow.

"He said 'no problems,'" Alassane translated.

"I didn't mean to make a scene." I felt a strange compulsion to apologize to Alassane.

"No problems," he repeated.

I thought I caught a mocking grin flash across his face.

As we wound our way through the hospital to Dr. Diarra's office, Alassane disappeared. Apparently unfazed, Dr. Diarra instructed me to sit on an empty bench and await his own return. He ducked behind a curtain across the hall into his tiny bureau. All around me, patients waiting in hallways and doctors in small offices pulled out colorful plastic kettles from which they poured water onto their hands. Almost in unison, they rinsed their forearms, then their teeth, noses and faces. They spread water over their heads and then into and behind their ears. Finally, they rinsed their feet: first right, then left. Beautiful prayer rugs—red, gold and green with pointed niches at the top—were spread on the ground, all at the same odd angle. The loudspeakers crackled to life, and the chanting I had heard at four that morning began again. Men's tenor voices called from speakers on every building: *Allahu Akbar*, *Allahu Akbar*. Women covered their heads and shoulders in sheer scarves and spread their mats behind the men's. For several minutes, the world around me bowed and prayed, whispering words I could not understand. Then, as suddenly as the kettles and rugs had materialized, the chanting stopped and the rugs and kettles vanished back into safekeeping, although where that was in the barren hospital hallways, I could not fathom.

Dr. Diarra emerged from his office, droplets of water still clinging to his ears and hair. Inexplicably, Alassane stood behind me once again; I had not heard him approach.

"Sekou!" A female voice called from behind us. The woman's heels clicked on the concrete floor as she approached our group. She wore a dress of brightly patterned local fabric under her lab coat. "*Eh, Alassane!*" She gave Alassane a kiss on either side of his cheek and spoke briefly to him and Dr. Diarra in French before turning to me.

"I ham Docteur Mercier. I leaf for France to-morrow, *sinon* I vould haf been here weeth you. *Le Mali* is *excellent, non*?"

Dr. Mercier said goodbye to us and walked off briskly, exchanging quick words—always the same ones—to patients waiting in the halls as she passed. I dearly wished she were not leaving; the only person with whom I would have regular contact now was Alassane.

As we toured more buildings, emaciated patients gaped as I walked by. Cries of "Tubabu! Tubabu!" followed me through every hallway, and I began to get angry at their taunting. Alassane's fingers clenched into fists.

Abruptly, he turned to face me. "Why do you not greet them when they call to you? It is rude to not greet."

"What? Greet whom?"

"All of them! Do you not hear them calling to you? Did you not see Docteur Mercier reply?" His yellow eyes smoldered. He imitated the patients' mocking singsong, "Tubabu! Tubabu! It means 'white person'."

The irksome cries abated as patients gathered for lunch. Around every corner, groups of men squatted around giant bowls. The smell was intoxicating, meaty and sweet from tomatoes and something else I could not place. Women tread almost imperceptibly around the men, pouring steaming red sauce, sparkling with

oil and dotted with small pieces of meat, cabbage and hot pepper, onto pounds of rice. Eager right hands dug in, unfazed by the undoubtedly scalding temperatures, pressing the saucy rice into balls shoved easily into mouths. The men ate silently but with gusto, until one by one, they murmured something and left to rinse their hands. My stomach grumbled loudly, and I opened the granola bar I had brought with me. Alassane glanced at me over his shoulder.

"Dr. Diarra," I whispered, falling into step with him so that Alassane was several paces behind us. "Is there any way for you to find me another translator? I don't believe Alassane will work well with me."

Dr. Diarra shook his head. "Alassane is very good man. He comes often here, sits with patients. He will work hard; you will see."

I didn't know what else I could say. Dr. Diarra led us through the hospital's only operating room to a wing slightly set apart from the others. People of all ages crowded onto metal benches, talking with family members or to themselves… I had been so distracted by the newness of everything that it hadn't occurred to me to look for potential patients! But patients were exactly what I needed, and here they were, right in front of me. The room was a parade of psychoses.

Dr. Diarra left to check on a patient in an adjoining room, and I motioned for Alassane to follow me as I approached an older woman muttering into her tightly clasped hands. Her heavy body was cloaked in a large robe of worn blue fabric. Her hair was covered in a badly knotted swath of the same, but gray strands poked out around her deeply wrinkled forehead.

"Excuse me, ma'am, may I speak with you?"

Alassane translated quickly, and the woman glanced at me with cloudy eyes, the worst cataracts I had ever seen. She shook her head and looked back down at her cupped hands.

"You must have misunderstood," I said, as much to Alassane as to her. "I just want to speak with you. I believe I can help you. Are you hearing voices?"

Again the woman shook her head.

"It's okay if you are," I said reassuringly. "I can help with medicine from America."

Alassane regarded me warily, almost angrily, but I nodded in encouragement, and he translated what I had said. The woman looked suddenly terrified. With a mighty grunt, she rose to her feet and, looking back at me as if I were the grim reaper himself, shuffled out of the waiting area as fast as her thick legs would take her.

I replayed what I had said in my head; it sounded perfectly normal, even nice. I had tried to help a stranger half a world away from my home, and she had reacted so ungratefully. Alassane must have mistranslated.

"What did you say to her?"

Alassane looked taken aback. "I say exactly what you say to me."

"Then why was she so scared? She ran away, for Christ's sake!"

"She ran from you."

"But why, Alassane?"

Alassane rolled his yellow eyes and turned his back to me. Already he was so difficult to work with. I contemplated speaking to Dr. Diarra again, but I reconsidered. Perhaps Alassane and I had started off on the wrong foot. I vowed to

make peace so that we could work together productively. He was the only person I had in this country, since I had not been able to reach the director. I shuddered, remembering Jeb's speculation: *Must've died, I suppose.* Well, I'd keep trying, anyhow.

"Alassane," I said as gently as I could. "I would like to speak with one more person." I touched his arm lightly in case he had not heard, and he spun around on the spot. For an instant, his yellow eyes narrowed to slits, so quickly that I thought I must have imagined it. I pointed to a middle-aged man huddled in the corner, rocking back and forth with his hands over his ears. A scar ran down the right side of his face, lifting the corner of his lip into a permanent half-smile. The left side of his face twitched irregularly, seemingly detached from the motionless right half. "I want the man to understand that I am just here to help," I instructed. "Please translate exactly what I say, understood?"

Alassane nodded, but a hint of a leering yellow smile made me uneasy as I walked toward the man. I repeated exactly what I had said to the woman, and although I did not understand what Alassane said, I could tell that he also echoed his earlier words. This time, the man sprang from his crouched position in the corner and shouted at me. The left side of his face contorted wildly, frightening next to the right side's paralysis. I backed away to avoid the spit spraying from the left corner of his mouth. Every head in the room spun my way; cries erupted from all around. Men shook their fists and moved between me and their wives, and the women backed as far away from me as possible. The room polarized, one half taken up by a clambering mass of Malians, the other space empty except for me, standing alone facing the mob, and Alassane leaning coolly against the back wall.

Dr. Diarra heard the riot and rushed to my side. His eyes opened wide as he heard what the patients bellowed at me. My short-lived relief at his reappearance vanished when he looked at me with shock and disgust.

"Why do you come here to do such a thing?"

"Do what?" I cried. "I just wanted to help! I thought that man could use my help!"

Dr. Diarra looked at me pityingly, and for a second, his face resembled the Dean's on that last day in his office. Dr. Diarra spoke to the angry and terrified mob in a voice befitting a giant; deep, loud and resonant, his words commanded the room. When he finished, the crowd resumed their places on the metal benches and continued to talk among themselves or to rock back and forth silently as if nothing had happened. Dr. Diarra took me by the hand and led me briskly out of the hospital into the bright afternoon sun.

He bid me a quick farewell, wishing me luck during my stay. Too stunned to stop him before he rushed back to his patients, I never had the chance to ask for an explanation. I stood bewildered in the middle of the parking lot. The sun burned my face. Cars parked and pulled out around me. Two loud honks shocked me out of my daze; Alassane had pulled his Volkswagen right in front of me. I stared out the window as we descended toward the city.

"What did they think I was going to do to them?" I tried to keep the bitterness out of my voice.

"They thought you would use your American medicine on them."

"Well good, because I told them that, Alassane." I could no longer hide my frustration. "But why did they act as if I held a gun to the women's heads?"

"You said you would use your American medicine," he repeated indignantly, his serpentine eyes shifting between the road and me.

"I know what I said!" I yelled too loudly in the small car. "But what did you say? You are manipulating my…" I trailed off, not wanting to finish my thought. What could I do? I was desperately stuck; I could not make it here without Alassane, but it seemed as if he did not want me to succeed in my practice.

I waited for his explanation, but soon the anticipatory silence ended and real silence took its place. Perhaps I was overreacting, just touchy from culture shock. I breathed deeply to rid myself of accusatory thoughts and stared intently out the window. A field of red dirt extended as far as I could see, dotted with sporadic tufts of low brown grass that only made the landscape more desolate. In the distance, a pack of three four-legged animals emerged from behind a small bush by the roadside. As we neared them, they noticed our presence and started to run along the road.

"Are they coming toward us? Alassane? Why aren't they running away?" Despite my best efforts, panic rose in my voice. Alassane's car was too broken-down to go much faster, and the animals were gaining on us steadily. "What are they?"

Alassane did not have time to respond for suddenly they were at our side. Three skeletal dogs—nothing but teeth and bones—bounded along not three feet from my open window.

"How do I raise this?" I yelled as I furiously cranked the window lever in vain. Alassane said nothing, but I felt the car accelerate dangerously down the mountainside. The dogs sped up as well, baring their nasty fangs as they barked and howled. Foamy slobber whipped off their tongues and blew onto my shirt and cheek,

and I clamped my eyes and mouth shut. I gripped the sides of my seat until my fingers went numb. My heart beat so fast and hard, I thought it might break a rib. The Volkswagen careened around a corner onto a long downhill stretch, tilting perilously as it rounded the bend. The car used the slope to increase its speed, and finally the dogs tired. The barking receded into the distance until it was only an empty echo. Alassane braked. My heartbeat slowed with the car. I opened my eyes only when I heard the familiar sounds of traffic; we were off the mountain. Alassane's yellow eyes stared straight ahead, unblinking. Except for his knuckles, whitened from his death-grip on the steering wheel, he seemed completely unfazed.

"Thank you," I whispered, afraid I would vomit if I opened my mouth too wide.

We did not speak again that day. Without so much as a glance in my direction, Alassane pulled up in front of my house and waited for me to get out. I fumbled with the handle and stepped shakily out of the car. I had to slam the door twice; my first effort was too weak. Steadying myself against the front gate, I watched the taillights of Alassane's Volkswagen pull away, glowing like a pair of bright yellow eyes amidst the crackling black paint.

* * *

That night I had a terrible dream. I was sitting in what I knew to be my Malian office, but the room was distorted. Shadows of my childhood trinkets played upon the walls like menacing puppets. I heard my heart pound as if from a stereo in another room, and the walls pulsed with each valvular beat. A faint beeping joined into the rhythm and grew louder and louder until I could hear nothing else. I searched for its source all everywhere but found nothing. Halfway down the pitch-

black hall back to my office, the floor became viscous and gluey, and my feet stuck in place. Blinded by the darkness and deaf from the overwhelming beeping, I feared I would die in that spot. Suddenly it dawned on me that the noise was coming from a beeper that had been attached to my belt all along; a telephone number glowed green on its display. The floor released me and I was back in my office, dialing the number. A lady picked up and said, *What took you so long, doctor? We need you here stat!* I knew somehow that she meant the hospital, and the next moment, I found myself in Dr. Diarra's dilapidated operating room. There was a young man on the table with dark skin except for a yellowed circular patch on his stomach where the scrub nurse had rubbed bleach. Scalpel suddenly in hand, I made my first incision. All was going well as I searched inside his body for the problem; my hand knew its way around the warm and bloody interior of his abdominal cavity, and I felt that I was almost there when the patient's eyes flipped open and he screamed a blood-curdling scream that made the scrub nurse faint. I dropped my scalpel and it landed in his belly, perforating his bowel. He cried louder, and I fainted. I fell in slow motion, watching, somehow conscious, as the pool of his blood on the floor came closer and closer to my face, and then abruptly time sped up again and I was about to hit the floor when—

I woke up with a jolt, as if someone had hit the top of my head with a metal bat. My eyes flew open and I felt hyper-aware of everything. My heartbeat was fast and irregular, my pillow soaked with sweat. I wiped my dripping brow and suddenly smelled iron. My palm was streaked with blood! Images from my nightmare came back to me, alarmingly vivid, and for a moment I could not tell whether the surgery had been real. I studied my hands and found that I had scratched the scab off a large

mosquito bite so roughly that I had trailed blood onto my palm from the bite mark on my thumb. I sighed in relief and tried to stretch, but I couldn't feel my legs. I panicked, flailing about so that the mosquito net was yanked out from beneath the thin mattress and gathered in a musty netted bunch on my face. I threw it off and rolled out of bed onto the floor. The cold of the tile shocked me back to reality. I lay there for a few minutes, listening to my surroundings, concentrating on anything but my own body. I heard a loose wicker strand of the old, lattice fan tap against its plastic base with each rotation, *chka chka chka.* The frogs sang in a deep baritone chorus outside. Slowly, I raised myself back into bed, tucked in my mosquito net and curled into a ball inside my cocoon. As I tried to fall asleep, I watched the blades of the old fan uselessly swirl the sticky air around and around and around.

* * *

Alassane arrived silently the next morning; I heard neither his car pull up nor his body enter the house. I found him in the living room, leaning against the wall as he had done before on his car. He did not respond when I inquired how long he had been there. I decided to confront him about the previous day's debacle in the hospital, hoping to clear the air before any patients arrived.

"Thank you for escaping those dogs yesterday," I began on a positive note, but Alassane merely tilted his chin toward the ceiling. "I'm trying to say that I appreciate how you handled that." I received no response from him still, so I moved on, trying to keep the conversation light. "Yesterday went very badly at the hospital, though and I don't want that to happen again. What do you think went wrong?"

Still gazing at the ceiling, Alassane responded, "I said yesterday, they were scared of your American medicine." He tightened visibly under his blue-black robes, and for the first time I noticed the brute strength lying dormant within his muscles. His every nerve seemed to stand on end as he regarded me. I felt myself unwittingly step away from him.

"There must be something you're not telling me. Yesterday you said they were scared of me, today of my medicine? Either you—" I caught myself before I accused him of lying, and I regained my composure. "Either you misspoke then or you are misspeaking now. Which one is it?"

I waited for Alassane to beg for forgiveness for being an untrustworthy translator, for pitting people against me, for misconstruing what I said and then refusing to explain it properly. But he remained immobile. He stared at me angrily, his yellowed teeth emerging from behind tight lips.

"What?" I asked, exasperated.

"I do not lie!" His voice boomed in the tiled living room.

I shuddered.

"I am not the one who made an error," Alassane continued, a controlled calm in his voice like a small ocean swell that grows silently, imperceptibly into a tidal wave. "It is you who do not understand. You understand nothing. And yet you think you can fix every problem." He took a deep breath. "You know nothing of sickness here," he muttered.

Insulted, but resigned to stop arguing with my only contact in this country, I appeased him. "Then tell me, Alassane. Tell me what I do not know."

His body remained rigid and his face, taut.

"Please," I forced through my lips.

His jaundiced eyes considered me as I fidgeted where I stood. Finally, he relented. "Here, when we hear of Tubabu medicine, we think of what happened before." He shut his mouth definitively and stared, as if waiting for me to gasp in horror.

"What was that?"

Alassane rolled his eyes and grunted. He murmured something that sounded like *wulu*, and I tried to remember where I had heard that before.

"The Tubabus called their medicine vaccines once, vitamins the second time," he explained. "None of the women who took the pills had any more children."

At that moment, we heard a soft rapping on the front gate. Alassane slithered off before I could blink. I was still in shock. How could he have let those people in the hospital think something so horrible about me? He should have told me how my words were going to be understood! At the very least, he should have clarified what I had said when things had gotten out of control. There was no good reason for yesterday's riot, unless he was trying to teach me some sort of lesson, the incompetent American he thought I was. Well, I would show him otherwise as soon as I had a good patient to cure.

Two pairs of footsteps echoed down the hall, and I remembered what I was supposed to be doing in this country, my first patient was here! Finally work could begin, and I would… what had the Dean said… garner some life experience. The Dean would be unable to refuse an applicant who had cured so many poor Africans of psychiatric disorders. The board would jump through hoops to have me back.

Alassane knocked on my door and ushered a young woman into my office. She was petite, fairer of complexion than Alassane, and not more than eighteen. Her wrap-around skirt advertised National Women's Independence Day 2002.

"What is your name?" I asked.

The girl looked from Alassane to me and started crying silently.

"Why are you crying, young woman? What is your name?"

Alassane translated, but the girl only cried harder. I was confused, disconcerted. I had made patients cry before, but only as part of therapy.

"*A ye dogotoro ye*," Alassane addressed my patient.

"What did you say?" I whispered sharply. "Please translate only what I say."

The girl's eyes darted to me in fear, and I forced a smile.

"*I te siran Tubabu ne*," Alassane continued unprompted.

"What are you doing?" I recognized the word for white person and knew he had said something about me.

The girl shrieked and ran out of the room.

"Tell her to come back," I ordered. "And don't say anything else!"

Alassane's coaxing murmur drifted in from the living room. When after a few minutes I still had not heard the girl's voice, I walked over to survey the situation. She was curled in a corner of the room, her forehead resting on her knees, her arms wrapped protectively around her bony calves. Alassane squatted several feet away, speaking rapidly. A floorboard creaked under my foot, and the girl's head shot up. Her terrorized face was dripping with tears. Before I could reach out to her, she sprang to her feet and ran out of the house.

I sat down on the couch and ran my fingers absentmindedly over the wrinkle on my forehead.

"What the hell happened?" I asked harshly.

Alassane seemed unfazed by my rudeness. "She cries because she has fear of you."

Again! Did anyone here have any other thoughts? What was Alassane saying to make everyone so scared of me? I pulled painfully at strands of my hair, trying to ignore my growing frustration with him. Knowing that it was too late to bring the girl back and that I could not handle another conflict with Alassane, I sent him to keep watch for more patients and returned to my office.

The early afternoon was quiet. I tossed my pill-shaped Lexapro stress ball between my hands, squeezing it hard every few passes. I must have dozed off for several hours, for I awoke with quite a shock when Alassane knocked on my door. A woman in her sixties entered my office and walked right up to me, shoving an open wound on her forearm in my face. Her breath and pores reeked terribly of garlic. I groaned and pushed her away, telling Alassane to direct her to the nearest medical clinic. Understanding that I meant to dismiss her, the woman planted her feet and yelled at me incomprehensibly, spewing garlic spit onto my face. Despite my imploring looks, Alassane said nothing to stop her.

"Tell her I'm sorry I can't help; I'm not that kind of doctor!" I yelled over her protests, wiping her saliva off my chin.

When the woman finally quieted long enough to hear Alassane translate, she stormed out of my office. I told Alassane to make sure that the next patients were psychiatric ones. He looked at me, inexplicably incredulous. Deciding to ignore this,

I sent him home for the day. Why had Jeb treated these people? He was a psychiatrist, not a nurse, for Christ's sake. Despairing at ever seeing a real patient, I worked on my stress ball until its purple coloring faded at the seam.

I made myself a tuna sandwich and spent the rest of the evening writing a deceptively encouraging letter to the Dean, trying to distract myself from the day's utter failures.

At four the next morning, I was snatched from sleep once again by chants resonating from the neighborhood mosque. Aggravated, I tossed and turned, threw pillows over my head, plugged my fingers in my ears, hummed the Gilligan's Island theme song to myself. Finally, lost somewhere in the chorus of *Allahu Akbar* and loudly braying goats, I fell back asleep.

I awoke to a loud pounding on my bedroom door. The clock read eleven. Already! I must have slept through my alarm.

"There is someone to see you," Alassane called through the door.

I met them in my office a few minutes later. My hair—more gray than ever, I had noticed that morning—was still disheveled from a fitful sleep.

A small boy in a ratty tee shirt sat in the chair across from mine, dwarfed by Alassane's imposing presence behind him. The boy's eyes bulged at the sight of me, and his right thumb shot into his mouth; he sucked on it as if it were the only thing preventing him from erupting into tears. The skin around the base of his thumb was raw, rubbed too often by his uneven baby teeth, and I marveled that he had any skin left at all on the rest of the finger.

"What is your name, son?" I asked.

The boy looked from me to Alassane, pulled at a loose thread on his shirt, and finally dropped his thumb from his mouth. Still bleary-eyed from sleep, I was not sure if what I saw was a trick of my mind, or whether the boy truly had no thumbnail. Was it possible to suck a nail off one's finger?

"*N togo* Karim," the boy whispered to Alassane.

"Karim," I repeated, " what brings you here?"

Karim burst into tears as he recounted his older sister's terrorizing behavior. He gestured vehemently as he spoke for several minutes, narrowing his eyes and curling his fingers into claws. Alassane put his hand on Karim's shoulder. Touching a patient was strictly unprofessional, but I held my tongue.

"What does he want me to do?" I asked.

"Help him," Alassane replied without consulting the patient. "He is very afraid of his sister. He believes she might hurt him."

"There's nothing to treat here. The boy has a mean older sister, and he's projecting the qualities of some monster he saw on television onto her. For Christ's sake, I thought my father was an alien when I was little, and I didn't seek psychiatric help!" I swiveled in my chair to face Karim. I told him to go home, apologizing that I could do nothing for him. I advised him to speak with his parents about his sister; perhaps she simply needed a good scolding.

Alassane translated my dismissal. Karim dropped to his knees, pleading at Alassane's feet.

"He says he will not go home," Alassane reported. "He knows you do not believe that his sister is dangerous. Will you not at least make him think you trust what he says?"

"Don't tell me how to do my job, Alassane. I won't lie to him. He can't stay here, I've got to see real patients," I said firmly. "Tell him I'm sorry, but he's got to go." I would get no closer to a position at the University of Iowa by curing a child of his overactive imagination.

Alassane ushered the sobbing boy out the door. He returned a moment later, looking dejected.

"That boy will lose himself in his fear." Alassane's voice trailed off. He muttered something under his breath and spit into his hand.

"What did you do that for?" I yelled, disgusted.

"I bless the boy." Alassane spit on his fingers again. "If you will not help him, I will try."

"Stop spitting!" I shouted. I felt as if I were living in world where people did exactly the opposite of normal. What was I doing so horribly wrong? I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I was not the crazy one here, everyone else was, Alassane foremost among them. His behavior was far too strange to attribute to cultural differences. Perhaps he had seen that Karim was in trouble, not because of his sister, certainly, but perhaps Alassane had noticed a tick, something in the boy that indicated some local psychosis… his thumb! Was Alassane trying to keep me from having a genuine patient? What agenda he had against me, I could not understand, but I knew I had to beat him at his own game. I would treat a real patient despite his efforts to thwart my every move.

I sent Alassane out of my office and called Lynda.

"Hello?" Lynda's voice was gravely with sleep.

"It's me."

"Len? What the—it's five thirty in the morning. You'd better be dying."

"I'm just having a day. My translator's horrible." I told her about Alassane's attitude and the mishandled encounters with patients.

"Can't be easy for him either, working with you."

"That's preposterous. I've been diligent and professional about my work and—"

"Len, I'm going back to bed." She hung up before I had a chance to respond.

No other patients came that day. I occupied my time by reading a Psychiatry textbook, quizzing myself on diagnoses as I went along, remembering exams I had aced. Late that afternoon, in the hour just before the sun began to set, I found Alassane sitting on the living room couch. With his perfect, mannequin posture, he looked unreal, not living. His head snapped toward me, but his eyes remained focused on the wall straight ahead. I shuddered at his eyes in profile: yellow pupil-less disks that blazed in the golden light.

My stomach grumbled loudly and I remembered I had not eaten. Glad for an excuse to escape Alassane's presence, I hunted for food in the kitchen. Of course there was none; I had not been to the market yet. Of sheer necessity, I asked Alassane to accompany me. He nodded curtly, and with a flick of his finger, bid me follow him outside. We walked in silence down a sloping dirt road flanked with shacks of cardboard and corrugated tin. Their doors, sheets of torn and tied plastic bags, blew in the breeze. I tripped as I leapt over a puddle, scarcely avoiding falling into the guinea-worm-infested water. Three beggars approached as we reached the main road, waving rusted tin cans in my face and yelling hoarsely through toothless mouths, though whether at each other or at me I could not tell.

Stalls cropped up with increasing frequency, and before I realized what had happened, Alassane had turned off the main road, and I found myself in the heart of the market. Long, gnarled branches supported tin roofs above damp wooden tables. Old men and women sat or slept beneath their makeshift lean-tos, swatting at hundreds of flies. Women in wrap skirts and tunics wound their way busily through crowded alleyways of trodden dirt between the displays piled high with produce, spices, calabashes and long wooden spoons. Small tomatoes were speckled with black mold, and flies swarmed in droves around the decaying parts. Small cabbages looked as if they had once been green, but heat and age had dyed them beige. The plantains, at least, were supposed to be brown, and I asked Alassane to buy several. I handed him a small wad of money, hoping he would not rip me off too badly.

As we moved deeper into the labyrinthine market, a putrid, acidic odor overwhelmed me. I clamped my hand over my nose, but even as I breathed through my mouth, my lungs burned. In the dense humidity, I felt as if I were eating the stench; I cupped my other hand over my mouth and tried not to breathe. Alassane looked back at me haughtily when I coughed; he seemed to be immune to this poisonous air. My ears buzzed, and I thought I would collapse when we turned the corner, so bad was the smell emanating from the giant pile of tiny, dried fish. Ten thousand little mouths hung open, the sun glinting off their sharply pointed teeth. They smelled like death. Not even flies dared touch their shiny russet scales.

I ran past Alassane down a narrow side alley, fleeing from the putrid fish stalls. I dodged a group of women haggling loudly over potatoes, and I had to skid to a halt to avoid smacking into half of a cow carcass, hanging upside down from a hook the size of my torso. A butcher's knife almost two feet long stuck out from the

top of the meat. I almost did not recognize the hanging hunk as flesh, for so many flies covered its surface that, except for the still-hairy head dangling below, it seemed to be a giant shimmering, black rock. I stood transfixed by the tremendous hanging mass, repulsed but unable to look away. The buzzing of the flies drowned out all other sounds in the market. The stink of sun-rotted meat hit me, offensive and pungent. I ran down another alley until the fetid stench died away into the distance and I could breathe again without gagging. I tried to trace my steps back to the main road, weaving my way out of the sticky maze of people. Darkness approached steadily, and the abutting tin roofs of the stalls let in very little of the dwindling sunlight. I was utterly lost.

I looked around desperately, but Alassane was nowhere to be found. I felt a familiar lightheadedness, anxiety creeping up too fast for me to catch it. My palms sweated, my heart raced; I braced myself on the nearest stand. The vendor's gruff voice rebuked me harshly and, eyes firmly shut against the vertigo, I pulled my hand from the wood and swayed where I stood, trying with all my might to remain standing. Suddenly, an anguished cry pierced the air, and my eyes flew open. A middle-aged man ran toward me, his hands clamped over his ears and his mouth stretched wide in mid-scream. His panicked eyes darted in every direction as he barreled forward, not registering my presence in his path. I jumped back to let him through, automatically running through symptoms and diagnoses in my mind; I could help him! I had to find Alassane.

As if he could hear my thoughts, Alassane appeared suddenly at my side.

"Where have you been?" I shouted, as angry as I was relieved.

"I stopped to buy rice, then you were no longer behind me." Alassane's voice was as uncaring as his expression.

I was about to retort when the screaming man wailed again, not too far ahead. I remembered why I had needed Alassane. "Follow me."

"Leen—"

"Just come!" I yelled as I took off in search of the man. I ran through the emptying market at full speed—I would not lose my first real psychotic patient—until I tripped over a protruding root and fell flat on my face in the parasitic mud.

I struggled to my feet, spitting mud from my mouth. Searching for drier ground, I stepped on the root that had tripped me. Howls erupted from right below me, and I jumped back in terror, horrified by what I had stepped on. The screaming man lay on his back, almost entirely hidden by the two flanking stalls. His face was screwed up in pain, and his hands were still cupped tightly over his ears. He shook his head violently as if refusing something terrible.

I bent down next to him and placed a hand on his arm. His resulting cry was excruciatingly loud, and I backed away quickly, covering my own ears. The man must have seen me do so, for his pained wail turned to laughter. Louder and louder he laughed until his roaring guffaw echoed from every tin roof. I wanted to shout, to shock him into silence, but I held my tongue. I never yelled at patients.

"I am a doctor," I annunciated loudly; Alassane translated, an unreadable smile on his face. "What is your name, sir?" The man cackled in response; I continued. "Do you hear voices? If you do, I can help you. The voices are not real. They are not real, do you hear? I am real. I can help. We can get rid of those voices together."

I made Alassane repeat this twice, but still the man laughed. Perhaps he was deaf, or too psychotic to know which figures were real, and which hallucinations. I had to touch him again to remind him that I was part of reality. I leaned forward cautiously, ready to restrain him in the event of another paranoid panic attack. His hot, sticky breath hit my skin, and immediately I knew: rum. His breath reeked of it; the stench oozed from his pores. He was nothing but a drunk! I stood, steadied myself and kicked his stubby leg with all of my might. He howled with laughter. I dug my fingernails into my palm to stop myself from crying out in anger. This place made me feel so inept! And Alassane, that look on his face… he must have known I was falling for a drunkard. A violent rage sparked inside me. Staving off my burning fury, I marched away without a second glance.

On the way out of the darkened market, I passed a small group of peculiarly dressed men gathered in a small clearing. They wore rainbow-striped woolen ponchos and hats and colorful patchwork pants. Their hair, too, was unusual, not the normal close shave; long, thin dreadlocks cascaded over their shoulders. They sat in a circle atop piles of old car tires, drums scattered around their feet. The oldest man produced a small pouch of what I assumed to be drugs, sprinkled some dark leaves into a pipe and lit it with a match. Smoke billowed out instantly. The man tilted his head back and blew perfect, thick smoke rings into the air. The rings drifted undistorted in my direction; the smoke smelled strongly of deep woods. I wanted to know who they were, but I was too furious at Alassane to ask. Reluctantly, I tore my eyes away from the gathering and continued out of the market.

"You may go now," I said without turning back to Alassane as we reached my house. I stormed through my front gate, slamming it behind me. I was caked in

mud, frustrated and exhausted. I threw the groceries in the kitchen, ripped off my clothes—strewing them on the hallway floor—and took a long, hot shower. I let the water cleanse me of the mud and the day, the drunkard, Karim, Alassane… the whole country. Finally, dripping wet and naked, I climbed into my netted bed and fell instantly asleep.

That night, my terrible dream reoccurred, but this time the surgery went further. I was looking for the problem, and the scrub nurse kept telling me: *You're almost there, doctor Leen, almost there.* I extended my incision up toward the top of the patient's ribcage and down past his belly button and made a perpendicular cut across his stomach so that I could open the four flaps like one of those paper fortune-tellers that little girls play with. I felt each organ, searching for the rotten apple: first the lungs, then the liver, the kidneys; everything was fine. *The heart, doctor, the heart,* whispered the scrub nurse in my ear. My fingertips reached where his heart should be, but I felt nothing but the brittle contours of his inner ribcage. I submerged my arm completely in the young man's body but found only empty space, muculent and warm. I thought longingly that this was the closest I would ever come to the feeling of being inside a woman's womb.

Keep searching, doctor, the scrub nurse urged. I reached even farther into the man's chest cavity, but still I felt nothing. *He has no heart!* I wailed, pulling my arm out into the cold, unwelcoming air. Again the strange thought of being a just-birthed baby came to me, and I felt a strong urge to plunge my arm, or my whole body, back into the man's moist insides. Then the scrub nurse screamed a blood-curdling scream and pointed to my raised hand. She shrieked again and fainted on the floor in a pool of blood… but whose blood? The patient was not bleeding. And

then I saw that in my outstretched hand I held his heart, pulsating and dripping blood onto the floor and the face of the scrub nurse, and I screamed a terrible scream and fainted, falling in slow motion toward the cold tile floor and the warm pool of blood until—

I awoke, head whirling. My neck and palms were sweating profusely. My bedroom was boiling hot, and my dry mouth gaped for air. My tongue thrashed wildly, searching for saliva. I knew it was late morning, for the sun was already high above my window. Alassane had probably arrived. For a moment, I forgot why I had been so angry with him the previous day. I just wanted to work, just needed a patient. But as I lay immobile, images of the drunkard and Alassane's condescending smirk flashed through my head. The sudden rush of frustration gave me the strength to rise out of bed.

Alassane leaned against the living room wall as usual. I nodded to him on my way to the kitchen. I spread non-refrigerated mayonnaise on a hunk of bread and made a mug of instant Nescafé. The coffee grounds reminded me of the dark leaves the dreadlocked men had smoked. My curiosity overrode my anger at Alassane, and I returned to the living room determined to learn more about the strange men.

"Good morning, Alassane."

Alassane nodded.

"Do you remember the men wearing striped jackets yesterday in the market?"

He nodded again.

"Who were they?"

"They are men with no homes or families."

"What were they smoking? I've never smelled any herb so strong."

"It was the Nahdili plant."

He was impossible to talk to. I inhaled deeply to regain control of my irritation, not speaking again until I knew my voice would remain cool. "Do you know more about it than that?"

Alassane eyed me warily. "Nahdili is a traditional medicine. Some say it has healing powers for minds in trouble." His yellow eyes studied me, but I kept my face perfectly impassive, and he went on. "Others take it to escape; they say it makes you see things that are not there and hear things that do not happen."

"Have you tried it?"

He shook his head. "I do not do such things. I have never seen it except from afar, but I have heard people swear by its powers."

"For minds in trouble… right," I mumbled as I turned toward my office.

"It is real," Alassane hissed at my back. "Tubabus, you never believe. You do not open your eyes; you do not see anything."

"Then show me!" I snapped back, tired of feeling that Alassane held some secret knowledge behind his poisonous eyes.

Alassane seized my wrist and led me to his car. I yanked my arm free and settled myself uneasily in the passenger seat.

"Where are you taking me?" I asked indignantly.

Alassane sped off without responding. The Volkswagen shook, threatening to stall out as he pushed the gas too hard. Ten minutes later, he turned onto a side street and stopped before a rundown storefront. The sign above the open doorway

read “pharmacopie”. Alassane slinked in and returned within a minute with a small plastic sack stuffed with tiny, dark green leaves.

“Nahdili?” I guessed.

He nodded. “Can you smell it?”

I took the bag from him and opened it. Up close, the leaves smelled even more deliciously of moss and dense woods than they had before. I took a deeper whiff. The image of the homeless men rushed back into my mind with perfect clarity, but as I smelled, the picture blurred. I felt lightheaded, not the normal vertigo, but a floating sensation that spread warmly throughout my body. My toes tingled and I heard a high-pitched whistling as my suddenly heavy eyes begged to close. I must have lost consciousness, for the next thing I remember, Alassane was walking up to a small concrete house with a flat tin roof. I slid unsteadily out of the car; I still felt lightheaded and my vision was murky and distorted, as if everything around me was reflected in a funhouse mirror. The front door swung open before Alassane had a chance to knock. An old man stood hunched in the doorway. Beside Alassane’s powerful body and dark, starched robes, the old man looked haggard and frail. Shorter than me, his back was the shape of a cane, and his face was so creased with age that he seemed to have twenty chins. The two men exchanged greetings, and Alassane whispered to the old man for a minute. Finally, they beckoned me inside.

Heat and the stench of old life overwhelmed me. A dim bulb hung from the tin roof, swaying slightly from a long copper wire. In the center of the shadowy room, a large dark object lay on a wooden table. I gasped as I recognized an unconscious teenage boy lying on his back, his arms and legs dangling by his sides.

"Is he… dead?" I whispered to Alassane, horrified.

Alassane laughed darkly. "No, he is here to be healed. Monsieur Samake," he nodded to the old man, "made him sleep so the boy will feel no pain. Watch; do not talk."

"What happened to him?" I was afraid for this boy.

"A car hit him. Do not talk now, or else I..." Alassane cut himself off, but I heard the strain in his voice and saw his yellow eyes pinch.

I leaned forward for a better view. Bone projected clear through the skin of the boy's arm; dried blood had stained most of his shirt a deep maroon. I gagged and backed away hastily, gulping back nausea. I had to take him away from this old man and bring him to the nearest surgeon. I moved forward again, extending my arms to lift the boy.

"Non!" The old man's cry was strong despite his infirmity. He limped frantically toward me and pushed me backwards against Alassane with surprising might. I staggered back in shock. He turned angrily to Alassane, speaking rapidly and with the energy of a much younger man.

"Do not touch the boy!" Alassane barked at me. His eyes burned into mine with such ferocity that I had to look away. "You said you wanted to know, so open your eyes!"

Alassane pushed me back against the wall; his force, or perhaps his resentment, was stronger than the old man's, and I hit the wall with a loud thud. I stifled a moan as I felt my ribs clang together and the wind knocked out of me. I clutched my chest, fighting silently to catch my breath. The moment I was out of the way, the old man went to work.

He placed three jagged black rocks on a pile of glowing charcoal. Thick smoke filled the room, and I buried my coughing fit in my sleeve. He extracted a glob of white cream from a bucket beneath the table and rubbed it on the boy's left leg and arm, chanting faintly as he worked. Every few minutes, he scooped more cream onto the boy's skin. Each time he did so, its acidic smell became more overpowering; it burned the inside of my nose and the back of my throat.

Suddenly, the boy's arm jerked and his eyes shot open. He groaned and winced; his eyes dove frantically from side to side in their sockets, terrified and unseeing. I stepped instinctually toward him, but Alassane grabbed the back of my collar and yanked me toward the wall. I sputtered for breath, coughing from the sharp blow to my trachea, but the men paid me no heed. Samake reached hastily into a small leather pouch from which he drew a pinch of dark green leaves. The boy moaned in earnest now; his eyes rolled back in his head. Moving with swift agility, Samake packed the leaves into a tiny metal bowl and lit them with a burning candle. A plume of smoke billowed from the leaf pile, and the smell of moss and deep woods rushed at me once again. I felt as if I were floating above the room watching Samake work, watching the boy's arm stop twitching, his eyes close, and his body fall limp again over the edges of the table. My breath returned, but the room swam around me still, and my legs could barely support my body.

Samake wrapped long white bandages around the boy. As the cream soaked in, the fabric turned from white to light yellow, and then, as if by some strange magic, from yellow to deep orange. In the swirl of dim lights and yellow eyes, I could not tell if what I saw was real or hallucination. I felt out of control. I could no longer direct my mind or simple bodily movements. Alassane's face looked as if it

were at odds with itself: in a half-smile, his lips seemed amused by my disorientation, but his eyes, fierce and yellow, glared at me malevolently. I pressed myself against the wall and felt a bruise forming where my ribs had been thrown against the concrete not long before.

From a small wooden box, Samake removed a translucent red stone that emitted a sickeningly sweet odor. As he hobbled past me to the table, my dizziness vanished, and I felt suddenly lucid, in control. Samake waved the stone in front of the boy's nose and the boy, too, regained consciousness. The boy's eyes opened, and he sat up on the table. His surprised gaze fixed on me, curious but wary. He conversed briefly with the old man—I understood nothing—and then, to my utter shock and disbelief, the boy hopped off the table and walked out the door without so much as a wince. Unable to stop myself, I brushed past Alassane and ran after the boy, managing to stop him just outside the house.

"Excuse me," I said breathlessly. "Can I…" I knew he could not understand me, so I pointed to his bandages.

The boy looked confused, but he held out his arm. Gently, I felt the spot where his bone had protruded at least half an inch out of his skin not thirty minutes before. It was completely smooth. I lifted the bandage with the tip of my finger and peeked down to where the open wound should have been. His skin was as seamless as if he had never been hurt, no scar, no bruise, no nothing. Impossible. I was seeing things. What was happening to me? The Nahdili smoke must have impaired my reason. I looked past the boy to the road, and then back at the house. The edges of my vision blurred; I felt as if I were in a dream where everything seemed real, even ordinary, until suddenly you realized that you were standing on the ceiling. I closed

my eyes, but the dirt-red lines that had swum in my open-eyed periphery danced across my inner eyelids, sprouting small yellow ovals—yellow eyes—like an ever-watching floral wallpaper.

I shook my head vigorously; my brain clanked against my skull, and an icy jolt passed through my body. Everything had seemed so clear when the old man had passed by me with that stone… but could a stone do such a thing? Impossible. Again, impossible! Had I lost all sense of reality? Perhaps Samake had performed no miracle at all; perhaps I had imagined everything! I looked around me, trying to regain my bearings. The boy was no longer in front of me. I ran toward the street, but he was nowhere to be seen in either direction. Had he ever been there? Was none of this real? I feared I was stuck in one extended hallucination.

My thoughts jumped to Alassane. He had not warned me about these terrible effects of Nahdili. I remembered our arguments, the public fiascos. *You know nothing, Leen, nothing.* He kept me from seeing patients, always muttering that I did not understand, and now he had drugged me and brought me here to prove his point! He didn't care if Nahdili drove me insane, perhaps not even if I died from it. Well, I would not let him ruin me.

A wave of vertigo crashed over me, and I collapsed onto a log outside Samake's house with my head between my knees. Little by little I felt myself come down from the ceiling. I waited there for Alassane to take me home, vowing to succeed here despite his intentions. In the car a while later, I averted my eyes from his piercing, yellow glare, and we rode home in palpable silence.

* * *

I slept restlessly that night. I dreamt of floating above wooden operating tables, of billows of green smoke and limbs tingling and falling off. Pairs of yellow eyes haunted every dream, etched into the wooden tables and discolored, glowing blotches in the smoke. I woke the next morning in a cold sweat, a sense of dread sitting deep in my stomach. The unsteadiness from Nahdili the previous day had not dissipated fully, and I took a double dose of motion-sickness pills, hoping that a large mug of coffee would suffice against the drug's sedative effect. My vision still blurry, I walked unsteadily into the kitchen. As I brewed my Nescafé, I vowed to stay away from Alassane. No more of his lessons, his arrogance, his penetrating yellow eyes. I concentrated on the familiar sound of brewing coffee; I needed something normal to remind me what was real and not a dream. I needed to work.

* * *

Alassane knocked on my office door and let in a very nervous man dressed in an old, pinstripe suit several sizes too big for his reedy frame. The man blinked twice as often as normal, as if he had dust perpetually in his eyes. His tattered, leather briefcase rattled in his shaking hand. Anxiety radiated from his pores; I'd hear him out, but in the end he'd get one fat script for Lexapro and be on his merry way. Then Alassane would understand what it meant to be a real doctor.

I instructed Alassane to be particularly careful in his translations. I did not want a needless setback with this man; he was as sure a patient as I had ever met. We started with the generalities; he was fifty-four and twice married, but seemingly confused at the question, he was unable to tell me his name. His rapidly blinking eyes darted from corner to corner as he spoke, never focusing on anything for more

than a split second. His legs twitched, and his hands, tightly gripping his briefcase on his lap, clenched and unclenched involuntarily.

"What can I help you with today?" I asked eagerly, though my words were slurred from the motion-sickness drug. I tried to ignore the wooziness setting in. My anticipation heightened as the man spoke to Alassane for over a minute.

"Headache," Alassane translated.

I waited in vain for the rest of the story; Alassane's face was blank as always. The nervous man touched his forehead to make sure I had understood Alassane's translation.

"What?" I snapped.

"Headache," Alassane repeated.

"I know he said more than that." I looked away from Alassane in frustration. He sabotaged my work at every turn! I suddenly felt afraid of his power over me. I had nothing in this country, nothing and no one. With Alassane, I feared for my work, perhaps even for my sanity, but without him I would be completely lost and unable to function. I could not even find the airport without his aid. I looked back at the shaking pinstriped man; his eyes, tired of blinking, seemed to plead with me to help.

"Why do you think you are so anxious?"

The man spoke stutteringly for a long time.

"He has had a headache for several years," Alassane finally translated back to me. "Yesterday, he took a medicine to help his head, but now he feels scared of everything, and this is why he came to you."

"Alassane, that does not make any sense!" I took a deep breath, trying to compose myself. "He spoke for five minutes, and you gave me two sentences. Did he say why he has a headache? What medicine he took? What are you leaving out?" I could not tell whether my fury or the sedative I had taken blurred my vision, but I felt as if a film coated my eyes.

Alassane stared ferociously at the wall above my head; his yellow eyes pinched as he strained to keep them off my face. I did not know what he could possibly be mad about, but I knew that I was in the right, and I would not be afraid. I had called him out, and I waited confidently for him to respond. Without a word, Alassane slowly stood and glided silently out of the room.

"Answer me!" I roared after him.

The nervous man jumped nearly to the ceiling, and, tripping over himself, ran out of my office.

"No!" I yelled. Alassane had cost me my patient! "Alassane, I'm gonna kill you!"

A loud crash from the living room startled me from my fury. I sprinted into the hall, nearly tripping over the nervous man's briefcase, which lay wide open on the floor. I picked up the scattered contents: illegible notes scrawled on scrap paper and a sack of familiar dark green leaves. The smell of damp moss and images of tire circles overcame me; my toes tingled and my eyes glazed over. I threw the sack away from me and breathed deeply, trying to clear my head. A dark object at the end of the hall caught my eye, and I stepped shakily toward it.

"Alassane!" I wailed as I stumbled backward at the sight, hitting my head against the wall and sliding down to the floor. The nervous man lay spread-eagled

on his stomach in my living room. He must have tripped on his briefcase in his haste to leave. I thought the fall must have broken his nose, for blood spilled out onto the mustard-colored tiles, trickling toward me in three slow lines.

"Alassane!" I shouted again. "What happened?"

Alassane stepped into sight several paces beyond the fallen man in the living room. Before I knew what he was doing, he had lifted the man by his armpits and turned him over. A grotesque mask of blood covered the nervous man's face. I gaped at him, dumbstruck. For a moment, I thought I glimpsed gray brain matter through a fissure in the man's forehead. I blinked hard, trying to clear my blurry vision.

"I'm going to take him to Monsieur Samake," Alassane said, "to someone who can actually help him."

"I didn't have a chance—" My voice cracked. "He had Nahdili; it was the Nahdili!" I cleared my throat feebly. "Why is this happening? You were here when he—" The meaning of my words hit me like a head-on collision with a semi, and I froze. "Why did you leave the office when I was speaking with him?"

"You accused me of lying again," Alassane snapped. "You angered me, so I left to pray. You saw that he suffered from something terrible! Why did you not help him? He trembled, and yet you shouted before him. You call yourself doctor," Alassane snorted bitterly. "It is your fault he is in the hospital."

This was insane. If anyone was at fault… Alassane had provoked me to yell at the nervous man, knowing the patient would run out in fright. Alassane had already left the office; he must have been in the hall… he could have tripped the man on purpose. And now he blamed me for the man's near death. Could Alassane truly want to sabotage me this much? He had gone too far. Goose bumps erupted on my

arms and I shivered despite the heat in the room. I was terrified to be near him and terrified that if I even hinted at my suspicions, he would accuse me publically of malpractice, perhaps even of attempted murder, and I had no one on this entire continent to believe me or defend me. He could ruin my career, my life. I had to pretend. As if from a distance, I heard Alassane lift the man into his arms and drive him away. I attempted to stand, but my vision clouded, teeming with dark blotches, and I felt myself fainting, slowly, slowly, to nothing.

I returned to consciousness sometime later, lying on the hallway floor. The setting sun cast large shadows that writhed like battling claws upon the walls. Groggily, I turned my head toward the place where the injured man of my nightmarish afternoon had been. His body was gone, but dried blood formed a perfect outline of his sprawled form on the tiled floor. I sat shell-shocked against the wall, silent and still, watching the last of the sunlight disappear and listening to the frogs' deep, husky bellows and the donkeys' sullen braying.

For a long time, I did not think at all. Not a single thought passed through my head. I felt numb to the world. Later, I would explain it to Lynda as a necessary respite, an anesthetized state of shock that let my mind regain its bearings. I came to sometime around midnight. I stood and walked shakily to my office, taking in my surroundings as if I saw them for the first time. My reflection in a windowpane caught my attention. I raised my hand instinctually to the vertical wrinkle on my forehead, and suddenly the image in the glass morphed before my eyes. My face turned into the nervous man's face, and all that remained of me was the cleft splitting my forehead in two. Hastily, I turned around. I felt my hair, my nose, my skin; it had been just a moment of panic, a vestige of shock. I needed to clear my

head, but I could not go for a walk without passing through the living room, so I picked up the phone and dialed Lynda. I jumped at the sound of her voice.

"You have reached Lynda and Len. We're not home right now. Please leave a message after the beep."

"Lynda," I cleared my throat. "It's me. Len. I didn't know I was still on your message machine. I like that. I'm just calling because I—" I didn't know what to say. "Well, I hope you're doing okay. Today was—" Again, words failed me. "Lynda, I—"

"Message terminated at maximum length. Please hang up and dial the party again," a robotic female voice cut in.

I put the receiver down. "I want to come home," I finished my sentence. Suddenly the idea of being awake any longer overwhelmed me. I could not muster even the strength to walk to my bedroom. I flicked off the light and put my head down on my desk just as the sun yawned across the early morning sky.

* * *

Three knocks on my office door startled me awake. My neck was terribly sore, and my arm had fallen asleep between my head and desk. I wiped sleep from the corners of my eyes.

"Yes?" I croaked.

"There is a patient here." Alassane's voice made my skin crawl.

I shivered and clasped my arms around myself, coaxing my body not to betray my fear. "Come in," I called.

Alassane flipped on the light as he opened the door. I blinked hard as my pupils readjusted to the brightness. My eyes darted to Alassane, and my hand impulsively clamped over my stomach; I felt instantly ill. Breathing slowly through

my nose, I forced myself to look around him at my new patient. A lanky man with great brown eyes knelt on both knees in my doorway. I stood up instinctively, but when he did not rise also, I felt awkward and hastily sat back down. He wore a nice collared shirt and a tailored jacket, but his trousers had large rips at the knees as if they had been dragged along many a rough road. I gestured uncertainly to the chair opposite mine. The man shuffled forward on his knees and used his arms to pull himself onto the seat. Stunned, I waited until I was sure that my voice would not betray my astonishment before beginning what was sure to be an interesting session.

"What is your name?"

"Moussa Maiga," Alassane translated, "but he asks you to address him as Moussa."

"What brings you here, Moussa?"

"His legs do not let him walk, but he can use them for other things… to drive, to sit."

I was confused. Moussa looked completely healthy; what had paralyzed him? And how could walking be the only problem? Alassane grunted from the stool behind me, and the back of my neck prickled with fear.

"What do you think I can do to help you?" I asked, trying to sound optimistic.

"Remove the curse," Alassane interpreted.

I silently damned Alassane for bringing me a patient he knew I could not treat.

"I'm sorry; I don't know anything about those. Have you tried an orthopedist or a surgeon?" I asked.

"No, he is sure they cannot help," Alassane replied. Moussa spoke again and tapped his temple before Alassane continued, an unfriendly edge to his voice. "He asks that you try to fix him; all curses live in the mind, and you are a doctor of mind."

Something about Moussa unnerved me. I felt an odd desire to run far away from him, as if there were something contagious about his affliction, whatever it was. I reminded myself that this was normal practice; I treated insane people all the time. *Mind over matter, mind over matter. He is the crazy one.* I glanced at Alassane sitting silently, like a snake ready to strike. *They are the crazy ones.*

I shuddered, remembering the nervous man's headache. What if I turned away Moussa, and he, too, collapsed in my living room? No, the nervous man's headache had not killed him. *Headaches don't kill. Curses are not real, not real,* I repeated, a silent mantra of sanity.

The more I spoke with Moussa, the more confident I became. My wariness was superseded by the excitement of an actual case. Moussa's somatic delusional disorder was evident; he believed his legs did not work. Judging from the visible musculature of his calves, and from the ease with which he crossed and uncrossed his legs sitting in the chair in my office, I was sure that, physically, his legs were fine. He also had persecutory delusions, manifested in his steadfast belief that sorcery was crippling him. I had made such a combination diagnosis only once before, and my client sadly had killed himself. This time I would not let that happen. I would cure Moussa, and his world—and mine—would be righted. If Moussa

believed that I could help him, he would take my antipsychotic drugs, and his "curse" would vanish. The word would spread, and I would be flooded with patients wanting to be treated. In no time at all, I would be the guest of honor at the Dean's start-of-term feast.

I asked Moussa many questions, looking for inconsistencies in his story; he would see my way more readily if I could find faults in his.

"You do not believe me," he said after finishing the story of his curse a second time. "I do, I do," I lied. "I just need to make sure I have the facts straight before helping you. You know, I have treated several people with this same problem."

"How?" Alassane repeated after Moussa. "He has seen our village chiefs who say it is impossible to remove such a curse."

Maintaining eye contact with him, I pulled a syringe and needle from my desk drawer. "Did your chiefs have medicine like this?"

I was merely going to draw his blood to rule out certain medical conditions that would disprove my psychiatric diagnosis, but Moussa seemed pleased at the sight of such medical technology, exactly what I had hoped. He had to believe I could help him where others could not. He shook his head and smiled slightly at the long needle.

"He says this will not work," Alassane told me as I attached the needle to the syringe and sterilized Moussa's arm.

"What do you mean it won't work?" I asked, continuing to prep his arm. I tied the rubber tourniquet and palpated to find a vein.

"You cannot take his blood with that," Alassane repeated firmly.

I ignored Alassane's effort to interfere with my work. "It won't hurt much," I assured Moussa as my fingers located a large vein on the surface of his arm.

"He says he is not afraid, but you will see," Alassane said, grinning haughtily.

"Inserting needle," I announced. I placed the head of the needle on Moussa's skin and applied pressure. The sharp tip would not penetrate. I pressed a little harder; still nothing. Looking at Moussa to make sure I was not hurting him, I pressed until I was using all of my might, bracing my foot against the desk to increase my leverage. I sweated with the tremendous effort, and my hand began to slip on the needle. Finally, I pulled back. Moussa smiled calmly, his arm still extended without even the slightest puncture mark.

"What…?" I managed to eke out before I had to sit from exhaustion. I felt as if nothing belonged to me anymore, not my mind or even the physical strength of my body. I had nothing to give, nothing to teach. I was lost and confused.

"Ask his permission," Alassane instructed, his yellow eyes widening in anticipation.

"What?"

Moussa nodded. I did not understand. Moussa had said nothing; what had Alassane translated, and how did Moussa know what Alassane had said to me in English? Not knowing what else to do, I followed Alassane's instructions reluctantly, "Moussa, may I please draw your blood?"

He nodded again. Alassane leaned toward me as I prepared once more to draw Moussa's blood. A smirk spread frighteningly across Alassane's lips, his yellow teeth gleaming against his charcoal skin. I tried to block out the image of his face

behind me. I braced myself against the desk and screwed up my forehead in preparation for great physical effort.

"Inserting needle," I said again. I placed the needle tip on the same large vein and pressed lightly. The tip glided through Moussa's skin as if through water, and the syringe quickly filled with blood. I stared in shock, remembering to remove the needle only when Moussa cleared his throat loudly. I sat back down and put my head in my hands. I did not understand anything anymore.

Alassane slid to the ground and bowed to Moussa as if in prayer. He took Moussa's feet in his hands and kissed them. I watched in utter confusion until Alassane began a low, reverent chant. I had had enough of this nonsense, for that was exactly what it was. Alassane must have planned this magic show with Moussa before bringing him in, must have done it just to spite me, to get under my skin, to teach poor, ignorant me something else.

"Get up, Alassane."

Alassane remained on the ground as if he had not heard me.

"Get up, Alassane!"

Alassane only chanted louder.

"Get out of my office! Now!" I bellowed.

Alassane ignored me, but Moussa slid off his chair onto his knees and shuffled toward the door.

"Alassane!" I roared at the top of my lungs. I was so angry, I could hardly see my hands in front of me. Finally, Alassane stood. He bowed curtly to me, and his yellow eyes held mine as he slipped silently out of the room.

For hours, I paced around my office, squeezing my Lexapro stress ball until its innards spilled out like foamy snow onto the floor. Finally, when the frogs had begun their nightly dirge, I decided I had to leave the house.

A torn piece of paper lay on the hallway floor just outside my office. The note was scrawled in Alassane's messy hand: *Docteur Len, I cannot work for you anymore. I am going home to Marafa. Good luck.* I crumpled the note into a ball and hurled it into the trash. How dare he! He had stranded me in this godforsaken country. How would I work? How would I survive? I needed fresh air. I stumbled distractedly into the living room and was met with the dried-blood outline of the nervous man's body crackling in the heat. I gagged and lurched out of the house into the night. I felt as if I were dreaming. Every shadow was more intense, every person loomed larger, every noise sounded louder than usual. I wandered through the neighborhood, looking at people and houses as if it were my first day on earth. I staggered down my street, drunk with depression and disbelief at how my life was unfolding. I barely noticed when I tripped on garbage overflowing from open containers three sizes too small. Even the rank smell of decomposing waste did not lift me from my daze. Guard dogs sniffing the trash heaps growled at me. I walked past them unfazed; they seemed to exist in another world parallel to my own. Nothing could reach me; nothing could hurt me. In my mind I was a pushpin on a globe, a tiny, insignificant dot that knew nothing and was nothing and could float away at any moment.

Somehow, hours later, I found my way back home. My shoes caked with red mud, I collapsed onto my bed fully dressed. Lying still for the first time in hours, I felt reality catch up with me, and I plunged into overwhelming despair. I broke down in sobs as memories of the day crashed down upon me like horrible tidal

waves, destructive and vicious. I struggled to catch my breath. I forced my mind to slow down; one… breathe, two… breathe, three. Slowly, my nerves calmed, and I drifted fitfully in and out of sleep.

* * *

I stood over the surgical table with the man's body cut open in front of me. The problem was just at my fingertips. I knew I was so close, as if I had already discovered the solution but had forgotten it. I dug my hand deeper into the man's abdominal cavity. A sharp pain shot up my fingertips into my hand. I shuddered and shook it off, thinking it must be nothing. I kept digging, determined to find his problem. I was almost there again when the pain came back, stronger this time, as if his insides were burning through my glove. I yanked my arm out of his body and gasped. Bones were all that remained of my hand; the rest had been eaten away. Suddenly I smelled burning flesh from inside his abdominal cavity, and I knew it had come from my own fingers. My head reeled. I placed my hand on the table to steady myself, but when I heard the clink of bone on metal, sick rose from the pit of my stomach, burned up my throat and filled my clenched mouth until I could hold off no longer, and I vomited. Tears flowed uncontrollably down my face. I could not catch my breath. I tried to call to the scrub nurse, but my voice sounded as if it came from the bottom of a deep abyss. My head pounded and the lights of the operating room hurt my eyes. Using my hands to block the light, I saw my skeletal fingers again, and I vomited once more, this time into the man's abdomen, over and over until there was nothing left of me but dry esophageal tissue and bones, and I fainted. My limp, empty body fell toward the cold tile floor in slow motion, but before I hit, the

floor turned into a mirror, and first I saw the man on the operating table and thought I was flying above him, and then I saw myself and my skeleton hand and—

I woke up, panting heavily and sweating from every pore. My right hand had fallen asleep beneath my body. I tried to pull it out from under me but could not. My arm would not budge. My toes would not move. My fingertips were numb. I tried to speak, but my jaw was locked shut. My eyes were plastered open, and they burned with dryness. The mosquito net flicked my cheek as the fan's lattice blades swirled the air. My eyes were on fire. The sandy numbness in my fingertips spread up my arm, and I wanted to cry out, to have anyone hear me, save me, but I could not. I struggled against my body, straining until I thought my temples would burst into one thousand pieces. I heard a high-pitch ringing in my ears, and everything faded to black.

* * *

I regained consciousness hours later to the low, melodic chanting of the call to prayer. *Allahu Akbar*, *Allahu Akbar*. For a long time I lay motionless on my bed, staring at the rays of sunlight filtering through my window. My room looked just as it had when I had first moved in. The off-white walls comforted me in their ugly familiarity; I appreciated the spider webs and the crackling paint. I don't know how long I lay there before I remembered why I had fainted, but the moment I did, panic returned as if no time had passed. I took three deep breaths; it was just a nightmare, not real. I held my breath as I prepared to wiggle my toes. They would be back to normal; everything was fine. One… two… three… nothing. I tried my fingertips. They would not budge from beneath my body. I could not feel my arms; I could not bend my knees. I screamed a blood-curdling scream that echoed off the walls. I

thought I heard footsteps bounding toward my room but no longer believed my senses. Who would be here? The sound must be in my head. I didn't know what was real anymore.

The door burst open, and I screamed louder. What nightmare was this? A tall, dark man in blue-black robes stood in the doorway, yellow eyes ablaze.

"No!" I wailed. "Don't touch me!"

Alassane ran out of the room then, and I thought I was safe until I heard his footsteps hurriedly returning to me. He rushed in with a plastic bag in his hand and a steaming cup. He knelt at the foot of my bed, out of reach of my paralyzed feet aching to kick and fight back, and poured light green leaves into the water.

"Leen, Leen," he cooed as he stirred. "You suffer from what we call *fadini*. Drink this, and you will be cured." The menace in his shockingly yellow eyes betrayed his gentle words, and I knew this was just his last trick. He scooped my neck carefully into his palm and tilted my head back, lifting the steaming mug to my lips. Helplessly, I watched in horror as the tea, thick with swirling leaves, tipped toward my mouth. He bared his yellow teeth as my shrill wailing intensified. The tea burned my tongue. My eyes darted around the room in panic, but I had no choice; I gulped down the tea so that I could breathe, but he poured more, filling my mouth again with his poison.

"Murderer!" I yelled, and all at once I could think and move and fight.

I spit the tea into his face, and he jerked back. Vigorously, I grabbed the mug from his hands and doused him with the steaming liquid. He fell backward against the wall, clutching his burning face. I threw the heavy mug at him, and with a sickening crunch, it collided with his head. He clambered to his feet, and I saw that

he was about to overtake me. I lunged for the broken fan blade and held it at the ready. Alassane looked at me hatefully, his fiery eyes burning into mine. He raised his arm and stepped forward, closing in. I swung. The edge of the blade slammed into his throat. He sputtered and choked, stumbled back against the wall and slid heavily to the floor. His eyelids fluttered, and he passed in and out of consciousness for several seconds. He awoke in a panic, gasping for breath and spitting blood. I watched, paralyzed, as his shoulders slumped and his body went limp. Bright red blood oozed slowly from one nostril and the corner of his mouth. His yellow eyes sprouted with red as the capillaries burst one by one.

I walked in a daze to the bathroom and took a hot shower in my clothes, washing away the blood that had spattered onto my shirt. I had seen so much blood in this house. I had to get out. I was incapable of any other thought, of any movement but leaving. I returned to my bedroom, dressed and packed a small suitcase. I pocketed my wallet and passport, steadfastly averting my eyes from where I knew Alassane lay dead. I took one last look at the room as I turned out the light. Immediately I switched it back on. His body was gone! Not a spot of blood flecked the floor. I spun around, searching wildly. I felt blind, insane. Was this his last trick, meant to drive me mad? This was not possible! Without another thought, I slammed my hand down on the light switch and sprinted out of the room.

I did not stop running until I reached the main road. I hailed a cab and pointed feverishly to my passport to indicate the airport. After more pointing and waving of my old plane receipt, I somehow managed to buy a one-way ticket to Iowa International Airport. A young Canadian man sat next to me on the plane. He tried to make conversation, but my ears muffled his words. Images of Alassane's final,

bloody stare haunted my mind. What had happened to his body? I tried to concentrate on the Canadian and heard him ask me something about my travels. I muttered about dirty translators, magic needles and dead men on my floor, barely aware of my own words. As the plane took off, I began to weep. *I killed him. I killed him.*

I fell asleep sometime during the ascent, tears still running down my face. Only when I awoke hours later did I understand that I had spoken my thoughts aloud. The Canadian had gone, and in his place was an Air Marshal in a blue uniform. A pistol gleamed from a holster strapped to his thigh. I spent the rest of the flight looking out the window at the sea of gray clouds, wondering what exactly I had said.

I exited the plane with the Air Marshal close behind me. He directed me wordlessly into a small office just before the customs line. Two men in dark suits sat behind a metal desk that gleamed under a fluorescent light. They questioned me about the purpose of my trip, my translator, and a dead man. I answered everything as truthfully as I could, trying to explain what I had been thinking during the events that had occurred. Even as I said the words, I knew the police officers would never understand me; they would think I was insane. After a while, I stopped trying. I watched their faces change from confused to accusing as they rewrote my account in their own words. One of the men read me my rights and handcuffed me. I spent the night in a police holding cell at the airport.

* * *

The judge at my trial committed me to a psychiatric facility. *You're not here because you've been convicted of a crime. In fact, we have some real doubts about whether*

anyone was killed over there. The African police found no evidence of a murder. Lynda cried and promised to visit. The Dean walked out of my life forever. And now here I am, Box 134 at Bloomfield Gardens Psychiatric Ward in Iowa City, Iowa. This is my life, my own personal hell. Everyone thinks I'm crazy, but I'm not. It was self-defense. You will never believe because you weren't there. You don't know what I know. You didn't see what I saw. You never felt the burn of yellow eyes scorching your soul, trying, slowly, slowly, to murder you.

Jelekise

Rain pounded on the straw roof of the lean-to. The water came down in sheets, so thick and fast that the children could not see twelve inches into the night. They had been stuck there for two hours, and they shivered in a chill like none they had ever felt. Sudden squalls bent the sheets of rain diagonal, and icy water pelted the children's bare arms. Huddled together for warmth and dryness, the children looked out in terror as gusts of wind threatened to steal their only shelter from the storm. Closer and closer they drew toward the center of their refuge, as the caked-mud earth absorbed the water, and a dark and menacing line of wetness crept toward them.

As one gale ceased and the rain resumed its vertical assault, so hard and unyielding that the water formed quick eddies upon the saturated ground, Karim's eldest sister shook off a young girl clinging to her arm and stood. Djeneba's mighty frame dwarfed the tiny children below. Strands of her black hair, braided into a

spiral, caught against the straw roof. She flinched angrily, yanking her hair free with an unpleasant ripping noise that made the children squirm. Djeneba's skirt, the dirty red color of creeping wet mud, thrashed in the wind, and Karim glanced instinctively toward the rustling. Djeneba jerked her skirt firmly around her legs. Karim did not have to look to know that her jet black eyes blazed into the back of his neck. He kept his gaze downcast, unsure what he had done. He nearly jumped back into the rain when his sister's voice rang out above the storm.

"Hear me!" she bellowed into the whipping wind. Djeneba stood just outside the shelter of the lean-to, arms stretched wide, head tilted back to the baleful heavens. As if possessed by the tempest raging about her, Djeneba spun round and round, faster and faster until she was no more than a mud-red blur. She cried out as if an exultant beast, "Hear me!"

Karim shoved his right thumb into his mouth, tonguing the fleshy part where his nail should have been. The accident had happened almost a year ago; Karim had been six, Djeneba twelve. Racing home from school one evening, Karim had reached their heavy iron gate first, but as he had spun around to gloat, Djeneba had bounded past him and slammed the gate shut on his thumb. A burning pain had shot up his arm as if someone had lit a line of fire along his skin. Blood had expanded under his thumbnail, dripping slowly onto the ground. The blood had clotted and blackened, and before long, his nail had fallen off and never grown back.

Djeneba stopped spinning and faced the children. Karim edged away; any moment now she would erupt upon them, and the others would blame themselves for her outburst and go home after the storm confused and terrified, wishing they had behaved better. The neighborhood children, all around Karim's age, had been

playing ball on the nearby dirt field when the storm had struck without warning. Djeneba and Karim had been on their way home from a school event, and had been forced to join the children huddled under the only shelter in sight.

The storm grew louder as hail joined the rain. Ice bullets flew at the children through the open sides of the lean-to, tearing at their dark skin until blood rose to the surface in crimson pockmarks. The littlest children whimpered. Karim tightened his lips around his mutilated thumb and shut his eyes.

"Silence!" Djeneba's voice boomed above the storm's rising din. "For I am going to tell you a tale you will never forget."

Djeneba stepped back under the lean-to and swept her twisted face past the children's small ones, so close that Karim's nose twitched from her acidic breath. She swung her massive frame upright and angled herself awkwardly so that she leaned over the children's heads, balanced like a lightning-struck tree that threatened to topple. Beads of water dripped down Djeneba's forehead in jagged lines, shining in the murky light of the cloud-cloaked moon. She shook her head to dry herself, and water rained on her quavering audience. The children huddled closer, sensing that perhaps they had something to fear.

"I had just finished sunset prayer, and I knelt at the end of my mattress, bowing still"— Djeneba covered her face with her long fingers and bowed theatrically toward the children as if in prayer, leaning again too close to their faces, forcing them to inch backward in fright— "when a cold hand rested on the back of my neck."

The small girl whom Djeneba had shaken off before gasped. Djeneba shot her a look as cold as the hailstorm. The girl choked back a sob and buried her tiny

head in her lap. A fleeting grin passed over Djeneba's face before she resumed an air of gravity. "I was not afraid of the clammy hand, for I have endured worse. Nothing can scare me anymore! I faced my intruder bravely, but it was only my Baba that stood over me." Djeneba paused, seeming to contemplate how to proceed. "Have you looked at the skin of an old, old man?"

The children did not dare speak.

"Have you seen his skin, I said? Have you touched flesh that is about to die? I have!" Djeneba yelled. She trailed her spidery fingers down her arms, leaving goose bumps in their wake. "Baba's skin was dried up like withering leaves from a Tamarind tree: old, wrinkly, papery skin, sucked back into the sockets of his cheeks as if he chewed on the flesh inside. And every time he coughed, deep and wet, his ribs clattered together."

Djeneba assumed the rasping voice of a dying man. "'Djeneba,' my Baba whispered, 'I will die soon. You are my eldest grandchild, and I must warn you. Pay close attention, child; what I tell you is true. Long ago, my Baba told me; his Baba told him, and his Baba before that saw it happen in front of his very eyes.'" Djeneba inhaled slowly, the air scratching against the back of her throat to make a sound of rattling breath that chilled her audience. She coughed as Baba must have done, and she smiled down at the fear growing in the children's eyes.

"Baba leaned in close to my face," Djeneba whispered, barely audible above the storm. "I smelled the dried fish on his breath. 'Be prepared,' he told me. 'Keep watch, for the Jelekise could return at any moment to get you…'" Djeneba pointed a shaking finger straight ahead at an invisible version of her young self, "or you!" she shrieked, thrusting her thumb at Karim, scratching his nose with her long nail.

Karim's eyes watered, and for a moment Djeneba's black eyes looked as though they might melt away and drip inky streaks down her cheeks.

"Three generations past," Djeneba continued, "when my Baba's great, great, great grandfather was a small boy"— she studied the children crowded beneath her, and the corners of her lips curled upward— "a small child *just like yourselves*, he lived in this very neighborhood. He sat, perhaps, under this very shelter in a storm. But this tale is about his little brother."

The frightened children looked about at their sisters and brothers. Unease crept into Karim's belly. He puffed out his stomach until his muscles strained, and he breathed in slowly to quiet his nerves.

"Here is what Baba told me," Djeneba began. "Many years ago, when our ancestors lived in small huts with clay walls rounded by the hands of their men and straw roofs stitched by the fingers of their women, when the sun was their light and their watch and their blanket, when fathers died young, fighting animals large as the white man's truck… back then, there was a small boy of six or seven who looked very much like you." Djeneba aimed her sharp pointer finger at Karim, but this time he leaned back, just avoiding his sister's long nail. Karim puffed out his belly again and inhaled.

"This little boy lived with his mother and his older brother," Djeneba went on. "He loved his family very much, especially his mother, who smelled sweet like warm bissap juice and crushed baobab leaves. She always told the boy how lonely she would be if ever he went away from her, and the boy would smile and promise his mother he would never leave. One night, a night much like this one," Djeneba swept her arm across the sky, "rain pounded down on the little boy's house, and

water dripped through his straw roof. Lightning lit his room, and his skin prickled with goose flesh. The little boy watched sheets of water cascade past his window, listened to the drumming of the rain on the roof and the tinkling drops of water onto his floor, when he glimpsed a flash of green outside, a trick of lightning far in the distance. The boy smiled at the mystery of the heavens and shut his eyes, waiting patiently for sleep. Sometime in the darkest part of the night when all you can see are the outlines of things, the boy awoke to a rattling outside his window. He squinted but could see nothing through the darkness. Suddenly, the walls trembled. He sat up in bed, shuddering in fear. He heard the clay that held the straw roof to the walls crack and then crumble as if no rain had come for many years. The little boy cried out for his mother, 'Maman!'" Djeneba shouted the name into the night. "His mother came running. 'What is wrong, my boy? What has got you?' The boy strained to hear the rattling outside his window or the crumbling of his walls, but all was silent. No green light flashed in the sky. His clay walls had but a thin crack, and his mother told him it had always been so. She kissed him gently, and he breathed in her sweet perfume. 'Hush now and go to sleep,' his mother cooed, and the boy closed his eyes. But as soon as his mother had left, he heard rustling outside his window. His walls creaked. Something like lightning flared brilliant green, not far away at all."

Djeneba inhaled grandly and lifted her arms to the straw roof of the lean-to, clutching at its twigs with her spindly fingers. She leaned her chest forward, stretching her body as she twisted back and forth. A twig snapped under her great weight. Karim threw his hands over his head, waiting to break the roof's fall. Djeneba pulled her arms down and continued her tale.

"The green light flashed again, closer than before. The little boy was very afraid. A snipping noise above him made him look toward his ceiling. Just above his bed, he saw—" Djeneba paused to look at each shivering member of her captive audience. She snapped her arms toward the children. They shrieked and scuttled backward, some clear out from under the tarp's shelter. Djeneba cackled, and the children fell silent. She drew her hands back up to the roof and entwined her fingers in the straw once more. She spoke softly and slowly, pausing after every word. The children edged closer to hear. "Just above his bed, the boy saw to his horror… long, white, sharp objects poking through the straw, clawing their way into his bedroom. Daggers, spears, he could not tell in the darkness what evil pried his roof apart. He saw the sky through the hole in his ceiling, a hole almost large enough for someone… something… to crawl through."

The small girl whom Djeneba had shaken off earlier screamed and buried her head in Karim's lap. Karim could not move his thumb from his mouth to comfort her. He remained still and silent as the dead, his eyes fixed on his sister almost unwillingly as if she had bound him by spell.

"The boy cried for his mother," Djeneba continued gravely, "and again his mother ran in. This time, she brought with her a candle. To prove that it was only his imagination run wild, she shone the waxen light on the wall and the roof, all around his round room and then upon her face to comfort her fearful boy, but his terror would not subside. He sobbed into his mother's hand and refused to let her go. His mother promised she would not leave; she would wait outside his room, watching over him until he fell asleep. For many minutes, the boy glanced at his doorway to make sure his mother had not abandoned him. 'Hush my boy, let sleep

come,' his mother soothed. But still the boy felt a chill and his muscles tensed. He had seen that his ceiling had no hole, and now his walls were silent, and yet the fear did not leave him. He looked once more for the shape of his mother in the doorway. 'Close your eyes, my boy, let sleep take you away,' she sang. Feeling he should not, but too exhausted to fight any longer, the little boy closed his eyes and felt himself drift away into nothingness." Djeneba's voice was soft and soothing, as if she hummed a lullaby.

Rain fell in an unbroken flow from the roof of the lean-to, hitting the ground with such constancy that Karim imagined the storm whispering the mother's words. Wind whistled through the straw branches and stung the children sharply with pointed, icy gusts. With a great inhalation, Djeneba leaned toward her audience. She blew a long, cold breath at their rain-soaked faces, swinging her body slowly around the circle of children. Karim tightened his eyes and mouth as Djeneba neared, but nothing came. Thinking that perhaps she had skipped over him, he opened his eyes. Djeneba smiled not five inches from his nose, and before Karim could pull back, her breath slapped his face.

Djeneba stood again, rolling her shoulders back to stretch as she continued her story in an airy whisper. "When next the boy awoke, it was because the air had shifted above him. A warm breath touched his cheeks, and he smelled the sweetness of bissap juice and crushed baobab leaves. His mother hummed in his ear and he smiled. She must have known he was about to open his eyes, for her fingertips grazed over his eyelids." Djeneba drew her fingers softly through the air. The children's tiny eyes followed her hand as if the story were written upon her palm.

The hard edge returned to Djeneba's voice. "As his mother's fingers drifted over the boy's lids, he felt a sudden pain! Sharp and searing beneath his brow, as if she had taken a knife to his skin in a small, straight line. The little boy's eyes shot open, and he saw above him two pairs of terribly long, white nails. He looked out from under them as if from a prison cell into the green eyes of the Jelekise. The boy tried to scream, but the Jelekise's claws covered his lips! The Jelekise snarled a hideous smile of jagged brown teeth. The smell of bissap and baobab was gone, and the boy choked on the odor of the long-decaying dead."

Djeneba spoke louder and faster, each sentence racing into the next, punctuated only by her sharp intakes of breath. "The little boy could not breathe! He struggled against the monster, but his tiny arms were no match for the Jelekise. His hand grazed the bladed edge of one of the Jelekise's nails, and blood shot from his finger into the Jelekise's green eyes. The Jelekise roared. The boy tried to roll out from under the monster's clutches, but the Jelekise was too quick. With one swipe of its long claw, the Jelekise slit the boy's throat. Blood spurted up in a perfect arc," Djeneba's hand drew the blood's trajectory in the air, "and rained down on the bed. The last thing the little boy heard was the long, rattling gasp of the Jelekise drinking the blood spilling from his own throat."

Djeneba took a long, loud, slurping breath, and Karim imagined her drinking blood out of the air. He shivered, bit down on his thumb and wrapped his free arm around his body. Djeneba's lips curled as she continued in a deep voice that thundered over the ebbing storm. "They say the little boy's mother killed herself the very next day. The boy's body was never found. His older brother, the sole survivor of the Jelekise's hunt, took it upon himself to pass down this story. Now and then,

you will hear of another such tale, another boy and his mother or girl and her brother ripped from each other gruesomely in the night by the Jelekise. Each taken soul becomes the next Jelekise, whose only purpose in life… or in death… is to feed on the soul of a child. It is a fact well known among the elders that the Jelekise often strikes on nights like this, when the wind and rain are so loud, you cannot hear the scratching of the Jelekise's nails at your window, and the clouds are so thick, you cannot see its white daggers grabbing at the strands of your roof. But beware, for truly there is no telling when the Jelekise might come out. You are young. Your blood is warm and sweet like bissap and baobab leaves. If you are not careful, you may be next."

A clap of thunder boomed as Djeneba finished her tale. She looked over her masterpiece: every child before her sat still as a grave, unblinking, barely breathing. Some had covered their eyes, others their ears. Cheeks were streaked with tear stains; noses dripped unnoticed. Karim's thumb drooped from the corner of his mouth. The children imagined that claws would sprout from Djeneba's fingertips and green horns from her head, and they would all die before seeing their mothers ever again.

"Now go!" Djeneba yelled.

The children clambered to their feet, tripping over one another as they ran out into the rain, turning every few yards to see that Djeneba was not chasing behind them with monstrous, white claws. Only Karim remained at her feet.

"Get up," Djeneba hissed. She yanked Karim by his armpit. "Move, or I'll bite!"

Djeneba strode so fast that Karim had to run to keep up with her. She had taken a short cut from school, and he did not know where they were; Djeneba was his only way home.

The dark and twisting roads of the city were illuminated by intermittent bolts of lightning that flashed white hot and horizontal across the sky. The rain had slowed but not stopped, and Karim was soon soaked to the bone. His gray tee shirt, sheer from years of vigorous scrubbing by hand, clung to his skin. He stopped to catch his breath and saw the outline of a city bus in the distance, a single headlight illuminating its way. He wished that he could ride it home to escape the chill. When he turned his attention back to the street, Djeneba was gone. He sprinted to the crossroads at the end of the block and strained to see into the distance, but there was no sign of his sister, not even the *clip clop* of her sandals hitting the backs of her heels or the squelch of a shoe yanked from mud.

Karim turned in circles, tears welling in his eyes. He stumbled to the side of the road and leaned against the corner building for support. He would never make it home, never see his mother; he would be stuck on this road in the rain until the Jelekise found him. His body would disappear. His mother would kill herself. "Djeneba!" he cried into the empty night.

"Ah ha!" Djeneba roared as she jumped out from around the corner where she had been hiding. Karim's stomach hurtled into his throat. He choked on his own breath, painfully swallowing air. His head swam; his vision blurred, and he lost his balance, falling into a muddy rut in the road.

"Get up or the Jelekise will get you," Djeneba taunted as she started walking again toward home.

Karim pulled himself from the reddish mire. Filthy and unsteady, he placed one foot feebly in front of the other. Everything hurt. He wanted desperately to stop, but he knew that Djeneba would not wait.

Karim recognized where he was as they passed through a small neighborhood where white people lived. The rain had tapered off to a slow drizzle, and guard dogs on long chains emerged into the street, howling and shaking water off their mud-matted coats. Karim reached out to scratch a mutt behind his ears. The dog barked, fighting against the chain's restraint, and Karim stumbled backward out of the dog's reach and ran. His shaking legs soon carried him past Djeneba, and he did not slow down until his house came into sight.

When Karim reached his front gate, his legs gave out and he slumped to the ground. He sat in a daze until his sister's silhouette appeared from around the corner. He watched Djeneba approach with a distant curiosity, observing her as he would an athlete on television: the way her feet stomped down with a weight heavier than her body, the force with which she swung her hands with every step as if she meant to shatter the air before her. He studied the pattern of her skirt, its maze of black thread on red cloth, and the two white stripes running down either side.

As Djeneba neared, Karim realized that the white lines seemed to swing past the bounds of the fabric as she walked. Impossible. Hoping his eyes had deceived him, he looked again, following the white streaks up the length of her skirt to his sister's very fingertips! Djeneba stepped closer, and all at once Karim saw every fearful detail: the bladed edges, the pointy tips, the menacing sheen of Djeneba's long, white claws. His heartbeat flew, and he feared that Djeneba would hear its urgent pounding. He closed his eyes and puffed out his belly. When he looked up

again, Djeneba was closing in on him. Karim scrambled to his feet and ran to the front door. He yanked the handle, but it would not budge. Djeneba was approaching from behind. Karim crouched in a ball at the foot of the door and clamped his eyes shut.

He heard the handle twist and the heavy gate creak open before he dared to look. Djeneba's arm extended above him and her hand, claw-free and normal, released the handle as the gate swung open. As Karim stood, Djeneba kneed him hard in the back, and he flew forward into their courtyard, scraping his palms on the ground.

"Next time, get out of my way," Djeneba hissed, stepping over him.

Karim lay on the ground for a minute, trying to make sense of what he had witnessed. Nails: long, white nails had definitely—almost definitely—come from Djeneba's fingers. Claws. He had seen them with his own eyes! But they had disappeared a moment later. Perhaps he had imagined them, his mind running wild after hearing Djeneba's tale. Karim struggled to his feet, hoping he could fill a bucket with bath water and wash before his family saw his clothes and face covered in mud.

Karim took a long time in the outhouse that night. He scrubbed his skin raw with mesh and soap, wincing when he passed over the cuts on his knees and elbows. He dumped cup after cup of warm water on his head. The heat relaxed his muscles, slowed his heart and breath and mind. Slowly, he felt himself return to normal. He realized how hungry he was; he had not eaten since noon, and he guessed it was near eleven. He dressed in clean, dry clothes, and walked into his house.

Karim was delighted to see his whole family sitting in the living room. His father and older brother watched the local news; his younger sister drew circles on an old receipt; his two visiting aunts, Tantie Fanta and Tantie Mimi, looked through booklets of dress styles from the local tailor; and his mother braided their servant's hair into thin, tight rows. His mother's arms, like her body, were thick and strong, but her fingers weaved the tiny strands of hair with unexpected finesse. She hummed as she worked; fine wrinkles rippling off the corners of her mouth seemed to extend her smile into her cheeks. Karim's eyes stung with tears of relief, and he quickly looked away to hide them.

"Be still, Nana," his mother whispered to the small servant girl. "You will mess up your braids."

Nana was several years older than Karim, ten or eleven, no one knew. She was short and very skinny—Karim's mother had told him this was because Nana had not been fed enough when she was a baby—and she stood so straight that she could balance a calabash full of water on her head. She slept on a small mattress on the floor in Karim's younger sister's room and ate with the family. She had come from Marafa, the big city to the North, almost one year ago. In her first month, Nana had cried every day as she washed dishes and scrubbed laundry. Karim had tried to speak to her, but she did not know Bambara. He had tried to give her a book from school, but his mother had scolded him and told him Nana could not read. Now, Nana never cried anymore, and she could speak in broken sentences. Karim often wanted to laugh at the way Nana said *doomooni* instead of *dumuni*, or *baara key* instead of *baara kay*, but he kept that to himself; his mother had heard him snicker once, and she had sent him to bed without dinner. That night, his mother had told

him terrible things about Marafa. She had said that Nana was lucky to live with them, even to be alive. She told him that Nana had been stolen from her parents as a little girl, and that she had run away from her captors because they treated her very badly. At the end of that night, his mother had looked at him fiercely and taken his hands in hers. *Promise me, Karim*, she had said. *Promise you will never go to Marafa. I do not want to lose you forever*. Karim had promised. Except for the occasional whisper, Karim rarely heard anyone speak of Marafa, for his mother had forbidden the topic.

Karim's mother tied off Nana's braids with tiny rubber bands and sent her to serve dinner to the family. Nana returned with two bowls, the smaller one in her arms and the larger on her head. She placed the first on the floor in one corner of the room for the women and the second in the opposite corner for the men. Karim watched Djeneba hunch impatiently over her meal. He rinsed his right hand in the water dish and sat on the floor between his father and brothers. The food steamed tantalizingly in front of them. The leafy black sauce glimmered on the surface of the sticky white rice and smelled of the forest, deep and earthy and salty. Karim's stomach grumbled loudly, and his mother laughed from across the room. Finally, his father took the first bite, and Karim dug his fingers into the scalding rice. As soon as all of the men were eating, the women began. The whole family fell silent, scooping large handfuls of rice onto their fingers and licking the food into their mouths with one swipe of their tongues.

Between bites, Karim glanced at Djeneba as she shoved a mound of rice ungracefully into her mouth. She slurped the sauce from her palm as she had done to the air during her story. Karim cringed at the noise. He took a large bite, trying to distract himself from the nagging sensation in his stomach that begged him to look

again, to be sure that no white talons sprouted from her fingers. Karim shoveled rice into his mouth until he could hardly breathe. He wished Djeneba's back were to him so that he could watch her undetected.

"Ah!" Karim gasped, yanking his hand out of the rice bowl. His fingertips felt as if they were on fire. He had been so distracted that he had not realized his fingers were resting idly in the burning rice. He licked black sauce gently off his hand and blew on his fingers. The fleshy patch where his thumbnail should have been throbbed. No longer hungry, he rinsed his hands and stood to leave.

"*A barika*, Father," Karim said with a quick bow.

"*A barika Allah ye*," his father answered between bites.

Karim walked over to the women's circle to thank his mother, "*A barika*, Mother," he said, lowering his head. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Djeneba chewing ferociously next to him. Though her mouth was full, her hand already formed a new giant ball of rice.

"*A barika Allah ye*," his mother replied.

Lifting his head, Karim stole one more glance at Djeneba. She picked black sauce from her front teeth with her nail. Her teeth were sharper than usual and darker, even brown, although Karim was not sure if this was the sauce or the color of her teeth. He stared at Djeneba's chewing mouth, too preoccupied by fear to realize what he was doing.

Djeneba cracked her knuckles. The loud popping pulled Karim out of his reverie. She squished rice between her fingers as her hand balled into a fist. Hastily, Karim pretended to look past her, but he knew he was too late. Cold sweat accumulated on the back of his neck. His stomach revolted against the food he had

scarfed down, and he shoved his right thumb into his mouth. In his peripheral vision, he saw Djeneba raise her head as if in slow motion. He tried to keep his focus on the wall behind her, but, as though a magnetic force existed between them, his head turned in her direction against his will.

Her eyes had narrowed to slits, but it was not the iciness of her glare that sent shivers down his spine. Karim blinked hard twice. Green! Was it possible that he had seen a hint of green in her black eyes? A wave of nausea washed over him, and he shivered noticeably.

Suddenly Djeneba was on her feet, standing over Karim and the circle of eating women. "Stop staring at me!" she shouted.

Karim was spellbound, frozen in place; he could not pull his eyes away from her. He felt the weight of his whole family shift toward them. He wished they would stop her.

"I said stop staring at me!" Djeneba yelled at Karim. Small particles of black sauce sprayed from her mouth. "I have had to watch you snivel all day. Why can you not leave me alone? Just leave me alone!" Djeneba spun wildly toward her family. "All of you, let me be! I can't stand it here. If you..." Djeneba turned on Karim now, furious.

Karim's face dropped. No longer could he hide his shock, his horror. His mind raced; he could not keep up with his own thoughts, could not understand the significance of what he had just seen. But he knew it was there, clear as day. In Djeneba's violent black eyes, a thin ring of incandescent green blazed just around her irises.

"If you stare at me like that one more time, I'll take off! I'll go to Marafa and you will never see me again!" Karim's mother gasped behind him. Nana whimpered. "Leave. Me. Alone," Djeneba ordered, her words trailing off as she bent over Karim to whisper a promise in his ear, "or you're next."

Karim's family stared at him in confusion. Looking helplessly at Djeneba, his mother opened and closed her mouth as if she wanted to speak but held herself back. Karim's mouth went dry and he heard a shrill buzzing in his ears. The floor pitched and rolled, and suddenly he was on his hands and knees, vomiting tiny black leaves and undigested rice. He felt his mother's hands coax him into the outhouse. He heard the heavy rush of water filling the shower bucket at the spigot outside. His mother placed the bucket at his feet and helped him remove his soiled clothes. She sponged him with the warm water, lathered his hair and rinsed him off, shielding his eyes from the soap.

"Here are fresh clothes, my darling," his mother murmured. "Join us when you are ready." She stroked his cheek tenderly and returned to the house.

Karim stood motionless in the outhouse, delirious with confusion and fear. His head hurt from trying to make sense of what he had seen. Images from the night flung themselves at him with dizzying speed: rain, lightning, Jelekise, long nails, white claws, Jelekise, brown teeth, green eyes, Djeneba, Jelekise! He pictured his family in the living room; he had to warn them! Karim leapt over the bucket to open the outhouse door. As he reached for the door handle, the sight of his bare arm reminded him that he was naked. What had come over him? Djeneba could not be the Jelekise because the Jelekise did not exist; it was a monster in a scary tale and nothing more. His face burned in embarrassment. What must his family have

thought of him… and poor Nana had had to clean up his sickness on the living room floor. He put on his second pair of clean clothes for that day and, his head lowered in shame, shuffled back into his house.

His family was just as he had left them, except that Nana washed the dishes outside and Djeneba was nowhere to be seen. Questions bulleted through his mind: where was Djeneba? What was she doing? How long did he have until she returned? He shook his head, remembering his revelation in the outhouse; Djeneba was probably asleep.

Karim sat on the floor by the television and watched his brother play a bootleg version of *Left for Dead*. Mutilated, bloodstained zombies sprang out to kill him at every turn, and when his brother died, virtual blood oozed down the screen until everything was crimson.

"Watch this! I'm comin' for 'em!" his brother whispered excitedly as he maneuvered his player through a desolate snowy landscape onto the roof of a lone barn. His brother blasted a hole in the roof and dropped down into a room full of zombies who raised their arms and marched thirstily toward the human intruder. Karim's brother managed to kill most of the zombies before he was fatally wounded and blood smeared the television screen.

"Wanna try?" his brother pushed the controller toward Karim.

Karim shook his head.

"What, baby's scared of a little monster?" his brother taunted.

"I just don't want to play."

Karim left his brother to the zombies and crossed the room to the couch nearest his aunts. He lay down close to Tantie Mimi, a large, affectionate woman

whose past visits Karim remembered fondly. He did not care much for Tantie Fanta, though she closely resembled his mother. His aunts were talking about the city and their families, and soon Karim's eyes drooped closed. Distantly, he heard his brother pad off to bed.

Karim ears pricked up when he overheard Tantie Fanta say Djeneba's name. "That girl should be sent away to learn how to behave in front of her elders." Tantie Fanta's nasal whine made Karim uncomfortable. "It's unacceptable for a girl to speak in such a way to her mother and father. If she were my child—"

"Sending her away is the worst thing you could do to her," Tantie Mimi cut her off. "Don't you know what happened?"

"What on earth are you talking about?"

Tantie Mimi lowered her voice, and Karim could not hear what she said next.

"I don't see the problem," Tantie Fanta challenged. "Every little girl visits her family in their natal village. I did. You did."

"Yes I know," Tantie Mimi replied, exasperated. "Just listen to me. When Djeneba was seven, her parents sent her to live with family in the village for one month. They decided to send her then because blessed little Karim," Tantie Mimi stroked her beloved nephew's arm, "was to be born any day, and they knew that any babe's first month at home is all consuming. The timing should have been perfect."

"But?"

Tantie Mimi grunted at the interruption but pressed on. "Karim was born too early. He was very small and very sick, and he required much attention from his parents. When I came to see them, they had not slept in days. Djeneba had written

them a letter not long after Karim's birth, begging them to let her return early. She was very unhappy in the village, but her parents were too overwhelmed to hear what she was saying. I saw it with my own eyes, they could not have taken on another child just then, especially precocious little Djeneba, but had they understood what was happening, they would have sent for her; I am sure of it."

"What was happening? For goodness sake, I am getting tired," Tantie Fanta sighed.

"Djeneba did not write this expressly in her letter, and she certainly hasn't spoken of it since her return, but I reread the letter many years later and am sure this was the case. She was really quite a curious girl, very clever. She must have poked around the village where she shouldn't have and overheard the elders speaking one day about… is Karim asleep behind me?"

"I believe so," Tantie Fanta answered, suddenly interested.

"He won't understand anyway at his age. Still…"

Karim heard Tantie Mimi shift toward him. He kept his breathing even, his body still. Tantie Mimi picked up where she had left off, her voice slightly more hushed than before. "Djeneba must have overheard them speaking of excision. She was so intelligent; she would have known what it was. Can you imagine knowing that in advance? So she wrote the letter to her parents, but they were so busy with Karim, they did not respond until it was too late. When her mother picked her up, she found Djeneba in the recovery house for girls. An infection had spread. More had had to be cut off. Djeneba returned home after six months, and she has never been the same. Always angry, so resentful. Toward her parents, of course, but most

of all…" Tantie Mimi's voice faded into a whisper, and Karim could only hear the slicing s's that punctuated her story through the gap between her two front teeth.

Tantie Fanta's voice, too nasal to be a whisper, broke the quiet. "How could she not see that it isn't the poor boy's fault? He was a baby, for goodness sake. He doesn't even know," Tantie Fanta's voice dropped to a husky murmur, "what *excision* is!"

"She was just a little girl. These things are never rational."

Karim believed Tantie Mimi; he could hear in her voice that she knew much about the subject. He wished he knew what excision was, but he understood that it was something not to be asked about.

"I'm worried about her now," Tantie Mimi continued. "This isn't the first time she has threatened to run away to Marafa. She would lose herself there. She wouldn't make it. No one makes it in that city."

"She's heard the horror stories, same as the rest of us. For heaven's sake, Mimi, people call it the city of lost souls. If she's as smart as you say, she won't go," Tantie Fanta concluded. "Thank you for the story, Mimi. Fascinating account, but I'm too tired to think on it anymore. I'm off to bed."

Tantie Mimi remained there for some time, deep in thought. Tired as he was, Karim dared not move. Finally, what seemed like hours later, Tantie Mimi stroked Karim's cheek and retired to the bedroom she shared with Tantie Fanta. When their door clicked shut, Karim picked himself off the couch and turned out the living room lights. Never before had he been the last to go to sleep, and the darkness of the expansive room frightened him. Shadows jumped toward him off the walls. The

house creaked and groaned like he had never heard before. Heart pounding, he hurried into his bedroom and drew his curtain across the doorway.

All night Karim tossed in his bed, Djeneba's tale echoing unrelentingly in his head. He watched the surrounding darkness for any sign of movement, any sound of intruder, a hint of sharpened nail, a flash of green light. Djeneba's story ate through the contours of his brain like beetles through decaying roadside carcasses. Searching for a distracting thought, his mind fell upon the odd white doctor who lived in his neighborhood. Karim had gone to see him several weeks earlier, desperate for help with Djeneba, but the doctor had shooed him away. Karim pictured the doctor's strange sunburnt face and the wrinkle that ran down the middle of his forehead, but the hour was late, and soon sleep drifted in like the rising tide, abandoning Karim's mind to his ungovernable dreams.

The white man glided along a road in their neighborhood, his feet not touching the ground, squinting at something in the distance. A loud crack caught his attention, and his face snapped toward Karim. The white man's eyes blazed angrily, slowly taking on the fiery color of his skin. He grew taller and taller as he approached until he towered directly over Karim. The giant's clawed fingers reached down from high above toward Karim's head. Karim could not run; his feet were rooted to the ground! He knew this was the end. Just as his sharp nails brushed Karim's hair, the white man vanished, and Karim found himself suspended in the air, level with a vast gray cloud that had just materialized.

From a great distance behind and a long way up, he saw a small figure walking across the dirt field behind his house, and he knew it to be himself. Even from such a height, Karim could see his self on the ground hide his naked thumb

between palm and fist. Though the air up high was still, the nape of Karim's neck prickled, and he understood that his self on the ground was being watched. In the distance, he heard a whoosh of air and the jingle of metal on metal. Suddenly, a flash of brightest green hurtled past him toward the field. Karim cried out, but he knew his warning would not carry to his self on the ground. His body froze in concrete air. An iridescent streak of green lingered beside him. Karim traced its path through the darkness and saw a monster extend its boney, sharpened claws toward his tiny body on the ground. He struggled to move but felt only pain where his body was bound in the sky, and he knew he would die along with his self on the ground when—

Karim's eyes flew open in the blackness of his bedroom. He clasped his hand over his mouth to stifle his frantic breathing, fearing to disturb any slumbering beast beneath his bed or outside his window. He sucked anxiously on his thumb and vowed never to close his eyes again, certain that the next time, the claws would reach him, and he would not be so lucky.

Karim lay awake for what felt like hours, forcing himself to keep vigil. He thought of his mother's *bouille* that he would eat in the morning; it comforted him to know that she would be awake before long, boiling water and millet, mixing sugar, lime and powdered milk until the porridge was thick and white and steaming. His closed eyes leaked unexpected tears onto his mattress. His stomach ached with grief and longing as his mind drifted back to Djeneba's tale. He saw that the monster would take him away, and he felt what life would be without his mother and cried noiselessly until sleep once again smothered his despair.

The damp air shifted above him. A breath, sticky and warm, caressed his face. A shadowy figure moved over him in the darkness. From beneath his transparent lids, two blinking lights burned faintly green. Body rigid, muscles stiff with terror, Karim flicked his eyes open for the briefest moment and saw hovering above him the blazing malachite eyes of his sister. Still as a corpse, he waited for to her strike.

Nothing. Silence. No claws dug at him. No teeth sank into him. Tentatively, he scanned his bedroom. Blackness. He puffed out his stomach and inhaled, raising a shaking hand into the air above him. Empty. A clanging of metal in the courtyard made him jump, but then he recognized the sound of Nana preparing breakfast. Finally, all struggle leached from him by exhaustion, his eyes closed with the sweet sting of long overdue sleep.

The sun rose too soon.

"Morning, Karim," Nana woke him. "*Bouille* for you outside now." She backed out of his room with her hands clasped in front of her. As if she knew how little he had slept, how much he wanted fall back asleep, she called to him a second time on her way outside.

Karim dragged himself out of bed, following the sweet smell of boiled rice to the courtyard. The morning felt good as it dried the night sweat from the back of his neck. He filled a bowl with the steaming porridge and sat against the wall, waiting for it to cool. He watched the white vapor rise into the air, and he remembered the Jelekise's claws and the flash of Djeneba's nails against her skirt the night before. He looked over his shoulder, half expecting her to be standing over him.

He tried to finish his *bouille* before Djeneba arrived, but the porridge was too hot, and she came before he was halfway through. She stretched her long arms

above her head and yawned widely. Karim choked, coughing a mouthful of *bouille* back into his bowl. Her teeth were brown! Shakily, he placed his bowl next to him; it clattered metallically on the floor. Djeneba eyed him scornfully and stomped over his outstretched legs.

"Fool," she snarled so only Karim could hear, "you are in my way again."

Karim pulled his legs under his body, but he could not keep his eyes away from her; he had to see it again. Djeneba shoveled a large spoonful of *bouille* into her mouth. Her lips were pushed up and out, their pink undersides contrasting with enamel the color of American Cola. From top to sharply pointed bottom, each brown tooth… brown fang, Karim corrected himself with a shudder, was two inches long, and her mouth had grown to almost double its size to accommodate them.

Karim put his head on his knees, hoping that if he could not see her, she would ignore that he was there. His legs fell asleep beneath his body, but he dared not move until his mother came into the courtyard. He shook out his legs, wincing as the blood rushed back into his feet and pins and needles prickled up to the base of his spine.

"Karim what on earth are you doing?" his mother asked, amused.

"I—"

Djeneba cleared her throat and drummed her fingers rhythmically on the ground; the long, ivory protrusions clinked on the tile floor. Karim rubbed his eyes, refusing to believe. From Djeneba's fingertips grew enormous bone-colored claws, each sharpened blade almost two feet in length.

"I… nothing," he answered his mother. Did she not see the teeth? The nails?

"Karim stop gaping at your sister," his mother scolded.

But he could not look away. He knew his face must give away his terror; he could feel his eyes open wide in shock, and his hands trembled from gripping his thighs so tightly.

"Karim!" his mother raised her voice.

"But she… mother, don't you see her?" Tears brimmed in Karim's eyes. "Mother!" he pleaded, angry that he could not stop the tears from flowing down his cheeks.

"That's enough!" his mother yelled firmly. "Enough! Do you hear? Leave your sister alone."

"But she's a monster!" Karim cried.

"He always does this!" Djeneba shouted, thrusting her finger at Karim. Her giant, knife-like claw surged toward his face.

"Stop!" Karim screamed, bolting up from where he sat and running into the safety of his bedroom.

"Karim!" he heard his mother shout as he dove into bed and pulled the covers tightly over his head.

His mind raced with incomprehensible thoughts. He had seen her in daylight this time! How could his mother not see? A terrifying idea dawned on him: Djeneba had put his family under her spell. They could not see what he saw, and so they could not protect him from her. Djeneba would get him in the middle of the night, make him disappear, and his family would never know what had happened. Karim shivered, though the day was warm. He had never felt so alone.

In the distance, he heard his mother send Djeneba to the tailor to pick up fabric. The gate slammed; he was safe for the moment. He thought about what he

could do to save himself from the Jelekise. He could not run, for the Jelekise could fly. He could not scream, for his family would see no monster when they ran to him, and they would think he was mad. He could not hide, for the Jelekise's green eyes could surely see through the darkness. He poked his head out from under his blanket and scoured his room. He spotted a plastic toy gun and a broken glass soda bottle under his bed. He darted out from his covers to grab his defenses and hid both beneath his pillow. If he scared the Jelekise with the gun, he might have time to stab it with the bottle. He knew that the plan would not really work, but the idea of fighting back made him feel stronger.

A little while later, Karim heard the gate swing open and slam closed. Djeneba had returned. He burrowed further under his covers. Perhaps if he never came out, she would think he ran away! He considered how he could get food into his room. He could sneak out in the middle of the night, but night was when the Jelekise was most likely to strike. In the day, then? His mother would surely see him, and everyone would know he had not run away. He would need an accomplice.

His curtain swished open. His stomach plummeted. Was it time already? Holding his breath, he fumbled under his pillow for the toy gun. Finger poised on the plastic trigger, he waited for Djeneba to make a move.

"Karim sir?" Nana's small voice shocked him. "I you see on the bed," she squeaked embarrassedly. "I have job to tell you."

Karim pulled the blanket down to just below his eyes. Nana stood in his doorway, alone. He sat up, relieved.

"Hi Nana." Karim considered the meek girl before him. She was older than he but had never seemed it. She would make the perfect accomplice! Djeneba would

never suspect her. Karim laid down the toy gun. "What do you have to tell me?" he asked, grinning.

Nana did not return the smile. She looked scared of something. Her raised eyebrows quivered, and her words caught in her throat. He thought he saw her hands tremble, but she clasped them behind her back before he could be sure. "Djeneba says you must to her come now, Karim sir. In her room to her now."

The blood drained from Karim's face. Fear rippled through his body. "Dj…Djeneba said that?"

Nana nodded. A lone tear rolled down her cheek.

"Why are you crying, Nana?"

She shook her head.

"It's okay," he assured her. Comforting her gave him courage. "It's okay," he repeated, "it's okay."

He stuffed the plastic gun into his pants pocket, made his bed neatly, and walked out of his room, leaving Nana alone. His footsteps echoed in time with the heartbeat pounding in his ears. He forced himself not to turn around; it would be far worse if he did not go, for Djeneba would come looking for him later, angry that he had not obeyed her call. He paused in front of her doorway, inhaled deeply and puffed out his stomach before pushing aside her curtain.

Djeneba sat on her bed amid piles of folded fabric. "Well, come in," she beckoned. Brown fangs garbled her words and forced her lips into a perpetual sneer. Even larger than before, her teeth protruded from her mouth at sixty-degree angles so that the top and bottom rows met almost an inch in front of her face. She located Karim's pile of fabric, blue and black with embroidered silvery vines and buds like

eyes that stared hostilely at Karim. Djeneba offered the pile to her brother on sharp, bone-white swords. Karim panicked. He could not touch her nails, for if he did, he was sure the blades would cut him. He took one step closer and extended his arms to pluck the fabric from atop her claw.

As Karim's hand closed over the pile, Djeneba met his gaze. His breath was scared out of him. His heart leapt into his throat, and he felt his pulse racing in his head. Two solid disks of blazing malachite stared back at him. Unable to make a sound, feeling as if his body were floating weightless above the ground, Karim spun around and darted out of the room.

He raced through the living room and straight past his mother, who yelled something after him that he barely took in: *Djeneba, go find your brother!* He ran past his older brother who laughed triumphantly in front of *Left for Dead* on the television, and through the courtyard where Nana stood crying. Out the front gate, into the street, his legs carried him without feeling. He listened vaguely for the gate to close behind him, but he never heard the click of the lock.

"Karim!" an unrecognizable voice, deep and powerful and angry, bellowed after him. "Karim!"

He looked over his shoulder. Not ten yards behind him stood a terrifying sight. Twice the height of a normal man and four times as wide, the Jelekise towered in the middle of the street, extending her dagger-like claws and baring her enormous brown fangs. Karim could just make out the street scene behind the monster's translucent black body. His gaze was drawn up to the Jelekise's blazing green eyes, emitting tunnels of fiery light that threatened to burn him. "Come,

Karim!" the Jelekise cried again, taking one giant step forward toward the shaking boy.

Karim's mind went blank. Not a thought passed through his head. He heard no sound; he saw no motion, as if everyone and everything had stopped. His felt his chest heave, up, down, up, down, his toes curl, the muscles behind his eyes strain to the left then right at the frozen scene around him. Without warning, the world came alive again and zoomed into hyper speed. The Jelekise bounded toward him, her nails scratching the ground as she ran. Unthinking, Karim's legs carried him forward, faster, faster until he thought he would fly.

Karim skidded to a halt at the big intersection at the end of the street. He glanced over his shoulder. The Jelekise was closing in! One more moment and she would be upon him. He looked down the main road and saw a large, rusty blue bus about to pull away. He ran to it, barely noticing the peeling letters M-A-R-A-F-A plastered on its side. Without a second thought, Karim squeezed his tiny body between the bus' closing doors, and, gripping his plastic gun tightly in his pocket, he watched the Jelekise disappear into the distance.

Bus Ride to Marafa

The stationmaster called, "Last bus to Marafa leaves in five minutes. You'd better run for it."

I could see the rusty blue bus ahead of me. The engine roared to life, and I broke into a sprint. Exhaust smothered me as I approached; I staggered as I coughed but kept running, willing my failing body to do me this one last favor. *Just get me out of this city!* The wheels rolled forward, gaining momentum. I grabbed the door just as it was sliding closed and heaved myself onto the bus. The door sealed shut behind me. I doubled over against the wall, panting. My lungs burned and my muscles spasmed, but I had made it. I was on my way out. With a feeling of deep sadness and profound relief, I watched the city of my grief recede in a blur from behind grimy windows.

"Ticket?" The impatient voice came from a young man standing on the step above me. The strap on his left sandal dangled uselessly, leaving him with only the thin, plastic sole. I recognized him immediately as one of "the disillusioned". A term

the government had coined after the last economic slump, "the disillusioned" described a whole generation of young men from Marafa who, at fifteen or sixteen, had found work in the big city as ticket collectors and busboys. At first, they had revered their jobs as stepping-stones to futures in government or in France, but by age eighteen or nineteen, the inevitability of their fates had struck them. They had been left with the telltale faces of young men who had sniffed hope and then lost it, faces that would mark them forever as one of "the disillusioned". I, too, had had grand hopes once, but illness had taken them away before the economy had had its chance.

"Got a ticket?" the disillusioned boy repeated. "Non-ticketed rides for under-eights only."

"Haven't bought one yet," I said. "Didn't have time. I heard I could pay when I got off if I cleared it with the driver first. Please, I promise I'm good for it." I pulled a small fortune from my pocket and tipped the bills in his direction.

The boy's eyes lit up, but he didn't answer.

"I've got nowhere else to go."

Hesitating momentarily, the boy stepped closer to me and whispered, "It'll cost ya somethin' extra." His right eyebrow rose to ask if I understood.

I handed him a small bill, which he quickly pocketed. He nodded and leaned over to say something to the driver before turning back to me.

"Find any seat ya can," he instructed. "Just watch you don't sit next to the crazy lady; she'll prob'ly bite your ear off."

"Who—"

But the boy already was making his way down the aisle. Touching only his right foot to the floor, he swung himself from row to row, pushing off the tops of the seats with his left sandal in his hand.

I stumbled down the aisle after him. The seats had been plush once, and the velvety upholstery had all but worn off. Air conditioning vents long since broken dotted the ceiling. The air was stale and sweltering, and open windows let in dust. The back of the bus seemed very far off, and at this hour, when dusk chose with no apparent reason which objects to illuminate and which to keep in shadow, I could barely make out the figures of people seven rows ahead.

As far as I could see, all of the seats were filled. To my right, a very small boy had squeezed himself between two passengers. He had pulled his legs into his chest, and his head rested on his knees so that most of his face was hidden in shadow. His arms were tucked into his threadbare tee shirt, one hand poking out of the neckline. He sucked on his right thumb but let it fall from his mouth in distraction as I passed. Where a thumbnail should have been, a fleshy patch of skin glistened with saliva. Across the aisle from him, a couple of teenage boys listened to music on their cell phones. The faint beat of Akon followed me as I walked unsteadily toward the back of the bus. *Nobody wanna see us together, but it don't matter, no, 'cause I got you. Nobody wanna see us….*

As the bus rocked, I grasped at seatbacks on either side of me for balance, once mistaking a person's head for his chair. I reached the back wall of the bus without finding an open seat and felt the familiar anxiety of loneliness rush up through my throat. I turned around, squinting toward the dark front of the bus.

Vaguely I saw a red light approaching. The driver slammed on the brakes, and I lost my balance and fell onto the person sitting to my right.

"I'm so sorry!" I said, pushing myself upright. "Please excuse me." On my feet again, I realized with a start that I had not fallen on a person, but on a large canvas bag propped against the seatback. A frail, wide-eyed woman peered at me from around the bag. She had pressed herself against the bus window, as far from me as possible.

"Good evening," I said as politely as I could. "Would it be possible for me—"

"Ahem." The woman on the left side of the aisle cleared her throat loudly. "Sir," she hissed.

"Excuse me," I apologized, bowing my head to the frail woman against the window.

The woman on the left was stout, and she exuded wealth and confidence. She rested her hands on the armrests on either side of her like a throne, leaving the man who must have been her husband to lean away from her against the window. He peered at me through thick glasses. Not relinquishing either armrest, the woman leaned her bulky torso toward the aisle. Her pointer finger curled and uncurled, beckoning me to her.

"*Don't* sit there." The woman inclined her head toward the right side of the aisle. "She is *crazy*." Her whisper was the worst I had ever heard; hoarse and throaty, it was louder than her regular voice.

I remembered the ticket collector's warning, and I unconsciously drew my hand protectively over my ear. "There are no other seats," I replied, hoping the large woman knew of one I had missed.

"Oh no? Still…" the woman clucked her tongue disapprovingly. "You don't want to sit there."

"Why not?" I whispered back. The woman's arrogance was irritating. "Why does everyone think she's crazy?"

"She's not right in the head. She does things… odd things. Her arms shook so hard one time, I thought she'd pull the armrests clean off! The last three people that have sat next to her all got off straight away. Lord knows what's taken hold inside her."

I winced, fearing the frail woman could hear. "Well, I've got to sit somewhere."

"Suit yourself," the woman said forebodingly. Her husband had inched his pinky finger onto the middle armrest while she had been talking to me, and the woman flicked him off with a swipe of her heavy forearm. She jiggled in her chair, settling in to sleep.

I turned back to the frail woman with the canvas sack. "Would you mind if I sat next to you? Please, there aren't any other seats."

She nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I'll just move this for you," I said, grabbing the handles of her large pack.

"No," she answered, barely audible. Her fingers were bone-thin but nimble, and before I could release the handles, she had pulled a small plastic bottle out of one of the pockets and zipped the bag closed again. Pills rattled as she hastily nestled the bottle behind her back. Finally, she nodded.

I hoisted the canvas bag onto the luggage rack and sat down as daintily as I could, not wanting to infringe upon her space. Relief washed over me as my body

relaxed. It would be a long recovery from such intense physical exertion—I had not done as much since my family fell ill—but for now, I was sitting and grateful for it. I extended my hand to my seatmate to introduce myself, "I'm—"

"I wouldn't do that." The large woman across the aisle cut me off, her bust spilling over the armrest as she leaned toward me.

"Do what?" I asked. I had done nothing, but every nothing I did seemed to be wrong according to her.

"*Touch* her."

I felt the seat next to me move, and I knew the frail woman had heard.

"Thank you for your concern, but I'll be quite fine," I replied, my frustration more apparent than I had intended.

As I turned back to the frail woman next to me, I heard the large woman mutter to her husband: *He's in for it, I tell you. That's the end of him. She'll do her crazy devilry, and he'll be gone by the next city.*

"I'm sorry," I said to the frail woman. "What's your name?" I did not offer my hand.

The frail woman stared at me for a minute before turning away again to look out the window at the unidentifiable black nightscape. I thought I saw her glance for the briefest of seconds at my hand sitting in my lap, but I will never be sure. She had extremely large eyes set far back in their sockets. Her hair was thin and tufty, as if it had been pulled out in little bits over time. Her collarbone jutted so far from her chest that it would have been possible to drink from the depression in between. She wore a long tunic bearing the President's face, made from fabric the government gave away every Independence Day.

"She'll never talk," the heavy woman said from the other side of the aisle, no longer attempting to quiet her voice. "I told you she's crazy."

I ignored her. I tried again to make conversation with the frail woman next to me. "Where are you heading?"

Silence hung deadly in the air between us. Perhaps she was deaf. I settled into my seat and closed my eyes, holding my bag close to me, just in case.

I woke up hours later, discombobulated and confused. I touched my seat and the seat in front of me, clasping my bag tightly in my arms, trying to understand where I was. Slowly, as my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I felt the rhythmic rocking of forward motion and remembered that I was on a bus to Marafa, that I disliked the woman across the aisle and her pitiful husband, and that I was sitting next to the crazy lady who wouldn't speak. I knew it was sometime in the middle of the night, for the only noise coming from outside was the wailing of red desert foxes, and, as far as I could tell when I poked my head into the aisle, the only other person awake in the bus was the frail woman on my right.

I could see her by the light of the stars, so bright and untarnished this far out of the city, and by the faint orange glow of the emergency lights that ran in two lines down the center of the ceiling. Her tunic hung from her skeletal arms like linen on a clothesline, and several sallow bruises dotted her wrists and the backs of her hands. I felt an odd impulse to protect her.

I met her huge, dark eyes, and imagined how she must have seen me when I first sat down, how, perhaps, she still saw me now. Very tall and thin in blue-black robes, my head clean-shaven, my face angular, almost gaunt, I must have been an unnerving sight. A treatment for whooping cough had dyed my teeth yellow when I

was very young, and I had been told many times as a boy that I scared people when I smiled.

Now, however, the frail woman did not look afraid. In the dark silence, we rocked soothingly with the bus, studying each other. There was no need to talk or smile. It seemed natural. Neither one of us looked away; neither felt uncomfortable. The moment was intimate, unexpected and private. I did not want it to end. I felt a sort of safety in her eyes, an understanding and a sharing that I had not felt in a long time and that I missed terribly.

Suddenly, her eyes rolled back in her head. Her body swayed. Her shoulders jerked back. One by one, her arms went rigid as if she were possessed. I tried to touch her, but her arm flew at me. I backed away in fear, leaning into the aisle. The whites of her eyes, salient in the darkness, seemed to stare at me. Her legs snapped straight, kicking the seat in front of her. Her torso shook, first in small, jerking movements from side to side, and then wildly in all directions. Her head knocked against the back of her seat. Her whole body convulsed, so violently that I feared she would slide off the seat and hit her head on the floor. A gasping noise came from her throat, and I realized that her lips had turned blue. She was not breathing!

"Help her!" I shouted, waking the people around me. "Help me! She can't breathe!"

Dozens of eyes stared back at us in the darkness, but not a sound came from any of their seats. No one moved. The frail woman's gasping intensified, and her seizing body fell sideways on top of me.

"Help us!" I cried again. I wedged myself between her seat and the row in front of ours, blocking her from falling to the floor. Her teeth ground together, and

her nose tried to suck in air. I put my arms around her bony body and held her as tightly as I could. Her elbow struck me in the chest and knocked the wind out of me. Her finger scratched my face, but I did not let go. Rustling noises close by told me the other passengers had gathered to watch. The stout woman across the aisle snorted with laughter.

"Sit down!" I hissed at the spectators. "Go away!"

Gradually, the tension in the frail woman's body eased between my arms. Convulsions lessened to twitches. She gasped one full breath and then another. Finally, her eyes closed, and her whole body shuddered and then was still. I released her from my hold and lifted her into a sitting position, resting her back against the window. Her eyes opened slowly; she blinked as her pupils slid back into place. At first, I thought she did not recognize me, or that she did not understand what had just happened. But when she looked at my face, I saw recognition, or perhaps resignation, in her eyes. A singular tear formed and dripped down her hollow cheek. She reached her frail hand to my face and ran her soft fingertips gently over the fresh scratch on my temple.

"I'm sorry…"

"Alassane," I answered.