

SABABU MAN DONGON



LOCAL LANGUAGE LITERACY

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“Don’t forget the sugar!” my husband called after our son who was already running down the road, hopping across puddles and skirting garbage mounds. He leaned back in his chair and sighed. The plastic covered wires were stretching to the point that they would break soon. We would get it restrung again.

The wind blew gently and the tree leaves gossiped quietly to each other. The sun was relentless as it was the end of the dry season, but the shade was cool. This was how most of our days were spent; under the skirt of the tree, next to a table of mangoes for sale, the kids coming and going. The meals, the tea, everyone we knew walking up and down the red dirt streets. *I ni sogoma. In ni tile. I ni su.* Good morning. Good day. Good night. And again and again, the days continued.

I heard a fluttering of wings behind me and turned around to see that Djeneba had fallen and scattered the chickens that hung around under our tree with us. She opened her mouth to wail. “Don’t cry, don’t cry,” I told her and reached around my chair to pick her

up and put her in my lap. She wailed anyway and kicked off her small sandals.

“None of the others cried like she does,” said Amadou.

“I know,” I said with a mixture of wonder and defeat. I bounced her on my knee gently and she quieted down some. “Maybe she will have a lot to say one day.” Amadou laughed and showed his perfect white teeth, straight as tiles. Even after ten years together I felt a small surge in my chest when I could make him laugh like that.

We sat in silence for a moment. Silence that was actually filled with the sounds of women rhythmically pounding millet next door, boys playing football in the empty lot across the street, the passing mopeds, the birds.

“You sent Soumaila to Moussa’s?” I asked, wiping off the sweat beading on Djeneba’s forehead.

“Yes, of course,” said Amadou. “God knows what Moussa will do with that money, but I know what we will do with the tea and sugar.” He looked to the boys playing football.

Djeneba began to whine again, this time because she was hungry. I reached into my shirt and pulled out my breast through the neck of it. She latched on and it hurt. She was getting too old for this. But now was not the time to stop feeding her for free.

“I told Fatim I would come to Kati some time this week,” I said. Amadou didn’t seem to hear me. He was thinking about something, his eyes not quite on the

boys playing football but something further beyond them. Something not there. "Amadou—" I said a bit louder. He turned to me suddenly. I picked up the hand-fan near me and swatted him with it gently. "I said, I told Fatim I would come to Kati some time this week. She wants me to see Mariam now that she's baptized."

"She can't be that different because of it."

"Of course she's not," I said, wondering if he meant to be funny. "But it's important to her. It was bad enough we didn't make it to the ceremony."

Fatim had married a Christian man and, much to everyone's surprise, converted. She'd never shown more than a minimal interest in religion at home, and most people here stuck with what they were born into even if they married someone of something else. But Fatim seemed to have been more taken by Catholicism and its rites and rituals and saints than she'd ever been by Islam. She was colorful like that. I didn't think it made much of a difference; either way, children were had and raised to not hit or steal or lie, to share, to love. God was God however you wanted to talk about it.

"*Salam waylekum.*" I looked up.

"*Waylekum salam,*" I responded in unison with Amadou. It was Mohammed Keita from up the block. His family ran the teleboutique, but with so many cell-phones around nowadays he spent most of his time and energy at the mosque. He was sweating profusely in his full *boubou*, small rivers shining off his face in the sun.

“Sit down,” I told him and pushed a chair closer to him. The baby stirred and pulled on my breast again. I hoped she was getting sleepy.

“*Somogo bedi?*” asked Mohammed as he settled into the low chair. How was our family?

“*Tooro t’u la,*” Amadou and I said. No pain.

“*N ba. Aw ka kene?*” And our health?

“*Tooro si te,*” we responded in unison again. No pain.

“*Somogo ka kene?*” Amadou asked his friend about his family. No pain he told us, though he promptly contradicted himself.

“Little Kumba is not well.” He fingered his bright plastic prayer beads.

“That’s terrible,” I said. “What does she have?”

“It’s that belly-button of hers,” Mohammed said to the chickens pecking around our feet. “It hurts her. And it’s growing still.” Kumba had developed an exceptionally large outy as many kids here do. By the time she was four years old it hung off her belly like a short elephant trunk. They had tried so many herbs and pills and creams, Mohammed explained. Now it seemed their only chance was an operation at a clinic or the big hospital. “But of course that is much too expensive,” he said with obvious defeat. He straightened himself up a bit. “Well, Allah will provide, and I didn’t come here to complain of bad fortune. I wanted to ask you Amadou if you would help me organize something over at the mosque.”

“I would be honored,” Amadou said. I looked at him. He was purposefully avoiding my eyes. “What is it that we are organizing?”

“It is perhaps a strange idea—I’m still working on it—it has to do with trees.”

“Trees?” I asked. Mohammed was frequently filled with “strange” ideas. Some of them the innovative vein of strange, others more useless. His biggest success had been to organize a garbage pick-up contest for the kids around here. For a whole week they were frantic. As soon as you threw your plastic bag that once held water or peanuts or ginger juice into the road a little hand had picked it up. It was all in the name of a big mystery prize. Oh was little Mamadou Traore sad when he won a private talk with Haj Ibrahim Sangare, our local imam. So I had my doubts about Mohammed being able to rally the neighborhood into much of anything again. And my reserves about Amadou getting in the mix when already he was overloaded like a long distance bus with his work.

Mohammed pulled his chair closer to ours. “Yes, trees,” he said. “You see, I was down at the Hotel de l’Amitié visiting my cousin Papy who just started working there. I wanted to make sure was being treated right. Not bossed around too much by the *toubabou* or the managers who think they are a bigger blessing than all the rest of creation. He works at their café downstairs, kind of a bar at night, but Papy only works days, and so anyway, when I was sitting with him there was a TV on not too far away which of course I was

drawn to immediately—you know how it is impossible to *not* watch a TV when it's on." He took a moment to breathe and survey the reaction his crowd. We nodded, though I don't think my husband or I had every felt particularly drawn to the scratchy boxes that played football games on the corner sometimes.

"Well I was watching some English news channel whose words I could of course not understand but whose message I heard perfectly clear. Young Americans were planting trees in memory of people who had died." Mohammed paused.

"Has someone died?" Amadou finally asked.

"No, no! *In sha Allah* no one in our community will pass any time soon. I think though, we should use this same tree planting idea to bring more young people to the mosque."

This was Mohammed's main concern. Not the garbage actually. The impiety of today's youth. Most of the active members at the mosque spent a lot of tea time worrying about this too. A generation that had not seen the French occupation or Independence or the struggle with our own leaders after. Just mopeds and cell-phones and night clubs blasting Ivorian pop. Not to mention the alcohol and the drugs and sex and AIDS..

"I think we should have a day during which young people come to the mosque and plant trees and talk about things like community and modern interpretations of the Quran. They'll discuss and listen to Haj Sangare and other leaders of course, all while

making our mosque more beautiful with the holy color green.”

“But that’s not really in memory of anything,” I said. Amadou looked at me, and this time it was me refusing to meet a gaze.

“Well no, not exactly,” said Mohammed, seemingly un-phased. “But I suppose it doesn’t have to be. We don’t have to do everything like the Europeans!” He laughed a bit too loudly.

“I suppose that could work,” said Amadou.

“Yes—it will!” Mohammed said excitedly. Djenneba was starting to stir from her doze with all of the noise. “They will plant the trees whose shade they will enjoy in the years to come that they spend at the mosque!” He flopped back against his chair, smiling broadly.

“Where will you get the trees?” I asked. I was pushing him for reasons even I didn’t understand. What had gotten into me? Here was a man with a sick daughter and all I could do was poke holes in the well bag of his dreams. I would hear about it from Amadou later.

“That is unclear at this point, but the solution will come to me, *in sha Allah*,” Mohammed said.

God willing, repeated Amadou.

“Here Dad—” Soumaila appeared suddenly in front of us. He was a skinny child, with knobby knees that were wider than his legs. His favorite football jersey was torn across the shoulder but he wore it every day just the same and wouldn’t let me fix it. A battle

wound to be proud of I suppose. He was holding out a small plastic sack of sugar and four green tea bags. "Uncle Moussa didn't let me pay for two of the teas." He dropped it all into his father's hands and turned to go.

"Haven't you forgotten to greet Mohammed?" I said, catching him by that jersey.

"*I ni sogoma*," Soumaila said to the ground. He looked up cautiously. I smiled.

"*N ba. In ni sogoma*," said Mohammed with a grand voice.

"*N ba*," said Soumaila and then fled.

"Always on his way somewhere," said Mohammed. "I should be on my way too." He started to get up, the chickens scattering from his feet. Such finicky animals. "Aminata is making my favorite lunch today and I want to be there with clean hands as soon as it's finished."

"*Tikkadegen*?" asked Amadou. Rice with peanut sauce would be delicious for lunch.

"Of course, I am a Keita. I cannot escape my heritage of peanuts," he smiled. "Just as you cannot escape yours of beans!" He laughed. I'd never had much patience for *cousinage*. So Keitas once ate peanuts and Djabatis once told stories, so some people were unfortunate enough to have been slaves and felt low enough to pass gas in public. You eat beans. Are we these people now?

"*K'am bu fu*," said Amadou.

"*U n'a men*," his friend called without turning around as he ventured back out into the sun.

I picked up the straw hand fan near my feet and began to fan myself and Djeneba.

"He means well. I don't know why you are so rude to him," Amadou said.

"I'm not rude to him," I countered. "I just think his head is always full of ideas that are never finished. And now he wants to drag you into it and you say yes even though you know perfectly well you don't have the time since the rains are coming and none of your projects are finished yet."

Amadou sighed. I fanned ferociously, working up more of a sweat than I was combating.

"The foundation is almost finished, you know that. And it should only be three more days at most to have that other lot cleared." Amadou was of course underestimating his construction crew's progress, but at this point it was what he had to believe. Once it started to rain the work would take twice as long and have to be done with half the men. But even though part of us prayed that the rain would wait just a few weeks more, the other part knew that a drought would be even worse. No one wanted to relive what happened in eighty-four.

"I'm not mad at you," I said. "I just want what's best for the family, and sometimes that means not doing what's best for everyone else in town."

"That's not very charitable of you."

"Well it's not very responsible of you to neglect your wife and children."

I hadn't meant to be so harsh but it was out. I stood up quickly, a bit dizzy from the intense heat, and walked over to the shack where the pots and charcoal burners were—the kitchen. On the way I pulled off a piece of fabric that had been hanging in the tree to dry and used it to tie Djeneba to my back. I plunged into preparing the rest of lunch, letting the pots clank loudly. By the time I could bring myself to look up, Amadou was gone.

As the onion sauce boiled I fanned the charcoal and thought about the things I wished I was cooking: big chunks of lamb meat, whole chickens, green beans, plantains. We'd been eating onion sauce for a week now. Amadou was expecting to be paid last week but at the last minute the man told him he wasn't going to hand over any money until the job was done since it was taking so much longer that he'd been originally told. It was just a basic courtyard clearing and tiling job but Amadou had only three other guys working with him and two of them were currently sick. I wished I could go over and help him but it was just not my place to.

The sauce was starting to bubble and froth. "Nana?" I called to my other daughter who was across the street with her friends playing a jumping game with a string. They were getting a bit old to be hopping about like that on the street, showing their underwear each time they swung their legs over the line. She didn't hear me. "Nana!" I tried louder. She looked up and saw me beckoning her, left the game and came over.

“Yes Mom?” she said.

“Put the rice out and then find Soumaila. It’s time for lunch.” I pointed to one of the big metal bowls. Nana picked it up and brought it to the shady spot under the tree where we always ate, covered it with a plate then walked off in search of her brother. I watched her go. She was twelve now, becoming more of a young woman every day. Saying things like that tended to embarrass her so I never did, but it was true. She’d sprouted up almost as tall as her father in the past year. I thought about what it might be that Nana thought to herself. She was such a quiet girl. I wondered how she would hold up in the second cycle of school. I myself had never made it past 6th grade. She would be the first woman in her family to do so. I smiled to myself and poured the steaming sauce into a bowl.

“Tell me there’s a whole juicy chicken in there!”

I jumped a bit and turned to see my father-in-law, Iba. “You know better than to tease yourself like that,” I told him gently. “Did you sleep well?” I asked as I went to bring over the sauce to the waiting rice.

“No,” he said and scratched at his nearly bald head. “It’s too hot to sleep. It’s too hot to do anything around here.” I wanted to remind him that at his age he was not expected to do anything anyway, and here he was, if not sleeping, at least in his bed until nearly noon, but I thought better of it and kept my mouth shut. I loved him like he was my own father. In some ways he was. Before my father died the two of them were best friends, which meant that he too had a say about what I

did. It was a good thing I liked him just as much as my father did.

“We just have to wait for the rain,” I said. “Then it will cool down so much you’ll start complaining it’s cold. Come, sit down, eat.” I began scooping him his own bowl of rice and sauce. He didn’t eat from the same bowl as me and the little ones. I made sure to put the biggest pieces of meat on top.

“Oh don’t waste meat on me,” he said pushing his bowl back at me. “Save it for you and the kids. You all have life left in you.”

“Don’t talk like that,” I reprimanded him gently, pushing the bowl back towards him. He’d been talking a lot about dying recently and it was making me uncomfortable. A small lump would form in my throat at the thought of him leaving this world, however hot it may be.

“I don’t even have enough teeth to chew it!” he protested. “Is that an ok excuse?” It was better. I shook my head in mock disapproval and picked the meat off his rice pile and plopped it back into the big bowl on the ground.

“I’m telling you though,” he started, scooping his fingers into the rice. “My time is coming.” He ate a handful with a satisfied look.

“Really Iba,” I said, flustered. I untied Djeneba and brought her into my lap. “It’s not good to say these kinds of things.” There was the lump.

“I just want to be ready, that’s all.”

“Well maybe the rest of us aren’t ready!” I said, louder than I expected to. I was like an agitated sheep this morning just baa-ing loudly at everyone and everything for no good reason. Djeneba woke up. I put her to my breast quickly.

“That’s exactly why I’m taking things into my own hands,” Iba said then put another handful in his toothless mouth. There was sauce on the remnants of his beard. It made him look almost childlike. Young. “I’m getting my coffin made and brought here so I can sleep in it.”

“Sleep in it?! My God!” I gasped. “Are you mad? What kind of nonsense is this?” I looked across the corner and saw Nana and Soumaila coming over. I didn’t want them to hear their grandfather talking like this. “Iba please,” I pleaded.

“This way you won’t even have to move me!” he said smiling. He was serious. “I plan on dying in my sleep you know.”

“Enough, really. Eat.”

“And it’s safer for my soul,” he continued as if he had not heard me. He lowered his voice to a conspiratorial tone and leaned in closer. “There are too many *djinn* at the city morgue.” I tried to say something but nothing came to mind. “There is no way I want my body laying around there, an empty vessel inviting disturbed spirits to make a home in it.” He shook his head. “No, no. I’ll just go straight from home to the grave.” He popped another ball of rice in his mouth.

“No more please,” I said. “Not in front of the children, ok?” And at that they had arrived.

“*Here sira?*” Nana asked Iba. Was his night peaceful?

“*Here doron,*” he replied with a smile. Always peaceful. He looked at me as if to say, ‘See, I’m behaving’.

“*Jaba ji* again?” moaned Soumaila as he sat down on one of the small wooden stools around the bowl. “I’m so sick of onion sauce!” He went to reach into the bowl but his grandfather caught his arm.

“Then don’t eat it,” he said. Soumaila looked at him, confused. “If you are so tired of what your mother spends all morning cooking for you, then don’t eat it.” He was still holding his arm.

“Iba it’s ok,” I said. Although I was inevitably hurt by my son’s disappointment, I was touched by my father-in-law’s defense. He let go. Soumaila looked embarrassed, couldn’t meet my eyes. Before he could reach for his lunch again I reminded him that he had not washed his hands yet. He seemed grateful for the excuse to leave for a moment. Nana went to fetch the water with him.

“He needs to learn to respect you more,” Iba said, a grain of rice flying out of his mouth and onto the ground where a chick found it.

“He doesn’t mean to be disrespectful,” I said. Djeneba got down from my lap and stood by Iba’s knees. “He just doesn’t understand our situation.”

"I don't care what he does or does not understand about money, he is certainly old enough to understand the notion of respecting his parents." He made a small ball of rice and fed it to Djeneba who worked on it with her few teeth. "I'm telling you, in my day? My mother would have let me go hungry for a week for talking to her like that. Would have fed me to the French."

"Fed you to the French?" repeated Soumaila who had appeared behind Iba, hands dripping. Always sneaking up on us.

"Oh yes," said Iba enthusiastically. "My mom used to tell me and my brothers she was going to feed us to the *toubabou* if we misbehaved."

"But it wasn't true," said Soumaila sitting down on his stool again, his voice betraying his desired skepticism.

"Oh but it *was*."

"Iba—"

"*Toubabou* eat bad little boys you know." Soumaila looked at his grandfather long and hard.

"Ok, ok—eat. Everybody, eat your rice," I said as I rinsed my hands with the water Nana had brought over.

Soumaila dug in first, taking a fistful he could barely fit in his mouth.

"Delicious, eh?" said Iba.

"Where's Dad?" Soumaila managed to get out of his full mouth.

"At Uncle Moussa's," answered Nana. I was surprised but tried not to show it.

“Why?”

“Too many questions for lunchtime,” said Iba. We ate the rest of our meal in a comfortable silence.

Once he was finished, Soumaila asked if he could go back to playing football with his friends. I agreed and he ran back into the harsh sun.

Nana started to clear the dishes. “No, no” I said. “I can do this. You should go study now.”

“I don’t think studying the day before the test is going to help me much,” replied Nana flatly. I sensed her discouragement.

“Oh I’m sure you would do very well even if you did not study today. But you could do *fantastic* if you did, no?” Her expression didn’t seem to change. “*Jakuma ka ninemine tono b’a yere folo kan,*” I said. The cat benefits first from eating the mouse. I’ve never been too good with proverbs, but I think it’s supposed mean that you get a cat to kill the mice that are bothering you, so that’s a good thing, but the first good thing that happens is for the cat; it gets to eat the mice. So studying would make her the cat and succeeding in school is the mouse she gets to catch which will help me in the long run but help her first. She was looking at me blankly.

“What’s the big deal with this test anyway?” interrupted Iba.

“I can’t go to second cycle if I don’t pass,” Nana explained. She pulled at her *panyé* a bit. Poor Nana, thought.

“Who said anything about you going to second cycle?” asked Iba.

“What?” I said.

“She doesn’t need to keep going to school. She’s almost thirteen years old. She can get married in just a few years. Her husband won’t need her to know any more math than how to count the pots in her kitchen.”

“Mom, I can’t go to 7th grade?” asked Nana, looking a bit like a cornered animal.

“No—I mean yes—what? Iba, you aren’t serious are you?” I was shocked. I knew Iba was old fashioned, like many people his age, but I’d never expected a display from him like that. The only other time he’d said anything about Nana’s schooling was when Amadou and I were deciding whether to send her to a *madressa* or regular public school. Iba had pushed for the religious school, which seemed only natural since he’d sent his own children there. But we settled on the public one instead because it was less expensive. But nothing out of him about school since then.

“Of course I’m serious,” he said. “What the point of putting girls through that much school when they won’t have a job anyway?”

“I want to have a job,” said Nana. She was looking her grandfather straight in the face.

“You do?” he asked her. I could tell her courage was wavering. Tell him, I thought. I don’t even know what you’re going to say but you should say it.

“I want to be a doctor.”

“A doctor?” He laughed.

“Or a journalist.”

“Or a journalist?” He laughed lightly again. “And who will feed your family? Who will take care of your house and your children?” Nana looked to the ground.

“She doesn’t have to worry about that now,” I said, finally coming to her defense. “That’s quite a few years away. What she needs to think about now is that test tomorrow. Why don’t you just go in the house and go through your notebooks until the heat passes. You can play with your friends later when it’s not so hot.” Nana nodded and walked away without looking at Iba again.

I stood up and grabbed the bowls. Djeneba clung to my skirt and followed me to the kitchen. Where had Iba’s outburst come from? Had he thought this all along? Did my husband know? I put aside a small bowl of rice and sauce for Amadou and covered it with a plate to save it from the flies. They were incessant this time of year.

Just then I heard him return. “*In ni tile,*” he told his father. It was midday by now.

“*N ba. I ni tile.*”

“*N ba.*”

I looked over and saw Amadou sit down next to Iba. He sighed audibly.

“Awa—get the rice,” called Iba. I was already on my way and felt like telling Iba I wasn’t deaf or blind, but I didn’t say anything. He’d made me so angry. I could feel the heat building up in my chest. More heat; just what this day needed.

Amadou rinsed his hands then dug in without a word. Djeneba wobbled over to him and he let her rest on his knee while he ate. I went back to the kitchen. I wanted to sit down, but not with them, and not inside—I didn't want to bother Nana.

"I told your wife I'm getting my coffin soon," announced Iba.

"Your what?" said Amadou. He was surprised too.

"I told her like I'll tell you: I'm not going to the city morgue where all those *djinn* are hanging around. I'm going straight from my home to the grave. I plan on sleeping in it so you won't even have to move me."

Amadou was quiet. He kept eating.

"So what do you think?" Iba asked him. Ah, so he just wants a reaction, I thought. Of course.

"Sounds uncomfortable to me," said Amadou without much enthusiasm. Iba watched him closely as he continued eating.

"So I'm just going to have that made this afternoon—" said Iba, still watching his son. Djeneba laughed and broke the silence. Was Amadou going to say anything else about it?

"It will be a waste," he finally offered.

"Why's that?" demanded Iba. This was the fight he was waiting for.

"Because it will rot away before you actually die and then we will have to go get another when the time finally comes."

“No! I’m going soon, I’m telling you.” That feeling again. I wiped my forehead.

“No you’re not. You’re hardly old and you’re perfectly healthy and you know you have too many things left to say to quit now.” I smiled to myself then looked at them. Amadou was smiling too. “Just don’t do it Dad,” he said and popped the last of the rice into his mouth.

“You cannot stop me,” said Iba childishly, and like a little one he stomped off back into the house.

I was pleased that Amadou had turned the whole morbid scene into something of a joke. But Iba’s unexpected outburst over Nana going to second cycle still had to be addressed. I almost didn’t want to bring it up for fear that I would find out that Amadou felt the same as his father, because then what could I say?

I decided to do the dishes first. I set the bowls on the ground outside the kitchen, got the soap and straw and pulled a heavy bucket of water out of the well. All the while, Amadou sat facing the other way. I couldn’t tell if he was still mad about what I’d said earlier, or if he was simply in one of his pensive moods. I figured I would let him come to me. Men are like that, taking their time.

By the time the bowls were set to dry he spoke.

“Seydou is taking another wife.”

“Another?” I asked tentatively.

“Someone from his village,” he said turning around. I went and sat next to him. Seydou had been in Bamako for a handful of years by now. He’d left his

village outside of Djenné to come to professional school for accounting then married a fellow student and stayed. Together for only three years they already had three daughters. They lived in one of the nicer houses in the area, but still, I could not imagine him having enough money to take on a second wife so quickly. Or enough of a reason.

“How did you find out?” I asked.

“Moussa.” Seydou was part of the *grin*, the group of men who had tea after tea together outside Moussa’s boutique. Amadou went sometimes. Though I’d been tempted more than once by the idea of joining them and their conversations, Moussa’s wife Bawa swore up and down they didn’t talk about anything of interest to us. She would know since her fruit and fritters stand is set right in front of them. Sometimes they would let something slip though; they would forget that Bawa was there despite her enormously round body and bright colors. She was the first woman to know about Mamadou and Fifi’s divorce. I was naturally the second. She came running faster than I’d ever seen her move. I thought her children were in trouble.

“They say it’s his brother’s wife.” Ex-wife I supposed, since Seydou’s brother had recently died of malaria. It had taken too long to figure out what he had, and too long after that to get the medicine to his village. Men as young as him can usually fight it but sometimes Allah has other plans.

“Is that nice of him?” I hadn’t meant to ask. I’d meant to say it like a statement, but I was still working out what this all meant.

“I’m not sure,” said Amadou slowly. I knew for a fact that Amadou was not interested in taking more wives. He was of the camp that when the Quran says you can have multiple wives only if you can treat them all equally, that means that you *cannot* have multiple wives since you inevitably *cannot* treat them all equally. I also think he has a place in his heart for modern love. Though in a way our marriage was arranged due to our fathers’ close friendship, we’d been fond of each other before either of them even brought up the possibility. I remember when he started coming to my mother’s fried fish stand every night. I suddenly became a very diligent helper.

“Is she younger than his wife?” I asked.

“I think they’re about the same age. She’s bringing her son too.” I could not imagine bringing more women and children into my life. Where would they fit in? I thought of my children, each of their distinct personalities. And Nana.

“Iba said Nana can’t go to second cycle.”

“When did he say that?”

“Today, just after lunch.” I couldn’t read his reaction yet. He was hiding so well today.

“Did he say why?”

“Kind of. Just that girls shouldn’t go. I mean, I know I didn’t go but—“ I was getting flustered, “That

doesn't mean Nana shouldn't go. I thought she was going to be the first—

"She will be." My body relaxed. I felt myself slide into the chair more.

"Praise Allah," I said.

"Just maybe not right away."

"What?"

"I was thinking about everything. School fees go up in second cycle. What's the harm in her just waiting a year? Come next spring we'll definitely have everything in order."

"What's the harm?" I repeated. "She won't get to be with all her friends! Maybe she'll forget everything! What would we tell her anyway? What would she tell everyone else?"

"Ok, just calm down—"

"I think it's ok to be worked up about our daughter's future. You do remember this is her whole future we are talking about."

"It's not her whole future, don't be dramatic."

I didn't say anything. Neither did he.

"*Jii sma be! Jii sma be!*" a young girl called as she walked by, advertising the sacks of ice-cold water she held in the bucket on her head. She was about Nana's age.

"It was just a thought," he finally said gently. "I didn't say I'd decided anything. We do that together, right? If anything it's you who decides things in the end. *Ni turukala sira nin min ye, dugu mana je onbonsi be wuli n'o ye.*" What is in the wife's braids will be in her

husband's beard when he gets up. At night, in our bed, in our whispers. That's where we decide things together.

"You should go to Kati today if you can."

"What?" Where did this come from?

"Well you said you were planning on going soon and I was just thinking I honestly can't remember the last time you left Djikoroni. Can you?"

I couldn't. Right after Fatim gave birth? When was that, almost two years ago? The farthest I usually get is to the market down the main road a bit. There's usually just no reason. All of my friends and most of what's left of my family is here. And there's the kids, and the mangoes to sell.

"You're right." I said.

"Then why not just go today? Iba's driving you crazy anyway. Go to the teleboutique," he said and pulled some change out of his pocket. Why hadn't I thought to do this before? Of course I could just get up and leave. It was only Kati after all. "If you're not at home when I get back from work I'll know you went, ok?"

"Ok," I said and turned to go. I felt filled with purpose.

Lamine, Mohammed and Aminata's son, was manning the teleboutique. He was dozing lightly on the chair by the telephone.

"*I ni tile*," I said. His eyes opened quickly in a way that reminded me of frightened animals and his body straightened. He relaxed when he recognized me.

"N ba. Somogo?"

"Tooro t'u la," I said. "I need to make a phone call to my sister up in Kati." I told him the number and he punched it in for me, the buttons beeping loudly in the small room. I could hear the line begin to ring though he still held the phone. Anxious, I held out my hand. He gave me the receiver just as Fatim picked up.

"Allo?"

"Allo Fatim! Somogo? This is Awa," I said, not in my usual easy cadence. Talking on phones always made me kind of nervous.

"Awa!" my sister yelled. "I'm so glad you called. Are you coming to Kati?"

"Yes," I told her, and suddenly wished that Lamine wasn't standing right there. "When?"

"I was hoping I could come today," I said meekly.

"Today? Eh!" she sang the Malian pitch of surprise. The *sotorama*-man sings it to you when you give him a bill that is too big for his liking, and you sing it to the chicken vendor in the market when he gives you a price that is too high.

"Is that ok?"

"Yes!" she said excitedly. "Of course that's ok! My home is your home you know that. I'm trying to get you to come up here all the time." I missed her.

*"Ok, well I guess I'll just get a few things and then find a *sotorama*—"* I started.

"Don't do that," she said. "My nephew David—I don't think you've met him before. He just moved here from Segou. Anyway, he's downtown right now and was

planning on coming home around 3. He can take you." I wasn't sure what her nephew was doing downtown or how he could take me, but I was eager to accept the offer as soon as I pictured myself stuffed into *sotorama* after *sotorama* inching up that hill so slowly the flies could settle on me, sweating...

"Ok," I said. "He knows where I am?"

"I can call him right now and tell him. It's very easy, and he's a smart boy—with a moped, so tie your head-scarf on tight!" She laughed.

"Ok. Thank you," I said.

"Come quickly!" she said, as if we hadn't just decided that I would wait to be picked up.

"See you soon."

"See you soon!"

I hung up. "I'm going to Kati today," I needlessly explained to Lamine.

"Sounds like it," he said flatly. I held out my palm of coins, unsure of how much the call had cost.

"Don't worry," he said shaking his head. "A gift."

"Oh that's not necessary," I protested. Suddenly I worried that what I'd showed him had not been enough and to save us both the embarrassment he'd decided to not point that out, pretend he could afford to let me make the call for free.

"Of course it's not necessary," he told me, lightly shutting the fingers of my opened hand. "Gifts are never necessary." He smiled, and I felt like he meant it and so I thanked him and went back out into the sun.

My stomach tightened. I was going today, just like that. What would I need to bring? We hadn't decided if I would spend the night, though every time I went there I did. I hadn't made dinner for everyone yet. What would they eat? I decided to go down to Bawa's and give her the telephone money and ask her to cook up some fried fish for my family and bring it to them later if possible.

I moved down the street slowly. The heat was too great to walk quickly anyway. I said hello to people, asked about their families, they asked about mine. Everyone was well. At least that's what we all said. We rarely asked those questions in search of the real answers. It was merely a polite routine that wove everyone together.

The call to prayer began to sound just as I was approaching the boutique. *Allahu Akbar... Alahu Akabar*. God is great, come pray it said. I wouldn't of course, since as a woman I was expected to pray at home; only on Fridays did I venture to the mosque to sit in the back with the other women. Truth was I hardly prayed any other day of the week. In that way you could call me a bad Muslim, but in all the others I was good. At least this is what I told myself whenever a wave of guilt hit me.

"*I ni tile,*" I said to Bawa who was rearranging her *zaban* pyramid. I've never liked those ugly fruits with slimey, sour pits inside. Eating one passes the time though I suppose.

"*N se!*" she said, her face brightening from the scowl of concentration she'd been wearing to a smile. "*I ni tile.*"

"*N se,*" I said and stood in front of her little table. "Will you be frying fish tonight?" I asked.

"Yes, of course," she said. "I bought too many yesterday and need to sell them quickly before they go bad."

"I'm going to visit my sister in Kati this afternoon and I plan to stay the night. Can you fry one up and bring it by my house later?" I held out my hand to show that I meant to pay her.

"One fish is surely not enough," she said. I looked at the coins and saw that I could not afford more than that. Would she not save me this embarrassment?

"Oh I have other things ready for them. I just want to give the little ones a treat so they won't miss me too much."

"Ok," said Bawa standing to retie her *pange*. "How about I give them a fish too so they won't miss me too much either?"

"They will like that," I said. "And they will miss you anyway."

Bawa was kind. My sister-in-law who was just as true as a blood sister. We'd grown up together around here, and it was through me that she met Moussa. Yet after all these years I doubted her sometimes, which was despicable really. Of course she wouldn't embarrass me about money. As if she didn't know exactly what was going on in my house. Like I knew

about hers. But still, I hardly ever got to see her anymore. Our children and stands kept us nailed to our places that were hardly fifty meters apart. I wondered if we would continue like this forever.

Just as I was handing over my few coins Moussa came out of the dark of the boutique, plastic tea kettle in hand.

"I ni tile," he said to me.

"N se. Somogo?"

"Tooro t'u la," he said. He was a handsome man. He and Amadou had often been mistaken for twins. Kindred spirits in some ways, but Moussa had something darker in him too. When they were younger he was the one always getting into trouble, coming home dirty, having the kind of friends who maybe weren't so good for him. He was the one who never bothered finishing second cycle. He left the academics to Amadou who could only go as far as 9th grade anyway. Since he'd gone to a *madressa* he'd learned all of his subjects in Arabic and so, he couldn't pass the high school exam in French. I knew he still felt a little cheated by it all. Moussa didn't care, but Amadou did. Yet that was exactly the element of him that drew Bawa near, the part of him that was unbothered by conventions, by anything really. Of course she always assumed he would stop drinking and hanging out at military bars once they were married. He did quit for a brief while but started up again not too long after she was pregnant with their first child. It had been like that ever since—an ebb and flow. He would go until she

couldn't stand it anymore and then he'd stop, then slowly, slowly it would start again. All the while Bawa kept selling her fruit and fritters and having babies. She was a good wife.

Moussa sat down on a rock and began his ablutions with the water from the plastic kettle. I watched as he washed his face and hands and feet. The puddles he created didn't last long. The parched ground sucked up the excess quickly.

"Is everything ok?" asked Bawa. I suddenly realized I'd been staring.

"Oh I'm sorry, I've just been feeling strange today. Thinking about a lot of things I guess," I said vaguely.

"Things you want to talk about?" she proposed. I did, but I couldn't, not at that moment.

"I have to get ready to go to Kati right now," I told her. "But thank you, really." Bawa raised an eyebrow at me and smiled suspiciously.

"Ok then. I'll have those fish fried up and ready for dinner," she said, reminding me why I'd come down in the first place.

"Thank you Bawa. See you soon."

"See you soon," she echoed. I turned to walk back up the block.

"See you later," I called to Moussa. He raised one hand in acknowledgment. I could feel him watching me as I left. He'd never been sure if I was on his side, and the truth was, I'd never been sure either.

Back at home I cooked some more rice and pounded some more onions and a hot pepper to go with the fish. I put on a new *panyé* and matching top. It was bright red with yellow birds flying out of their blue cages across me. I put on my nice earrings too and wrapped my braids tightly in a head-scarf. They'd been a mess recently. All fuzzy like newborn animal. I kept meaning to get them re-done but never remembered at the right time. Maybe Fatim would do them for me tonight, like old times. We used to sit by our mother's stand, doing small errands for her if necessary, braiding each other's hair. I can still picture the shadows we made against the mud wall from the small kerosene lamp. Shocked rectangles of hair, tiny slopes of noses and long stretches of lanky limbs.

I picked up Djeneba who had been napping on the ground near me and tied her to my back. She didn't stir. Though Allah had made her a crier He had at least given me the peace of making her a good sleeper.

I looked into the other room and saw two horizontal figures. It was Iba and Soumaila napping. Iba was so still I had to go over and make sure his chest was moving just to be sure he wasn't dead—with all that nonsense he'd been talking about. Soumaila was moving around even in his sleep. That boy could never keep still.

Just as I went outside to see where Nana had gone off to, I saw a young man getting off his moped across the street. He was wearing a *bogalan* outfit, which must have been boiling him alive. He looked at

me and I waved hesitantly. Was that David? He came over and extended his hand.

"I ni wula," he said.

"N se. I ni wula,"

"N ba. Somogo bedi?"

"Tooro t'u la."

"N ba."

We paused.

"I'm David," he clarified.

"Yes, yes, I know," I said, though of course I hadn't been sure. "Thank you for coming to get me."

"It's no problem," he said. "Are you ready?"

"Almost," I said. "I just have to find my daughter, she's supposed to watch the mango stand when—"

"I'm right here Mom," said Nana.

I turned around quickly. There she was.

"I'm going to Kati to see Aunt Fatim," I told her. "Dinner is ready in the kitchen and Aunt Bawa is coming later with an extra treat. Watch the mangos." She nodded, a bit sadly. "And don't bother studying anymore," I told her boldly. "I'm sure you've done more than enough of that already." I felt awkward, as if I was displaying some kind of this-is-how-I-mother show for David—like I was pretending, like I was not really me.

"Ok," said Nana and she walked over to our table of mangoes and began rearranging them slowly so the most orange and succulent ones were on top.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I said.

"See you tomorrow," she mumbled.

I looked at David who was looking at Nana. “Ok I’m ready.” I told him.

The ride up was long and loud. Just getting to the road that goes up over the mountain was an adventure in close calls. Everyone else on their mopeds looked quite calm as they swiveled through the traffic, coming within mere centimeters of each other. At first I closed my eyes but that made it worse. I wanted to have them open in case anyone came too close to Djeneba who was strapped tightly to my back. So I started to focus on the people we passed. The woman fanning her charcoal burner roasting corn for sale, the men playing card games at a dilapidated table, the little boys chasing bicycle tires with sticks, the old man with his boxed hat on his way to the mosque, the woman hanging large squares of colorful laundry on lines between the trees, the Quaranic kids with their empty tomato sauce cans and filthy shorts singing songs in praise of Allah.

I felt better just watching Bamako go by like that.

But by the time we were going up the big road to Kati there were no longer people to focus on and my sense of sound took over. The endless pattering of the moped and that of the *sotoramas* and cabs and all other kinds of vehicles winding up the Presidential hill sounded like a mechanical drum circle gone mad, and the constant whip of the wind was a force all of its own.

Once we were on top of the hill the land leveled out again into a long stretch of brown. It was hard to imagine that anything ever grew here. The rainy season

was coming later and later. I remember when I was a kid and it was life's easy promise that there would be puddles as big as lakes all around the neighborhood by the end of May. But here we were, halfway through June and not a single drop yet. And none in sight was what everyone was saying. That it wasn't going to be until the middle of July. I was no farmer, but I understood that this was bad news for a lot of people.

Once in Kati proper we slowed down a bit, driving through the market and into the familiar cross-hatching of brown streets and mud and concrete houses. It looked much like Djikoroni, just with wider roads and more trees.

We came to such a quick halt I thought we were about to crash into someone's house not park at my sister's. But here it was. I could hear a hum of activity coming from within the courtyard. She was always hosting someone. I thanked David, straightened my head-scarf, and went in.

Fatim was sitting under her giant mango tree with three other women around her all equally decked out in their *bassin*. Fatim in a bright yellow that made her look wonderfully blacker than a river at night, the others in blue, purple, and green. She squealed when she saw me and sprung out of her chair.

"My sister!" she said rushing over to me. I opened my arms and we hugged. We exchanged greetings at rapid fire, talking over each other, answering questions before they were asked about our health and families and days. She took me by the hand

and set me down in what had been her seat. I tried to protest as I untied Djeneba but she protested right back and pulled a chair off of a high pile nearby for herself. I thought of our three chairs at home and what a wreck they were. Fatim was doing well.

She took Djeneba out of my hands and cooed in her face as she simultaneously asked me if I wanted water and introduced me to her three friends Sadjo, Jaqueline, and Therese. I accepted the offer for water and drank all of the cool mug down. I'd breathed in a lot of dust and dirt on the way up that made me feel parched in a way that I hadn't felt in a long time.

"We were just talking about Jaqueline's daughter who had a baby boy in America," Fatim told me. I wondered for a moment if these women would want to continue their intimate conversation with me, a stranger, now there, but no one seemed to mind. It was as if I had been there all along.

"So he's American now, which is fine and lovely in many ways but what we were not expecting is that now he needs a visa to come back to Mali. Can you imagine?" The women laughed, their bracelets clinking together as they slapped each others' knees. Therese even hit mine, so I laughed too.

"And it's not cheap—" Jaqueline went on. "You'd think he would get a discount or something having Malian parents, I mean *wa lai*, he was *made* in Mali, but no, it's just as expensive." They all laughed more.

"I think I would have a baby in America all the same," put forth Sadjo. "I hear you don't even need husbands to have them over there anyway."

"Sadjo is waiting for a divorce," Fatim informed me with no ceremony. I was surprised but tried not to show it. This woman here, laughing with all the rest, was about to end her marriage? I wondered if she was part of Fatim's church and if they did things differently there.

"It's true," said Therese. "There are pairs of homosexual women having babies together over there."

"Together?" I gasped aloud. I couldn't help myself. This is all a little much.

"Well not *together* really. They adopt them. Or one of them has one."

"And then the other has the next!"

They burst into more earth shaking laughter.

"Ok, ok," said Fatim, her laughs settling. "We are scaring my poor sister."

"But she is the city girl from Bamako, no?" said Therese. "Surely she's seen it all."

"Well I can't say I get out that much, I usually—"

"I'm just joking with you dear," she said and smiled. I felt like I was twelve years old again, trying to navigate Fatim's older friends as they talked about boys and other things I wasn't quite as invested in yet. But here I was, thirty years old!

"We should let you two catch up," said Sadjo. Jaqueline nodded and said something about having to get back to check on someone at home.

“Will you be staying long?” asked Therese.

“Oh, I’m not sure,” I said.

“Well I hope we see you again,” she said, and she looked like she meant it. The three of them stood above us, big balloons of color.

We all wished each other well and the rest of them had a laugh about something that must have referred to a conversation that took place before my arrival because I didn’t get it. Then it was just us.

Fatim took my hand and looked me up and down. Had it been anyone else but my sister I might have been embarrassed. “You look well,” she finally declared.

“And you too,” I said. It was true. She was wonderfully full, her *bassin* was crisper than any I’d ever seen before, and her eyes were brighter than the gold she was wearing.

“Thank you,” she said. “God has blessed me with good health for a long time now.”

“I will pray it stays,” I said.

“And Djeneba is so big now!” said Fatim pinching lightly at her puffy cheeks.

“Where is Mariam?” I asked.

“Oh she’s napping right now, thank *God*. That girl is non-stop,” she laughed gently. “She talks more than I do.”

“Uh-oh!” I said and we laughed together. I was feeling more at ease.

I took a look around her courtyard. We were surrounded by three small buildings made of concrete.

The courtyard itself was tiled and spotless which must have been the work of the three young girls I saw through the open door of the kitchen peeling and pounding things. The large mango tree provided shade for most of the courtyard which was littered with woven chairs that were all empty save ours. Spots of afternoon sunlight came through and speckled the tiles with yellow.

“So you must tell me everything,” said Fatim. “It has been unspeakably long since I last saw you. How are the children? And Amadou? And good old Iba?”

“The children are fine,” I started. “Djeneba here is a bit of a crier but other than that everything has been well with her. And Soumaila is growing like a weed. He plays football all the time but I suppose that’s normal. And Nana is about to finish first cycle you know.”

“Already?!” said Fatim. “How these children grow. I only hope they are growing old faster than we are.”

“And speaking of growing old, “ I started. Why not get into it all now? “Iba keeps talking about dying.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know. I don’t like it. Not at all. Just this morning he told me he was going to buy his own coffin.”

“His coffin? Already?”

I shook my head and rearranged my *panyé*. “He wants to *sleep* in it,” I whispered. The lump in my throat was growing

“No,” she said in the same whisper.

“Yes,” I insisted. “He says there are too many *djinn* at the city morgue and that he doesn’t want his body going there even for a second.”

“He’s always been a bit of a nut,” said Fatim good-heartedly. At least she could see the lighter side of things.

“Amadou told him not to do it but I think he just might anyway.”

“Well I suppose we should allow our parents some insanity since it was us who drove them mad.”

Djeneba held her arms out towards Fatim who took her without a word. We sat in silence for a moment, just listening to the baby’s nonsense sounds.

“And how is Francois?” I said, finally remembering my manners.

“He is well,” she replied with a bit of a sigh. “He works too much and for too little money,” I couldn’t help but wonder exactly how much “too little” was. I had no idea what a professor made but from the looks of it, it was a good deal. Francois taught English down in Bamako at the University. Last I’d heard from him the students were not of the caliber they’d been when he went there years ago. But weren’t we all tempted to remember the past treating us better than it actually ever did?

“Still as handsome as the day we met though,” she said with a giggle. We were both so lucky to have loved our husbands dearly since the very beginning. There were plenty of women our age whose first private

conversation with their husbands had been on their wedding night.

“Umu and Robert are doing well too,” she continued. “Umu *loves* school. Well, that’s not precise enough really,” she said. “Umu loves *dressing up* for school. You should see her now. A real little lady. Though frankly I think it’s a bit too much sometimes. Honestly—how many times a week does a girl need her hair done?” Umu had always been a very pretty girl. It was only a matter of time before she noticed it herself.

“She’ll get over it,” I said.

“I can only hope so. I don’t need to be knocking anymore boys’ heads around here.”

“And Joseph?”

“Ah yes—the same really. Much like you said about Soumaila—football, football, football. The good news is he seems to have taken a liking for math as well.”

“That *is* good news I suppose.”

“Only it makes me wonder if in fact I am his real mother!” she slapped my thigh and let out that contagious cackle.

“Oh Fatim it’s so good to see you,” I said, and suddenly I was overwhelmed by the urge to be held by her. My big sister.

“There is more on your mind than what you have told me so far,” she said.

“Of course there is,” I answered.

“Let us squeeze out your frustrations though some *citrons*, ok? The girl in the market had no change

and I was so hot and frustrated and dying to get home I wound up buying the whole 5000 CFA worth!" she laughed. "So we have buckets upon buckets of juice to make." She stood up and set Djeneba down. "I promise, we will crush this thing out together." And with that she disappeared into the house.

"Does that sound good my baby?" I asked Djeneba who was stepping hesitantly around the chairs. "I think that sounds good."

I turned to the young girls in the kitchen. They looked remarkably strong, their muscles as well defined as those of young men. They were talking quietly but fiercely about something. Was it boys? School?

"Politics," said Fatim from behind me. She was holding a large bucket of *citrons*. Had she known what I was thinking? "All day long, they bicker about politics, I swear. They're all in *lycée* right now. They cook dinners here and in return we send them to school." She sat down heavily and let the bucket drop. "They are going to rule this country one day, I'm telling you. Big plans."

"That's—" I didn't know quite what to say. How had Fatim found them? How did she manage to pay for all of them? How did they know so much about politics?

"Siré the one in the green—she's not going to quit talking about it until another five years from now when ATT's new term is over. She's absolutely convinced he stole the election." She took a knife from the bucket which she waved around while talking. It made me more than a little nervous watching that blade swish through the air with every giant gesture of hers.

“Of course they *all* went and voted for Sidibe Diallo even though they knew perfectly well she had no chance of winning. I told them they were just going to be disappointed. Boy did I get an earful that day.” She put her arms on her hips and took a serious tone to mimic them. “If you ever want to see your country come out of the colonial shadow then you’d better start voting for the way you *want* Mali to be not the way you think it *has* to be—if we’re not voting for Diallo now when will we ever and blah blah—” she started laughing again. “It’s not that I don’t agree, deep down I do. And I appreciate their fire, really, but I just have no spirit for politics. I didn’t even make it out to vote. Did you?”

“No,” I said simply.

“See?” she said. “That’s our problem. It’s not ATT. It’s old ladies like us who just don’t care!” She pulled a *citron* out and sliced it in half. “Oh, I’ve totally forgotten the bowl for the juice. Where is my mind today?” She got up and went into the house again. I could hear her banging things around. I turned and looked at the girls again. What was it that Fatim and I talked about when we were eighteen? It certainly wasn’t the new democracy. Well sure, we talked about it some I suppose, but I can’t remember forming any specific opinions about it other than believing that anyone would be better than Traoré who was shooting innocent people down in the streets. I guess I’ve always managed to interact in a smaller world of family and friends. One seemingly untouched by politics.

“Ok, I’m *back*,” said Fatim triumphantly as if she had just accomplished something grand in the short time we had been apart. “Here’s your knife, here’s our bowl. Let’s make juice.”

I took the knife and reached into the bucket. Within seconds of our slicing the air was full of fresh citrus.

“Don’t worry about the seeds now,” Fatim said. “We’ll strain the whole thing later.” I squeezed a half in each hand, letting the juice run through my fingers. Djeneba came and put her hands on the bowl nearly sending our first batch to the floor.

“No, no, no, honey—” I told her and pried her tiny fingers off the edge. “Take this,” I handed her a *citron* of her own which she promptly dropped. It became a game for her quickly.

“So who is it?” asked Fatim slicing into another.

“Well, it’s not one person in particular really,” I began. “It’s just so many things at once you know? I told you about Iba being difficult recently. Today when Nana was talking about the big test tomorrow he told her not to worry because she wasn’t going to go to second cycle anyway.”

“He said *what*?” Fatim demanded.

“I know—”

“And what did Amadou say?”

“Well at first he seemed like he was on my side.”

“Rightfully *so*.” She was really wringing this one out.

“But then he kind of changed his mind midway through, saying something about how Nana could just wait for a year maybe and—“

“Why wait? She needs to be with her friends. Making that transition can be very hard to do alone you know.”

“Yeah I know. That’s kind of what I said.” I took another *citron* and pierced its green hide.

“I think he’s jealous.”

“Jealous? Who is?”

“Amadou,” she said. “If Nan goes to second cycle maybe she’ll go to high school.” She waited. And then she’d be more educated than all of us, even him, I realized. Fatim was watching me. “Exactly,” she said, knowing she had followed my thoughts.

“Maybe that’s part of it, but Amadou is not a spiteful man.”

“No, no,” Fatim said, picking up another *citron*. “He probably doesn’t even realize that it bothers him. Things like that sit a little deeper and haunt you discretely.”

I didn’t like the idea of my husband being jealous of daughter’s potential success at all. “No, I think it’s just the money.”

“The money?”

“Well, school fees go up and you know, we just—“ I trailed off.

“Why have you not told me this before?” said Fatim. She sounded angry.

“Told you what?” I played dumb for lack of knowing what else to say.

“That you need money,” she said quietly.

“Well I don’t *need* it. Really, we’re doing fine. It’s just—“

“Awa. Nana needs to go to school, and if you don’t have enough money to send her then you *need* more money.” There was never any arguing with Fatim.

“She said she wants to be a doctor.”

“Well good for her!” she practically shouted. “Lord knows we need more of those here.”

“Or a journalist.”

“And those too! Why not?” She was working quickly. Already our juice bowl was filling. “Ok,” she said, continuing to squeeze away. “Don’t worry.”

“Don’t worry?”

“Yes don’t worry. I will pay for what you can’t.”

“But Fatim—“ I started. Somewhere in me I’d known all along where this conversation might have gone, but I’d never felt like she owed that to me at all. I was never going to ask.

“Don’t argue with me sister, you know I always win,” she said. This was one time I was happy it was true.

“Thank you,” I said. I felt my eyes filling with water.

“And don’t thank me either. If you could do the same for me you would.” She wiped her own tearing eyes with her sleeve quickly. “Besides, I’m doing it for Nana, not for you.” And she laughed.

We spent the rest of the afternoon squeezing *citrons* until our fingers puckered, talking about our world together before kids, before husbands. She reminded me of the time we put one of our mom's fish in the toilet kettle to scare our cousin Mamadou who was living with us at the time. I had completely forgotten after all these years, but then I remembered the sound of his little boy shriek coming out of the latrine. That turned out to be an accidental declaration of war. We had to check our sheets and shoes very carefully from then on. We talked about old friends and what they were doing now if we knew—those who had gone to France, those who never found a husband or a wife, those who now had unimaginable amounts of children.

As we meandered through our memories I realized that my life was not that far from the dreams I had for it as a little girl. I had a husband I loved, three healthy children, a home. What was missing most was my parents. They both died just after Nana was born. My mother went first. She'd been having all kinds of health problems for years; her chest hurt, her digestion didn't work that great, she had trouble sleeping, her skin never healed well, her vision was nearly gone. We all just kind of figured she'd live to one hundred with it all; but something caught up with her and rather suddenly, she died. To make matters worse, my father mysteriously passed only a week later. Everyone said it was of heartbreak. I don't think I could have survived the grief had I not just brought another life into this

world. I realized that was around the time Fatim and I stopped seeing so much of each other. Really it should have been when we held on tighter, but perhaps being together would have reminded us of what was missing.

By the time dinner was ready I realized I was starving. The smells wafting from the kitchen awakened senses I had been trying to suppress for weeks. Chicken and lamb and potatoes and onions and eggplant, fried plantains, green salad; it was practically a feast. With the plates and cups came the children. Umu *was* beautiful, though you could see too well that she knew it. She was polite to me, though a little cold to her mother. Joseph could have been Soumaila from behind save the fact that his football jersey was yellow and green not purple and red, and of course, good as new. And Mariam was a delight I had never expected. Hardly two years old and already talking like school kid. She took a liking to Djeneba immediately, if only because she could finally boss around someone smaller than her. Djeneba seemed to enjoy the arrangement as well.

“Will we not wait for Francois?” I asked.

“He’s never back before 9,” Fatim said, handing me a plate. “I’m telling you, he works too much these days.” She filled my plate with bright white rice. “But it’s work that should be done. He doesn’t tell me a lot about it, but from what I gather he’s helping develop more maternal language curriculum. Serve yourself some meat.” I did.

“Don’t be shy now,” she said and threw a whole other drum leg onto my pile. “So yes—the Ministry of

Education has been working on getting more Bamanakan and Peul and whatnot into the school system so kids won't wind up with the French-only stuff we got."

"I think Nana does mostly French," I said then took my first bite. Oh it was delicious.

"Well yes, exactly. Things have been going a little slowly. Apparently it was all supposed to start ten years ago. But translating and publishing has been a problem, and even just getting the books that are already done out to the schools. Francois says there are storerooms full of books just waiting to be delivered but no one has coordinated where they should go or how. "

"That does sound important," I offered rather lamely. I couldn't keep up my end of the conversation much as long as there was food like this in front of me.

Just then David came over. He filled himself a huge plate and turned to go.

"Do you have somewhere else to be?" asked Fatim.

"Uh, no?" he said, unsure of himself.

"Then sit with us for a while." She patted the seat next to hers. "I'm sure you didn't even get to talk to Awa the whole ride up and here she is, an aunt of some kind to you."

I wasn't exactly sure why she was pressuring him to socialize with us. Perhaps she realized my full focus on the food was going to bore her.

He sat down and started eating.

“So you work in Bamako?” I asked. Not exactly a fascinating start, but a start nonetheless.

“Yes,” he said and was careful to finish his mouthful before continuing. “I paint *bogolan* at the Carrefour de Jeune.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Did you paint what you’re wearing now?”

“Yes.”

“It’s very good.” The truth was it looked just like any other *bogolan*, but I guess that was a good thing.

“Thanks.”

“He does other things too,” added Fatim. “Tell her about the big canvases.”

“I uh, paint wall pieces too. Mostly maps of Mali or scenes of women with buckets on their heads, things like that.”

“*And* he’s a teacher,” she pushed him on.

“Well only *kind* of. Sometimes *toubab* come and I show them how to paint a bit, tell them what the paint is made from and everything and then we work on something together.” Neither Fatim nor I were responding so he went on. “There’s this one lady who’s been coming in for like a month now. She’s really into it. She always makes these big *baobab* trees. She works for some kind of tree-planting NGO.”

“Tree planting?” I thought of Mohammed.

“I guess. I don’t really know that much about it. I think they’re working on planting trees in places that are turning into deserts.”

“This might be a strange question,” I began. “But would she have any interest in giving some trees to a mosque?”

“Is it in a desert area?” he asked in all seriousness. Fatim laughed.

“No, it’s just in Djikoroni. My friend Mohammed has some idea to get kids to plant trees at our mosque and make a day of it talking about the Quran and things like that while they do it.”

“I don’t know if that’s really their thing,” he said cautiously.

“Well if you don’t know you might as well ask,” said Fatim, putting a handful of greens on her plate. “Next time she comes bring it up. Call it ‘community building’ or something like that. NGO people love that crap.”

“Ok,” he said. “I can try.”

As I sucked my chicken bones clean Fatim started quizzing David about his friends.

“And what about Borema? I hear he’s into drugs.”

“Auntie—” said David.

“Don’t think I’m too out of the loop to know what goes on at those drum circles down there. You get a couple of dreadlocked *toubabs* and some *djembes* together and the next thing you know—”

“It’s not like that,” he protested. “Really.” We all paused. “Well there *are* some kind of questionable characters, but I promise I’m not hanging out with them.”

“Questionable characters?”

“Yes, questionable characters.” He was switching sides. “They’re the kind of guys who lose track of what’s really going on. They get sucked up in this Bob Marley tourist world and they try to show off the bits of English they’ve picked up, maybe get close to a girl with it you know.” We didn’t really know. At least, I didn’t. I hadn’t ever thought much about what kind of things happened at a place like Carrefour de Jeunes. I supposed these young guys had made themselves a rather strange world to live in. A cross of too many things, and not all of them good.

“M-hm,” said Fatim and she put her plate down on the table then dipped her hands into the water bowl on the floor next to her.

“You happy now?” he asked.

“That I dragged a confession out of you?” She laughed. “I just want to know what my lovely nephew is up to, that’s all,” she said. He rolled his eyes in a friendly way and finished off his plate and excused himself to leave.

Even though my stomach was pushing over the ties of my *pange*, I grabbed another handful of plantains.

“That’s my girl,” said Fatim. “You are looking a little too slender!”

At the end of the meal we didn’t even have to do the dishes; the girls would do them later. I at least insisted on bringing them to the kitchen. Of course we left a large helping for Francois on the table. It looked lonely without all of the other bowls.

“So you’ll be sleeping in the room with Umu if you don’t mind,” Fatim told me as we both picked up our girls who had fallen asleep in a chair together.

“No, that sounds just fine,” I said.

“There’s a fan in there so it shouldn’t be too hot.”

A *fan*. With all the food in my stomach I could have slept like rock through heat even greater than this, but with a fan—my body grew even more weak at the thought.

“I’m so glad you came up.”

“Me too,” I said. “I don’t know why I haven’t come sooner.”

“The same reason I haven’t come down,” said Fatim. “No good reason at all.” She kissed me on my forehead, then Djeneba on hers.

“*K’an kelen kelen wuli*,” she said. May we each wake one by one.

“*Amiina*.” Amen. May there be no disturbance to wake us all together in a fright.

Umu was already in bed when I came in. It was a big bed. Bigger than the one Amadou and I shared at home actually. She wasn’t asleep yet though. She was flipping through a magazine with pictures of white girls on the cover.

“*I ni su*,” I told her.

“*N se*,” she said. “You’re sleeping in here?” I worried for a moment that her mother hadn’t told her and that she would be annoyed.

“Yes. I hope that’s ok with you.”

“Yes!” she said much more excitedly than I was expecting. She sat up and pulled the sheet down on what would be my side.

Just then Fatim opened the door. “Here’s a nightgown sister,” she said and tossed it to me. It landed on Djeneba’s head but she didn’t stir.

“Thank you.”

“You girls don’t stay up too late talking!” she said to us. I could hear her gentle laugh fade with her as she walked across the courtyard over to her room.

“And Djeneba too?” she asked.

“Djeneba too.” I laid her down so she would be between us.

“I *love* babies,” she told me. “I want to have lots and lots of them when I grow up.” She lightly touched Djeneba’s head.

“There’s a lot that goes into one,” I said. “I’ve got only three and that’s quite a handful already.”

“What does Nana look like now?” she asked me as I put on my nightgown. I tried to think back to the last time the girls saw each other, how Nana would have changed.

“She’s very tall now.”

“Tall like a model?”

“Tall like her father.”

“And her hair?” She touched her own braids which were wrapped in a headscarf for sleeping.

“Braided.”

She laughed. “Yeah obviously, but *how?*”

“Kind of like mine,” I said then remembered they were a mess. “But she keeps them much better than I do of course. Remember, with babies I have no time for that kind of thing.” She made a face. Probably reconsidering her love of babies.

I got into the bed. It sunk below me gently and there was no sound of squeaky springs. Umu gave me a pillow from behind her back.

“Tell me a story,” she said laying down again.

“Really?” I asked.

“Yes. Like a bedtime story. I haven’t heard one in *years.*”

I looked at the ceiling above me and like my mind it was blank. What stories did I know? I couldn’t even remember what I used to tell Nana and Soumaila. There was Mali Sadjo but that was too sad. Who wants to go to sleep contemplating unrequited love and murder?

“Ok?” she asked. I turned to look at her and just then remembered the perfect story.

“Ok.”

“Yes!” she nearly shrieked. I guess she hadn’t been expecting me to really do it.

“One day, not that long ago, there was a beautiful young woman named Bintu,” I began.

“What did she look like?”

“She was not too tall, not too short. Her skin was darker than the night and her eyes were brighter than the moon. She had long hair that she never cut her

whole life which she wore in braids that went all the way down her back.”

“She sounds *gorgeous*,” said Umu and sighed.

“That’s what everyone in town thought. And more importantly, that’s what she thought too.” I paused for effect then went on.

“Every eligible man wanted to marry her. And the ones who were already married wanted to take her on as another wife. But she would have none of them. Even the most handsome men she found flaws in. This one’s nose was crooked, this one’s feet were too flat, this one’s teeth weren’t straight enough. Honest, hard working men she turned down with no shame.”

“Well she deserved the best!” said Umu, already in her defense.

“That’s exactly what she thought. She told herself, and anyone who would listen, that she would only marry someone with beauty equal to her own and that so far she had not found anyone who matched her.

“One day, a mysterious man came to town. He was more handsome than anyone the whole town had ever seen.”

“What did he look like?” I pictured Amadou.

“He was tall, and lean, with shoulders that were broad enough to show how strong he was. And his smile was delightful. Enchanting really.”

“And Bintu wanted to marry *him* right?”

“Exactly. As soon as Bintu saw him she knew he was the one. He was her equal in perfect beauty. And

sure enough, the mysterious man was taken by her as well.

“Within a week they were married and after the ceremony and party they left to return to his village. Bintu wished everyone goodbye, but not before reminding them that none of them had been good enough for her.

“Shall we turn out the lights?” I interrupted myself.

“Does it get scary or something?”

“No, no. I just find that with the lights out you can really picture it all better.”

“Ok,” Umu said warily. She slipped out and turned out the buzzing light. I waited for our eyes to adjust for a moment.

“One day, about a year later, Bintu came back. Her hair was a mess, she was covered in bruises and scars. The whole town rushed to greet her and was shocked by her changed appearance.”

“What happened?”

“That’s just what they asked her. And she told them. It turned out that the mysterious man was actually no man at all. He was an evil *djinn* who turned on her as soon as they left the village. He beat her and told her she was ugly every day. He never let her have any friends.”

“Oh my God, that’s *terrible*. Why would he do that to her?” Umu sounded genuinely disturbed. Maybe I had pushed it a little far with the lights.

“Why do you think?”

“Because he was evil.”

“Yes—“ I waited for more but she was waiting for me. “Bintu told the town she finally understood that this was punishment for being so vain her whole life. Had she not been too proud she would have married a lovely man from town who would have treated her well and the *djinn* never would have come at all. She was embarrassed and ashamed, but the town forgave her and she lived there peacefully but alone for the rest of her life.”

She was silent. Finally she asked, “That’s a true story?”

“Oh definitely,” I told her. My mother had told it to me and Fatim when we were little. Maybe it happened somewhere. You could never be sure.

“That’s so sad.”

“In some ways yes,” I said. “But it is happy in the end too.”

“Happy? *How?* Binut’s ugly and she lives all alone.”

“That’s kind of true, but she is with her friends and family and they all treat her well and love her for more than how she looks finally.”

We both considered this quietly. “I guess so,” she eventually said.

“I hope I haven’t scared you,” I said, though of course I meant the opposite.

“No, no,” she said a bit too firmly. “I’m not scared of bedtime stories. I’m practically in high school you know.” She was in 7th grade.

“Of course,” I said and put a hand on Djeneba’s round belly moving up and down with each breath. “Well, good night.”

“Good night Auntie.”

My mind swirled over all the conversations I’d had that day until it finally settled on Fatim’s promise to help pay for Nana to go to school. And before I could think much about it, I was asleep.

That night I dreamt there was a great storm that tore through Bamako. But instead of rain and thunder and lightning the clouds were dropping fried plantatins and *citrons* and whole cooked lambs. It was frightening. The food lay everywhere on the street and on the tin roofs of our houses. People were running all around the place trying to collect as much as they could but they were being pelted with roasted chickens and mangos. Children were crying and people were arguing and yelling. All the while I was lost downtown somewhere, trying to figure out which way was home. Finally I saw our corner. It was pouring onions there. I could see that my children were drowning in them. I tried to run but my movements were slow as if I was trying move through *tikkadegen*, which I kind of was because the street was swamped in that peanut sauce too. When I finally got to our house my family was completely covered by the mound of onions. I was digging and digging through them, trying to unbury them, all the while being beaten by more falling onions. I woke in a panic, clawing at the sheets.

It was still dark but the call to prayer was echoing somewhere not too distant. The pre-sunrise call. Gentle, cooing, long. I listened to the words.

Allahu Akbar
Ashhadu an la ilaha ill Allah
Ashhadu anna Mohammedan Rasool Allah
Hayya 'ala-s-Salah
Hayya 'ala-l-Falah
Allahu Akbar
La ilaha illa Allah
As-salatu Khayrun Minan-nawm

Prayer is better than sleep it told me in the end. It was just a dream from a false world.

The girls were sleeping soundly. In the deep blue I could see that Umu was holding onto Djeneba's arm. Maybe she really would love babies, I thought. Maybe that would be who would teach her to love more than she could ever love herself.

I must have drifted back to sleep because I woke up later to find that the sun was coming through the shutters in small slices and the bed was empty. Could Umu have already gone to school? Where was Djeneba? I got out of bed and put my clothes back on. When I opened the door to the courtyard I was momentarily blinded by the inundation of sun. After a second or two I spotted Fatim in her place under the mango tree with both Djeneba and Mariam in her lap.

"*I ni sogoma*," I said and she looked up.

"*N se*," she said. "Though perhaps you should know it is almost time to start saying '*I ni tile*'."

I sat down next to her. Mariam was talking to Djeneba about bicycles.

"Is it that late already?" I said, feeling suddenly disoriented, the entire morning pulled from beneath my feet.

"Yes. It's 11:30."

"Oh my God!" I gasped. Fatim laughed.

"There's no shame in sleeping when you need to my sister."

"But it's nearly time for lunch, and Amadou is expecting me to be back—"

"Don't worry, don't worry," she said. "I called the phone booth you called me from yesterday and that nice young man said he would tell Amadou you would be in later."

"You didn't tell him I was still sleeping did you?"

"No, no," she laughed again. "I just told him that you had more to do up here than you originally expected. And don't worry about lunch. I can send you down with a pot of what we're having here."

I rubbed my eyes in slow circles.

"How did you sleep?" asked Fatim.

"Very well," I said. "I had a nightmare at some point, but I don't think I even dreamed after that."

"Good," said Fatim. "Mariam kept wanting to wake you up, kept trying to convince Djeneba to do it actually. 'She's *your* mom,' she told her." We laughed.

Mariam gave us stern looks then went back to lecturing Djeneba about the bicycle they were going to ride together or something like that. How was it that they could be so close in age but so vastly far apart in speech? I still considered Djeneba a baby, but Mariam here was like a tiny woman.

“By the way, Umu says you’re her favorite Auntie.” I smiled. “What’d you do to earn that? Play dress up?”

“Quite the opposite actually,” I said. “I told her the story Mom used to tell us about the girl who won’t marry anyone until one day—“

“Yes, the handsome man who turns out to be a *djinn*.” She laughed. “You are evil sister!”

“Evil?”

“Wonderfully evil! I’m sure the poor girl didn’t even realize why you were telling her all this. I can only hope she took it to heart. Though perhaps she didn’t if she’s calling you her favorite Auntie now!” She laughed again.

While we drank some of the juice we made the night before, we played with the girls. Clapping our hands so they would dance, throwing things they would retrieve, pretending we couldn’t find them even though they were right in front of us. It reminded me of when Fatim used to come down to Djikoroni a lot right after she moved to Kati. She still hadn’t made many friends up there. Both Umu and Nana were little more than babies and we’d spend all afternoon by the mango stand playing mindless games together. Amadou made fun of

us a lot, calling us little girls ourselves. But I think he was jealous of the world we had all created together. At night, after those visits, I would pull him into our own one to soothe him.

“I should go,” I finally said.

“I want to make you stay but I know Amadou and the kids will miss you too and there are more of them than there are of me, so.” She shrugged. “Let me get you that lunch first.”

“Fatim it’s no—“

“I don’t want to hear it!” she said as she walked away to the kitchen.

“I don’t want to hear it!” echoed Mariam. Uh-oh.

Fatim came back with a pot tied in a *panyé*. “It’s *tikkadegen*. I know you love that.” I thought of the way it covered the streets in my dream then thought instead of how happy Soumaila would be.

“Thank you Fatim,” I said, taking the pot. “Now you will have to come down to Djikoroni. I’m not giving you back your pot until you do!”

“I told you you’re evil!” she said and gently hit my arm. “I wish I could offer you a ride downtown but everyone is out and about and you seem set on leaving soon.”

“It’s ok, thank you. I can just catch a *sotorama* on the road.” I set down the lunch and picked up my extra *panyé* and Djeneba. “Say bye to Mariam,” I told her and took her hand to make it wave.

“Bye!” she said, loudly, clearly.

“Come back to my house tomorrow,” said Mariam.

“*Your* house?” laughed Fatim. I tied Djeneba to my back, picked up the pot, and gave Fatim a one-armed hug.

“You just let me know what you need before school starts,” she said, reminding me of her promise. “But don’t worry—I’ll be seeing you before then.”

“*In sha Allah*,” I said. God willing, she repeated.

The ride back down was less sensational than the one up. I was crammed in the back of the station-wagon with two other mothers and their babies. It didn’t look any better for the four in the middle of the two upfront sharing the passenger seat. Once down the mountain I caught a *sotorama* to Djikoronni and suddenly, I was home.

Walking down our block I felt elated, refreshed. There is nothing like laughs, food, and some good sleep to heal you. My “problems” were only temporary situations. What I had beyond those was most important: family, love.

The sky was a bright blue and even the few clouds floating there looked cheerful. People were moving all around me, full of life. This was my home. And there was my house and Amadou and Iba sitting outside under the tree.

“*Aw ni tile*,” I said to them, almost singing.

“He did it,” said Amadou. He looked worried.

“Did what? Who?” I asked. I looked at Iba who was looking at the ground.

“He went and got his coffin.”

“Iba—” I started, but didn’t know what to say after that.

“It’s my life, it’s my death—let me do what I please with them!” he said, shaking a little. I felt panicked. My feeling of elation was suddenly drowned in the flood of this news. I needed to breathe.

I walked away. Not very far, just to the kitchen, but far enough that I felt like I could breathe again. I untied Djeneba and let her off my back. She hurried over to her father. I untied the pot and started to put the contents into two of our bowls; one for Iba, one for us, just as usual. If he wanted to pretend like this was normal, then I could too I decided. There seemed to be no use in fighting him. It might drain the life out of him anyway and wouldn’t that be just what he was looking for.

“Where is Soumaila?” I asked. He should have been home for lunch by now. Nana wouldn’t be coming. There wasn’t enough time between the testing periods. I hoped Amadou had remembered to give her some money for a bean sandwich at least.

Neither of them answered so I set down their bowls and went to look for him myself. Hardly around the corner I saw him playing goalie in a game down the block.

“Soumaila!” I called. He saw me and came running instantly. I turned to walk back but decided to

wait for him instead. He ran right into me without slowing down.

“Hi Mom!” he said as he clung to my body. I had to smile.

“Hi Soumaila.”

“Did you bring me something from Kati?”

“As a matter of fact I did.” I pulled on his ear lightly. “Some of Auntie Fatim’s *tikkadegen*.”

“Yes!” he whooped and jumped in the air then calmed down quite quickly. “I mean, I like your food too Mom.”

“Oh baby I know that,” I said. Iba had scared him. “I’m sick of having *jabaji* too you know.”

“You are?”

“Oh yes,” I said. He smiled a little. “I can’t wait to get my hand in that peanut sauce.”

“Me neither,” he said and ran the last few paces home.

Iba and Amadou were already eating from their separate bowls. Soumaila and I washed our hands then sat down too. It was delicious, and still warm. Creamy, salty, and little spicy. I focused on the tastes in my mouth, not the silence around me.

“Nana?” said Soumaila. We all looked up. There she was. Her eyes were red and puffy, her cheeks were striped with tear trails.

“Nana what’s wrong?” I asked and stood up, still holding a handful of lunch.

“I couldn’t do it,” she said.

“Couldn’t take the test? Why not? Was there some kind of mix-up?” We could get this straightened out. There must be more testing times. School wasn’t even supposed to get out for another two weeks.

“No, I just couldn’t do it,” she said and let out a sob then ran into the house. We all looked at each other. Soumaila looked scared. His eyes were wide, waiting to hear what the grown-ups would say. Amadou’s face must have been a mirror of mine; confusion, sympathy. It was Iba who was smiling.

“I don’t want to hear it,” I said to him and thought of Fatim and Mariam and the force with which they could say those kind of things. I hurried into the house. Popping the rice ball into my mouth and licking my hand, I pulled back the curtain with the other. Nana was huddled on the bed, face down, hidden in her arms. I could hear her whimpering.

“Nana,” I said gently and sat down on the bed. It squeaked loudly under my weight. “Nana it’s ok.”

“No it’s not!” she lifted her head to yell. Into the blanket I heard her muffle, “Grandpa’s right. I’m never going to go to second cycle.”

“Grandpa is *wrong*,” I said firmly. “Is he why you’re so upset about this?” She didn’t answer for a moment.

“I’m too stupid anyway.”

“You know that’s not true,” I said and pulled her up gently so we could look each other in the face.

"It *is* true," she said and began to cry again. Her chin ruffled and her lower lip turned down. "Even Mr. Coulibaly says so."

"Mr. Coulibaly says so?" I asked.

"Last week when he called on me in French class I couldn't answer his question and he told me to stop spacing out and to think about what we were doing instead and I told him I *was* thinking about what we were doing and then he said in that case I must be stupid."

"Did he use those exact words?" I was appalled. Who was this man?

"Almost."

"I want to know exactly what he said Nana." She looked at me and thought for a moment in between her heavy breaths.

"He said, 'If that's the best you can do while paying attention you might as well get up and go.'"

"His exact words?" She nodded. Someone would hear about it before the day was through.

"*He's* the stupid one," I said. Nana laughed and sniveled. "Does he do that kind of stuff a lot to other kids?" She didn't answer. "It doesn't diminish what he did to you if he does." She paused.

"Yeah. He's *so* mean Mom. He makes kids cry all the time." And with that she started to cry again. "I failed Mom. I only answered the first question."

"It's ok. I'm sure we can find a way for you to take the test again."

"I don't want to take the test again."

“Sure you do,” I said and held her shoulders.
“Don’t you want to go to second cycle?”

“I don’t know,” she said quietly.

“We can march right down to the school together as soon as you get some lunch in you. We’ll figure it all out today, I promise.” She looked at me, hesitant. The sun from the one high window was illuminating the tiny streams on her face so that they shone like silver. She looked beautiful. And not so much like a little girl anymore. Suddenly I saw my mother in her face. Just as quickly, it was gone.

We did what I said we’d do. We ate lunch quickly and together we walked the few blocks over to the school. It was eerily quiet. On most days, passing the school you could hear echoes from every building. Shouts of “Moi Monsier! Moi Monsier!”, or the monotonous drone of one hundred children reading a French passage aloud together. Occasionally you could hear a whip, a silence, and then the slow wail of a child. And there were always other kids playing outside—ones that didn’t even go to the school—playing football or hand-games, running around in their underwear and odds and ends of handed down clothing.

But today it was nearly silent. All of the extra children had been shooed away, and only the sound of a thousand pencils scratching their way to 7th grade could be heard. And here we were in the cloud of quiet outside, hurrying towards the director’s building. I didn’t know exactly what I was going to say, or for that

matter what he would tell me either, but I charged forward nonetheless.

“What’s the Director’s name?” I asked.

“Mr. Diarra,” Nana replied quietly. She was scared. I would have to do all of the talking. Perhaps she could win his sympathy with her defeated silence.

The small building had only two offices. I knocked on the open door of Director Oumar Diarra. “*I ni tile,*” I said.

“*N ba,*” he said without looking up. He was finishing writing something. His glasses suddenly fell and I could see that they had only one stem. He put them back on and they promptly fell off again. A stubborn man.

“*Somogo ka kene?*”

“*Tooro t’u la,*” he replied, finally looking up. “Can I help you?”

“Yes, please.” I took a breath. “My daughter here needs to take the test to go to second cycle.”

“Why was she not here today then?”

“Well she was, but—” But what? Then she got overwhelmed by her grandpa’s discouragement? By her own teacher’s discouragement? “But something happened and so she had to leave.”

“It’s too late.”

“It can’t be too late!” I said.

“Did she finish the first part?” he asked. He hadn’t even looked at her yet.

“No,” Nana answered, almost inaudibly.

“Then no, it’s too late. I was going to say if she had finished the first part she could try and catch up on the second part now, but really, even with a perfect score on the second half it would be impossible to carry a low score on the first.”

“But couldn’t she take it another day?” I tried to sound optimistic, not panicky, but it was hard. He laughed. I hated him in that moment.

“Listen, the education system doesn’t have the time or materials to go around making special exceptions for everyone.”

“But she’s just *one* girl—isn’t there an extra test somewhere? Couldn’t someone watch her take it for another hour or so after the rest of the children are done?”

“Oh but she’s not just one girl you see. I’ve already sent about ten other kids home empty-handed today.”

“But couldn’t we—“ nothing came. This was the infuriating bureaucracy block. From here on, people were not people, merely tools of a larger system. No one would take blame, though some would take credit, and everyone was just a number. I felt a terrible taste rising in my throat and suddenly I was sweating uncontrollably.

“Well as long as I’m here I need to warn you about the behavior of one of your teachers.” I had his attention. Perhaps I was not the first to come to him about this either. “Mr. Coulibaly, teacher of my

daughter's 6th grade class is inappropriately mean and discouraging."

"How so?" he asked. I couldn't interpret his reaction yet.

"Just the other day he unnecessarily insulted my daughter for not knowing the answer to a question. Embarrassed her in front of the whole class—and let me remind you Mr. Diarra that it is not a small thing as a twelve year old to be shamed in front of one hundred and twenty other kids." Nothing. "He does this to most of the children, repeatedly." Still nothing. "They cry. And on top of it all, part of his insult was to discourage her from ever trying in school again."

"I'm sure it was said in jest."

"How could you be sure? Were you there?" I heard Nana shuffle her feet. There was no way this man would help me now, but there was no way I was leaving his office with out making heard what needed to be said.

"No Madame, I was *not* there. But I assure you that our teachers are of high quality and have received proper training. They are trained at our government institutes and are continually updated in all things educational by our regional directors. All of our teachers are of high quality I assure you. Very well trained." It meant nothing, talking in circles like this. These were empty responses, his way of telling me I don't care. I don't care that your daughter was embarrassed, I don't care that she can't go to 7th grade now, and I don't care about whatever else is going terribly wrong for you.

“I’m afraid you are wrong Mr. Diarra,” I said. “And I believe you should look into this further or else more and more parents will start taking their children out of your school like I am doing now.” I took Nana’s hand and pulled back out into the light. We were practically running.

“But Mom now what? Do I have to do 6th grade again?” Her chin was wobbling. “At a new school?” Tears started quietly falling down her face.

“We’re going to figure it out Nana,” I said. My brain was pulling in ten directions at once. “I’m going to call Auntie Fatim. When I was up there yesterday she promised me that she would help you get through school however she can.”

“But how?”

“That’s what we don’t know quiet yet, but what we’re going to find out.”

I told her to go and lie down and think about good things. Things she’s grateful for, things that make her happy. This did not have to be the end of her world. When we got to our house no one was there. Amadou must have gone to work and put the mango table inside, and Soumaila was back at school. Iba was probably resting in his new coffin. Just the thought of it made my stomach lurch. I gave Nana’s hand a last squeeze then kept walking up the block to the teleboutique.

This time it was Mohammed working. I might have preferred it to be Lamine again, but I suppose all of this would come out in due time anyway.

"*I ni tile,*" he said. "*Somogo?*"

"*N se,*" I said. "I need to make a phone-call to my sister in Kati." I suddenly remembered that I had no money on me. "It is somewhat of an emergency and I am sorry to say that I have no money on me right now."

"Is everything ok?" he asked, genuinely concerned.

"It will be, *in sha Allah.* I promise I will pay for the phone call later today. I just rushed out of the house in kind of a panic."

"It's no problem Awa, really. You should not worry." I gave him the number and he dialed for me, then handed me the phone as soon as it started ringing.

"*Allo?*"

"*Allo Fatim,* it's Awa."

"Awa! You missed me already!" she laughed.

"Yes," I said. It was true. "Listen—Nana didn't take her test and the Director says she can't do it again and so she's going to have to repeat 6th grade but she can't do it there because I told him I was pulling her out." It was like one long word. I hoped she understood me.

"I'm coming down."

"No, you don't have to, I just wanted to see what—"

"No, I'm coming down. Francois left the car after lunch because he had a meeting somewhere else he was carpooling for. I have the keys in my hand right now. Give me half an hour at most."

"Ok," I said.

“Besides, I need that pot back for dinner,” she laughed. “You can laugh Awa, it’ll be ok.”

“I’ll see you soon.” I said, and she hung up.

“It is the unfortunate reality of my job that I overhear other people’s business, and usually I do not dare interfere, but I just wish to tell you that Nana is a smart girl and she will get through this.”

“Thank you, “ I said, and suddenly I felt bad for all the times I’d ever doubted Mohammed’s schemes and plans for the neighborhood. I remembered Daniel. “You know, I might have found a way for you to get trees.”

“Trees for the mosque?” he asked excitedly.

“Yes, my nephew of sorts gives *bogolon* painting lessons to a European woman who works for some kind of tree-planting NGO. I asked if he could bring it up with her.”

“Oh thank you Awa. That means so much to me!” He was clutching his hands together, smiling like a child.

“Well I don’t even know if he’s asked her, so, don’t get too excited.” This time I wasn’t trying to undermine his plans, rather, encourage him fairly.

“Of course, of course,” he said.

“I’ll bring you the money later,” I told him and walked back outside.

I wanted to walk somewhere far away. I wanted to run even. I thought about going down to the river to be alone while I waited but decided against it. Instead I went home, brought the table back outside and carefully set up the mangoes. I focused on their colors, the way

one mango could be orange and green and yellow and even white. I thought about where each of them had gotten their black bruises. I pictured their pits. I tried to imagine which ones came from the same tree, like mango family. At one point a boy of about seven came by and he chose one I had decided was most definitely a part of a larger group. It was silly and strange but I told him another one was better, one that I had decided wanted to get out of the pile, see more of the world. One that didn't have mango family.

I heard Fatim's old Mercedes before I saw it. She pulled up right into our yard. That thing sounded like a beast. When she turned it off it let out a huge sigh and didn't stop grumbling for another few minutes.

"How fast was *that*?" she asked, hauling herself out of the car, laughing.

"Probably too fast," I told her.

"I know! But when you're coasting downhill and there isn't much traffic... I don't get behind the wheel much these days. I love it when I do." I remembered back to when Fatim was first learning how to drive. She'd begged me to come along for her first lesson from Francois. All the bickering was much too intimate. I felt like a small child trapped in the back. Apparently she improved greatly once she started practicing with Francois' older sister instead.

"Do you want some water?" I asked, getting up. On my way to the well she caught me in a hug. I held her

for a moment until I felt my eyes tingle with tears and so I pulled away.

“No thank you. Actually, what I’d love is one of those mangos.”

“Pick out whichever one you want.” I wondered which she would choose as I pulled up a rubber bucket of water and poured it into one of our kettles.

She was examining them all very carefully, turning them over in her tiny hands. Though she was a large woman as far as most of her characteristics were concerned, her hands and feet were remarkably small. Sometimes she looked like she might teeter over on them.

We sat down in the two low chairs by the table with Fatim’s chosen mango. It had been a grandmother to many of the others. A good choice for her. I poured the kettle over her hands as they rubbed the mango clean of whatever invisible harm it may contain. She bit into it and spat the first bite of skin out onto the road.

“So why didn’t she take it?”

“I think she was just really overwhelmed in general. Maybe she hadn’t been doing that well in all her subjects, and on top of it, it turns out her teacher is really mean. I’d heard her complain a little bit before but not much really. You know how quiet she usually is.”

“And then there’s Iba and his inspirational encouragement,” she added.

“Right. I’m sure that didn’t help. But I didn’t help either you know? I didn’t jump in and tell her Iba was

wrong. Maybe she didn't realize I was on her side until it was too late." I looked to the sky. There was only one small, wispy cloud hanging just above the buildings.

"But it's not too late."

"Well it *is* too late for things to go according to any kind of plan we had before."

"So we make a new plan!" Juice was dripping down her chin. She sat with face extended past her lap so it would fall on the ground.

"You look like a messy little boy," I said and felt my cheeks pulling into a smile.

"Sometimes that's what I think I am deep inside. I know I love eating spaghetti with my hands just a little too much." I had to laugh trying to picture Fatim as a small boy.

"Ok," she said. She took a few more bites until the mango was just a pit separated from its skins on the ground. She threw it to the street. "Maybe we can start with some bad news so that this all looks better here?" She rinsed her hands with the kettle again. "Remember Sajo?"

"Of course." She'd been the one in green. The one waiting on her divorce.

"On my way down here someone called to tell me that her oldest son, Ousman, had everything but the life beaten out of him last night."

"That's terrible!" I suddenly didn't think starting with bad news was going to make me feel any better. Now I just felt sorry for everyone.

“He was picked up by the cops late last night for not having an I.D. on him. I don’t know *why* he didn’t have one—some people are actually starting to say that he did but the cops took it and then claimed he never showed it to them or something. Either way—he wound up at the station with a few other people that had been picked up too and didn’t have the money to pay the ‘fine’ and there was a group of soldiers there as well. I guess they were making rounds too or knew some of the cops. No one really knows the details yet. So Ousman gets into this kind of verbal argument with one of the cops about everything and one of the soldiers says something insulting from the sideline and of course Ousman can’t bite his tongue and I guess it escalated pretty fast because now’s he’s in the hospital with broken ribs and a face swollen up like football.”

“That’s so unfair.”

“I know.”

“You can’t talk back to cops or soldiers.”

Tempers were dangerous.

“Yeah, but they can’t beat up civilians either.”

Fatim wiped her hands on her skirt. “And now it’s going to go to court and it’s going to be ‘the law’ versus ‘reckless kid out partying with no I.D.’. He’s not going to stand a chance.”

“But why’s it going to court? Is he pressing charges?”

“No, it’s the cops I guess, or the soldiers, I’m not sure. Some official came to the hospital and notified him of a court date, that’s all we know right now.”

“Oh Fatim this is all terrible,” I said and untied my head-scarf. “And all the while she’s about to get divorced? This doesn’t make me feel better at all. That poor boy. And Sadjo! She’s so nice.”

“I know. I’m sorry. It was unfair to tell you like that. I didn’t really think it would make you feel better, I just had to tell someone. It’s not the kind of thing you want to keep to yourself.”

“I understand,” I said. “So what now? What does everyone do?”

“Wait. I’m going to try and see Sadjo tonight. I don’t want to overwhelm her—she’s probably got a million people banging down her door.”

“Yes but you should go anyway. She’ll need her friends.”

“We just have to wait and find out what kind of ridiculous charges are being pressed and then begin the never-ending battle against the bureaucracy beast.” I imagined Fatim holding a sword, marching up the steps of the courthouse to battle a beast as she said. Then I imagined myself bearing the same kind of sword outside the gates of the Ministry of Education.

“Ok, well, we don’t have to wait to decide what’s going to happen with Nana.” She ran her hands over her face as if to refresh herself. I tied my head-scarf back on tightly.

“You may not like the idea of this at first, but let’s just think about it for a moment before we decide either way.”

“Ok.”

“What if Nana comes up to Kati and goes to school with Umu?”

“To Kati?” I asked. My baby moving out. My bones ached even starting to think about it.

“Umu loves her school, I’m sure she told you. It’s *really* good. And of course all the classes are what—a third of the size they are in public school?”

“Send Nana to *private* school?”

“Yeah why not? Everyone knows that private schools are better than public schools. I bet everyone we know would send their kids to private school if they had the money.” It was probably true. I’d heard people gripe about it before. What was worst was when the kids got pulled out when the family just couldn’t afford it anymore for reasons they couldn’t control. Like what happened with the Djabatīs after their father died. The only reason I didn’t wish for it was that I never considered it as even a remote possibility. Like snow in Mali or talking goats. It just wasn’t going to happen.

But now it could. Maybe. “That would be too much Fatim.”

“No it wouldn’t.”

“I mean, helping make ends meet for some public school fees is very different from private school tuition.”

“Don’t worry about the money. Let’s worry about Nana.”

I thought of her packing to leave. “That might be a lot to put on Nana all at once.”

“I know—moving, making new friends, going to a new kind of school. But think about that all in more

detail—the move isn't that far, and it's to be with family. And new friends? Well she's already got one built-in with Umu and *she* knows the whole damn school so that's a shoe-in, and a new kind of school? It's not like she's going to miss the *old* kind." I was letting it settle in me.

"I'm telling you—this school is great. It's one of the few schools around here doing that maternal language stuff I was telling to you about. She'll have maybe a third of her time in Bamanankan, and all other kinds of progressive thing. *Wa lai*, there's art and dance classes!" Oh if only it was just right around the corner.

"You're not saying anything, so I'll tell you another reason this is a good idea: if she does 6th grade there, then getting into 7th there will be that much easier which is a good thing because it gets really competitive at that cut-off point."

These were all sensible reasons, but I could not feel sensibly. Nana was my first baby and it would take a lot to let her go, even if it was just to Kati.

"Yeah," was the best I could offer.

"You're probably thinking about how this is the baby bird leaving the nest. In some ways it is, but don't forget, she can fly back to you. Maybe she'll go to that school for three years and then come back down to Bamako for *lycée*. All the better ones are down here anyway." That was true.

"I wonder what Amadou will think," I said at last. "And Iba—hah."

“Well most importantly we’re going to have to find out what Nana thinks. If she doesn’t like this idea we can talk with her about what she wants to do and figure something else out.”

“Yeah,” I said. Fatim stood up. “Now?”

“Yes now, why not?”

“What if she says yes and then Amadou comes home and says no?” Fatim raised an eyebrow at me.

“Has Amadou ever said no to something that you or Nana truly wanted?” I tried to think back to a time when we faced a big decision like this, or when we came down on different sides of a situation but my mind was more slippery than soap in water and I couldn’t catch any specific memories. I stood up.

We walked over to the door. Fatim pulled back the curtain for me and I went in first.

“She’s not here,” Oh what now?

“Check in the other room,” said Fatim.

I moved towards the other door. Iba’s room. I hoped she hadn’t found the coffin without being warned.

Pulling back the curtain that served as a door I surveyed the room. My eyes were still adjusting to the darkness. There was the wardrobe, and the bed, and on it was Iba on his side, napping. But no coffin. I turned to leave the room then let out a small cry of surprise. There it was, leaning up against the wall closest to the door. I hadn’t seen it in my peripheral vision but I nearly knocked into it trying get out.

“Mom?”

“Nana?” A figure rose from behind Iba. “What are you doing in here?” I whispered.

“Auntie Fatim?”

“Hi Nana.”

“What are you doing in here?” I asked again. Had she not just been furious with him?

“I was talking to Grandpa. And napping.” I could just make out her face now. “I know, you probably think I’m a traitor.”

“What?”

“But we worked it out. *Kind of* at least. I mean, he promised he’d think about it, right Grandpa?” She put a hand on him and rocked him gently to wake him.

What had she proposed? What had he agreed to think about? I tried to imagine how their conversation even began—who approached who. Maybe Iba had felt sorry and invited her in after listening to her cry. Or maybe she’d decided to face this thing herself first.

“Grandpa Iba,” she called again, singing his name, shaking him with a bit more strength this time.

“Can’t say I’m surprised *he’s* turned out hard of hearing,” said Fatim and we each laughed.

“Grandpa come on. Auntie Fatim is here.” She was really rattling him now. I took a step closer and then suddenly felt like the floor was trying to pull me under.

“Iba—” I said loudly.

“Oh my God,” said Nana and pulled her hands back to her chest quickly.

“No,” said Fatim.

I dug into the dirt with my hands. My nails were black and despite the intense heat, the soil this far down felt cool.

"I think that's deep enough," said Fatim.

"Just a little more," I told her. "You heard Mohammed. It's got to be as deep as your elbow.

"The whole tree's going to be underground for God's sake!" said Fatim. I looked up. Everyone around was still digging their holes too except for Amadou and Moussa who were already moving their tiny tree into its hole.

Mohammed's plan had been realized, mostly. David had somehow convinced the NGO woman to donate twenty trees and here we all were having spent most of the morning on our hands and knees, digging out places for the memories of our loved ones to rest. We'd forgone the Quranic talks and replaced them with a brief meeting during which we all said something about the person we were dedicating the tree to. There were of course many tears, but a surprising amount of laughter as well. Everyone had chosen someone we all knew.

Fatim and I were planting this tree for our mother. Umu and Nana were planting theirs for our father, their grandfather, who sadly they had hardly known. These trees were of course together. Mohammed had told us we'd made our holes too close to each other, but Fatim told him that's the way our mother and father always were. Mohammed nearly

cried at the sweetness of it but once he turned around Fatim confessed she'd only said it so we wouldn't have to dig another wretched hole. Nana laughed the hardest of us all.

"Look—Amadou's planting his already, come on," said Fatim.

"Ok, ok," I said standing up. I wiped the dirt from my hands on my *panyé*. I looked at our girls next to us on their hands and knees. Umu's enthusiasm for getting dirty had surprised us all; perhaps she hadn't even noticed how filthy she was though, as she seemed to be enraptured in her own monologue about what 6th grade was like at her school, and who all of the kids in Nana's class would be.

"We'll both grab the base," said Fatim crouching down near our tree. I put my hands around the dirt-clumped roots and felt my sister's from the other side.

"This is for you Mom," said Fatim.

"May it grow to be as beautiful as you were."

We moved the tree into the ground.

"I'm still mad no one's planting one for me." We turned around.

"It's very simple: you're not dead yet Iba," said Fatim. "Had you croaked like we thought you did that time, we would have another hole to dig."

"But who of this group would have not gotten a tree then?" he asked.

"This is not a competition to see who is most loved ok?" said Fatim laughing. "Shouldn't you be

helping your sons as they plant a tree for your *wife*?" I asked.

"Oh they're not letting me help," he said. "I'm too slow."

"You can help us Grandpa," said Nana. "Wasn't he your best friend?" Iba paused for a second.

"Yes," he said. "And so I'll never understand why he gave me the most difficult daughter-in-law." He pretended to scowl in my direction.

As we filled our hole with the dirt we had extracted, the girls talked with Iba about his friend.

"He was the only man in town who could catch a bull when it got loose. He could grab one by its two horns, just like that," he said, demonstrating on a phantom animal.

"And he wasn't scared?"

"No way."

"I hear you have a coffin in your room."

"*Umu*," warned Fatim.

"It's true," said Iba.

"Let's not keep bringing this back to your death." Fatim was standing over Iba now. "We're trying to remember other people today."

"Ok, ok," he laughed. I was still uncomfortable with it all for the most part, but our house seemed to have reached a new kind of balance after that day and so, I let it be. And besides, although he was still talking about dying an awful lot, he at least had a humor about it now.

Just then we felt the first drops. My senses heightened.

“It’s raining!” cried Nana and stood up with her palms open. We all looked to the sky. Suddenly I realized there were no clouds above us.

“Oh I’m sorry—” said Mohammed. We turned around. He was standing behind us with a hose. “I was trying to see if this could reach all the way across the yard.”

“Oh you’re terrible!” said Fatim.

“I’m so sorry!” he said with a hand over his mouth.

“Well, we will just have to keep waiting then,” she declared. We’d wait for the rain, for Amadou to get paid, for the new school year to come, for Nana to leave and come back, for Soumaila and Djeneba to grow up, for Iba’s last days, for the time when all of us would stop wanting more and know that this was enough.