

# FINDING THE SOURCE

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ONE MAN'S QUEST FOR HEALING IN WEST  
AFRICA

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## A DEPARTURE

THE PAIN IS SEARING. It radiates from the center of my spine, up my neck and down to my hips, flaring outward like the thorns of a brittle acacia branch along its route. This fiery serpent in my body consumes the whole of my being: I am the pain, and the pain is me. It is my curse to bear.

I shift my weight in the rickety wooden chair and brace myself for the oncoming surge, which hits me like a jolt of electricity. I grip the seat, my face contorting in agony. After a few moments, my invisible assailant lightens its grip, but the fear lingers. There will be more.

*At least no one can see me here.* Yes, that would be worse. To suffer like this publicly would be even more unbearable.

For now, I can be alone. In my hiding place behind the small round hut, chickens peck idly at the ground. The occasional lizard scurries past me. A little further, a spindly fence made of sticks separates me from the main compound. On the other side, women are pounding millet, unaware of my presence. A few children pass by the fence, a little too closely, pulling a reluctant goat by a rope. I stay perfectly still. I don't want to jeopardize this moment of solitude. These moments are scarce here.

Rhythmic blows of the mortar and pestle resound from nearby. A

woman breaks into song, softly at first, and then she is joined by another:

*Eh Daouda lè! Dunin timba, tinya maka, Daouda!*

The short song is followed by laughter. I recognize my name in their song, though I'm frustrated I can't understand all the words. Are they mocking me? The intricacies of the language still elude me, even after all these years.

I turn my thoughts inward. The sun, though not yet at its apex, is already scorching and blindingly bright. The dry season is at its peak, that dust-choked time of year when rain seems like an impossible dream. The leaves of the giant kapok and baobab trees are brown, as desperate for relief as I am. Only the river brings respite now, and it is shrinking daily. The dry season has reduced even the mighty Djoliba River to a feeble current.

The rains will return, perhaps in a month, they say. *A month!* Clouds are building on the horizon, but hold only a vague promise of rain. I wonder if I'll still be here when the first drops fall from the sky. I imagine thirsty leaves turning upward, quavering with anticipation to catch the first plump droplets. When they overflow and roll off, they'll bead up on an earth still too dry to receive them. Small pools will form, and the cracked soil will yield, softening, allowing the water to penetrate. The thought of it quenching the land is soothing, in the way that I want to soothe the fire in my spine. Well, a month might as well be an eternity. How much more of this can I take? That rain might never fall for me.

I close my eyes and let the sensation of the sun's heat take me over, trying to focus on anything besides my burning spine. The memory of the old shaman arises, her weathered face illuminated by firelight a world away from here. I recall her words that night: *If you do not do this, the pain they will inflict on you will only grow worse.*

I shudder at the thought. I'm doing everything I can to appease them.

Sweat rolls down my neck and onto my bare chest. My shirt, still stained with blood, lies crumpled at my feet. I remember the pool of blood spreading on the ground, shockingly red in the midday sun. The smooth feel of the wooden shaft of the blade in my hand. The prayers

and chants uttered in languages unintelligible to me. Under the hot African sun, the deed had been done.

*You are in the fold now, on the inside*, the old woman had said, *and as such, you are beholden to the customs of the people.*

A bolt of lightning crackles through my spine. My entire body convulses in response. *Christ, it's bad!* I wince and ride it out with gritted teeth, clutching the chair. *It's not supposed to be like this.* I'm following their instructions. Why are they still torturing me like this?

From within me, the familiar voice of doubt and self-criticism chimes up. *Idiot. You deserve to die in Africa.* What the hell am I doing here? I've staked so much on this journey. Was the life I left behind *that* bad? Sure, I had thoughts of ending it all before; at times, it seemed the only way to be free of this curse. But wasn't there still so much good in my life, too?

I remember one late summer night at home, sprawled out on the lawn behind our house in the mountains. The pain was coursing through my body as I gazed at the stars overhead. *Oh, the stars!* Too infinite to grasp, too numerous to comprehend. I had the almost casual thought that I could slip away into that inky blackness and leave this torment behind. People would understand, I was certain. I was only a burden to them anyway, unlovable, surely, in my wretched state of never-ending anguish. I wouldn't be missed for long. They'd go about their lives like they had before.

The ease with which these thoughts arose that night jolted me: *No, no, NO! How could you?!* I remembered a time before the curse began. I had dreams then, and an insatiable vigor for life. What became of that young man? If I ended it all, those dreams would never come to fruition. The vision I once had for my art and music, left to wither on the vine. But what if there truly *was* a way to end this nightmare? How could I not at least try?

My awareness drifts back to the path set before me by an old shaman and a council of elders. I must complete all the tasks to have any hope of redemption. If I fail, the consequences are unthinkable.

I let out a deep breath and prepare myself for what is next. I must still reckon with the blacksmith's wife—if I can find her, that is, if even she is still alive. I pray she is, though the thought of facing her terrifies

me. The old blacksmith himself died some years before. I had taken a photograph of him dancing in the *numuw* festival, the dance of the blacksmiths. In the old days, the blacksmiths were reputed to be sorcerers, and Sako Gbè was no exception. Sako “the Pure,” they called him. He was from the old tradition, a leader of the secret societies. He *knew* things—mysterious things, perhaps even dark things. Back home in my art studio, I had captured his likeness in paint. I remember the way his image came to life on my easel, how his painted eyes had looked back at me. What secrets did those eyes keep? Shortly after, old Sako Gbè left this world to rejoin the world of his ancestors, those spirits who oversee the world of the living. The ancestors are a bridge between the realms of death and life. It is *them* I must ultimately contend with.

*The ancestors are not to be fooled with*, the shaman had said. *It would have been much better for you if this man was still alive.*

Somewhere on the outskirts of the village, I am told, Sako’s wife is still alive. She is my last remaining hope, and now I *have* to find her. What will the encounter with the old sorceress be like? I never knew her, but my mind conjures an image of a formidable African woman, sitting on the dirt floor of a small hut. Her face deep with lines, like a road map of her years carved into her ebony skin. Around her, there would be jars of herbs and potions, collections of amulets and horns, beaks and feathers, bones and strange powders. All part of her magic, her *gris-gris*. I picture her dark eyes piercing my soul, scrutinizing my worthiness. I would be a strange apparition to her eyes, with my pale skin reddening beneath a hostile sun, a weathered fedora shading a brow furrowed by worry. What would she think of this man who had left his culture and ventured too close to their secrets? I had crossed a line, and now I was in trouble. Would she help this outsider? Would she have the power to release me from this curse?

*If only there was some way out of it*, I think, though I know such thoughts are futile now. But still, for a moment, I long for my old life, the *normal* one with a house and a yard and a proper bed to sleep in. I think wistfully about the forest path that leads to my beloved mountains. My family, who pleaded with me not to come here. Friends who are carrying on without me, and the one I couldn’t save.

And of course, there is Kerri. The love I took for granted. A lump

rises in my throat, and I strain to hold back unwanted tears. An empty house is all that remains of the home that once held so many dreams.

The images of that old life recede, like a curtain closing on a play in which I once had a part. The characters onstage hadn't understood, perhaps couldn't. They wanted an ordinary life for me, to save me from my reckless adventures. But life had led me down the path of the extraordinary, and I couldn't turn my back on it. Not then, and not now. I will have to take this journey to whatever end. Perhaps some unknowable magic will lift this curse and reveal the cure. Or maybe Africa will finally claim me—and then, too, I will be free from this pain.

*Time is running out.*

One way or another, I sense that I will not see the return of the rains in Africa.

Almost unconsciously, I reach into my pocket for the small plastic container. I listen for the familiar rattle inside. *Good, I think, there are still some left.* I've long since depleted my rations of the dried, powdered leaves I used to numb the agony in my spine. While it lasted, the soothing tea made from that green powder had helped keep the dragon at bay. Now, only the pills remain. I dump two of them into my dirty palm, and stare at the shapes. Their perfect round whiteness is out of place here, so unnatural. I hate the pills, and myself for taking them.

*I can't go on this way forever. I have to stop...*

My attacker lashes at me, catching me off guard. My torso contorts and a moan escapes me unbidden.

*Oh, fuck it.* The pain decides it. I wash the pills down with some tepid water and wait for the chemical endorphins that will soon flood my body, allowing me to ignore my throbbing joints for a time. Just as importantly, they'll numb the sorrow residing in my heart, the sorrow that collected over the years like a dark pool in a cave, one little drop at a time.

I sit waiting for some blessed relief as the sun climbs. The heat rises off the baked earth in waves. At least the forest path between villages will offer some shade.

A sound puts me on alert: the shuffling of feet from behind me. From inside the hut, a familiar voice calls out, searching.

"Daouda?" It's Lanciné. "*T'es là?*" He's looking for me.

I pull myself together. “*Oui, Lanciné, j’arrive,*” I respond, my voice cracking. “I’m coming.” I try to sound confident, but I wish I had just a few more moments to myself. I close my eyes, my fears and doubts buzzing around me like a swarm of angry bees.

“*Daouda, il faut y aller. It is time to go. Maintenant.*” There is urgency in his voice.

I can’t linger any longer. With a deep breath, I stand shakily, turn the corner, and approach the hut. I brush aside the curtain that hangs from the narrow door frame, and enter.

Inside, the temperature is cooler by several degrees, and dim enough that I have to pause to let my eyes adjust. The interior is sparse and dusty. On my left is the small table that holds the few items we use at mealtime: two spoons, two mugs, the thermos for hot water, a canister of instant coffee. The plastic bowl, almost always filled with rice, is now covered with a towel to keep the flies off. Two steps further is the wooden frame with the clumpy straw mattress reserved for me. After months of agonizing tossing and turning, however, I’ve taken to sleeping on the dirt floor, trying hard not to wake anyone with my groans. A thin cot flanks the opposite wall. Two plastic chairs face each other in the center of the room, a contrast to the ancient-looking wooden flutes that lie beside them, each decorated with strips of leather and cowry shells. Against the far wall is the small, black portfolio case that carries my drawings. This is home, for now.

Lanciné stands in the opposite doorway, his tall frame silhouetted against the thin curtain that barely filters the sunlight. In the afternoons, when a breeze blows, we pull the curtains aside at either end of the hut, allowing for a pleasant cross-draft to ease the stifling heat. Today, there is no breeze.

Lanciné is silent, unmoving. The woven straw fedora he’s taken to wearing recently is cocked to one side, and his calm temperament makes me all the more aware of the wild tempest that rages inside me. His stature too, strong and almost imposing, is a contrast to my frailty. I carry the weight of my curse on my back, and that burden pushes my posture ever downward into a hunch I can no longer hide.

My eyes adjust to the light, and I catch Lanciné’s gaze. Like always, he’s studying me, ever trying to make sense of me and the

strange world I come from. Over the years, we've formed an unlikely relationship that is something like brotherhood: he the big brother and I the little brother. The master of the *tambin*, the three-holed Malinké flute, and his devoted apprentice from a world away. My quest of healing now forces us to reckon with our differences, our beliefs, our identities. I am challenging to him, with all of my questions, all of my *whys*. The trip has stretched our friendship to its breaking point—but still, something else unites us. He committed to helping me and has been unwavering thus far. Perhaps he seeks his redemption, either here on this Earth or in the *'ākhirah*, the afterlife. Whatever his reasons, I am grateful. Without him, I would not have survived in this strange, often hostile landscape—and we both know it.

I hesitate before collecting my gear.

“And what about Famoudou?” I ask. “Has there been any word?” I've been awaiting the old master's arrival in the village for two months now. The waiting has been torturous. My respect for the old man borders on reverence, and it's not just because he bears the title of *djem-befola*, one who makes the djembé speak. He too had been my teacher for more than a decade, but time has altered that relationship, deepened it. Bonds of family are unexpected motivators now, and I need him here.

I picture the soft creases in Famoudou's weathered face, the kindness in his bright, playful eyes when we last saw each other.

*I shall see you again before the rains come*, he had said to me then. *You will wait for me in the village.*

He gave instructions, and I followed them diligently. I am not to undertake the final steps without him. But the months that have passed without word have made me nervous: the trip here is long, filled with many dangers, and he would be traveling alone. I worry for his safety. And if the old man doesn't make it, all will be for naught.

Lanciné pauses before responding. “I have no news about Famoudou. But we must go on. You remember we agreed—”

I hold up my hand and cut him off, suddenly annoyed.

“I know what we agreed, Lanciné.” I don't like it, but I can ask no more of him. Without Famoudou here, my tasks are more daunting. I need his encouragement, his guidance. I want assurance I am doing the

right thing. But I know that Lanciné is right: time has run out. We must go on without him.

Lanciné just nods, assessing me. Both the pain and the narcotic medication cause my mood to shift unexpectedly like a gust of wind kicking up the harsh sands of the harmattan.

“Do you have the book?” he asks.

“It’s in my backpack.”

My doubts surface again. Can I get out of what I have to do next? The question is absurd, though my mind still searches for an answer.

I muster up my resolve. *Courage*. That simple word. In Malinké, they say, *Kewó jusôo nánta benná le*: One’s heart must be courageous. It’s like a mantra to the people here. Life is hard. The strong keep going, one day into the next.

*When this is all over...I’ll stop taking the pills. I promise. But not now.*

“An nye wa,” Lanciné says, switching now to Malinké. *Let’s go.*

I brace myself against the pain, and sling my pack onto my back with a grimace. I feel the weight of the book inside. Before turning to go, I pick up the small black portfolio case. I have to guard it now. The drawings are all I have left.

With a deep breath, I walk out of the hut and into the bright sunlight. There is no turning back now.

## THE CASTLES OF YOUTH

SOME MEMORIES ARE VAGUE NOW. I try to recall the chain of events that led me here, to a village in West Africa where I limp along a dirt path with a man named Lanciné. Certain details bring the memories into focus: in my backpack, I carry a book infused with ancient magic. The portfolio case in my hand contains artwork of immeasurable value to me. But most of all, it is the pain that reminds me why I'm here. Though the invisible enemy is now a constant, I remember a time when it wasn't there.

The memories drift closer, like a familiar melody playing somewhere in the distance. I strain to hear the song, and try to recall that person who was me, who must have been me, though he might as well have been someone else. But I have proof. In a box somewhere, old Polaroids and Kodak prints show a younger man who was still healthy, hiking in the mountains of Virginia or Vermont, or perched on a rocky cliff somewhere in New Mexico or California. The photos reveal the wildness within him. He was always searching for the next adventure. Pushing the limits. Tempting fate. If I could step into those photographs and warn that kid of all that was to come, of the pain and heartache his adventures would cause, would he still go on? Probably. Because he was

bold. Unafraid. He would have said that he could take whatever came. *Bring it*, he would have growled with a devilish grin, a glint in his eye.



*This is an excerpt. Full book available at:*

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