AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: *May We All Wake Up One By One*

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Keith Scribner

*May We All Wake Up One By One* is the beginning of a novel set in the West African country of Guinea. The story follows Sean Wake, a twenty-something American who finds himself working for the Feed the World Program as the country falls apart around him. While his co-workers try to push him out of his job, and he battles with the loneliness of cultural dislocation, Sean meets various characters who influence his decision making for better and worse.

The novel examines the issue of race in the frame work of cross-cultural interactions, while observing how traditional values conflict with newly colonizing western commercialization and technology. The narrator attempts to make sense of Guinea’s seemingly self-destructive nature and searches for a responsible party. But his snap judgments only lead him further from the truth. The novel looks closely at the tribulations of living in cultural isolation and the frustrations of unmet expectations, as well as the nature and role of development work in developing countries.
May We All Wake Up One By One

by

Jason Ludden

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any read upon request.

________________________________________
Jason Ludden, Author
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May We All Wake Up One By One
All the guns—police, military, thieves, gendarme, vigilantes, and the embassy task force—had to stay outside. All the beggars, trash, dirt, and the rip tide current of sewage were held back. Only good things were let in—the sound of the ocean on the rocks below, the smell of hibiscus and mango blossoms, the drumming of a wedding ceremony. It was artificial, a courtyard constructed between a high-rise hotel of balconies behind us, a wall to the ocean in front, and chain-link and razor-wire hidden by high groomed bushes on the sides.

The wetness of the evening made me uncomfortable. But Fran didn’t notice. The sun set on the Atlantic. We sat under the white lights at land’s end, tables clustered around the pool. The waves broke against the retaining wall and a new moon rose in the clear sky. The peninsula of the city stretched into the ocean, the blackness, into the distance, no electricity except for the scattered compounds with generators.

Fran’s flight left in four hours, and she said that she planned to return after her sister’s wedding. She was good at pretending. She fooled me. She fooled herself.

The wine came with four glasses. “We should have come here sooner,” Fran said.

“Yeah, it feels like we’ve left Africa,” I said. “Have you guys ever been here?” I gestured towards Deuxième and his wife, Ashmeou. They had come to Conakry, the capital, with us. Not to see Fran off, but to see me in. I was becoming Deuxième’s
boss. But they knew Fran, she had worked with Ashmeou in Labé. They were friends and carried the conversation at the table.

“No,” Deuxième said. “We normally eat with our family when we come down.”

“But I thought you were both from the Fouta,” Fran asked—both from the north?

“Yes,” answered Ashmeou. “But we have family everywhere. And if they find out we were in town and didn’t stop by, they’ll be offended. We don’t come to Conakry often, it’s stressful.”

“I wished we’d come to Conakry more,” Fran said. “When I come back we’ll have to explore this place.”

She was talking at me now. I nodded. “When you come back I want to get to Freetown and Monrovia.”

“But are those places safe?” Ashmeou asked.

“Yeah. Well, we can fly down with my new job and stay with the staff.” I turned to Fran and moved to kiss her on her cheek. She had her hair down, despite the heat, and a soft, white dress on—thick enough to hide her skin, thin enough that my imagination saw through it. Her bags were already packed in our hotel room—she planned to change after we ate, before we went to the airport.

“Why don’t we do that?” Ashmeou asked Deuxième.

It pulled him into the conversation. “We could.”

“Why haven’t we?”

“I’ve been busy. There’s a lot of work to get done.”
“There’s always work to be done—but how often can we see the ocean in Freetown. I hear it’s more beautiful than St Louis in Senegal.” Ashmeou turned towards Deuxième.

“We’ll see,” he said.

“I’ll let you know when we go,” Fran said. “You can come along with us if Deuxième is too busy.”

“We could all go,” Ashmeou said. But her enthusiasm stopped at our reality. The only way Deuxième and I could both leave Labé was under office orders, my boss’s orders.

I poured the white-wine for myself and Fran, then offered to Ashmeou and Deuxième. Ashmeou said “Just a little,” which brought a look from Deuxième, who declined the wine.

“To a happy return,” I said and raised my glass. We three wine drinkers brought our glasses and Deuxième brought up his glass of water. He sipped, then set the glass down and leaned away from the table again. The wine was not good.

“Do you know your sister’s fiancé?” Ashmeou asked. She wore an imported top and slacks and arching, cork heels. Her skin was smooth and her ears pierced with large gold rings. She had a lack of restraint in conversation that most women in Guinea had; she leaned forward onto the table, she spoke with her hands. She wore a dirty-gold wedding ring on her left hand.

“Kind of. I met him, once, years ago. They’ve been friends for a long time.”

“Do you think they’re a good match?” Ashmeou continued.
I looked at Deuxième. He leaned back in his chair, the odd man out. He didn’t belong. I wished he’d leave.

“I think so. She seems to love him very much.”

“It’s so exciting.” Ashmeou took another sip of wine. She obviously drank rarely. “I can’t imagine.” She smiled.

We all leaned back and waited for the waitress to take our orders. It would be my first good meal in months. Fran would have better food in twenty-four hours when she landed in New York. As for Deuxième and Ashmeou, I wasn’t thinking about them. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure why they were there. When, on the ride down, Ashmeou had asked about our plans Fran had haphazardly invited them along. It was a hollow invitation—formal and symbolic. But they’d accepted. And now Deuxième looked as if he did not want to be there—at the premier hotel in his country, the place where dignitaries and big-money men stayed. A place with a real bar and real drinks where the waiters and waitresses wore black pants, white shirts, black ties, and white cotton aprons. Waiters took your order and waitresses asked if the food was to your liking. A place you were waited on, like a guest not an intruder.

So there we were. Me no longer feeling the intruder because I had landed a job, Fran leaving for a month to help with her sister’s wedding, Deuxième escorting his new boss, and Ashmeou enjoying a life she rarely saw, enjoyed, or realized she wanted.

“Where’s your family?” I asked Deuxième.

“My brother lives in Humdilaya.”

“Where’s that?”
Ashmeou answered. “It was the big, big round-about back when you could first see the ocean, as we came into town there.”

“A nice area?” I asked.

“He has a nice house,” Deuxième said.

“He doesn’t like Conakry very much. Too dirty and too many hustlers,”

Ashmeou smiled and sipped some more wine. I looked at my glass wet with sweat, the wine cloudy.

“I just don’t understand what these people do,” Deuxième said. He became more animated and leaned over the table, setting down his silverware. He had slender wrists and a loose watch. “Up country, there’s so much work to be done, and here I see people just sitting. And I can’t understand why?”

I took a bite. Deuxième looked at me for an earnest answer. Instead, I tried to imagine how we were going to work together. Fran left the conversation and focused on her food.

“Electricity?” I said, half joking. But only half.

Ashmeou laughed. A quick spurt of laughter, quickly countered by her napkin. She was unlike any other woman I had met in Africa in my previous three months. Ashmeou wasn’t after anything, it seemed to me, and could laugh. The women I’d met who laughed, laughed viciously, condemning, insulting, to undercut and hurt. Or they laughed at the truly absurd, the misunderstandings of life.

Deuxième was not fazed. “But there’ll never be electricity if the people don’t help build it.” He wasn’t interested in people, only ideas. And his ideas were never that interesting.
I was done with this path. My goal was to enjoy my last evening with Fran, to eat and drink, and watch the waves break and the sunset. Instead I was discussing rural development issues and the only thing bringing me joy was the woman across the table from me, Deuxième’s wife, with her impulsive conversation. I watched Ashmeou. She seemed willing to talk, something every other Guinean I had met was not. She was funny. She was interesting.

Fran touched my leg under the table. I had faded into my own thoughts. Her fingertips pressed through my pant leg. She was done eating and her wine glass was almost empty. Night had taken over the hotel pavilion and pool area.

“Jesus,” Fran looked at her watch. “I should really get going.”

“So soon?” Ashmeou said.

“They want you to be at the airport so early anymore. It’s ridiculous,” Fran said.

Deuxième nodded, as if he had flown internationally in the last ten years. He wanted to leave; his demeanor said so. I motioned to the waitress and told her to put the bill on my room.

“Why don’t you come with us?” Fran asked Ashmeou.

I looked at Fran. I felt betrayed by her, first for accidentally giving away our last meal together, and now for purposefully offering up my chance to say good-bye in private. I wanted a moment with her alone and she wanted a buffer. I wasn’t sure if it was against me, or against the emotions of leaving. It made me angry.

Ashmeou looked at Deuxième. “No, you too should have time alone.”
“We’ve had three months alone. Come on, you can see the airport,” Fran said.

“You can both come.” She motioned to Deuxième as well.

I had told Fran, before we had come down for dinner, that I wanted time alone with her. These were the last moments I would spend with her for a month and I didn’t want to share her with anyone else. And I started to wonder if all this wasn’t planned somehow. If Fran wanted a wall between us – the wall being Ashmeou. We hadn’t even had sex. First she was hungry, so we came down to eat. Now she needed to get to the airport. And there would be Ashmeou. She was closing off to me even before she left.

“Oh, Ashmeou said. She looked at her husband, “Do you want to come?”

“No, I’m tired,” he said.

I wondered if he knew what was going on. I wondered if Ashmeou knew.

“I’ll be right back down,” Fran said.

“I’ll help.”

“No, I can manage.”

I ignored her and followed her into the hotel.

In the elevator we both leaned against the back wall. It might have been the only elevator in the country. Neither of us spoke. I wanted to be mad at her, to tell her it was unfair that she was leaving, or at least leaving this way. I felt brushed off. I felt already forgotten.

In the hotel room I reached for Fran. She was already two steps ahead of me after opening the door. I slid my hand around her waist and her dress gave no
resistance. I curled her into me by the small of her back. She put her arms around my
shoulders, but kept her body stiff—not pulling away, but not giving in either.

“I want some time with you,” I told her.

“I know. This isn’t the way I wanted to say good-bye.” She paused. “But my
flight leaves soon.”

“Why’d you invite them to the airport.”

“Sean, why do you think? She’s my best friend. I wanted to see her there. And
you.”

She rubbed the back of my head and then let her arms slide down along my
side before patting me. “Come on, let’s get going.”

I held her.

“Sean, it’s only a month.”

“I know.”

“You’ll be so busy with work you won’t want me around anyway.” She turned
from me.

I grabbed her bags and followed her to the lobby. Ashmeou was waiting with
the chauffer.

Our taxi to the airport had cracked seats, the smell of silty-ocean mud, no
seatbelts, and no brakes. The taxi driver slowed using his emergency break, leaving
large gaps between us and other vehicles. Ashmeou rode silently, sleepy from the
wine, in the front with the driver. Fran’s backpack rested between us, big and bulging,
and a hand carved drum sat between my feet. She had bought some souvenirs to take
home, masks for her parents and a drum for her brother, a rug for her sister. She’d left most of her clothes with me, which made me confident she’d return.

“Pull over there,” Fran told the driver. On a street corner the vendors crowded the road, their tables spreading beyond the shoulder’s edge, close enough that Fran didn’t have to get out to order.

“I love these things. I’ll miss them,” she said in English to me, then turned back and ordered three. A women sat at a junk-wood table with candle in a large jar illuminating the gateaux, cornmeal dumplings, her face, and the scrap paper bags she wrapped the food in. Our driver was impatient.

“I love street food,” Fran said, then told the driver to keep going.

“You’ll be back soon enough. By then you’ll have probably forgotten all about them.”

“No way.” She bit into the gateau and chewed.

“You’ll probably be at the doughnut shop in town and wonder how you ever could’ve imagined anything else so good.” I laughed at her. Her mom was French, her father Portuguese, she a diplomat’s kid. She grew up with the finest of fine—this was her attempt at humility.

“You think I’m going to forget that fast, do you?”

“Who knows?”

“I know.”

“You do, do you?” I forgot that I’d been angry. She was leaving and I was staying. I smiled at what I thought I knew: I’d do great work and help people, she’d return and help people, we were in love. I smiled at what we pretended not to know:
our relationship was broken, I would be lonely, she might not come back, it might be
the end.

“I know so much more than you can imagine,” she said past me.

“You know what you want, at least.” I faced her.

“Maybe.”

She used to want me, but I had been replaced. I hoped it was only for a longing
to go home, a break from Africa. I felt my face go blank. I worried it was more, that it
was away from me that she wanted, the wedding a pleasant excuse.

We arrived at the airport and the driver attempted to get me to pay him an
advance for the ride back—I told him he could wait, or leave, it didn’t matter, but I
wasn’t giving him an advance. They were not reliable, or dependable. And in the end,
I couldn’t blame them. They had no reason to be. They’d probably never see me
again—they could say what they wanted. Fran and Ashmeou waited as I finished
paying. Police and military men started shouting at the chauffer to leave.

Frustrated, the chauffer helped me unload by tossing Fran’s baggage at me. I
already held the drum and Fran had her carry-on, but the backpack landed at my feet.

“What the hell,” Fran said.

She took a quick step towards the backpack. The driver, already back in the
car, pulled away. His damage was done.

“Sean, be careful,” she said.

“It wasn’t my fault, the driver just chucked it out.”

“You know those guys are rough with bags.” She opened the top of her bag
and removed some clothes to reach inside.
“It wasn’t his fault,” Ashmeou said.

Fran stopped and looked up at Ashmeou.

“What are you doing?” I said.

“The masks. I want to see if they’re okay.”

“Fran, stop,” I said.

She kept looking.

“Stop.”

“Why?” she said, but didn’t stop.

“These guys.” I motioned over my shoulder at guards and officers walking around. Some with clipboards, others had machine guns, some with side-arms. I wasn’t afraid of them, but I knew they could make our lives difficult. “They could claim you’re taking away artifacts, or stealing, or something. Who knows.”

“So what do you want me to do?”

“Check them in Paris, or when you get home. There’s nothing we can do about it now anyway.”

She kept rooting.

“Fran, stop.” I said.

“Relax, I’m just feeling to see if they are broken.” And drawing more attention. She always had to know, always had to be right. She could never let things be, let them develop, wait and see.

She closed her bag. “I can’t tell.” She frowned. I figured they were broken, but I’d let her find out on her own in America.
The airport was clogged with families saying hello and goodbye. We weaved through the money exchangers, taxi drivers, military officials, security guards, beggars, and students studying on the steps under the generator powered lights covered in gnats, mosquitoes, flies, and dust. A large canopy covered the open-air compound like a hanger. The airport was dirty yellow and oppressive. From the walled-off-baggage claim area came voices, the smell of human sweat, and steam.

At a gated entrance an officer stood checking documents. He glanced at Fran’s ticket and let her pass. I tried to follow but he put his hand across the door.

“Your ticket,” he asked.

“I’m with her.”

“You must have a ticket to go past this point.” He pushed me out of the way to let a man he knew pass by. Fran waited inside the door.

“I am her husband and am seeing her off,” I lied.

“The only people who go in there are ticket holders,” he said and held out his palm. He was demanding my ticket, or a bribe.

I didn’t pay bribes.

“Sean,” Fran said and stepped back through the doorway. “It’s fine. I’ll check in and be back. Wait upstairs for me.” She grabbed her luggage and was gone. Before I could respond, Fran had passed around a corner. I stepped away from the entrance and into the crowd of people. For a moment I wondered if she would come back out—part of me believed she wouldn’t.

“Let’s go upstairs and get a table,” Ashmeou said.

I nodded.
“She’s just stressed about leaving,” she said.

“Yeah, probably.”

I followed Ashmeou up the stairs to the café overlooking the tarmac. We sat near the window. I looked at Ashmeou and then around the room. Couples and groups sipped tea and espresso. A group of white men in Air Force uniforms sat at a table behind us. The plane hadn’t arrived yet, and departure wouldn’t be until forty minutes after that. The Air France flight only stayed in Guinea for one hour. It didn’t replenish with water or food, didn’t take on new flight crew or staff, didn’t even refuel. The last link to the old colonial power was reluctant at best. And who could blame them for not wanting to land in an airport with no steady electricity, no hanger, and more machineguns than passengers.

Fran arrived. I smiled as if I was greeting her to Guinea instead of sending her away.

“What do you guys want?” I asked.

“An ice cream sounds good,” Fran said.

“Chocolate?”

“If they have it.”

“And you, Ashmeou?” I asked.

“That sounds good.”

I walked over to the bar and ordered three ice-creams and an espresso for myself. Fran and Ashmeou talked while I waited for the food.

The plane landed.
I handed Ashmeou and Fran their ice cream and we watched people disembark. The wave of heat and humidity caused the new arrivals to pause at the top of the steps as they exited the plane. The tarmac was lit by orange and yellow lights. Below us a fountain sat drained and empty.

“You got an espresso?” Fran said. Her voice was accusatory.

“Yeah, I’m feeling a bit tired.” I sipped the espresso. Guinean coffee tasted like burnt dirt.

“Huh,” she said. I thought of offering it to her.

Ashmeou was silent. She was no longer part of the conversation; she was barely part of the group. She stood up and went to find the bathroom.

“I should go and get ready to board,” Fran said.

“Don’t you want to wait for Ashmeou?” I said.

“I should.”

She looked at me, but I stayed focused on the plane. It was the one connection, direct, to the outside world. I never thought about going home, really never considered it an option. Even when Fran asked me to go back with her. Even before I found a job. There was nothing back there that couldn’t wait, and my adventure felt like it was just beginning. But there – confronted with the plane and the realization that I could walk downstairs right now and get on that plane and be home, be done with Guinea, be done with Africa, be surrounded by food and friends and water and hot showers and temperate climates—I was overwhelmed. I wanted to go with her.

“What?” Fran said.

I turned to look at her. “Huh?”
“What are you thinking?”

“So many things.” I tried to be truthful. “I guess, there it is, the literal ticket out.”

“Do you want to come?”

I looked back at the plane.

“I have a credit card.” Her voice was flat.

Her parents had a credit card, she meant.

America and home seemed so far away and so close all at once. There it was, in the plane. There it was, across an ocean. Here I was, in a plastic lawn chair at a plastic table in a café at an airport in a mangrove swamp.

“Sean?” Fran asked.

“Yeah. I’m thinking.”

“This place has made us strange to each other,” she said. It was the summary of a conversation from before. Discussions of why we weren’t working. What wasn’t working. But my job changed everything, we said, and she just needed a quick break. We talked about our relationship. Talking about a relationship is never a good thing.

“When you come back, it’ll be different,” I said.

Ashmeou came back.

“Sure.” Fran stood up. “I should get going,” she said to the two of us.

“So soon?” Ashmeou asked.

“The plane won’t wait.”

“Well, this is not good-bye. It’s, ‘I’ll see you later,’” Ashmeou said. She hugged Fran. Fran held Ashmeou tightly.
Fran turned to face me. “I’ll see you later,” I said and embraced her.

I held her. I tried to absorb as much of her as I could. Her arms were there, but all soft. She wasn’t holding on.

“I love you,” I said.

“I know.”

She let go of me and I of her. “I love you too,” she said.

“Call me when you get there.”

“Sure thing.”

Fran walked out of the café and down the stairs. I wished I had walked her to the gate. I sat back down at the table, suddenly devoid of any thought other than pity for myself. She was gone.

The heat of the night caught up with me, the humidity condensing on the hair of my arm. I fanned my T-shirt to get some air moving over my body. I could hear the noise of the baggage claim below us.

“Do you want another drink?” Ashmeou asked.

“No.” I wanted to tell her that the first espresso had been bad enough.

She looked outside at the plane.

“It’s huge, isn’t it. Like a flying building,” Ashmeou said.

“Yeah.” I didn’t look.

The café was fairly empty. Those waiting for arrivals had left to meet them.

“We should go,” I said.

“You don’t want to see her onto the plane?”
I looked outside. They hadn’t started boarding yet and the people below were small and distant. The engines of the plane were turning slowly, lazily and the café’s thin windows barely cut down the hum.

“We won’t be able to tell who she is,” I said.

Ashmeou nodded.

“You okay, Sean?” she asked.

“Not really.” I was alone.

I looked past the runways and the UN plane, over the dark mangrove swamp, to the dark silhouetted bluffs north of town. Along the distance random fires and generator-powered-lights glowed. There was no way to know that four-million people were living below me. Except I knew that. And except for a few, all of them were in the dark.
The bomb didn’t go off. Again.

The sun set fast, but it was still light out and hot. It would be hours before the night cooled, and not until morning would my house become a bearable temperature again—if it ever became comfortable. The strike had meant no electricity, no running water, and no gasoline to run the generator. Only yesterday had the country returned to work, and the radio static filled with news of normality. The tanker trucks had finally left port, the government had finally found money to pay for imports, the teachers had finally accepted a new contract, the police had finally stopped beating people, and the people had finally stopped being beaten.

Outside my house was calm. The whole town of Labé was calm with only the normal mistakes. The taxi driver who thought he could sneak by the road blockade only to be caught and nearly beaten to death while protestors torched his car. Normally someone looted his car and stole the belongings, but only through complete destruction could the masses justify their actions. It was not pillaging and looting, they wanted to make a statement. And then the shopkeeper who tried to open his doors only to have his windows smashed. I went to work on my guard’s bicycle during strikes, a thin-wheeled Chinese steel-frame with bent rims and plastic brakes. I had access to the whole road; local popular ordinance forbade cars from the road during strikes. The air, even in the afternoon breeze, was calm, and the dust had free reign over the landscape. Houses were locked up, cafés closed, and the streets littered with shattered
rocks children had thrown at the Governor’s SUV as he left town for Conakry. That’s how riots went in Guinea—the bomb was in the threats, the aftermath was always the inaction. In the five months since Fran had left I had lived through four general strikes. After my third I came to accept that people were angry, but not angry enough to pull down their government.

During the strike, I found the compound empty except for the guards I paid extra to stay there. At my house, my guard, Bilo, and his son, Sékou, spent the week while his brother protected his family. I slept at the office during the strikes and met with the people I needed to meet with. The army needed to be paid to protect our warehouse and office. The strike leaders needed to know we were behind them and wouldn’t open until they said so. And I needed to radio in reports to Conakry for the head office and the embassy. I read during strikes, and wrote letters.

The day after dropping Fran at the airport, I’d gone to the US Embassy to be briefed on the situation in Guinea. The fat black-American security officer told me that the country is a powder keg. “The President is a dead general walking. Sources say he has three types of cancer, had at least two strokes, got taken in by a mystic marabout wife, and smokes five packs of cigarettes a day – unfiltered Camels. We’re not even sure how he holds on. Me, I think everyone else is just too lazy to throw a coup.”

He didn’t have a good picture of him, as they wouldn’t let the president out in public anymore. It was never clear what “they” meant—but it implied that someone else was in control. The security officer left the room after telling me to stay away from city centers, not to take public transport, or trust anyone, and to keep enough
euros and dollars on me to get out of the country at a moments notice. The scene in Conakry was different than Labé, where I had lived for three months trying to find a job.

The embassy aide sitting next to me wore glasses and a long khaki skirt.

“Don’t worry about it. When I came in for my orientation they told me the same thing. That was three years ago. The aid who sat with me told me they’d been saying the same thing for a decade.” She gave me a tour of the facility, got me my official badge, and then took me outside into the humid air of the city for some Chinese food.

Five months had passed since I had Chinese food, and the powder keg of a country had almost exploded every other month. It always started the same way. Marches, talks, protests, strikes, the fuse being lit and burning, the international eye almost turning to look at us. The neighbors beginning to worry.

They ended the same way too. I’d grown used to it.

This keg of a country was more like a train wreck that had already happened. No one blows up a train wreck – they loot it and leave it to rust. The powder in the kegs was a bunch of wouldn’t happens. They wouldn’t storm the presidential farm. They wouldn’t storm the palace. They wouldn’t even blame the president; they blamed the corrupt ministers. They wouldn’t take the airport or a military base. They wouldn’t storm and smash markets. They wouldn’t take up arms and shoot at the army. They wouldn’t do much of anything.

They sat and waited. They listened to how the latest government talks had gone. They swallowed promises they knew no one could keep. They thought about the limbless immigrants from Sierra Leone and Liberia. They thought of dead family
members in Cote D’Ivoire. They thought that if the president just knew that they were upset, he would fix everything. They were the ones keeping him in power.
Fran finally got through to me during the quiet calm of the office at sunset, the roads only beginning to come to life again. I heard the scrape of metal shovels clearing the pavement, people tossing the rocks and debris into the grass like it was snow—something just as natural, just as light, rocks that were just as pure. They clanked the rocks and broken glass and twisted metal pieces into wheelbarrows with bent axles and wobbled the debris to the shoulder. A wheelbarrow sighed as it unloaded its contents in a soft thud.

I turned to look out my window and caught the last flamboyant blossoms in the orange shadow of my office. When I started my job the tree was only green, but a month later the flamboyant dripped with blood-red flowers, bright over the dust covered leaves and walls, the tree glowing in the afternoon white-out-dust and the cool blues and oranges of sunset. If I found myself at work too long, which was often in the beginning, I would watch the sunlight change colors around the tree that seemed to illuminate itself. I swore that at night, in the dark of Africa—where everything is hidden—the flowers shined.

The first taxis, leading the stream of trucks and cargo and people, began to pass by outside. All headed to points south. When a strike ended, the taxi station in Labé—a muddy pit of dogs, rice and vehicles, even in the dry season—filled immediately with passengers loaded with heavy bowls of clothes and produce, small backpacks and briefcases, and suitcases. Goats too. The women sat silently. Two men tried for the same car, and the next taxi driver offered to take one. A skinny driver in jeans and T-shirt tried to steal a passenger, break queue, from the fatter, older one
wearing a sports coat and green chinos. A fight and shoving match started up, the
director of the taxis came out of his pine box station. The old one spat on the young
one, who was pulled away from the older one. In the confusion the passenger threw
his stuff in a third car, not a taxi but just a private car looking for some gas money, and
he was gone.

The edginess of life became something different, the jubilation at the strikes’
end turned quickly to frustration.

I decided to bike home before it became pitch black out. I closed my window
to the cool evening breeze and shuffled through my office, locking the door behind
me. I went slowly around the dark shadow that was Binta’s receptionist desk and
locked the main door to the office—an aluminum French door. Under the awning of
the second floor I saw the remaining light of sunset painting the courtyard and parking
lot of the FWP compound blue and purple, like a negative of a photo. I remembered,
as I saw the tail of the sun disappear, the east was watching it rise. My phone rang.

“Hello?” I said with a French accent.

“Hi Sean, it’s Fran from America. How are things going?” As if I forgot where
she was. And the conversation began.

“Fran.” I sat down on the step. It was smooth with dust.

“Sean. I finally got through. I have been trying for days,” she started. Her
words sounded compressed by the distance.

“Yeah, the strike just ended and I guess phones just came back on,” I said. I
reminded myself that we could not converse—the lag of the phone, a miniscule three
seconds, disjointed the question and answer period and ruined any efforts to actually
connect. Instead we did a series of tellings. Usually I told her everything about work. She told me everything about her family. I told her about the books I read, mostly started and stopped Louis L’Amour. She told me about the movies she had seen, films I had never heard of. I told her about the people I was meeting and made them sound more interesting than they were. She told me about people we both knew.

“Are you okay. In Labé? And the strikes?”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m fine. A few rocks, a few shots, and some yelling. No different than the other times. But you, how are things going in America? How’s your sister?” The reason she had gone back in the first place.

I didn’t tell her that this time was different. That the news reports were wrong and backwards. The reports focused on Conakry and the big issues and huge protests, always misquoting the parties involved. The real trouble, this time, had been up country, on the back roads.

“She’s fine. Their new house is beautiful.” A pause. “But you, how’re you doing?”

“Me. I’m fine. A little tired of the heat and dust, but things are good. Work’s good and life’s good. I mean, not much to complain about.” But of course there was.

“Last time you didn’t sound like this.”

“Well, it’d just been a hard week. It’s always hard when you start a job, you know? I’ve just got to stick it out a little longer. It’ll get better. I mean, this place still needs a lot of help.” I wanted to change the topic.

“Have you seen Ashmeou and Deuxième? How’re they?”
“It sounds like they’re doing well. I haven’t made it over to their place in months, since you left. I haven’t been invited.” Another topic I wanted to avoid.

“They said just to stop by.”

“Fran, everyone says to just stop by. They don’t mean it. People don’t mean a lot of things here.” I began to question why she had called. I liked talking with her, but preferred trying to forget her.

“What does that mean?”

I wanted to change the topic. She had left so early, she didn’t understand. “Has your dad got a new job?”

“Oh, he’s back on in New York. He teaches two days a week and consults with the embassy still. So we’re not moving back to Portugal. No plans yet, at least. I think we’re all going to France this summer to see my mother’s family. It’ll be fun. You could come.”

“We’ll see. That’s a long ways off and who knows if I can get vacation. There’s usually a lot of extra paper work in the summer, Jim says.”

“But most people go on vacation in the rainy season.” A pause, she was pushing me to answer.

“I’ll talk with Jim, but I kinda want to see the rainy season. All I’ve seen since I got here has been dust and heat. I can’t wait to see green and wet. I mean, the way people talk about this place, the rivers just swelling and I heard rumors of hippos up in the Tougue area. How great would it be to see hippos?” I dodged a response.

“So you’d rather see hippos than me?” The pauses grew longer.
“No. I want to see you. I do. But how can I get to France? There’s work here to be done.”

I changed the topic, jumping to what was on my mind. “Do you think you might come back? I mean, before the baby.”

“Sean, I want to talk about you.” Her tone changed. “Tell me what is going on?”

“That is what I am trying to figure out.” Pause. Always a pause. And never clear if it was the phone or Fran.

“Sean, why don’t you come home? That place is falling apart. If half the news reports I get are true, and if you hide half of what you know from me, then it’s getting bad. You can always go back. It might not be the right time for you.”

I cut in, over what she was saying. “Come back and do what? I mean, I have a job here, a job I promised to see through for a year.”

“You can leave if you want. You’re the only one keeping yourself there.”

How little she understood, how easy her life was. I had followed her here and when the situation got tough, she left. She was the one who had come here to help people. She was the do-gooder. I was the follower, with nothing better to do after graduation than to follow her here. I didn’t respond.

“How are you there?” Silence.

“I can ask you the same thing.” Along with how she expected me to get home, and what she thought I would do once I was there. In Guinea I had a job. As menial and pathetic as it seemed most of the time, as boring as my life had become, as
inadequate as I felt and as useless my efforts seemed to be, I could still convince myself that I was doing something constructive. The alternative scared me.

“Sean, what’s wrong?” Silence.

“What makes you think it’d be any different if I came home? Here I have a job and, as much as it frustrates me, I think, sometimes—not all the time but sometimes—that I am doing a good thing. And if I leave no one will replace me, or that is what I tell myself. You ran away to America and said you would come back, but you don’t even pretend like you’re going to anymore. You don’t even say you miss me, or love me anymore.”

A pause. We both wait for the other to fill it. Communication had become brief from Fran even before the strikes. She gave more gaps in her accounts, made more space for maneuvering in her stories. She decidedly did not tell me things, as I did her, and stopped making excuses for her delayed return to Guinea. At first she claimed to be enjoying her family. And then she helped her sister get settled. Then the cost of the flight—though her family had more than enough money to fly her back. The last excuse had been her sister’s approaching baby, but that had meant a delay of almost a year. An American might have continued the ruse, adding excuses on top of excuses, making dramatic promises never to be kept, sobbing and laughing and sobbing. But a French-Portuguese girl did none of this.

“I followed you here, gave up all I had, to try and make a difference. Well, here I am, trying. And instead of supporting me, you try and pull me back, to follow you. Where to this time, Fran?”

She didn’t answer. She waited through the pause.
I took it. “To Connecticut with your sister and your parent’s summer home? Maybe to Portugal or France to visit your family? And then?” I remembered that I was at work and looked around. I saw the small orange coal flame of the guard and his tea kettle, but the night had taken over the compound. The steps in front disappeared into the black and the shadows of the trucks and buildings were gone. A guard walked with a flashlight around the interior perimeter. I worried they understood what was going on, but then I didn’t care. They didn’t know English, nor understand what I was going through. They had their arranged wives and prostitutes and I was trying to eek out some kind of relationship five thousand miles apart.

No response.

“I miss you.” And I want you back, I thought.

No response. I wondered if the connection had been broken.

“Fran?”

No response. I decided not to give in, to wait her out.

“Yeah?”

The silence stretched. The cars were going steady outside and I heard the sound of generators running. Across the walls I saw compounds begin to glow in the night. The night air filled with radio music and talk shows, in Pular and French and English and Melinké. I decided I would walk home on the moonless night. Easier to avoid a sprained ankle than a taxi-bike collision. An enormous pressure was being released in the country.

“Good bye, Sean.”
I walked home alone in the escaping twilight. As big and beautiful as Africa had seemed upon arrival, life popping out in picture book fashion, it became boring quickly. After all the photo-ops were taken and all the neat and witty conversations had been had, I was left standing in a dirty heap of splintered cans, piece-meal shacks, wasted condoms, filthy children encrusted with snot and disease, and dogs mangled by cancer and cars. After removing the big animals, fantastic flora, and the crazy locals, I was left in a hot boredom. Even the occasional episode of tropical disease became blasé. It had taken me three months to find a job and five months to realize why the previous white-man had quit.

I worked for the Feed the World Program (FWP, or Programme Nourrir le Mond in French) as the Fouta district office manager. It was glorified babysitting. I had come to Africa for freedom and wound up tied to a desk. I watched over the staff with hawkish eyes and sharp pen in a war of attrition. They tested me, broke the rules, lied on invoices, lied on reimbursement forms, helped friends, helped family, all at the FWP’s, and my, budget’s expense. I wrote them up, reprimanded, threatened to fire, sanction, and reassign. But they knew more than I did. My referrals and reprimands sent to Conakry were ignored—a stream of pink papers thrown into the ocean for all I knew. Under Guinean law I couldn’t fire anyone. There were no positions to transfer people to. So I stopped caring so much. As long as the job got done, the head office stayed ignorant, and most people got fed most of the time, I let things go. The staff didn’t win, nor did I lose; the situation just was.
I slid into a state of self-righteous catharsis. I consoled myself with nightlife. I had a job that gave me no control, in a country that, more and more, resembled a shit pile covering a shit hole. I believed that I was doing good, at some point my work would benefit others. But keeping focused in the face of all that was against me was hard. Underpaid for my efforts and culturally isolated, I felt a certain entitlement to things that weren’t mine. In order to be respected by my staff, I needed to take more than they did. If they used the car to run a personal errand, I used the car to send Trust on my afternoon errands. If they added a few francs to their travel reimbursement forms, I placed a week’s worth of dinners. If they transported their family members with them to Conakry, I took my friends. Only I didn’t have many friends.

The expats were Germans, Canadians, Missionaries, the once in a blue moon tourist, and randomly scattered other Americans in the Save Humanity with Teachers program. The Germans kept to themselves, the Canadians had families, and the missionaries were self-important. They were fine in small doses, but did so damn much, they felt so damn important. At first, their divine driving force kind of infected me, saving souls and all. But after a while their standards left me feeling rejected, me not capable of all they were doing. And then I realized they were in for the money and fame just like my staff. I kept running into families of missionaries on the street where they wore bright-crazy and cheap African prints. Around the market a group of children followed them like little elves, helping in the hope of a tip, waiting for handouts. The white parents pulled their kids in close, telling them not to touch the “street urchins.” These four tan white people in button-up shirts and hemmed-shorts walked in Gore-Tex running shoes around the little market, kids wrapped in rags
behind them. And those kids who needed money and food and love, they got nothing from this family that filled their baggage with African clothes to sell at churches to raise money for their “mission in Guinea.” Some mission.

There was one family, the Hawthorns, from Albork, Missouri that had three kids. I thought them insane to uproot three kids and drag them into the sticks of Africa, but then I went to see their place. It was before Fran had left. She had met Mrs. Hawthorn, Celeste, at the organization where she volunteered. Celeste had invited us over for a Saturday afternoon. We walked through their front gate, entering a little hippy-yuppy America with a crucifix or two thrown in for good measure.

“Welcome,” a large white man said. He wore a T-shirt and jeans and was big. His hair, his shoulders, his height—all big. He had dirt under his fingernails and on his hairy arms from working in his garden. He wiped his hands off on his pants. “You must be Fran and Sean. Celeste told me you were coming. I’m George.” He offered his hand.

“You must be her husband,” Fran said.

“Yep. Let me take you on a little tour.” A Guinean child came up in flip-flops and shorts. George turned to him, “No more gardening today. Go tell Mrs. Hawthorn that Fran and Sean are here.” The boy nodded and ran off. George turned back to Fran and I, cleaning his glasses with his shirt. “You guys want to see my pride and joy?”

“Sure,” I said.

Then follow me. He led us through the compound. It was three-quarters of an acre of America, lined with cement walls topped with broken bottles. The house looked clean and well kept. We walked around a two car tin-doored garage and into a
garden of berries, grapes, kale, spinach and tree sized tomato plants. In the middle of the garden was a flower topped mosquito net lined gazebo.

As we walked George named the plants. “Now look at this. I learned this trick in Mali.” A bed of plants was covered in a tent of clear plastic over bent rebar. He lifted one of the flap. Inside was a long germination bed, sectioned off and labeled by seed type.

At another bed George stooped down and gathered some mint in his hands.

“The sun is strong today, let’s say we go inside?” But before we could respond he walked back towards the house. I looked at Fran, she still scanned the garden.

“Come on,” I said.

“Isn’t this amazing?”

“I guess so.” I looked around too. “Come on, let’s go.” I started walking.

The place was everything Fran and I had come to Africa to inherit. It was how we imagined ourselves living. I was in awe. We had a floor and dust—they had a life. A life I wanted.

We entered their air-conditioned house. George gave us a tour: a stocked refrigerator, X-box, European style kitchen, direct-TV dish, two-ply toilet paper, A/C in the bedrooms, jiffy-pop popcorn, vaccines, a generator and huge solar panel array. Hot showers.

Celeste was in the kitchen. She came over and hugged us both. She had strong arms and wore a light dress. “You must be Sean, I’m Celeste.”

“Thanks for having us over. Your house is amazing,” I said.

“Thank you.”
“How about a mojito?” George asked.

“Uh, sure.” It never occurred to me that missionaries drank. I assumed they were priests of a sort, that they sacrificed everything for the good of god or something. Celeste took Fran to look at some clothes. George went to the cabinet and pulled out some bottles. He began making the drinks.

“Sean, if there’s one piece of advice I can give you, learn how to relax here. No use in spinning your wheels.”

I laughed. “Relaxing isn’t the problem right now, a job is.”

“It’ll come. Jobs always turn up. I’ve been at this a long time, there’s always work. That’s the easy part.”

“And the hard part,” I asked.

“Is learning to enjoy a shitty mojito on a hot day.” He laughed.

But the drink wasn’t half bad. They told us about their life in Labé. George did the work, leading a service at the local Methodist church around the backside of their compound and advising with the local ministers on questions of faith and community. In his free time, which was a lot, he worked on gardening projects with local groups. In the middle of a Muslim country, he admitted, there weren’t many people to deal with.

I envied them for their work. Sure, their place defined luxury, and I was jealous of all their comforts and modern house. But that wasn’t it. I wanted what they had: a purpose. They understood it all, did good things, and still managed to live like kings. I kept waiting for them to ask who I’d helped, what had I done that day, who
was I saving? But they never did, which made me feel even worse. My envy turned to bitterness towards them.

To find the Christians in town I didn’t head to the church or the Hawthorns, I hit up the bars and clubs. The Muslims stayed away mostly, leaving space for Christians, pagans—the forestierés from southern Guinea, the refugees from Sierra Leone, Côte D’Ivoire, and Liberia, along with random covert Muslim. A hodge-podge of whispered languages smelling of cheap gin and formaldehyde laden beer over driving-bass and tweaked-treble. The expats always paid extra for imported beer, twice the price of domestic. Sometimes the locals—with checks coming from family abroad, wearing knock-off gangsta gear, rolled up to the club in their slightly beat up five year-old Renault coupe with no bumper—drank Heineken too. Buzzing on something, they’d give themselves ridiculous names like “Blood Tooth,” “Ice Man,” “AK-47,” or maybe “Tupac,” “Dragon,” and “Killer.” They pushed the image, but not the life. They rarely fought. When they did, it was only a quick swing or two, then it was done. It was like watching chickens fight over food: lots of squawking and running, ruffled feathers, but very little actual pecking.

My days weren’t much better. I worked in a sunlit white-painted cinder-block cement office, dealing with every complaint or problem possible. People showed up at my office asking for days off or called in sick. They complained they didn’t go into the bush on tournée, assignment (so they could inflate, steal, boof, their per-diem) enough. A spark plug needed changing. Food needed to be ordered. The governor demanded my presence. Choose the colors for the wall. Who should meet with the minister. Every day started different, but they all ended the same with only the order
of events changing. I’d taken to wearing headphones in the early morning but not
turning on any music, ignoring people at my door. It sounds childish, but the job was
childish. I was babysitting professional children.
I decided to go to the clubs for a drink. Fran had thrown a good day sour, taken away a chance for celebration. Most nights I made my way through DVDs and new music from my monthly package of entertainment. I sat at home and basked in a generator-powered glow. As my time in Guinea had gone on, the lure of the disco had faded. I was attracted to a glowing box of Americana instead. With the television lighting my small three-bedroom house, I felt a divine presence—an intrusion of greatness into my world; or maybe just a window back to the West and America. I escaped Guinea for two hours. I tried to pace myself, but after a week the movie shipment my mother and brother had sent was consumed and next month’s came too slowly.

I never missed America except when I thought of it, which was rare. I thought about the heat, the dust, or the rain. I thought about work and exhaustion. I thought about the animals I was not seeing. Fran and America were one in the same to me. The last thing I wanted was America on my mind. I wanted to escape into Africa for the evening.

After dropping my bag at my house, I went to a classy restaurant in Labé hoping to join another expat for dinner. The restaurant was barely functioning—the end of the strike having ended after market hours—and empty. After a cheese pizza, alone with my thoughts, I wanted to go dancing and try to hide in a crowd.

The club I liked, “L’Inferno,” was new. I made the tour with Fran, when she was still around, checking out the city’s nightlife. The “Impossible” downtown, near the market, is cramped and falling apart, the pink painted cement crumbled in spider-webbing cracks from fights and overuse, the bar soiled with sweaty hands drinking
cheap alcohol. Too accessible, with a lack of capacity limits, the club layered by bodies lit by half-expired Christmas lights in a dark room – hands everywhere, limbs reaching. We got out of there. The locals’ bars, with cloudy white drinks, contained dark men that drank themselves near vomiting before passing out across the street. The drunks talked about their fathers and mothers and how the country was ruined. It was a fun change from sex and treble, but I rarely desired a slurred French conversation.

The “Chat Noir,” which had no cat or jazz, thumped the retro rock of Celine Dion and Peter Gabriel over packed bouncing flesh. Once over the mêlée of dance moves to music from the “Titanic,” the place became dingier and more deranged than the “Impossible.” The men had fewer teeth and cheaper clothes, the woman let breasts hang out. The opposite of elegance, hookers advertised in the raw at the cheapest possible price. Dakar, St. Louis and Banjul had clubs with huge light shows and elaborate bars. The people dressed nicely and enjoyed themselves, having fun. In the Labé clubs, there was none of this. The patrons seemed serious, intense. The clubs a last relic of communism with the lines to get in, patrons had an obligation to partake in all activities, and limited amounts of alcohol—the bars ran out of beer before 11 PM usually. Not to mention the bare boned atmosphere and tweaked speakers. Even in Tambacounda they had the basics for a great club, while in Guinea a disco ball was still exotic.

L’Inferno was alive and dark and naked, and I felt safe and hidden. I can’t really explain why. It was all tight clothing and nipples. The walls, shiny red tiles, reflected the lights and my image a hundred times. It was dark with a barely lit back
bar and the smell of humid sweat, like a jungle. I danced with randoms and wanted to sip my beer in anonymity. But, I never went unnoticed. A white guy at a club. Alone. I was the sugar, the prostitutes the swarm. It was fun to dance with them. A dance or two only though, past that I drew the line. I had to draw the line, too much drew me in. The Peuhl women: black, long sleek bodies of models, and tight breasts. Their faces kept me awake at night. These women didn’t chase me, they hunted me. They tried to make conversation in bad French and stuttered English and Creole. They tried to connect. But we had nothing to talk about. I was a grad in economics, they never passed fourth grade. Maybe a few went to high school, one or two might’ve graduated.

A gesture of interest sparked an excited reaction from the hunters. On the dance floor, they rubbed against me, rubbed my pants with their long fingered hands. A woman, or girl—prostitute—danced with me, giving room, her breasts shaking free in her tight tube top. She placed my hand up her panty-less glimmering skirt. She dared me to be man enough. I turned, hands sweating. The only thing a man can do is walk away—or that is what I told myself when I did. But I felt gutless in it all. Guinean guys took any girl at the club across the street to the dark field returning ten minutes later with grass pressed into the girl’s bra and dirt in their hair.

I tried to retreated from the dance floor to the bar. A heavy buzz made the room shake and bounce out of rhythm. Every time I turned there was a new woman pulling at my clothes, making me dance with her. Smoke poured over the crowd and a strobe went on. In the blackened confusion the world became a series of still frames. I tried to pass between the images, hungry hand reaching, eyes whitened and gray in the flashes. At the bar, my shirt heavy with humidity, I ordered another beer. Detached
from the frenzy of the dance floor, the strobe having cut off and the disco ball
returned, the speakers squelched. All that was available to me. All that I could
consume. All that consumed me. When I came with Fran she danced non-stop, with
me when I was on the floor, with other expats, and with Guineans with long
dreadlocks and leather necklaces. She laughed as she danced, the whole bar at her
amusement, she in control of her partner. The prostitutes danced needy, pulling and
grinding, offering and touching. Fran held back, sometimes dancing with me,
sometimes it seemed she was just dancing next to me. I guessed my presence had
never really mattered. I left the bar into the night, cold to the heat of the club, and
stumbled on the rocky shoulder by a late to rise waxing moon. I wanted to be home to
ty and sleep off the day, forget all that had and hadn’t happened.
At my office the next day, I could not wait to go home. But at home, I didn’t know what to do except wait until work. I floated from day to day. Hours passed in gigantic seconds that chewed my patience, but weeks flew by. I don’t think I was made to fall into such a systematic work environment, nor were Guineans. The office could really run itself if the staff wasn’t trying to run off with all of the equipment.

I couldn’t blame them. They were poor, for the most part, except for our best paid employees—the accountant, Mamadou, and my second in command, also named Mamadou. I called the accountant Le Chef, he had all the money, and of course Deuxième. Le Chef did not fit his name. He was a stout man from a more rural district, Tougue, famous as a last stop military outpost. His father had managed the President’s mansion in Tougue and excelled at using influential names on his behalf. Le Chef stood below my shoulder, me an even six feet, and had small hands and short legs—not a midget, but misproportioned. Over his desk he kept pictures of himself from his years at University in Conakry and then Cuba. In one photo he had an afro, a goofy grin, and a foreign woman at his side. She looked possibly Cuban, taller than him, but it wasn’t clear. I kept my relationships as professional as possible so I never asked. Even if I had, I don’t think he would’ve told me. He played a persona and didn’t want it compromised. Le Chef spoke with halting French and fumbling English. He played the clown of languages, but his education was too good for me to believe his skills. I went back over all of his books to double check them, always finding errors. I feared he understood more than he let on, so I was always careful around him.
I worked hard to be professional. I wore suits that I had tailored in Conakry. I took tea with office staff, but not the drivers and rice-warehouse workers. I attempted to become friends with Deuxième, but he didn’t seem interested. When I first met him, I hoped we’d connect. But I learned that he was a shrewd man, if not conniving. He wasn’t taller than me, but his gauntness made him seem longer. He had the lightest, almost silvery, skin of all the staff and his facial expressions, the way he furrowed his brow, made me distrust him. He squinted and held up his chin when asked a question. He never used body language to communicate. Even if he had wanted to use his shoulders, Deuxième’s ill-tailored suits obscured his figure. Stiff-shelf mounds of padding under cheap polyester material tented the suits off his neck. He was the opposite of Le Chef. Deuxième knew no one of influence and worked his way up through sacrifice — University in Farranah for a degree in forestry, though he was from Labé and had wanted to study literature. He received his PhD while on an exchange program to Moscow, returning to become a professor back in Farranah. But he had hated living among the Melinké—he wanted to live with his own people—and was inept at the politics of the time. He absorbed all the Marxist idealism but none of the Party’s political craft in Russia. He got pushed out and started working as a driver for FWP in Labé. After two years with FWP, and a quick turnover of office staff due to the wars in Sierra Leone and Liberia, he found himself as the second in command.

I was too hard on him, even his name. Deuxième – the name given to a second wife – I first used by accident upon introduction, “Donc, vous êtes ma Deuxième,” “So you are my second.” The Guinean staff roared in laughter. They explained, and the name stuck. It may have been why he had been cold to me in Conakry. I stopped using
it, but the staff never did. Slowly it became part of my vocabulary as well. He was a
good guy, a hard worker who tried his best to keep everyone in line. Boofing less than
normal, next to nothing by Guinean standards. He, in many ways, was right.

Working on the monthly report, I tabulated the number of sacks of rice handed
out against what we still had left in the warehouse as my office grew warmer with the
day. The numbers were off. I called Le Chef in and he fudged the records. At first I
fought for transparency, but there was no use. The height of the dry season, when
dusty skies buried the rolling hilltops and minarets, made me want to leave my
laminated-white office and hide until the evening’s sun. The dust saturated the sky, my
nose, the rivers, my mouth in the morning, the sun, and my thoughts. Living in such a
place, rice tallies mattered little to me.

Le Chef left.

Deuxième entered and asked to speak with me.

“We need computers,” he said.

I set down my pen. I had learned how to deal with demands. My staff informed
me of a “need.” After researching the “need” for half a day it became obvious that it
was a “want,” and I discarded it. The trick was not to waste the half a day.

“We need computers. If there was a fire in the building all of our paperwork
would be burned up and lost. We should have computers.” Deuxième had learned how
to deal with me. Come with a rational to accompany a request, no matter how absurd.

“Mamadou, if there was a fire the computers would burn up as well.”

“Not if we stored the information online.” He had been thinking and apparently
talked to someone about it. He looked to be in his 20’s, but actually was in his late
30’s. The Internet had not existed when he was abroad. And it didn’t exist in Guinea then.

“We don’t have a working phone line, let alone a decent internet connection.”

“They’re putting in a satellite connection downtown, and I think we could get a connection through them.”

“Where’d you hear that?”

“My friend, who runs the internet café told me.”

The disconnect between Guinea and the rest of my life made me pause. It had allowed Fran to drift away from me. As hard as we had tried, at first, we only talked every few weeks. Labé was essentially an unconnected black hole of communication, a big city on the frontier of development. It took nothing for someone to drift off the edge of the map—the mob ruled. Then, a connection, an extension to the outside world. I’d tried the dial-up service at the internet café, but the old computers crash and the dial-up was about as fast as my secretary Binta—explain things five or six times, wait an hour, and hope for the best.

“I heard over the radio that the Kankan office was getting computers.”

All of our communications went over short-wave radio. All of our vehicles and every FWP office had a small black box crackling radio with CB hand set. Above our office, an antenna of disproportionate size draped like a wire web from a mast. I hated the radio – a constant buzz at Binta’s desk. She usually didn’t hear a call for us, but I didn’t blame her. Guineans yelled into the radios, over one another, trying to trump the crackles. They used it like a multi-stringed can-communication system. And, since we
only used one frequency, all of our communication was heard in every office and in every vehicle.

“They have a larger operation than us and a solar system for electricity,” I said.

“I still can’t believe they haven’t sent us the electrical system I told you to ask for.”

“Neither can I.” I never requested the stupid thing. At the end of every month, gas and rice went unaccounted for, but Le Chef could hide it in the books. How was he going to hide a stolen solar panel or battery, I wondered. Plus, I couldn’t see a reason for the system.

“We’re being treated unfairly. How can they receive so much and we so little?” His thoughts were framed by the legacy of communism—equality at the expense of equitability. “They have a bigger office, more staff, and more vehicles. They get everything and we get nothing.” Deuxième’s veins showed in his neck and his short cut afro perked up in crispness, like a rooster going into a fight.

“They also have a larger region to cover, more food to distribute, no chance of electricity because the government cut off their grid, and they don’t need computers. We don’t need computers.” It was hard for me to say. I wanted email.

“They only have more rice because they steal it all.” He really did hate the Melinké. “With computers and email we could file reports online and the books would be better kept.” He stood, silent, waiting for my reply.

“Okay, thanks, Mamadou.”

He blinked at me, stupefied by my lack of movement. Dumb struck, I couldn’t see why he wasn’t leaving. He finally did, but didn’t stop at his office. He left the
building to sulk in some tea. Deuxième really wanted this thing, like a kid at Christmas, and would cry like a little kid until he got it. I couldn’t understand why.

I knew what happened next. Deuxième had learned well from our drivers. When a driver wanted something for his car he asked for it first. Then, if he didn’t get it, he sabotaged his work. He arrived late to meetings, to picking people up, to getting home, and blamed it on what he hadn’t received. One driver was angry his car didn’t have a radio, so he drove into the bush on tournée and didn’t return until a week later with a list of excuses. Deuxième would do the same. Sitting in the shack café, on low painted benches, nursing his shot glass full of tea, the sugar working its way into his body, he’d build up the courage to slow the cogs of the FWP.

He was a good guy and, in lots of ways, right about the computers. The head accountant of the FWP in Guinea, a Melinké, gave all the good stuff to his home town, Kankan. We received the hand-me-down trucks and Landcruisers. At first it pissed me off. The guy screwed us over every time. Then, I saw how screwed up the whole thing was. Our job was, essentially, to deliver bags of rice to small schools in rural villages. We gave a few talks and made sure that schools fed the students, and I supposedly trained my staff to be better employees—in the American sense—but that was all secondary. The FWP didn’t need computers, electricity, fancy new Toyotas, or half the staff it carried. It was a distribution center with an international moniker.

Deuxième and I butted heads possibly because of his smartness and my professional ineptitude, or because I had capitalist foresight and he lived by pragmatic communism. He never accepted me as his boss, a white boss at that. Indoctrinated in Russia with the ideas of class struggle and the proletariat and the evils of capitalism.
To Deuxième I must have symbolized the devil. Me—23-years old, a B.A. from Stanford in economics and a minor in physics—running the operation over Deuxième—five-years with FWP and a PhD—described everything wrong with his world. The first few weeks, when I tried to connect with him, he had to force himself to make the effort. There had been the dinner in Conakry when Fran left, and before I started work, before he knew I would be his boss, he had invited Fran and me over to dinner at his house. Or maybe Ashmeou had invited Fran and me. Fran was still around, volunteering with a women’s organization that gave presentation in smaller villages.

They lived in a small house at the back of a larger compound. The yard was coarse red lava rock from the hills outside of town and cement. Small planting boxes held withered, parched plants. The main house sat empty.

“The place is owned by a government minister,” Deuxième said as he walked us through the compound.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“In Conakry. He only comes up here once a year.”

“Where’s Ashmeou?” Fran asked.

He led us back to a cooking hut. While still light outside, the cooking hut was dark. The door was the only opening; the smoke escaped through the thatch roof. Ashmeou sat on a stool cutting vegetables into a pot over a fire. Fran went in to join her, leaving Deuxième and me to talk. Inside, sipping warm tea from a thermos, we sat on uncomfortable furniture. The polyester fabric made me sweat and the support
beams dug into my back and thigh. I quickly discovered that Deuxième liked hearing himself speak.

Deuxième believed that each man should only have one wife and both should produce some meaningful work. I turned off while he babbled about worker’s rights and responsibilities. But, I admired him as an enlightened man – most Guinean men had two or three wives and physical assault was an accepted form of communication.

Fran and Ashmeou came in with the food and we all sat at their wobbly kitchen table. Fran and I had real chairs while Deuxième and Ashmeou sat on short stools.

“How’s work, Ashmeou?” I asked.

“It’s well. Having Fran around helps.”

I complemented her on the dinner. Fran and Ashmeou discussed some issues at work, and then turned to gossip about a secretary who was engaged.

“Do women in America gossip like this?” Deuxième asked me.

“I’m not sure,” I said. I smiled, Deuxième, who played the enlightened man, frustrated me with his impulsive directness. “Fran, do you talk like this in America?”

“All the time,” she said. We laughed at Deuxième’s expense. The conversation stopped at that. Ashmeou didn’t bring the topic up again.

“How long have you been married?” Fran asked.

“Five years now,” Ashmeou said. Ashmeou was young, our age—maybe younger, and he had at least ten years on me. They had no children, and in a country of infants, it was odd. I wanted to ask, but thought better not to.

“It seems like more,” Deuxième said. It confused me, I couldn’t tell if it was a compliment. “I’ve learned so much from her.”
“Like what?” Fran asked.

Deuxième said he washed his own clothes—she had taught him how. Ashmeou blushed.

Fran asked how they had met. Deuxième, reeking of intellectualism, recounted the story. He had met Ashmeou in the village after he returned from Moscow. His family informed him of the arrangement. He had agreed, but only under the stipulation that Ashmeou finish school and go onto university—he melded tradition.

Fran and Deuxième continued the conversation, while I watched Ashmeou. She was a smart woman, a catch in any culture, and beautiful. For him to dictate terms to a woman like that took strength. She was not the classic Peuhl beauty, she was curvy and strong with hair braided simply. Fran had told me that after graduating, Ashmeou started working for the NGO.

It was clear that Deuxième worshipped Ashmeou, and for good reason. Yet, something about her began turning in my mind. I began to think she didn’t want all of his world.
At that time, Fran and I had lived in an apartment near downtown while we looked for jobs. It had plumbing, but our corner of town rarely got water. Our toilet became dirty, then a grim encrusted pool, then obscene. We poured bucket after bucket of water into it, but it never sent everything down. We abandoned the small tiled bathroom; I opened the window and closed the door. Our apartment had wiring, and when the electricity came on, we turned our lights on, every one we could find, plugged in our boom-box, and charged our music players and batteries. The rush brought on by the lighting of the night sent kids playing into the street, music came from everywhere, and televisions turned on. We took to the streets as well. Fran joined in dancing with a group of young girls next to a house with small speakers and big trees. I picked up in a soccer game with ten-year-olds on a pitch created in the glow put out by the café on the corner. The night evaporated around us, we entered day before we knew it, the electricity disappearing shortly after sunrise, the lamps cutting out and letting the sun do its work. And then we’d sleep, the day away, exhausted from the night before. The town did not sleep when the electricity was on, and neither did we. Sleep was for when the oppression returned, when we dwelt on all the things we did not have. But when the power was on, so were we—over the electric noise was laughter. Every electrical appliance in the neighborhood ran. The clubs emptied onto the street as people careened towards friends’ houses. Refrigerators, sitting empty for days, were filled with water in every container available. The fridge, turned to the coldest setting, shook, fighting to stay on.
On good days, I forgot all that wasn’t, and leaned back in a chair on the balcony and thought of the rat race I had left behind in America. I thought of our adventure—it was still “our adventure” then. I thought of all that was possible. I took in the sun, the city, the life below me. I took in all that was in front of me.

On bad days, I looked inside at our miserable place. Our empty place. A foam mattress, two-inches thick, covered in polyester sheets that made us sweat, sat alone in our bedroom. Our clothes, piled against the wall, had blankets covering them to keep the dust off. Our salon had a beige linoleum floor. No rugs or carpets to hide it, only two bowls, four chairs, and a heap of discarded water bottles in a corner disturbed its glare. Our glassless, screenless, windows—one per room—had the height of theft-deterrents: rebar woven into a design and anchored in the cement walls and metal shutters that locked from the inside. To a Guinean, the apartment was high living, a symbol of apparent success; it even had a view of the mosque. But for us, it was a shit hole. It made me sad for the people who thought it great. People running around with babies and motor-scooters, running potatoes to and from market in torn skirts, trying to make a living out of their miserable city. They’d sell their soul to get what we had. What we didn’t want.

I sat in the house, reading random books—I was at the whim of Fran’s books, plus discarded vacation lit from hotels—asking myself what the point was. We had two rooms we didn’t even use. Once, Fran stormed into one of the unused rooms, angry, and slammed the door on me, only to turn around and come back to embrace me shaking.

“What is this place?” Her face white.
“It’s okay.”

“No, we’re poor in a poor country in a house with too many rooms.”

I searched for words to fix the problem.

“What are we even doing here?” And she walked out of the apartment.

In America I would have followed her. I would’ve trailed her and found out where she was going. I would’ve found a place and cornered her and made her talk with me. I’d bring her to tears, break her down, and then build her up again. It was how we worked, her breaking down and me building up. That was the way it had always been. I was attracted to fickle women with big hearts.

In Guinea, it was different. She had no where to go. The people we knew were few and far, the local hangouts still unknown to us. She was terrified by the city when we first arrived—the order of Dakar replaced by the dirt of reality. So I let her run. She was bound to me by the loneliness that had gotten us both. Maybe she saw that in the room.

Loneliness consumes so completely, enveloping the world, that it becomes natural—the eyes adjust, its sounds become white noise, its smells evaporate, and it makes us sweat less. And then, confronted by an empty room with dirty floors and blinded windows, Fran saw her life. I waited for her on the balcony, watching for her return. An hour later, she appeared with food for dinner. She pretended like nothing had happened. I had learned not to push her when things seemed okay. I had followed her here, living out her dream with her, and she was the one who couldn’t handle it. But she was still connected by the bungee cord of our life together.

But such a life.
I woke up in the pale purple light of dawn, my white mosquito net tightly tucked to protect my sheets from mice. Before I arrived I thought the sun shone forever in Africa, punctuated by short nights of compressed animal activity. But the sun might be the most orderly variable on the continent, rising at 6:30 and setting twelve hours later. Night was not the panic I expected: the Guineans have long since killed off everything that might be dangerous. My anger over the now absent slaughtered lions and cheetahs, elephants and hippos subsided after dark walks home from the bars. While I worried about being mugged or spraining an ankle, I never watched the trees for a ready-to-pounce leopard.

I showered in lukewarm water from the small electric water heater that cooled with the generator off. A bowl of porridge from a woman who walked by my house, and a cup of American coffee from my stash worked as my breakfast. I had a cook, Trust, who was more like a housekeeper-mother-cook-personal-assistant-and-shopper, but she didn’t arrive until the afternoon. She practically came with the house. Trust came to Guinea from Liberia in the 80’s and had worked for various ex-pats in Labé over the years. Her English was fast and fluent and her skin more black than brown, more purple than tan. A pudgy woman, she looked to be over thirty-five but didn’t know when or where she was born.

The sky became metallic white, consumed by the sun. Cherif picked me up in my FWP Landcruiser after breakfast. Equipped with the gray vinyl interior, diesel engine, roof-rack, step-up running boards, short-wave radio for news and music and a long-wave radio for communication, the big white SUV was standard issue in Guinea.
Cherif was tanner, older, grayer, and less enthusiastic than all of my other drivers. He disliked most of his coworkers and prided himself on his car’s maintenance. He wore his same unofficial uniform every day—a button-up green or blue or orange shirt, brown slacks, and shiny black shoes the street boys buffed while he waited for me at meetings. Cherif never knocked in the morning. He started the engine and revved the car a few times.

Setting my dishes in the sink for Trust to clean, I turned off the BBC, grabbed my backpack, and closed the house’s glass doors.

“Bilo, come here,” I called out. From a small tin hut near the compound entrance, Bilo emerged. Gaunt and hairless, he was a scrawny and honest guard.

He greeted Cherif in Pular, quick phrases exchanged out of habit. I learned to recite them, but didn’t understand what individual words meant. I’d memorized enough so that officials thought I was studying their language. Enough to make an impression on those I needed to impress. Behind Bilo emerged his son, Sékou. The boy was eleven and spent his nights and mornings before school helping his father. This meant that Bilo could relax while Sékou did the work: opening the gate to let people in and out. But Sékou had promise. Bilo wanted him around for another reason—Bilo wanted his son to do better, and in the end so did I. Sékou sat in the shack and did his homework instead of playing in the streets. In my compound, he had light to study by. Bilo asked me to teach him English, and I did when I had time in the evening. I brought home papers in French—technical manuals and magazines and pamphlets—and he gobbled them up. Sékou walked around with his folder of papers
like they were a government secret or underground communications. He admired knowledge in a way that I had forgotten. I took access to information for granted.

“Bilo,” I called again.

Sékou greeted Cherif, who rubbed Sékou on the head.

“Salut Sean.”

“Bilo, I want you to wash the porch today, all the dust is making it slippery.”

“Okay,” he replied.

“And also, make sure to water the plants well. Don’t make Sékou do it, do it yourself because they need lots of water right now.”

Bilo respected my wishes, but thought me crazy to grow flowers in the dry season. I knew he’d make Sékou do the watering, but at least he’d make Sékou do it well. There wasn’t much watering, the compound wasn’t big. The house sat in the middle with a large rounded driveway in front designed to let a Landcruiser make a three-point turn. In the south-eastern most corner, the tin-topped guard-hut rusted, as did the orange aluminum gate, rimmed with spikes. A basketball hoop on a pole chipped paint onto the driveway’s edge. I found a basketball in Conakry and kept it in the guard hut. Some days I came home and found Bilo and Sékou trying to play a game, with inept dribbles, crazy shots, and lots of fouls. When Sékou could get the ball up to the rim, I told myself, I’d teach him how to shoot properly.

Once I was in the Landcruiser, Cherif said good morning. I turned on the BBC and Cherif put an unlit cigarette in his mouth.

“Mamadou is sick today,” Cherif told me.

“Which Mamadou?”
“Deuxième.” Cherif smiled.

“Who told you?”

“He did. He told me to tell you that he’s sick.”

“Did he look sick?”

Cherif didn’t respond. He motioned to Sékou to open the gate and absorbed himself in his driving. I rolled down my window to let the wind wash my face clean and tight. I trusted Cherif, knowing he wouldn’t lie to me—but I also knew he felt no obligation to tell me the truth. He preferred silence as his primary form of communication.

“We should have computers,” Cherif finally said.

“Why?”

“We could do better work.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I think that not having computers makes people angry and sick.” He stopped. Cherif rolled his unlit cigarette to the other side of his mouth, removed it with his left hand, then placed it back. The banging dirt road led us from my compound to the main road,bottoming out the struts.

At work I discovered that Binta was also sick. She’d sent one of her children to report that she would not be coming in. Le Chef showed up, but sat at his desk and threw his pen in frustration. “This would be better with a computer.”


The chauffeurs lined the interior of the white washed compound wall. The sun rose high, the air began to warm. They hid in the shade, waiting for tea an FWP guard
was brewing. I saw them out my window as I unpacked my bag. At my desk I tried and relax and concentrate, but the day already felt disordered and unproductive.

Vehicles crowded the drive, making it difficult for me to exit the building and cross the compound to where the chauffeurs were sitting.

“Why aren’t you out on your *tournées* for the day?” I demanded.

They sipped their tea intensely. Abdou, one of the more experienced drivers, stood. He drank and looked at me with his dark eyes. He only had five of his teeth left and rarely smiled. He was their recognized spokesmen. “We haven’t received our written orders.”

“You should’ve gotten them yesterday,” I said. Deuxième placed all of their *ordre de mission* paper work in their vehicles the night before.

From his pocket, Abdou retrieved a piece of paper. “I can’t read Deuxième’s writing, he writes like a baby.”

Abdou couldn’t read period. Neither could most of the chauffeurs I have on staff. I trusted Deuxième to tell them the next day’s plans the evening before.

“From now on we want our *ordre de mission* typed and printed so we can read it.” He finished his tea and sat down.

It was all absurd. My entire staff in mutiny over computers. Two or three computers at that. And no one had mentioned a printer.

I stood in the sun, looking at the chauffeurs in the shade, and felt my skin heat and burn. I went in and radioed Conakry. The office began to brighten; the red-flowered flamboyant tree no longer shaded my open air windows. The morning chill had evaporated and I felt the air drying, pulling at the exposed skin on my arm. I
looked around the office and saw a playground. The handmade tables with twisted wooden legs, cracking from improper seasoning. The chairs, with their unhinged backs, wobbled against the wall next to the brightly colored plastic bins for papers, files, and pencils. It was an office in abstract. I wondered how I was able to function in such a place—and what was the point. I had a mutiny on my hands, and my hands were sweating.

I radioed the main office to speak to Jim Fulrun, the director of FWP in Guinea. I hated talking to Jim on the radio. Not because he was my boss, or was mean or difficult—he was fine. He was the guy who hired me when we met at a bar. He was good at sizing people up, judging them, and then pushing them to succeed. Jim gave encouragement and rarely reprimanded. He also had a thick Brighton accent and stuttered—but never in French. The radio garbled, smoothed, and hid words as it cut in and out. Some mornings I couldn’t reach Conakry for hours. Some mornings were good, others were bad.

“Sean, how’re things going up, up in Labé?”

I also knew all of FWP listened to our conversation.

“Good, good,” I said.

I heard my voice echoed by the radios in the trucks below. In my head, I heard it echo across the country.

“Glad to here it. What can I do for you this morning—make it quick, we have to visit with a minister soon.”

I couldn’t tell him I was under seige. I had to be casual about computers.

“Some of my staff has been discussing ways we could improve our program with the
office in Kankan.” I paused, but Jim didn’t pick up. “One thing that might make us more efficient would be computers.”

“So, they’ve been talkin’ with K, kankan have they?” Jim laughed on the radio before clicking it off. Jim, a good-natured cynic, had seen it all before. He had been in development for fifteen years, always in Francophone Africa where he didn’t stutter or get challenged. I think he viewed me, in some ways, as his protégé. I think he truly enjoyed my anxiety.

“Yeah. Our bookkeeping system is pretty archaic up here. If we could get a few computers we could streamline the process. Plus, there are rumors that a satellite connection is coming to town and we could set up a relay station at the office.”

“Now that is good news. About time this bloody place got with the twentieth century.” Jim laughed. He laughed a lot. His face was mobile, always alive with surprise and laughter or anger and frustration. He was not a stoic Brit.

“I’ll go and check it out.”

“That’d be great. Get back to me on that, and I actually already have three computers waiting for you guys. I’m just waiting on the printers to arrive from the main office. I’m going to send up a technician when everything is here, and someone to set up a solar panel system.” He hadn’t been to England in a decade.

“That’d be great.”

“No worries, buddy. Hopefully in the next week, k or t, two they’ll get in. Conakry out.” The radio crackled lifeless.

Some of the trucks and Landcruisers started up below—tea time was over. I went into my office, light shining in from behind me, and wondered if I would ever be
in control of my staff again. My five months with FWP had been a constant battle. 

Now the lines had been clearly drawn: me against everyone else. It might have been 
time to go with the flow. I had hoped that Deuxième and I would work together, but 
that now appeared next to impossible. 

He showed up to work ten minutes later. Ashmeou was with him. He smiled 
and wore a new sports coat, a locally tailored one with shoulder pads that were too 
pointy and a fabric that glistened like a trash bag. A communist at heart, he recognized 
the need to dress his part. In Guinea that meant slacks and a jacket, even in the heat. 
He thought he looked chic. He walked into my office, shoulders thrown back, like a 
winner. 

“I thought you were sick?” I asked. 

“Me? Who told you that?” 

I tried to remember. “Cherif did.” 

“There must’ve been some confusion. I had to run to the tailor and pick up my 
new suit. What do you think of the shoes?” 

Pointy and brown with shiny scale-like pleats in the leather, his shoes stuck 
out—oversized—to compensate for his baggy cream blue pants. I’d seen Deuxième in 
shorts: he had match-stick legs. A skinny man in loose clothing. He looked sickly in 
the heat of the rising afternoon. 

“It’s nice to see you, Sean,” Ashmeou said. 

“You too, Ashmeou.” He had brought her to flaunt her. I wondered if she knew.
“You should stop by for dinner.” She wore an ivory blouse and a long black skirt. Only her ankles and arms showed.

I nodded. Not only had Deuxième won our little battle, he felt the need to gloat. He paraded his new clothes and his wife through the office to make me jealous.

“Have you heard from Fran? Is she well?”

“Well enough, I guess.”

She nodded. Deuxième said something to her in Pular. She excused herself and left. I wanted Deuxième to leave instead. His maneuvering was going to tire me quickly. I turned back to my desk.

“So, did you call in about the computers?” he asked.

I stopped. “Yeah. They’re waiting in Conakry. Mr. Fulrun said he’ll send them up when the printers arrive.” He already knew this.

“Oh, good. See, I knew they’d be helpful at the office.”

He pretended like nothing had happened, that a great conflict had been avoided. Maybe, but it felt underhanded and conniving. A different political game, Guineans worked on two levels: one of confrontation and one of denial. Covert confrontations happened through intermediaries. If Le Chef had a problem with me, he gave Cherif a cryptic message that Cherif related to me best he could. I had to decipher it. The first time it happened, I confronted Le Chef and he denied the whole thing. The constant outsider, I functioned in a world of two languages—the staff able to talk around me. I considered making a rule that only French could be spoken at the office, but I realized it would challenge their pride.

Binta arrived.
“I thought you were sick?” I went out to her.

“No. Whatever gave you that idea?” She set her stiff, red leather purse in her bottom desk drawer. Besides the purse, the desk only contained two pens and three pencils.

“Well, you weren’t here.”

“I told you that I would be late today.”

“I don’t remember that.”

“You forgot then.” Forgot her child coming in to say that she was sick. Forgot that she lies. And she left it at that, turning to arrange her desk top.

She sat in the central entrance area that doubled as a reception room. Her room, decorated simply with two couches and two puffy—but uncomfortably hard—chairs connected my office, directly behind her, to Le Chef’s to her left and Deuxième’s to her right. A few FWP posters hung on the wall next to a picture of the president. The last was necessary in all offices—though not a written law. Public officials grew uneasy if they slipped out of the gaze of their head-of-state. Le Chef’s office had all the filing cabinets, except for a few in mine that I kept locked. I left the second floor offices and walked down the stairwell from the balcony to the driveway. I wanted space to think.

I went into the first floor meeting room and into the kitchen to make some tea. From the driver’s lounge came the constant hum of an FM radio. The compound—office, small garage, and guard hut—was silent for most of the day except for the radios and occasional truck. We kept all of our rice and cooking oil in a warehouse near an army barracks. After the water had heated on the small stove, I
poured myself a cup of green tea. Outside, in the noon sun, I walked around the
interior perimeter. Both our office and warehouse compound were painted white with
our green horn-of-plenty logo stenciled at odd angles inside and out. Rimmed with
razor wire, the guards looked formidable with uniform and arms, but they carried no
bullets.

The great joke in Guinea: the army couldn’t shoot. The President, afraid of a
coup, refused to give out bullets. He armed the military, police, gendarme, and the
small navy with AK-47 from China and old Russian rifles, but kept all the bullets.
They trained at a firing range and stayed at the ready, but only with bayonets for
defense. It was a show army. Even our guards, from a private company, begged for
bullets. Despite their demands, I wouldn’t give them any. Jim suggested the rule; I’d
enforced it. If I had given them any, they would all have gone hunting. My staff was
always killing things.
8.

When I came back to my office, I heard Le Chef, Deuxième, and Binta talking in Pular. Laughing and joking. Patting each other on the back. I walked out of my office and down to the chauffeur’s lounge. A big dry board listed all of my driver’s names, their vehicles, and the *tournées* planned for the day. Junior had a mission to Lelouma, but was napping on the couch.

“Junior, wake up,” I said.

He rolled over and opened his eyes. Seeing me, he sat up. I rarely dealt with the drivers; they still feared me. The computer battle had meant nothing to them: they only went along because Le Chef, who handed out their paychecks, told them too. They were afraid of Le Chef.

“Why are you still here?” I asked.

Junior rubbed his eyes and felt for his cigarette packet in his breast pocket—he seemed concerned about them. We called him Junior because, sixteen years ago, he was the second Ousman on staff. He was the eldest now, but the name had stuck.

“Aren’t you going to Lelouma?”

“Yeah boss, but it’s only two hours away and I don’t want to get there before the principal is around.”

“What are you taking with you?”

“They need more oil.” The cigarette pack was empty.

“Well, let’s go get it.”

He was confused.
“Fire up your truck and wait for me,” I said and went back to close up my office. “Binta,” I called.

She came out of Le Chef’s office, scooting her flat heels across the floor in shuffling slides, her thick legs constrained by her tightly wrapped skirt. “Yeah boss.”

“I’m going to Lelouma. If someone comes to see me tell them to talk with Deuxième.”

She froze. The laughter in the office behind her stopped. I locked my office window and drawers and filled my water bottle. When I passed back through the entrance room, Le Chef and Deuxième leaned out of Le Chef’s door. I paid them no attention.

I wanted them to be perplexed, to throw them off their game. I never went to the bush unscheduled, nor alone. I had never left them in charge of the office. They’d be in radio contact if something came up, but I wanted to get out of there. I needed to escape. Only by leaving could I gain the upper hand, I thought. If I stayed, I played their game by their rules. If I left, I’d confuse them and have time to reassess. They needed to not be in control.

Junior had the engine running, waiting for me. I opened the passenger door and climbed in, the vinyl bench seat of the Toyota pickup already warm. Junior had a few tapes on the dashboard and prayer beads hung from the rear-view mirror, but otherwise he kept a clean car. With his shades on and clutch in, he played with the gear shift while chewing a match. The fear I’d put in him when I woke him up was gone. Now I was in his world.

“Let’s go,” I said.
He didn’t budge, just rolled the match in his mouth.

“Junior, what are we waiting for?”

“Just a minute,” he said. I looked around. The gate was open. The car was running. I had my stuff and he seemed to have his.

A boy in an oversized, torn, Iron Maiden T-shirt came running barefoot with a pack of cigarettes and some change. He ran up to Junior’s open window and handed him a pack of cigarettes and then ran to my door to jump in the truck. He paused with a hand on the latch. He saw me leaning out the window over him. His arms were skinny, pocked with shiny round scars, in his too-big shirt. His feet were white from bare-foot play and work.

Junior said something in Pular, pointing to the bed of the truck, as he put the transmission into gear and let out the clutch. We pulled out of the parking spot while the kid scrambled onto the bumper and over the tailgate to sit on a wheel-well.

Angry, I couldn’t think of an appropriate response. I stayed quiet. A cigarette run slowed us, and then I found us carting some kid around town—to where, I didn’t know. Nor who this kid was and why he listened to Junior. He didn’t look like Junior. I should’ve asked.

Instead, I fumed. I felt more and more powerless—no space was left for me to control. Junior drove and chewed his match end. He set his cell phone on the dash, useless outside of city limits—barely receiving a signal in Labé—and settled in.

Through the streets of Labé we wove around bikes and motos and shitty taxis. The stiff shocks were unweighted and pushed us hard over the bumps. Junior raced, constantly in lower-gears so he could explode forward at the first gap. Cherif was calm
and patient, no need to push the vehicle, and Junior the opposite. He put it all on the line.

I looked back. The boy loosely held the side of the truck as we bounced along. He barely noticed our speed.

Junior saw me looking back. “My sister’s boy,” he said. “He lives near the warehouse. He comes to work with me and runs errands for people. Good boy, very smart.”

“Why isn’t he in school today?” I asked, keeping my voice calm.

“His teacher is bad. He goes sometimes and passes, but he learns more with me.” Junior smiled at me and I looked away.

We swung past the military barracks and around to the far side of the FWP warehouse. Junior honked twice and a guard sauntered out the gate, eyed us, and let us in. The boy in the back jumped out and ran off, waving at Junior.

“His mom lives over here?” I asked.

“Yeah, his dad’s a military man. That boy’ll grow up to be general, maybe run the country someday.” He smiled again. Junior’s smile wasn’t reassuring, just the opposite—a joke on someone else. I was never sure if it was me or an absent third party.

“You can wait here, I’ll run in and grab the bottles.” He got out of the car, leaving it idling, and jogged a slow walk to the warehouse.

I sat for a second, then decided to turn off the car and follow. I visited the warehouse rarely. Last time it was with Le Chef right after a lorry had come with a shipment of rice and oil. A flurry of busyness with people running and carrying 110
pound sacks of rice and ten gallon jugs of oil. I had no forklift, no machines to move
stuff around—it was all man power. Inside, Le Chef pored over the stacks of rice,
counting and recounting. One bag had been “misplaced.” Le Chef yelled accusations
of stealing. A search went out, the place went on lock-down. Le Chef accused a
foreman, who accused the driver, who accused a fat guard. Every man accused
someone else of stealing. After twenty minutes of searching, the missing sack
appeared behind a truck wheel. At every delivery there was a jug or sack that
disappeared but it was always found and added to the tally. I dealt with tonnage, of
rice and oil. Thousands of sacks and jugs came through the operation every few
months. When school closed for the summer, my warehouse’s stock went down. In
summer it became anemic and looked ill-suited for its purpose, a scant sprinkling of
piles here and there, the empty unlit space felt like a refuge for dust.

School had just started up again in Guinea, so we found the place full. It’d be
four or five weeks before the teachers would go on strike. Before it would happen, I
knew the story. The government minister in charge of paying them would try to steal
the payroll, hoping no one would notice. But they would. The schools would close,
sending the students to the street to pester the rest of Guinean society. After a few
days, everyone would protest in the streets with the students and teachers. Guineans
loved a good protest.

On the cement floor that kept the place cool into the early afternoon, between
stacks of grain and oil piled on mice-friendly wooden pallets, I found the guards and
warehouse workers sitting on top of rice sacks around a makeshift rice sack table
playing a loud game of crazy-eights. They slammed cards down with violent gestures,
laughing. They yelled, cheating as often as possible. Junior grabbed cards from a man’s hand and shouted at him in Pular—probably to load the car—and then, taking a cigarette out of his pocket, lighting it and smoking it, took the man’s seat and started playing. He sat himself down like a card-shark serving his prey.

I stood behind Junior. A quiet came over the game and they paused. Junior looked over his shoulder at me.

“They’re loading the car.” He puffed his cigarette.

“Fine. Let’s hurry,” I said.

“Okay.” He turned back to the game.

A man made tea on a charcoal fire in a corner of the warehouse. His small metal kettle boiled over onto the coals, making the room smell of burning sugar and caramelized mint. He grabbed the pot with his callused hands, moved it off the fire, and commenced the mixing process.

“Hurry with the tea,” Junior shouted.

The man with the kettle nodded and began to pour the tea between two cups, making a thick foam.

Junior started losing at cards quickly. The man he kicked out of the game loaded the truck, passing by us with each bag of rice and each jug of oil. Every time he passed—on his slim legs and soiled shorts, FWP T-shirt on top, two 110 pound bags of rice on his head—he paused to notice that Junior was gaining cards, not losing them.

The tea was brought over. The guard offered Junior a shot glass full of thick, tarry, sugared chai, and then offered me a glass. I turned it down – I had tried it once
and didn’t like the taste. It’d been when Fran and I were living above the family, the son had invited me down. We sat around a little fire on a cool night and he brewed up a pot of vile tasting tea. I didn’t sleep that night, too much energy and caffeine pulsed in my head. The boy thought it was funny.

The man returned to find Junior holding half the deck. The man slapped Junior hard on the shoulder, grabbed the cards back, and pushed him out of the seat, yelling at him the whole time, and then turned back to the game. The other men laughed at Junior.

Junior roared back at them. He kicked the bag of rice that the loader sat on, the smell of rice dust floating up, and left with me following.

“They cheat,” he said, loud enough for anyone to hear.

I’d played the game with Guineans before—they all cheated. “Isn’t that the point?”

“No.” Junior turned to me. “I don’t cheat.”

But he had. I’d watched him. That was why he had so many cards: he cheated and got caught every time he tried.

We climbed into the car. A fresh match went into Junior’s mouth. The man with the tea came over and offered us two more shots worth.

“You brew tea like a little boy.” Junior grabbed the tea from the man, drank it, and made a face of pain. “Let someone else make it next time. You use too much sugar.”
The man shouted back at Junior, but in one fluid motion Junior turned the car on, put it into first gear, and slid the car over the dust. We raced the guard to open the gate.
An hour had passed and the road was still rough, more potholes than actual track. An inch-deep layer of dust sat on the road like a blanket of snow. It kicked up into plumes around us and was sucked back in our windows by the draft. With our truck’s air conditioner broken, the plastic seats made my clothes sweat against me. Each time a taxi—overloaded with people and gear, children hanging off the roof, chickens tied in live bundles like dead fish, goats and cows tied up around the hoofs with heads hanging to the side—dodged us, diving off the ridges of the road and into the bumpier sections, the road’s soot encrusted my face and hair. The sun was inescapable. The open plains of the plateau were inescapable.

Women walked the edge of the road, wrapped in pagné skirts and loose T-shirts. They balanced bundles of wood and bowls of goods on their heads while they carried their babies strapped to their backs. They chewed large sticks to clean their teeth; toothpaste was a luxury item. As we passed, the women darted into the grass at the last second, like deer caught running a trail, and pulled their shirts over their mouths. The children jumped and waved, naked but for shorts under swollen bellies, eyes hoping we might stop and say hello—their expectations comically unrealistic.

I had traveled back roads by taxi before this job. The focus of thought in a taxi had always been on my own discomfort and misery. I hadn’t had time to view others. I enjoyed the leisure of watching from my new position.

A woman, instead of jumping to the side, flagged us with her hands. Junior barged past her, an invincible logging-truck-driver. Then he slammed on the brakes. He skidded the car over the gravel, bringing us to a stop, the cloud of dust we had
been carrying behind us engulfing the truck. It came through the windows and settled into my lap.

Junior didn’t say anything to me, but said something loudly in Pular. The car idled as he looked out the side view mirror. The woman was jogging, in her flip-flops and skirt, to the car with a basketful of eggplants the size of footballs. She came up to Junior’s window. Her face was old for a woman carrying so much and running so quickly. The lines on her face were a spider-web of cracks and she spoke a high-nasal Pular. She looked, and sounded, more like a small animal than an old woman. She stared past Junior at me, barley seeing over the edge of the truck. A small, raisined woman with bright eyes sized me up in my button down shirt, top two buttons undone revealing my white chest. She was all modesty, wrapped head to foot in bright cloth. Turning her face back to Junior, she shook her head no. Junior said some fast words at her and jerked us forward.

She yelled, in squeaks, after us. Junior stopped the car and slapped the side of the truck twice. Behind me I saw her climb into the truck bed with her eggplants. She pulled up a seat on one of the rice sacks. No sooner did she sit than Junior drove away.

More dust and more confusion.

I hated not knowing the language. I hated having life happen in undecipherable patterns around me. Too arrogant to question Junior, too proud to ask, I tried to figure it out on my own. The old lady must have been a friend of Junior’s, because no other way could he justify taking her. Taking non-approved people in FWP vehicles was forbidden.
We climbed the mountains, passing through the low areas of rivers where towns stood around central water-sources. The land alternated between green and yellow. Yellow in the flats from sunburnt grass, green near the rivers from agriculture. Fields of onions, potatoes, tomatoes, bananas and okra grew in the lowlands enclosed by the mud and straw huts of the towns. By early afternoon everyone was hiding from the heat.

Junior flew through towns with a speed rarely seen on dirt roads. While taxis picked their way through pocked roads on coil shocks, bouncing hard in each divot, we floated like a prize fighter sparring in warm up. Grimacing now and again, Junior braked hard to slide us around an obstacle, a boulder in the road or a misaligned bridge—but even the slide was barely slower. I turned to see the woman in back. She seemed to sleep, chin on chest, rocking with the swerves of the car, her head scarf falling over her face. A leg showed from under her pagné, her skin loosely tight, like layers of scar-tissue or an old tarp. Her feet were balls of callus, harder than rocks.

We hit a chicken and feathers flew in the air. Junior didn’t flinch. A kid in shorts ran to pick it up and cut its head off with a knife.

We climbed out of the lowlands. The front wheels slipped on the dust that settled into the pot holes as the road grew steeper. Junior shifted the truck into four-wheel drive. The engine revved and shuttered and then pulled the truck up a road that could only be described as an engineering feat of sheer stupidity. The road ran straight up the face of the hill making it a river of mud in the rainy season. We wove from side to side around exposed rocks. I rolled up my window, the dust slamming into the car. The vents blew the filtered hot air of the afternoon at my sweat. Red road dust caked
the plastic-burlap’s fibers of the rice sacks and the plastic oil jug’s handle contained pools of dust.

At the top of the hill Junior stopped.

“It’s time to pray, I’ll stop for a minute.” He opened his door and reached behind his seat to pull out a prayer mat and water bottle. He threw his cigarettes onto the dash and closed his door.

The woman climbed out to join Junior in the shade to pray—she behind him.

I decided to get out too: the cab was turning into a heat prison. Junior and the woman had taken the only shade. They knelt and bowed behind an acacia tree at a taxi-stand shelter. I looked around to figure out where people could have been coming from. We were on the dome rise on the top of a barren hill. Nothing but the tree and shelter. The ground, exposed bedrock and small pebbles accented with dead plants and ash, was scraped clean and a haze of dust sat around the hill’s edges, whiting out the distant views. The road, a cleared area with scattered gravel on the bedrock to flatten out the bumps, looked no different than the scorched fields.

I walked some ways down the road and then turned to look back. The truck seemed small out in the open. The two Muslims counted prayer beads and mumbled towards Mecca. At the outer edge of the vacant hill, cows trotted at a quick pace to the shade on the other side, trying to escape the sun. A boy ran behind them with a long whip stick. Small and thin in shorts and no shirt, he didn’t notice us—his voice barely audible over the hot afternoon breeze. The stillness of the day gone, it would be windy until the evening. Worn into the pebbles, footpaths spread like cracks in a vase from the taxi stop towards the horizon. Life seemed just out of view in the dry season.
Junior picked me up in the truck.

“It’s not far now, just over two mountains,” he said. In the direction he pointed, ash and smoke rose into the sky from the direction we were heading. The smoke turned gray and then a light blue. The heat made the distant hills move.

“It’s further than I thought.”

“Are you tired?” He smiled. Guineans believed that white people were soft and cannot handle Africa; we were incapable of enduring the continent’s trial—we survived only by the kindness of locals. They always searched for my weaknesses.

“No, I just think you’re driving slow.” I smiled back.

Junior frowned. “It’s a rough road.”

I laughed at him, but he was all serious talk now.

“You shouldn’t go walking alone in the bush. There are snakes,” he said.

“I didn’t see any.”

“You’re not trained to see them. We can see them though.”

“I thought only the devil could see all of the snakes.”

“I didn’t say all of them. But we know where the devil lives, and where the snakes are.”

I left it at that. It was a common story that I didn’t push. Guineans feared snakes and the devil. The snakes I understood, most Guineans I knew told me about a relation who died from a snake bite. Junior didn’t want to radio in that I had died on his watch.

The devil was more complicated. He was not described in the way I was used to—red with horns, or a black tail—but as a mischievous shape shifter. A snake
passing in the mist. I didn’t know where their fear of the devil came from; maybe a pagan throwback, something passed down between generations. It mattered little though; they were afraid of it and avoided speaking about it. Their fear mixed not wanting to be ridiculed for their unfounded anxiety, their dislike of their old pagan beliefs, and an uncomfortable feeling of doubt.

Winding down the mountain through runoff-worn switchbacks, we made our way into the Korbé valley. Another small town spread out below us, straddling the road and the river at once. We shot through town losing no speed from the downhill. The shops were shuttered, houses closed off. The place looked abandoned.

“Where is everyone?” I asked.

“They’re in Lelouma for the market.”

Along the road heading out of town there was a loosely woven thread of people going towards, and coming back from, Lelouma. Baskets and bowls were balanced on people’s heads, strapped onto bicycles with thin tires and steel frames, and held by passengers on small motorcycles that bounced along the graded road. Taxis began returning towards Labé carrying layers of loads with them. A sea of black faces too numerous to count and too tightly packed to differentiate, huddled with mouths covered against the dust, filled the insides of Peugeot station wagons and sedans driven by men with sweaty faces and small shoulders.

Lelouma, fit into the final corner of the plateau with cliffs dropping off from every edge of town but the entrance, was a spit of a city into the sky. And it was run down. It didn’t have the busy paved truck route like Labé, with roads leading to other countries. A dead-end town, the road ended at the far side of town in the conifer
planted the French had planted. The carcass of an unfinished university, abandoned in the 80’s with the old regime, decayed in the pines. The town stayed away from the empty buildings, the administrative offices sat near the entrance to town with the school complex. We pulled into the school yard, passing through an open gate in a chain-link fence.

No one was there.

Junior turned off the engine. The car bounced as the old lady climbed down from the bed. Junior watched her in the side view as she came up to him. She unrolled the top of her pagné and handed him a 500 Franc note. The bill was brown and soiled, limp and ripped, and had passed through too many hands to be worth anything anymore. Junior just looked at her. No market lady would accept such a bill; they demanded fresh, crisp money.

He pointed at the money and talked in Pular, his eyes large.

She grabbed her bowl of eggplants and balanced it on her head.

He yelled and started to wag his finger at her.

She held out the bill and squeaked back.

He pointed at her skirt.

She shook her head and peered in at me, looking past Junior completely.

I looked towards the school.

He grabbed the bill and barked some more.

He grabbed three eggplants from her bowl – the largest eggplants she had.

She put her hands out to receive them back, her voice growing fainter as she talked.
He shook one of the eggplants at her, accusing, and then waved her off with the back of his hand.

She held still, her hands ready to receive.

He placed the eggplants on the seat between us and stuffed the bill in his chest pocket.

“What was that all about?” I asked him.

“She said she’d pay 2,000. But now she says she doesn’t have the money. I told her then she shouldn’t have gotten in.”

“You gave her a ride for money?”

“I did her a favor – the cost should be 5,000 and cars never stop for people out here. It’s people like her that are pulling this country down. They lie and cheat and make it hard for us to develop.”

“But we don’t give people rides,” I said. I wanted to point out that it’s an FWP rule, but I knew that I had no control. The woman still stood there. Hands waiting. Watching.

“You want me to make this old woman walk?”

“No. But you can’t take money for it.” Trying to assert control only made it more obvious.

“If I don’t take money they’ll never learn the value of work.” Junior turned the car on and put it into gear, spinning out the rear tires, almost knocking the old lady down. He began mumbling to himself in Pular, looking into the mirror and cursing. He came back to French, “No one’s here. We’ll go to the mayor’s office and find out where the principal is.”
Before I could think of a response, before my anger and disappointment materialized into words, he swung the car around in the school’s red dust courtyard and out the gate. Across the street he parked in front of a low cinderblock building with an angled front porch and cracking cement stairs. Three men sat on plastic chairs in suits that would have made Chairman Mao feel at home. One wore brown, one gray, and one navy. Above the tin roof of the building, a shortwave antenna stretched out. Next to the building some men were cutting down a tree—they already had four on the ground.

Junior and I got out of the truck and mounted the steps.

“Junior, why are they cutting down those trees?” They were acacias, with dropping yellow flowers and crescent shaped leaves, planted to shelter the building from the sun’s heat.

We walked up to the men and saluted them, exchanging opening remarks. Junior pulled out a cigarette and each of the three men asked for one. He handed them out. Junior asked the men, in Pular, why they were cutting down the trees. The one in brown, the one who was short with a round face and belly, said, in French, “The governor didn’t like them. They had too many birds in them and they woke him up in the morning."

“Where’s the governor?” I asked.

“At his house."

“Where’s that?”

“He lives behind the offices."

Junior dispensed with the pleasantries. “Why is there no one at the school?”
“It’s market day, they’ve all gone to the market. The teachers have gone home.”

“Hmm.” Junior settled into smoking.

“When will they come back?” I asked.

“At four.”

I turned to Junior. “I don’t want to wait until four.” I turned back to the men. They had pocketed their cigarettes and looked out towards the school yard and the woman with the eggplants. “Where does the principal of the school live?”

They talked in Pular for a moment. “He lives by the University.”

“Thanks.”

I walked towards the car. Junior said goodbye in Pular and followed.

At the principal’s house, a small compound of mud-brick walls and doors to one room apartments, we found three women working, but no men. One cooked, one washed clothes, and one swept the dirt compound clean of debris. Junior asked them about the principal. They said he wasn’t there.


He turned back to me. “Three other teachers. They’re not here either.”

“Do they know where the principal is?”

Junior turned and discussed.

“He’s in Labé visiting his wife.”

“What?”

“He left yesterday, he should be back tonight or tomorrow.”

“Are they sure?”
He talked with them in Pular. They all laughed.

“Yes.”

I thanked them and left.

I slumped into the vinyl of the truck. Junior said goodbye and returned.

“Let’s stop and ask the officials, to make sure.” I said.

Junior popped a cigarette out of his pack and began rolling it around in his mouth. He honked through the streets as we pulled up along the market area. It was a cattle stampede of people in bright colors, a low hum of conversation and bartering. Women sat nursing babies along the road, their day-old produce spread on cut up refugee tarps and canvas sheets. Children and chickens, casually sliding to the side, pretended not to notice the truck’s honking.

At the office, the men hadn’t moved. A boy ran to them with fried bananas wrapped in paper and the workers cut down their last tree. Children searched the downed tree branches for birds’ nests, pets, and eggs.

I walked up the steps while Junior waited in the car. “Where’s the principal?”

“We told you,” the round one said. “School is out for market.”

“Is the principal in town?”

They talked in Pular. “No. He went to Labé to see his wife.”

“Why didn’t you tell me earlier?”

The man in brown shrugged his shoulders before leaning over the fried bananas with the others.

“When will he be back?” I asked.

“Maybe tomorrow. Why don’t you ask at his house?”
“I did.” I turned without saying goodbye.

“If you have something for the school, you can leave it with us,” one called behind me. I ignored him. We only left supplies with principals—these men reminded me why.

I tried radioing Labé from the truck to find out why no one had checked with the principal. No one answered. Behind me I heard yelling. A boy had found a baby bird. He cradled it in his hands, cheering and laughing. The others rushed him. They scuffled and the bird jostled free, falling to the ground before getting stepped on. A pushing match began and the young buy made a wild swing, but then the older boys pushed the younger one down and laughed.
The next day, as was normal, I arrived at the office before everyone else. I was still angry over my wasted trip from the day before. In the end, we had gone out for no reason. My anger was only compounded when I returned to find the office empty. They had all left early for the day. I planned on holding a meeting with the office staff. I wanted to organize my thoughts.

I turned on the radio to find myself already being called. I placed my bag in my office and came back to Binta’s desk to answer the radio.

“Labé here,” I said.

“Hold on Labé, Mister Fulrun wants to speak with Mister Wake.”

I set down the mike and retrieved my water bottle from my office. The rooms were dark, the only light came from the open main door and the radio’s glow.

“Sean, it’s Jim.”

“Hey Jim.”

“I’m sure that Mamadou told you that he found a printer. I’ll send up the computers today with our I.T. guy.”

“Okay, sounds good.” No, he hadn’t told me that.

“I’ll call up when the truck leaves.”

“Perfect. Labé out.” Where in town had Deuxième found a printer? Mixed in between the soap and cloth boutiques, or near the butchers? No one in Labé knew what computer components were, let alone sold them.

“Conakry out.”
I opened up the windows of the office and the cool morning breeze swept out the trapped heat of yesterday. I looked out the window and realized that two trucks were gone. Cherif sat with a guard, on a short stool, huddled over some pieces of charcoal and tea. I could hear the fire crack.

Deuxième arrived on time, but was the only one to do so. The rest of the staff trickled in around a half hour late, then turned and left for breakfast. They set down their bags, arranged the papers on their desks or in their cars, and headed to the shack stand across the street where they served tea, concentrated black Robusta coffee with evaporated milk, and oily eggs on bread. I often wondered why my staff even showed up—I couldn’t fire any of them. It might have been for the eggs and coffee.

I walked over to Deuxième’s desk. The Mamadous would yell commands between offices, like children from their bedrooms. I tried to keep decorum.

Deuxième stopped what he was doing, “How was Lelouma?”

“The principal wasn’t there,” I said.

Deuxième didn’t respond.

“Didn’t you radio them yesterday before we left?”

“I never had time. You left so fast and I was feeling ill.”

I told him that we would have to go back there today.

“There aren’t any vehicles free. They’re all on mission today.”

“Cherif too?” My personal driver provided by FWP.

“He has to run Le Chef to the bank this afternoon.”

“And the other two Landcruisers, where are they?” I remembered that they were missing.
“I sent them to Conakry.”

I couldn’t imagine why.

“Sili’s Landcruiser needs new tires so I sent Omar down to pick them up and bring them back.”

“And the other?”

“Sili went down to pick up our new printer from Mammou.”

It hadn’t occurred to him, I asked, that Sili’s tires needed replacing.

“I thought it could still make it to Mammou.”

Mammou was halfway to Conakry—a four hour drive on a broken string of a winding road. It would’ve been easy for the Conakry car Jim sent to pick up everything.

“I didn’t know Jim was sending a car.” Deuxième was pushing me. Trying to prove his control over the staff and the cars, he was pushing me out of my job.

“But you talked with Conakry?” My eyes hurt.

“Yes, but they must have called back after I went home.”

I continued to stand in his office, waiting for him to offer up an explanation, something I could understand.

“We discussed it in the office and Le Chef said that, as your second in command, I was in charge when you aren’t here.”

My mind spun. He was right, which only made me, already frustrated, angrier. I’d rarely left the office in the first five months after my initial tournée, and had prepared no directions for operation in my absence; as a result, I was trapped into siding with him. He shuffled papers, clearing a spot on his desk for his new computer.
With a few quick decisions, Deuxième had thrown my monthly budget into turmoil. I needed to find money for two or three extra nights of per diem, gas, new tires, and a printer.

Deuxième stood up, oblivious to me, and moved the stack of final reports from his desk to on top of a filing cabinet in the corner. A picture of Ashmeou, moved over to the cabinet as well, looked on him from behind now. He took his black desk lamp that had never worked and moved it to the floor. He put knife-sharpened pencils in his drawer and combined piles of papers and annual reports. One pile he threw away completely. He called for Binta, yelling past me in his doorway, and told her to bring him a cloth to wash his desk.

“Where did you find the printer?” I finally asked. Binta arrived. She wore clothes I had never seen before: a new red tinted wig and a blouse with heavy pleats that fell over her breasts and flared over her hips. Her hips moved me out of the way.

He told me the story of his friend who had the rapidly improving internet café.

“What is his name?”

“Mamadou,” he told me. “But everyone calls him Bolton.”

“Do you know if it’ll work with our computers?”

Deuxième said he saw no reason why it shouldn’t. In a country where the man with a hammer is a mechanic, cars run off of D-cell batteries and empty tomato-paste-can carburetors, the man with a computer could call himself a technician.

I mumbled in English, but no one heard me. I left his office.

I made myself a cup of tea and waited for the computers to arrive, busying myself by filing away paperwork. I put on my headphones and realized no one was
coming to bother me. Instead, Deuxième’s office saw a constant stream of people coming and going. I closed my door and fell asleep in my chair, only to wake up in the heat of the afternoon with a fever taking over.

“I’m going home, I don’t feel well.” I told Binta. My hands felt swollen.

“It must have been the trip to Lelouma,” she said.

Deuxième overheard. “But it is only one in the afternoon.”

I ignored him and told Binta to call Cherif for me. My elbows and knees hurt.

“But Cherif is taking Le Chef after lunch. Cherif can’t take you right now,” Deuxième said.

I walked out the door and called Cherif’s name as I descended the stairs and climbed into his car.
For the whole of the weekend I was sick, cycling through fever and chills and nausea. When I had first arrived, the diseases scared me and made me wish for home. It annoyed me that I fell ill every two months. It annoyed me that I’d lose ten pounds, become dehydrated, and be unable to take care of myself. It annoyed me that nothing made my joints comfortable, my stomach settled, or my head clear.

Trust came in on the weekend. She sat and watched movies with me—the generator throbbing in the background—made me soup, made sure I took my pills, and cared for me. Laughing hard at the movies and talking about the stupid things the characters did, Trust was the annoying woman at the theatre. The only time she left my house was for Church with the Hawthorns on Sunday, and when she returned they were with her.

I propped myself up on the couch, focused more on my nausea than on the conversation. George and Celeste had brought along their oldest, Mary, who wore a white dress that flared from the waist more than it should’ve for a fourteen-year-old girl. She was out of touch and out of fashion. Trust put water on to boil for tea and coffee, while the guests sat around waiting.

“I hear you haven’t been feelin’ too well Sean,” George said.

“Yeah, I got a touch of something.” I waited.

They settled into chairs. I always felt the presence of Jesus in the room when they were there.

“Has Trust been taking good care of you?” Celeste asked.

“Yeah, she’s been great.” I lowered my voice. “She talks a lot during movies.”
They laughed some. Mary stared at me.

We were in the afternoon stillness. “I feel bad that we haven’t made it over here sooner.” George said. “You’ve been at your new job, what, two months?”

“Four.”

“How time gets filled. Is work keeping you busy?”

“It keeps me on my toes.”

“I think you’re doing some really good work over there, Sean.”

“I’m trying.” My legs were crossed under me, but my stomach began to twist again. I placed my feet on the floor.

“I hear Mamadou’s been helping out Bolton at the Café. It’s nice to see them both working together.”

“How do you know Mamadou and Bolton?” I asked.

Trust entered with a tray of cups and drinks. She set them onto the table and joined the conversation. “Bolton married a Christian girl in our church and has been attending with her.”

“He converted?”

“No, he’s just interested. Bolton’s an interesting man.” George poured himself a cup of tea with two sugars.

I wasn’t interested in Bolton. My face flushed. I leaned back against the couch, head nodding to one side. I blinked hard and long, concentrating on regaining control.

“I hear you went out to Lelouma last week, beautiful isn’t it?” Celeste said.

“What did you think of the views?”
I sat forward. These people knew more about my life than I did. “It was too dusty out for me to see very far?”

“It’s that time of year.”

“But I have to go out again this week.”

“Do you think that’s wise?”

“Oh sure. I think it does me more good to get out of this town – this town is what makes me sick.”

“Give yourself time to recover – bad things can get worse if you push yourself too hard. Remember, this isn’t the states, there’s no hospital,” Celeste said.

“I’m used to being sick now. Kind of comes with the territory.” I tried to laugh, but winced instead.

“Don’t fool yourself. You don’t get used to this. We’re not meant for it.” George said.

Silence took over and Trust sat down on the couch next to me. Her heft made the wooden frame of the furniture groan. She laughed. “Look at you all so serious.” Mary smiled.

Trust turned to Mary, “Mary, how’s school going?”

My mind left the conversation. When I woke up again, the Hawthorns were gone. I rewatched another movie with Trust and pretended, for a few moments, that I was no longer in Africa.
When things went right, I knew something was going wrong. On Monday morning the Conakry car was waiting to be unloaded and our two Landcruisers had returned. We unloaded the new tires, new printer, and new computers. The staff competed to carry the computer and monitor boxes—two people to a carton.

A pile of boxes sat in the middle of Binta’s entrance area. No one had been late today and they all swarmed to Binta’s desk, waiting for the presents to be opened. They had no idea what Christmas was, but they looked like children huddling around a tree. I double checked the equipment’s shipment list on the *ordre de mission*: the towers and keyboards, monitors, power strips, power regulators, extension chords, mouse pads, and dust covers were all there. We waited for the technician to arrive.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“He’s late,” Le Chef said.

“I can see that, but does anyone know where he is?”

“The guard said that he went to stay with a friend,” Binta said.

I scanned the faces in the room. “Does anyone know where his friend lives?”

No one answered.

“Well, I’ll start setting them up then.”

I picked up a box containing a tower and carried it into my office. Others followed me in. They picked up boxes and brought them along as well. Having no idea which boxes I needed, they transferred all of the boxes into my office.

I began setting up the computer. The room watched my every movement, the whole compound quiet but for my movements. Once done, I told Binta to have
generator turned on. No one moved. Some one nudged Binta and the spell was broken.

She moved and yelled down too the guards in Pular.

After a rough cough of exhaust the generator caught and idled high. Then the power switch was turned on. The lights in the office came on in the mid-morning sun and the generator took the deeper hum of work. I pushed power.

The room crowded around. They pushed and jostled for position as the screen lit up.

“Bienvenue à Dell.” The computer said at full volume.

The crowd jumped back. A skittish guard who had wandered into the room took off.

“Computers can talk?” Le Chef asked.

“No. Well, some,” I said. “Hey, what are you all doing here? Get back to work.” No one moved. “Get to work.”

They left, leaving just the office staff and me.

“Well, who’s next?”

“I am,” said Deuxième.

“Okay then, grab one of each box and let’s go.”

“How do you know how to do this? I thought you studied economics in school?” Deuxième asked.

“Well, yeah, but I still had to use a computer.”

I set Deuxième’s computer on his desk. As I finished connecting all the pieces the technician showed up.

“What are you doing?” he asked me.
“I’m setting up the computer, what does it look like I am doing?”

“That’s my job, you get away from that. You’re going to break it.” He wore over-sized pants with a belt cinching pleats on his waist. His fake gold necklace and football jersey only accentuated his thin body and small head. Pulling up his pants as he walked around the room, he shuffled over to me and pushed me out of his way.

“You see, you connected it wrong. The keyboard connects here,” he said.

I watched him as he unplugged the keyboard and replugged it in elsewhere. “Didn’t they tell you I’m the one to set this up,” he continued. “I’m trained, this is my job.”

“You’re also two hours late,” I said.

“You were supposed to pick me up.” He stood and faced me. The man moved closer to me. He was used to intimidating the people around him, a rooster with big feathers.

“And where would that have been? At the bar?” His breath smelled of schnapps.

“Don’t talk to me like that. I’ll leave.”

I had made a false step, pushed it too far, and had become rude. “I mean, we weren’t sure where you were. The driver didn’t remember where he had dropped you on Friday.”

The man turned back and started disconnecting all the cords so that he could start over. I assumed he accepted my apology so I left the technician and Deuxième to feast over the computer.
When Junior came into my office and asked if I wanted to go back to Lelouma with him, I jumped at the chance to salvage the respect that I had just won back. I was trapped battling another man for control of my office and I did what was becoming a habit—I ran off into the bush.

We found the principal in his office after a bumpy smoke filled ride. They were still burning the fields, covering the road in smoke and pieces of ash. We had driven with the windows down hoping to keep out the heat, but without air-conditioning it was not much better. It made for easier breathing, that was all. Just before Lelouma, the hills were a parched blaze. A backlit fire had gotten out of control and climbed into the forested land at the edges, igniting lower trees and singed taller ones. The flames encroached on the road—the car’s glass absorbed the heat and thick smoke obscured the road. Junior drove slowly. Children and men—their faces covered in wet handkerchiefs, eyes protected by cheap sunglasses—emerged from the forest, the fire, and the smoke. To our left, down the hill, in an area cleared but not yet burned—the brush and trees cut to the ground—hunters crouched with shotguns waiting for animals to be flushed down towards them. A little ways further, past the fire and smoke, once our windows were rolled down again, we saw a man with a large wild boar over his shoulders, blood dripping from its snout. Its teeth were gnarled and its hair sparse. It must have weighed 200 pounds.

We entered the principal’s office, an unpainted cement room with termite tracks on the walls, and found him sitting at a wooden table grading papers. All around us we heard the monotone chants of school children shouting in unison as they read the lessons on the board. I couldn’t understand what they were saying. It was clear that
some students couldn’t read and lagged a half a second behind the others echoing what they heard.

The principal stood up. He was a stout man. Short with a grayish beard only on his chin. His sport coat’s sleeves were too long for his arms so he’d rolled up the tweed cuffs. Underneath he wore a blue-oxford and a tie. Junior shook his hand enthusiastically and then introduced me.

“I’m very pleased to meet you. I’m Amadou Funa, principal of Lelouma college and lycée, but call me Funa.” He made direct eye contact as he introduced himself.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Sean, the regional program director for the FWP.”

“You’re English?”

“No, American. But you speak English?” I asked.

“I grew up in Liberia.”

“And what brought you here?” I asked.

He motioned to two chairs along the wall and we all sat down. “My family was from Dubreka, but we moved when I was a child. I grew up there and when the war started we came back to Guinea. What brings you to Lelouma?”

“I’m still new to my job and want to get a feel for the schools we’re working with,” I said. It seemed as good a reason to make up as any.

“I’m glad that you’re taking the initiative. Your predecessor—” he stopped. From the courtyard came a yell. The principal rose quickly and went out the door.

I got up and followed, but the principal had ducked into another room. Junior came to my side. “He’s a very famous man.”
I turned to Junior.

“They send him to problem schools. Here, he’s the principal of the college and the lycée.’

“Two schools?”

“Yes. These schools were very bad. The teachers were charging students and no one was passing the tests. So they sent in Mr. Funa too take care of it.”

I nodded.

Funa returned. “I’m sorry for the interruption. There always seems to be a problem. Two schools means three times the headaches.”

“Why do you run two schools?”

“I was sent here to run the lycée, but I realized how ill prepared our students were when they came from the college. When the college principal ran off with the student’s fees and food, I decided to manage both until a replacement could be found.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Two years. No one wants to work with me.” He smiled. Funa was a short man who talked and acted larger than his stature. His cheeks were loose, giving him a soft round face that soothed children, but his eyes were hard. He looked like a small boxer.

“So, you’ve brought us more oil. Good, our stock was running low.” Funa stood up. “You must excuse my directness, but we should unload before school is over.”

We walked back to the car. “Where do you want the oil and rice?” Junior asked.

“There’s a storage room behind my office.”
Junior pulled the truck up to the building. After parking, Junior walked over to a classroom and yelled, in Pular, at three boys near the door. Through the door I saw the boys’ confusion. They looked at Funa.

“What are you doing?” Funa ran over to Junior.

“Getting help for the truck.”

“These boys are in class.” Funa turned to the class and the boys. “I’m sorry for the interruption, please continue.” Funa then turned to Junior. “Do not interrupt my students. Please apologize to these boys.”

Junior looked at the principal. Funa looked up, keeping Junior in his gaze. Junior stood a foot taller than Funa, easily.

Junior turned to the boys and mumbled in Pular.

“Thank you,” said Funa. “I’m sure we can unload the truck.”

After unloading, Junior lit a cigarette and walked off on his own. He was a man who was used to being the boss. In Guinea, the civil servants were looked down on by the business men—this included the NGO workers and do-gooders of the country. Junior saw the principal’s salary, a third of his, as a form of welfare.

“Your friend’s angry for having to do his job.” Funa smiled.

I smiled back and Funa continued. “In Liberia, I was taught at a religious school. It was run by Europeans and Americans and they made us respect ourselves. Here, teachers just want their students to respect their authority.”

“Why did you move to Liberia?”

Funa outlined his history. His father had been a dancer with the famous African Ballet troupe. But when Guinea began to fall apart and became isolated, he
wasn’t making any money. The advances the dancers received went to the government, the gifts they were given were taken away to go to “the people.” He realized that he wouldn’t be able to take care of his children, so he told his wife to run to Liberia and, while on tour in Canada, he escaped from the troupe. Funa’s father never returned. He stayed in Canada and found a job teaching. He married a student and had a new family and a new life. But he never forgot his ‘African family,’’ as he called them, and sent them money every month. At first the money arrived with a letter, but as Western Union took over, he stopped writing but kept sending a third of his salary every month.

Sitting in this office on a day filled with heat and dust, the smoke starting to blow from over the hill, and Junior outside smoking, I saw a man who was trying to help, against all odds. Small but articulate, in a position of inferiority in a country ruled by the military, he tried to improve his student’s lives. I thought of the Hawthorns, and then me, and wondered how I compared.

Junior entered the room. “The smoke is getting bad from over the mountains.”

“Yes. You might want to take the other road back,” Funa said.

“It’s too hard on the vehicle,” Junior said.

“You’ve no load, and the rivers are low. A taxi just went that way yesterday.”

Junior said nothing.

“Well, we should be going. I still have work to do.”

“Can you wait five more minutes, there’s a teacher I’d like you to meet. She’s also American.” Funa stood up.

Junior grumbled in Pular, then said, in English, “I’m going to run into town.”
From under the desk, Funa retrieved a thermos and two mugs. “Would you like some tea?”

“Sure.”

He poured two mugs and placed powdered creamer and sugar on top of the desk. The desk was more of a table with a pen drawer. The boards were uneven; they were pressed and warped into dull varnished hills. Funa had the desk arranged with neat stacks of papers covered in uniform print handwriting, bound together by clips, and stored in folders. The tea had little flavor.

“It's kankilibah tea, from the bushes that grow all over our hills.”

I sipped again.

“It tastes best with sugar,” he said. “So what brought you to Africa?” He leaned back into his chair.

“A girl, I guess.”

He laughed. “Must be some girl.”

“Was.”

“But you’re still here.”

“I have a job. They’re hard to come by back home.”

He frowned some—then sipped. “What did you study? You must have gone to college.”

“Economics,” I said. He was sizing me up. The tea began to taste bitter over the sugar. “Where did you go to university?” I asked.

“I started in Liberia, but never finished there. I came to Conakry after the war and finished here. But I used to dream of going to America and going to university.”
“But you don’t now?”

“Now I have a wife, a family, and work. If I leave, who’ll do my work?” Funa placed his cup on the table and put away the creamer and sugar. His cup left a water ring on the table and he mopped it up with a folded towel. I scanned the office again. On the termite-chewed walls I saw, between the cracks in the cement and paint chips, quotes stenciled in blue and red paint.

He caught me reading them. “I studied literature. Some of these are quotes from famous Guineans. Have you read Camera Laye?”

“No, I haven’t.”

I had known nothing about Guinea before I arrived. “I was not planning on coming to Guinea. The plan was to work in Senegal.”

“No work there?”

I nodded.

“Yes. To work in Senegal, you must put in your time elsewhere.” He took my cup and put it with his. “This is elsewhere.” He looked at his watch.

“It’s time to ring the bell. Please, wait here and read the walls. I particularly like this one. The nuns at my school made us memorize it.” He left the room.

In small cursive handwriting was written “We can do no great things, only small things with great love. – Mother Teresa.”

There were bible quotes, Koran quotes, and passages from various leaders. I looked up. The roof was lashed into the cement walls with bent rebar and was made from poorly cut wood with wavy tin nailed to it. The sun came through hundreds of holes in the tin, holes ranging from pinpricks to a few almost golf ball sized punctures.
The room was dirty and spartan. A chair and table had been placed in a supply closet and labeled an office. I tried to reconcile the fact that Funa seemed a gifted and driven man, dedicated to the task ahead of him, but worked in a room that most would avoid storing their old clothes in.

Things were never what the seemed, nor what I was told, in Africa. I assumed Funa had a past he needed to keep hidden. Maybe only the normal, everyday, principal downfall story: he had slept with one of his students, or multiple, and had been chased out of town and wound up here. Maybe he had stabbed a man who went after his favorite girl, or boy. I had heard of these things happening, all pardonable offenses but with a sentence of banishment. The ministry of education was always willing to abide by community mandate and simply transfer people. This position seemed a place to transfer a pedophile/man-stabber/corrupt official to. I thought of “the nice neighbor boy” in America who ended up being a serial killer. Here, they’d be teachers, strangers from out of town, transferred into the mix.

Chaos erupted in the school yard as children ran and screamed, only to be reprimanded by Funa. I looked out through the single un-glassed window. Funa stood in front of the students, who had formed themselves into orderly lines. The yard went quiet: even the smallest children didn’t fidget in their blue and white checkered uniforms. The older children had khaki uniforms—shorts and shirts for boys, skirts and shorts for girls. The richer kids had nice fitting tailored uniforms, while others wore theirs loosely or too tightly.

Funa said, “Thank you for your effort and patience,” in French. Then in English, “Have a nice evening and see you tomorrow.”
In unison, the children called out, “You are welcome. Sleep well, and we look forward to learning tomorrow.” They filed out of the courtyard, the youngest leaving first. The teachers were left in a shady spot, next to the old car-tire rim that functioned as a bell, at the base of the flag pole, surrounded by the red and green leaves of full grown poinsettia plants. I listened to the squeaks of the old flag line as they retired their tri-color.

Funa arrived with someone following. A white girl – or woman, I’ve never been able to differentiate between the two terms with people my own age – wearing an African-print blouse followed him. He entered the room and I stood to meet them. She wore a long skirt she must have brought with her from where ever she’d come from. Her hair, pulled tight into a bun, exposed her heavy wire glasses resting on a slender nose. Her pale oval face had a hint of make up, and she was smiling.

“You are—?” She extended her hand to me before Funa could position himself to introduce us.

“Sean. And you?”

“Lars,” she said. I must have looked at her funny because she felt the need to clarify. “My parents named me Lawrence thinking I’d be called Laurie. To spite them I go by Lars.” She smiled.

“At least they didn’t name you Dick or Joy,” I said.

“No, they named my older sister and brother that.”

“Your sister’s name is Dick?”
“No, my sister’s name is—” she stopped herself and caught the joke. “Sorry, I’m a bit out of practice with sarcasm. Funa is about the only one who knows how to use it, but he’s working too hard to banter with me.”

“Not nearly as hard as you, Lars,” he said. He turned to me. “She’s one of our best teachers. I just need to find a way to keep her.”

“Funa, as long as you’re here, I’m here.” She smiled at him. “For now,” she added.

Funa laughed.

“What do you do, Sean?”

“I work for the FWP in Labé.”

“So you’re the guy who feeds our students.”

“No, just the guy that makes sure the food gets here.”

“Well, good job so far. How do you like Labé?”

Lonely, dusty, dirty, annoying. “It’s fine.”

Junior returned. In the back of the truck was a goat. It bleated, fought against the rope holding it, and then peed before lying down.

Lars laughed. “Looks like someone got you a present.”

My face turned red and I clenched my fists. The truck wasn’t to be used for personal business. The trucks carried food to hungry people, not pissing brown and black goats.

“It’s a pretty goat,” Funa said.

“You ready to go?” Junior asked.
I looked in the direction we’d come from; the smoke was coming quickly over the hill. “Funa, is there another road back? The smoke and fire seems to be blocking that one,” I asked in French so Junior would understand. I gestured to the hill.

Lars answered. “Yeah, keep going on the road through town. It’ll loop down the mountain but then climb back up again.”

“That road’s no good,” Junior said.

“I was on it three days ago. It’s fine.”

Junior grimaced. “That road’s too steep and the rivers flood it.”

“It hasn’t rained in three months and the road’s not that steep,” Lars said. She turned to me, and in English: “The drivers don’t know that road so they’re afraid of it. Yeah, it’s steep, but a truck can do it easily, especially with no load. I did it on my bike the other day and got passed by a few shitty taxis.”

Junior mumbled in Pular and said something to Funa.

“What were you doing down that way?” I asked.

“There’s a big waterfall, Chute de Sala, with a big swimming spot and some chimpanzees.”

“Can you see it from the road?”

“No, you have to take a side spur.”

“Is it easy to find?”

“Yeah. There’s a sign, and it’s right after a village on a left-hand bend in the road—you just take the spur to the end. But you probably don’t want him driving that road. It’s really rugged.”
“I guess I’ll have to go exploring. Thanks for the tip. And if you’re ever in Labé, either of you, and want a place to stay, stop by. I’ve got a big place that I barely use.”

Funa laughed. “I think I’ll stay with my wife, but I’ll stop by.”

Junior hopped into the truck and turned on the engine. I stood, about to mount.

“If you ever need a ride in too, and an FWP truck’s here, they can give you a lift.”

“Thanks.”

I waved and we left the compound.

The road was straight and took us behind the abandoned university and then out of Lelouma.

“I don’t like her,” Junior said. “She was rude and spoke in English so I wouldn’t understand.”

“You spoke in Pular.”

“It’s my country.”

He drove silently, glancing through the rearview mirror at the goat. “I think this way will be no good.”

“Have you ever driven it?”

“No, because everyone says that it’s no good.” He pulled a cigarette from his pocket and put it in his mouth. The road began to descend in big, fast switchbacks. The outside corners were slick with dust and the truck skated through them as Junior overcompensated with the brakes. His pack of cigarettes slid from side to side in the cab.
I looked out the back window at the goat. It had vomited and was covered in road dust. “Why did you get a goat?”

“It was cheap. The man sold it to me for half of what it costs in Labé.”

“Why was it so cheap?”

“I don’t know. It’s a fine goat.”

The fine goat was not looking good.

After twenty minutes of descent, the forest grew lush again and we reached the bottom of the mountain. A town of banana fields along a creek went by, and then another. I watched for the bend in the road and the side spur, but saw nothing.

We began to climb again, the truck slipping on the slick hard-pack road, as Junior down shifted. We crossed a cement bridge over a small river with wide banks. The road began to climb again. The banana fields went away, replaced by rows of potatoes and corn. Then it was all rice and fonio fields around the car. The forest became sparse and less dense and the undergrowth had been thinned out for firewood. Men and women walked with bundles of wood. A boy came running out of a collection of mud-brick huts waving a chicken as we flew by. He held it by its feet, the red and black rooster was small and thin—all bone and feather.

“This is a bad area,” Junior said.

“Why do you say that?”

“Even the chickens are small and poor.” He laughed.

Finally we came to a town around a dirt clearing with bamboo soccer goals. Just past the town was the bend in the road and the spur. “Stop,” I told Junior.
He slowed down. There was a sign reading “Chutes de Sala.” The spur cut between two cleared fonio fields framed with stick fences. Hills sloped down to a creek ahead of us, but there was no sign of a waterfall.

“Lars told me about this place. Have you ever been?” I asked Junior.

“No.”

“Do you know anyone who has?”

“No. It’s a bad place.”

“Do they have poor chickens too?”

“No. There are no chickens there. The devil lives there. I told you that she was no good, telling you to go see the devil. I don’t like her.” Before I could protest, Junior put the car into gear and pulled away, covering the sign with our dust.
A week passed and the computers had not moved. Not only were they not being used, but Le Chef’s computer boxes had not even been opened. He claimed that he had no room on his desk for the computer. He hunched over his desk in his reading glasses, meticulously shuffling papers from one pile to another. He believed that organization was the key to productivity and efficiency, not knowledge.

“Just clear off a corner of your desk,” I said.

The day was bright, the dust having temporarily been blown off of Labé. We were exposed to direct sunlight. No one was out in the open, yet everyone was outside of their house. The city hid in patches of shade, resting on raffia palm beds and prayer mats of woven plastic. Under trucks and semis, workers had strung up hammocks made from the green-nylon webbing used to hold down cargo. Dogs slept under cars. The office moved slowly.

“That’s where I keep the invoices,” Le Chef said.

“Well, move the invoices over here.”

“That’s where I put the invoices once they’ve been entered.”

“And there?” I pointed at a pen holder.

“I keep my pens there.”

“Move your pens.”

“Where too?”

His desk was sixty-percent clear, but apparently a hundred-percent accounted for. Always accounting. He had figured for everything.

“I need another desk for the computer,” he said.
I left his office, letting him trail off in an explanation.

In Deuxième’s office, the computer was unpacked and sitting on his desk, but I had yet to see him remove the dust cover. The static of the radio hung over the office and the hot afternoon winds had arrived early. It was the beginning of the oppressive time of year, when the temperature climbed over a hundred on a regular basis. We tried, as an organization, to keep the cars from *tournées* because the roads split tires and the radiators boiled over. Necessary travel only. A school near Lelouma, Korbé, had run out of food. Still angry over the goat, I sent Junior. He had not been happy with the assignment.

The drivers were only happy when they could stay overnight or went on a market day. On market days they bought produce and animals cheap and then sold them for a profit in Labé. Like Junior and his goat, which had died shortly after we got back. It had thrown up plastic bags.

Cherif had told me about the goat. Cherif kept me informed of the going-ons of my office. Too much passed in front of my face in Pular for me to understand the state of my staff. We wore ourselves down in the dry season. We stopped sweating, stopped eating, and only desired sleep. But there was a lot of work that needed to be done. Evaluations needed to be completed and tallies taken, numbers collected. The cars needed their monthly maintenance. The plants needed to be watered.

Each day was a question. Would there be water, the biggest one. Every morning I sent a driver to the water pump in the south part of town—one of the few still with water, the only one with clean water—and had him fill up twenty *bidons*, ten gallon jugs, for the office. At the end of every day I asked a guard to dump the extra
water onto the plants, but it was never enough. Fields of grass crackled like fire in the heat, the stalks, stems, and leaves split in the sun. In the evening would leave early. I planned to have Cherif pickup Trust and my bidons and take us all to the pump. My well had also run dry.

Deuxième entered my office, wearing a blue polo shirt of a construction company from Grand Island, Nebraska and suit pants. He smiled and furrowed his forehead. The lines were always visible, giving no hint of his intentions. The smile gave a hint. He rarely smiled—and never like that.

“My friend with the internet would like to talk with you,” he said. He settled into the chair and made himself at home in my office.

“Good, we should,” I said.

“He’s very excited to start the project.”

“Good.”

Silence fell between us. Deuxième seemed to expect me to speak. I’d been getting my paperwork in order and tried to continue. Outside I heard the traffic of the highway. I listened for an accident. Once a week a wreck happened, a beat up taxi passing into an on-coming semi, killing the driver and passengers. I waited and listened. Anything to get my mind off work and the heat. Deuxième cleared his throat. I looked up at him and set down my work.

“How’re the new computers?” I asked.

“They’re okay,” he said.

“Just okay?”

“Well, we haven’t had the electricity on, so it’s difficult.”
“Yeah. I was going to have the generator run this afternoon.”

A pause. “I also can’t figure out how to turn it on.”

“I think the switch is in the back.”

“Of course.” He nodded.

“Let’s fire it up,” I said, and then called out to Binta to have them turn the generator on.

I uncovered my computer and moved my chair into position. Outside, the diesel generator sputtered and then spun in a loud whir before the switch was thrown to connect us to the power. The lights came on. Binta went around and turned on more lights. Below, I heard the static of the television in the driver’s office. It was a new black and white TV. Its big rabbit ears only picked up squiggly lines and scratchy voices that faded in and out with the wind. The guards turned up their radio to cover the shaking of the generator’s exhaust pipe rattling against the cement wall.

I showed Deuxième the switch on my computer. We went to his office and he uncovered his. I leaned over him as he positioned himself in his chair and fumbled for the switch. We waited as the computer screen lit up.

Le Chef entered. “I can’t think with that generator on. Turn it off.”

“We’re using the computers,” I said.

“Use them after I go home. The generator is too loud for me to think.”

“Then close your windows.”

“And make my office hot?”

I looked at Le Chef. Today he was wearing a grey leisure suit. It only accentuated his stockiness. His small reading glasses made his head look big.
He looked at me, but not directly. He stared into the space over my shoulder. After a few moments of silence he walked past me to Deuxième’s window and reached for the shutters. His arms were almost too short to grab hold of them. He was forced to lean with his belly cushioned on the window frame. He closed the window and left Deuxième’s office with a black streak across his shirt from the wall. I heard him close the other doors and windows. Binta chattered at him in exasperated Pular. Le Chef responded sharply in low tones and shut his office door.

The computer was now up and running. Deuxième started hitting the keyboard with his index fingers. After a minute of pecking keys and checking the monitor he said, “It doesn’t work.”

“What?”

Deuxième had no idea how to use a computer. He couldn’t track with a mouse, open programs, or type.

“I thought you said you knew computers?” I said.

“I’ve seen people use them.”

I turned and left his office. I called for Le Chef to come into my office. I tested him on his computer skills—he had fewer than Deuxième. He sat at my chair and touched the screen when I told him to click on a picture. I explained the mouse, but it only confused him. He slammed the mouse down with a force that could have broken it.

“The machine is broken,” he said.

I was broken, I thought. We had three computers: one in a box under a window collecting dust; another on a desk covered by plastic, inoperable due to user
incompetence; and lastly, mine, a computer I had wanted but had yet to find a use for. Unless the internet came through. I began to doubt it would. I sent Le Chef out of my office and told him to close the door on the way out.

The door was heavy wood on slanted hinges and closed loudly.

I started a letter, a possible future email, on my computer. I wrote down the story about the computers, about how my staff was inept. I recounted my visit to Lelouma and the turn-off road to the waterfall and how Junior’s goat had died. I was not sure who I was writing too, but putting my story on paper made it manageable. After a page I was onto my house and malaria and talking about Trust. A page later and my office had become unbearable, lit by an incandescent bulb that acted like a furnace. The generator rattled more than hummed, each turn of the engine sounded like an individual cylinder’s chug of diesel. I could barely hear the traffic. I turned and opened my window. The light covered the monitor and I could no longer see from the glare. My words were muted out by dust and sun. The heat of the afternoon blew into my room, but the movement felt good as my back sweated against the chair.

I leaned forward and continued the letter. “What I miss.” I looked at the list when I was done. A list of items, foods, people, and places from home. One of my college roommates, but not the other. Cheese. My parents. They had sold their house and moved, so that wasn’t on the list. But football on Sundays and good cold beer was. I mentioned air conditioning. I forgot my sister, my car, and mowed front lawns with soft grass for hot days. Things slipped. Phones and computers, absent. But new pants and chocolate were there.
My next paragraph was on what I thought would happen. Or wanted to have happen. Or desired. It dealt with work and survival. My goals: internet, a clean warehouse, a letter of recommendation from Fulrun, and a new job somewhere else after next year. I added “friends.” I told myself I had to last a year in Labé. I told myself it was a great opportunity.