Oranges

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Dust squalls swirled in the headlights and flew up the windshield like ghosts. They flew up through the rusted-out holes in the floor, holes I'd seen when we first got in at dusk but could only feel now as a whir tunneling in wind and dust. Three veiled women sat in the back of the station wagon with infants. Jean-Claude sat up front against the window, with two men between him and the driver. Sejal and I were crammed into the middle seat, beside a nervous young man and an old, frail man who kept falling asleep on my shoulder. I didn't mind; in such close quarters, you had to go a little numb. The station wagon barreled down the rutted road as wire springs pressed against my rear and a chicken under the seat feathered against my ankle. Initially, I'd wondered if the chicken was part of the smell, but it was our sweat, the sweat of many passengers, like a closet of unwashed socks, the dampness pressed and dried in the industrial velour seats many times over.

Dust filled the car, a graininess that thickened the air and caused our breathing to grow shallow. One by one, the men took out handkerchiefs; Sejal and I tied bandanas over our noses and mouths. I turned around to check on the women. They'd drawn their veils more closely around their faces and laps like tents protecting their infants. Sejal and I had said hello to them in Bariba when we first got in, and they loved that we knew how to say *kà yoka*. I wanted to think that made a connection between us, grateful there were other women in the car.

When the tire went flat, there was no spare and the driver disappeared into the darkness. The last village we'd passed was way back, and when we asked, Jean-Claude guessed it was another forty kilometers to Péhunco. We stood in the dark, flanked by forest. Now and then a man went down the shallow embankment to the woods' edge to relieve himself. Jean-Claude leaned against the car with the other men. When I'd asked him whether he thought the driver would return, he looked off in the distance and said he didn't know.

When we'd first climbed into the "bush taxi," as it was called, the prospect of actually reaching our destination looked unlikely. The car had no keyhole for the ignition, just two frayed wires dangling out of the steering column. Sparking the engine involved a two-step process whereby the driver touched the frayed wires together while three male passengers pressed their hands on the hood and pushed the vehicle backward to get it to catch, and then jumped in. That Sejal and I were now sitting on our backpacks at the rear of our banked taxi could hardly be a surprise, yet both of us were at such a loss as to what would happen that we didn't say much. No one did.

The men stood around, bored and exhausted, while the women huddled on the other side of the car caring for their infants. The flat tire appeared unremarkable to them, and so it would become unremarkable to us. I figured I should give up any hope of getting dinner that night and wondered to myself if we'd have to sleep out here. I didn't want to—snakes and scorpions didn't appeal to me—but I could if it came to that. When my stomach grumbled and then Sejal's too, we laughed dryly. There was nothing we could do about our hunger, so we tried to stay in good spirits. *This is an adventure!* But, really, the travel had worn us. The prospect of walking and not eating had cut us off from everything but each other. Then the women walked up to us, shrouded in their veils, and leaned over, offering up oranges in their hands.

A massive cumulus hung over the road, lights popping in its hollows, the sky rumbling in the distance. We'd arrived in Péhunco. The driver had reappeared with a spare and somehow gotten us to our destination, an unlit village where we stood with our fellow passengers one last time as the driver unlashed stacked basins, yam sacks, and duffel bags from the roof rack. Jean-Claude began

walking down the road and we followed him toward the storm. He wouldn't say where we were going, whether we'd eat or if Sejal's house was ready. Each time she asked, he said, "We'll see." That drove Sejal crazy, but I didn't mind. Hungry and coated with dust, I felt light and alert, spent, like my body had gone past mattering. The night was unfolding. Two years of my life lay ahead, and I didn't want any grievance or worry to spoil it.

Without a single crack of thunder, a lightning bolt slinked sideways right over the cloud face, briefly lighting its contours before diving back in and disappearing. Never before had I seen lightning go horizontal. We walked in silence, and a chorus of insects rose, trilling in rounds like invisible, modest souls. I asked Jean-Claude if he thought it would rain. My French was clunky, but he understood and said the last rains had gone; they wouldn't return. I wondered how he could be so sure, but didn't contradict him. Sejal grumbled to me in English, "Sure, he can answer *you* about the rain, but when I ask about the house all he can say is '*On verra*.' " I tend to shy away from commiseration and so answered neutrally. The night was beautiful; I wanted it to stay that way, held in this place where things never before imagined were possible.

Later that night, Sejal and I sat looking out on a ghostly field from the back terrace of the village health clinic. A single latrine stood a hundred yards in the distance, the latrine we were supposed to use. I feared waking in the night and having to go. I did not want to walk out to that isolated outpost alone, so I tried not to think about it. Jean-Claude's younger sister had cooked the spaghetti we'd packed, and a friendly matron had helped us sweep out our room and bat the dusty mattresses.

The storm had retreated and gone farther west, the sky clear with the radiance of stars. The crickets steadily pulsed, and occasionally other sounds broke from the dark: a metal handle dropped against a bucket, a motorcycle revving up in the distance. I wanted to be quiet, and listen to the night to calm myself for sleep. But Sejal was livid. "Did I not *ask him* about the house the whole way up? When was he going to tell me?" I don't know what

I said to her. I couldn't stop thinking about the pregnant women we'd seen sleeping on the floor of the front terrace. One slept on a plastic mat, the others on cloth spread like towels. We'd walked by quickly and then passed another woman in the corridor curled up close to the wall. I could see that she was hugely pregnant. In shock I asked, "Are there no rooms for them?"

Jean-Claude kept walking. "What did you say?"

"*Rooms,*" I repeated. "Are there no rooms for the women?" He laughed airily, as if I lived in a dream.

Now sitting on the back terrace, fed and housed, I couldn't forget them.

"Why doesn't he just tell me the house isn't ready?" Sejal demanded.

"I don't know," I said. We'd been told innumerable times that Beninois were indirect. Sejal knew that. She could tell herself that in her head and try to be reasonable, but Jean-Claude's equivocations were unnerving. Not intentionally. He had no deliberate, underhanded agenda; he just wasn't good at being a host. He himself seemed to be lost in a fog, unrooted and treading so lightly with words that it was difficult to place him. We'd known him all of two days, having met down south at the collective training for volunteers and their Beninois counterparts.

The director of the baby-weighing program in Péhunco, Jean-Claude was supposed to be our counterpart, but he was really more Sejal's than mine. I would be living thirty kilometers away in Yémasõ and working with a midwife, so Jean-Claude didn't really bother me. Being the tallest and thinnest man I had ever seen made him intriguing, and remote. He shared few thoughts with us, but when his compatriots made jokes, he laughed a light, embarrassed, and sincere laugh, all the while covering a part of his face with his hand as though it were imprudent to be so expressive. His reserved manner made Sejal uneasy. Only his condescending comments about Péhunco troubled me. He called it "the bush," displeased that his government had posted him there. "There are no restaurants," he'd said. "*Il n'y a rien*." There's nothing.

I kept thinking about the mattresses in our room. Ganigui, the matron, had explained that the room was supposed to be for the midwife, but they were still waiting for the government to send one. She was sweeping out the room as we chatted with her, Sejal visibly troubled that there was no other hand-broom so she could help with the cleanup. Save for a layer of dust, cobwebs, and the two thin mattresses propped against the wall, the room was bare. When I'd asked Ganigui about the women in the halls, she turned to me, remotely puzzled. "Women?"

Maybe I hadn't said it right or she couldn't hear me over her sweeping, so I asked again if there were beds for the women sleeping on the floor. "Oh, beds," she said cheerfully. "The beds are full." Sejal asked about the doctor. We'd heard there was a doctor in Péhunco. But Ganigui made a smiling evasion with a wave of her hand-broom and moved toward the cobweb-covered windows. "Let's evict these spiders, no?"

I wondered how the women would react if we brought them the mattresses. I wanted to ask Sejal what she thought, but it didn't seem right to ask then. All wound up, Sejal had been spinning different scenarios of what would happen if she didn't have a house to live in and was stuck sleeping in the clinic indefinitely, not for her whole two years, but maybe three, four, six months of being unsettled. That was *not* what she'd signed up for. I tuned her out, still wondering what would happen if we brought the mattresses out to the terrace. Would they think us odd? Would it make them uncomfortable? Us, these strangers, bringing mattresses? And there were only two mattresses. Who would get them? If they even wanted them. What if they were sleeping and our efforts to help made them anxious or confused, disturbing their precious sleep?

Sejal began crying. Then, pushing the tears away from her face, she wondered aloud if she was ridiculous, if this was ridiculous. I put my arm around her shoulder, feeling awkward. I'd been trying not to judge her, but I could not relate to her outrage. We had mattresses and a room while there were pregnant women sleeping on hard concrete out there. No one was offering those women a room like ours. But Sejal was frightened, unused to uncertainty. I had the feeling she'd never had to rough it. She'd come from a stable home.

Not me, and I think that freed me, in a way. My mother had abandoned me half my life ago, so wonder, for me, always happened outside the home. I was grateful for that, for lightning and crickets and moon; without them, there would be nothing to take me out of my head. I tried to understand Sejal, but I didn't know how. This much we had in common: for six weeks we'd been in training down south, and now we had five days to check out the places we'd been assigned to live for the next two years of service, five days to see if our homes had windows with shutters and doors with locks, a secure latrine nearby and a private place to wash up. Sejal likely wouldn't have any of that, and I'd be leaving the next day, leaving her with Jean-Claude and heading thirty kilometers north to Yémasõ. I knew no one in Yémasõ, but I didn't feel afraid. I felt cupped in the hand of what was to come, my one chance to be far away so I could learn something completely different from what I knew. The previous volunteer left behind a report that glowed about the mayor, the Délégué des Jeunes, the Djodi wives, and especially the midwife, Tounkara. "Tounkara is wise, patient, and fun…the voice of the women." I read that report over and over. Tounkara—wise, patient, and fun. Those words replayed in my mind all the way to Péhunco. The voice of the women.

Suddenly I thought I heard something out in the field. "Hold on," I said to Sejal. She'd been talking, trying to calm herself down, when a moan rose out of the dark, something close to the sound of expiring, or a ghost breaking through the membrane between the living and the dead. I couldn't pin it down. I leaned forward, looking intently at the midnight field, my ears opening, wondering if someone or something was out there. Crickets chirped and the other nocturnal insects swung in concentric, high-pitched circlings. Sejal was listening too. But nothing came. We looked at each other and Sejal's brow furrowed. Then a cry broke out, wet and pink and rubbery.

Ganigui burst through the corridor and rushed past us with the silver flash of her medical basin. I jumped up and rooted about my bag for a flashlight. We bolted down the back steps, and around the corner, not fifteen paces from the back terrace a woman was on the ground, legs pressed together, cradling a newborn on her thighs. We'd been listening to a woman give birth. We'd been there the entire time and hadn't known.

Ganigui worked diligently. The placenta sat in the silvery basin as she cut the cord. Another woman came with soap and a basin of water. A girl. It was a girl. Ganigui scrubbed the fatty creases and folds of the newborn body. Sejal and I held flashlights so she could see; we didn't know what else could be done. No one spoke. I kept wondering where the mother came from. How had she ended up here, on the side of the building? But no one asked her these questions. Maybe she was too exhausted, but I kept thinking that someone should ask. I wondered if she'd given up on anyone helping her and so had done this on her own. I barely understood then that I was actually talking about my own problem.

We are alone in sensing what we really mean. We are alone in wondering about mattresses and what will be helpful, or what can be done, despairing when what could have been done needed to have happened long ago. Still, I believed we all had chances to stop the wheels of generations from turning down the same paths. I believed there were places on earth where we were in good hands, and you had to find those places. I had wishes for mothers and children. Vague and teeming wishes. I wondered if Tounkara would understand. I wondered if she would show me what I needed to do, and how. Tounkara—wise, patient, and fun. The voice of the women.

I'd felt all of this closely on the drive to Péhunco. This wish to work with a midwife was something I guarded and treasured, as if it could somehow change the past and future. As if being there to witness and care for a mother and her child would somehow lead to something better. I clung to that while the tin-can station wagon had rattled madly down the washboard road.

I often listen to the night, hoping it can tell me something, make at least some things clearer. I've wanted to know how to help mothers. I've wanted to know what one could offer them to avert despair. Was there something like the oranges the women had offered us when the station wagon broke down? Something simple. No need to make it complicated. Why do we make things difficult when so much is basic?

The rains were gone, as Jean-Claude had predicted. The winds came, the wells dropped, and much would die for a time. I wouldn't hear the insects again until rainy season returned like spring with bullfrogs croaking en masse and wild mangoes dropping on tin-pan rooftops. I'd nearly forgotten about them, but one night, after a clean wash of rain, I stepped out of the house in Yémasõ. The stars were brilliant. I stepped farther out to see more of them.

At first I wasn't listening, my mind too clouded, but the stars focused my ears, and out of the eaves came the sound of those insects, the ones I'd heard the night of the lightning and birth, their invisible wheels turning, cranking and pendulating back and forth, the song of something unoiled and sweet, coming back to me from another world. Children on metal swing-sets, swinging higher and higher, and dropping through the chutes of the sky, like an ocean. ☙