

Return to the Country of the Crime

DAN GROSSMAN

On her first evening as the Peace Corps nutritionist for the market town of Gabi Mai Wuyhalla, Niger, the dispensary chief Hamza Dogo accompanied Sheryl on a stroll by the riverbank. He didn't give her a choice. When she told him she was going for a walk, he said that it was dangerous for a woman to walk alone after nightfall and he insisted on coming along. It was especially dangerous along the dry riverbed where the evil jinn wandered, he said. Sheryl had just eaten a meal of chicken and couscous with Hamza in his compound, together with the infirmary's physician assistant Musa Sani.

"We're glad you've come to serve as nutritionist," Hamza exclaimed in his impeccable French as they walked south along the riverbank. He was wearing thick bottle glasses and a white turban, the tail of which flowed down over the shoulder of his olive-green suit jacket.

"I'm glad to be here," Sheryl replied.

"You are aware of our lack of amenities in Gabi."

"Of course," Sheryl said.

"I'm glad you understand. You will, of course, provide the infirmary each week with a 700 milliliter can of Nescafé."

Sheryl didn't say anything immediately in response. She knew there would be moments like this, and she wanted to "choose her reaction," this being the coinage of Michael Boigny, the Peace Corps training site director. She inhaled deeply and looked out straight ahead, at the dry riverbed that curved south and disappeared into the dusk. The first stars had just come out: she could see the Southern Cross. She could also see the trees on the other side of the riverbank in silhouette. She was glad to have Hamza Dogo accompanying her on this walk, despite his all too forward request, which, if she assented to it, would result in a substantial drain on her Peace Corps stipend. She forced a smile and said, "There's nothing written in my Peace Corps service description saying that I'm required to provide Nescafé to the dispensary."

“You don’t understand. It’s important for dispensary staff to keep awake during the afternoon consultations and we are eager for your assistance in this matter.”

“We can talk about this tomorrow, can’t we?”

“I’d rather talk about it now.”

Sheryl reached into her handbag, pulled out a pack of Marlboros and offered him one. He accepted: she struck a match, lit the cigarette and he, in turn, lit her cigarette with his.

Mercifully, Hamza didn’t bring up his request for Nescafé again as they continued to walk along the riverbed. Hamza instead laid out Sheryl’s responsibilities at the dispensary and described the improvements that he would like to see there. He mentioned the names of people Sheryl needed to know, including that of Adulsalaam Mustafa, the chef de poste. Sheryl raised the issue of security in the village and Hamza said he had been thinking about the same thing himself. He said that, in general, there was little crime in the village and that people were good about watching out for one another, but that she should remember that the Nigerian border was 40 kilometers to the south and that it was impossible to keep track of all the people moving through Gabi, especially on market days. He suggested to her that she might want to get a watchdog. By this time, it was dark except for starlight and the glow of their cigarettes. Hamza suggested that they turn back towards the village and that is what they did.

In Sheryl’s flat-roofed mud brick house there was a foyer and two small rooms; she had set up one as a kitchen, one as a bedroom. The foyer walls, radiating with the day’s heat, glowed with the flickering light of the kerosene lantern hanging by a bungee cord from an overhead crossbeam. Windows in the east and north walls of the bedroom provided circulation and made sleeping there tolerable. She left the lantern burning as she untied her hair, peeled off her wraparound skirt, and lay down on her foam mattress with a paperback copy of an Albert Camus story collection in the original French. By flashlight, she managed to finish the first story entitled “La femme adultère” before falling asleep.

She wasn’t surprised by the dream. It was the same one she had been having every night for the past week. A woman in a pressed navy-blue suit skirt, her psychologist, was

standing a foot away as a young man raped her. The woman was taking notes on a legal pad, under the glow of fluorescent lights.

Sheryl woke up curled up in the fetal position with her right hand between her legs, drenched in sweat, sobbing, and shaking uncontrollably.

Five months previously Sheryl had been raped at the Peace Corps training site in Hamdallaye, Niger. It had happened on a night when the majority of her classmates were on tour, visiting their future posts in the southwestern part of the country. She had been sleeping outside under a mosquito net, as were three of her male classmates. They were outside because the temperature inside the dormitory was hovering around forty degrees Celsius. After the knife-wielding rapist finished, he walked off into the night casually, as if he had nothing to fear. None of her classmates, in bed meters away, had been woken up by the rape (at least that's what they'd said afterwards). She now had to explain what had just happened to her. She had gone directly to the residence of Michael Boigny, the Peace Corps training director, who subsequently notified the local authorities and the Peace Corps country director.

She had no choice but to leave country. Peace Corps administration arranged a medevac to Walter Reed Army Medical Center, in Washington D.C. She remained in the capital, residing in a Holiday Inn, for a month's worth of psychological counseling and medical tests. In the middle of all this testing she was granted a month's leave time, which she spent at her parents' home in Boston. Telling her parents what had happened to her was agonizing and it only got worse from that point on. They thought she was nuts to want to return to Niger, and their repeated attempts to get her to stay made her time there unbearable. Her father had a particularly hard time digesting the news. Archibald Johnson was a principal engineer on the uber-complex Boston underground highway project known as The Big Dig. He was conservative in both disposition and politics. He was what her daughter referred to glibly as a "reactionary type-A" and, as such, he was not one to digest the news lightly. Sheryl had spent as much of her leave time as possible avoiding her father, spending time in cafés reading—she read a tremendous amount during this time—

devouring the works of Marguerite Duras both in the original French and in translation. Duras' protagonists often flip-flopped between angst and nostalgia with their burdensome memories of adolescent love and Sheryl didn't find it hard to identify with them. Reading in French was also a way of maintaining her language skills, preparing herself for her imminent (at least she liked to think of it that way) return to Africa. Focusing on the Duras oeuvre was an activity by which she could crowd out her anxieties during daylight hours. But they all came back to her each night back to her parents' house. One evening as she walked into the kitchen for a glass of orange juice she overheard a conversation between her father and mother in the living room, which was adjacent to the kitchen in their split-level condo not far from Boston Common.

"How will Father McPherson feel about her being raped?"

"Stop it, Archy. You're acting like it was her fault."

"She was the one who decided to go into the Peace Corps, against our advice. And she still wants to go back there. What kind of woman runs back towards her attacker?"

"I don't think Sheryl views it that way. She's trying to get on with her life. Though I disagree with her decision I can't help admiring our daughter for it. Archy, Sheryl is a strong young woman. You should be proud of that."

Sheryl had tiptoed back upstairs without her juice. She hadn't had the energy to confront her parents. That her father had mentioned the Catholic Church surprised her: it did seem more than slightly hypocritical because he attended mass twice a year at best. Sheryl herself had fallen away from the church during high school. Her father was aware that she had had a succession of boyfriends in college; she had let it be known to him indirectly (by talking with her mother) that she wasn't eligible for a white wedding. It occurred to her that the news of her rape could help her father come to terms albeit in an apocalyptic way with the fact that she had long ago dispensed with her virginity. This couldn't have been much of a silver lining for him, to say the least.

After this interlude with family, she felt some relief upon her return to the excruciating group therapy sessions at Walter Reed. She realized early on that, if she was

going to make it back to Niger, she would have to get with the program while at the same time refrain from revealing any information that could prevent her return.

Dr. Donna Rosetti was the therapy session leader. A tall brunette in her early forties, Dr. Rosetti kept a poker-faced expression during sessions and was armed with an intense gaze that gave Sheryl an indication of how seriously she took her job. At the same time, a strong Brooklyn accent colored her clinical observations to the extent that Sheryl occasionally had to bite down on her bottom lip to prevent herself from laughing during the sessions.

Sheryl wrote down the timeline of the rape as she was asked and discussed this timeline together with a group of women who had also been sexually assaulted. Most were in the military, stationed at army and navy bases in the US and abroad. In most cases, they knew their assailants. Only one other woman was a Peace Corps volunteer. She was a petite blonde, in her early twenties, with a slight lisp. She had been gang raped at her island post in Micronesia. Because she knew the men who perpetrated the act, and because they hadn't been arrested, she wanted to complete her service in a South American country. The situation was so bad on her island that she would under no circumstances be allowed back there even if she had wanted to return. Complicating matters, the Peace Corps country director had taken the side of the local authorities who had denied that rape had taken place. They even claimed that she had invited men over to her house for a gangbang, one in which she had been a consenting partner. In one of the sessions, she blurted out, "my island raped me."

Sheryl considered herself fortunate that she hadn't known her attacker. There was, on the other hand, considerable uncertainty about her case. There was substantial doubt about the guilt of the man who'd been caught, at least in the mind of the training director. Thus there existed the very real possibility that the perp might still be running around the country free to rape other women. A rape analysis hadn't been conducted (as there were few, if any, rape kits available in-country) and she had taken a shower immediately afterwards. But Sheryl was not so concerned with bringing justice to the rapist—a remote

prospect at best. She was more concerned about preventing injustice. That is, she would have considered a Peace Corps refusal to send her back to Niger to be another form of rape. While Sheryl remained relentlessly optimistic about her own chances of returning to service as a volunteer, she suspected that the Micronesia volunteer wasn't going to South America anytime soon.

In addition to writing down their stories, the rape victims were encouraged to “have a dialogue with their traumatized selves,” to bring forth their buried responses to their own assaults. “Feelings of guilt are normal responses in rape cases, but you must realize that this is a culturally-conditioned response,” Dr. Rosetti explained. Indeed, Sheryl often played the rape over in her mind asking herself how she could have prevented the assault from happening. She felt guilty that she had not resisted more than she did. When she brought these issues up in the group sessions Dr. Rosetti told her that, yes indeed, she was guilty. Guilty of “hindsight bias.” But that was not the only trap to which rape victims could fall victim. She also told Sheryl that she was also guilty of “all or nothing thinking,” “the Catch-22 syndrome,” among other psychological self-deceptions. The stories that Sheryl and the other rape victims wrote down, and the correlating self-dialogues were examined in and outside of group therapy for these pitfalls. But what most obsessed and upset Sheryl were the dreams that brought her both mental trauma and sexual excitement. She refused to discuss these dreams during therapy. It was a well of darkness too deep within her to bring out into the light for fear that Dr. Rosetti would hold her back. Not that her shrink didn't try to draw the water from this well; she talked reassuringly about how it was a normal reaction for women to climax during rape, lubricate when thinking of their attackers afterwards, and even fantasize about the attack repeatedly. Sheryl didn't fall for the bait and kept her emotions in check throughout these sessions. It may be normal, she thought, but did Peace Corps want women who experienced such reactions heading back to their country of service? These psychological probes weren't the only potential barriers to her heading back. There were also potential medical problems that could ground her for good. Her biggest fear was that the attacker might have infected her with HIV but there were also other sexually transmitted diseases that she was tested for. They didn't find anything—initially. But HIV couldn't be tested for right away. It was about a month

before Sheryl knew the results of her comprehensive tests, which were all negative. She had already had her pregnancy test and that too had been negative. But even after all the results were in, Dr. Rosetti encouraged her not to go back in-country immediately, saying that she could always go back a year into the future. “If I want to go now I should go now. Why should I be punished for being raped?” Sheryl asked her. She was wearing on that day a gray suit skirt that Sheryl thought less than flattering. “You’re not being punished,” she replied. “Then why are you trying to prevent me from getting on with my life?” Sheryl asked. “We just want what’s best for you,” she replied.

This wasn’t just her mantra. It was also the mantra of her parents, her older sister (a divorce attorney based in Providence, Rhode Island) and her closest friends. Sheryl, trying to maintain her serenity, said, “You must understand I will appeal if you prevent me from going back.” The psychologist replied, “I figured as much. However, I don’t think you’ve been totally forthcoming with me.”

Eventually she was allowed to return to Niger. Despite many tense moments with her, Sheryl didn’t think that Dr. Rosetti was all that bad of a shrink. (She was the one who had turned Sheryl onto Marguerite Duras.) But Rosetti wasn’t universally respected within the realm of Peace Corps administration. In fact, what Sheryl learned about Rosetti through the grapevine at Walter Reed disturbed her. Not because she was considered a bad shrink, but because Rosetti had started her own pilot counseling program—the one that Sheryl had participated in—that she hoped would serve as a model for future Peace Corps counseling programs. Sheryl had also heard that Rosetti was thought to be a wacko by most of her colleagues who universally assumed Peace Corps rape victims invited their own assaults. Rosetti never had assumed anything like that about Sheryl or with any of the other women in the group discussions that she led. For that she was grateful.

Sheryl headed outside behind her mud-brick house, under the new moon sky, carrying her lantern in one hand and towel in another. She took her shower. Afterwards, she made herself tea, and sat down on a straw mat on her cement porch.

Her mind wandered.

The last man she had been with before leaving for Africa was a Quebecois assistant professor of Economics at Boston University by the name of Reginald Depuy. They had met at Mass General when he presented with appendicitis, and she was the on-duty triage nurse. She had been impressed with his humor during a painful ordeal and she liked his intellect and the way he parted his thinning blond hair. Reginald was an advocate of the neo-liberal school of globalization: he believed that the lowering of trade barriers between nation-states would usher in an era of unprecedented prosperity. For a few months their relationship seemed like an era of unprecedented prosperity, but then real life started to set in. The pressure on Reginald to find a tenure track position at Harvard created fissures in his exterior. He constantly talked about the “McDonaldization” of Quebec City, his birthplace, which, one could argue, was brought about by the globalization that he so cherished. His reflexive disdain for the U.S. had charmed her at the outset, but it began to annoy her. One night she found herself going home with a surgeon in her unit. She told Reginald about it, in a spasm of guilt, hoping to salvage their relationship. His response all but guaranteed that this would not happen. “You fucking cunt, all you think about is fucking,” he said.

Sheryl assumed the lotus position and tried to inhale and exhale in a controlled manner—one of the useful things she had learned at Walter Reed. This was the first step in controlling her thoughts. She stayed outside, concentrated on her breathing, letting the mosquitos have their way with her. The village was quiet save for the sound of cicadas. For a while it seemed to her as if these mindfulness techniques were working but then after about half an hour her mind started to wander again. It occurred to her then that it wasn’t safe to be outside. But then, how safe was it anywhere? Just before midnight, she went to bed. She did not dream and woke up to the sound of roosters crowing half an hour before dawn.

The next day, market day, was Sheryl’s first day on the job. She spent the morning with Musa and Hamza in the gray cement-block dispensary that had no ventilation save the occasional breeze that fluttered through the high windows. Sheryl weighed her first

babies, eleven in total, all of them mildly to moderately malnourished, and wrote down the information in her logbook, then on yellow cards their mothers carried around with them. The mothers were mostly a cheerful lot. They sat patiently on the bench under the concrete awning, talking to one another while breastfeeding. They had carried their infants to the infirmary on their backs in thin sheets of fabric tied around their waists, fabric that in many cases was cut from the same cloth as the wraparound skirts and shawls the women were wearing. One was a young pregnant woman named Talatu. She was in her third trimester. She had brought her son Tanko to be weighed and for polio inoculations, that were to be administered by Hamza and Musa. The infant was emaciated, but this was nothing unusual, the effect of chronic malnutrition and diarrhea-induced dehydration. Talatu seemed to be the most relaxed of the bunch. She asked Sheryl if she had a husband. Sheryl said she didn't have one, not yet at any rate.

"Well," Talatu said, laughing. "We must find you one." Sheryl took an instant liking to Talatu, who lived in Gidan Hatsi, where Adam Goldstein, her nearest volunteer neighbor, was posted. Sheryl extended an open invitation to Talatu to visit her house.

Hamza seized every opportunity that morning to tell Sheryl how tired he was without Nescafé to, in his words, "charge my blood." Finally, she cornered him in the hall and told him in French, "Hamza, please don't ask me again for Nescafé. I can't afford it." His initial response was a hard stare. But then he nodded without a word and continued prepping the batch of polio vaccine, which had been dropped off in the early morning by a driver sent by Médecins Sans Frontières, and which would be used to vaccinate over a hundred babies at mid-morning. It had been essential for Sheryl to draw lines in her work as an ER nurse, and it was essential now, considering all that had happened to her.

The dispensary closed early on Sheryl's first day of work because it was market day. She walked directly to the market, not bothering to go home and change her clothes or take a shower. There was nothing to do about the intense heat and the stirred-up dust hanging over Gabi like a fog but accept it.

As it happened, the Babban Iyaka volunteer team project pickup truck was parked near the marketplace, in the lot with the Land Rovers and Peugeot bush taxis, and she saw Abdu Yusi, the project truck driver, knelt over at a Tuareg woman's concession stand,

buying a pack of cigarettes. Sheryl thought him a curious character. With his mustache, perpetual smile, and unlit cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth, he reminded her somehow of her ticket scalper classmates in high school. He looked like a man who could talk a pearl out of its clam, perpetually on the lookout for an angle. She stopped to talk with him.

“How’s your health?” he asked. “Kina Lahiya?”

“Fine.” Sheryl replied. “Lahia Lo.”

“My wife’s pregnant,” he said, smiling wide at her. His smile conveyed warmth and friendliness, but also an unsubtle probing. Or so it seemed to her.

“Congratulations,” she said.

“You’re doing well?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. She knew that Abdu Yusi had been at Hamdallaye when she had been raped, working as a handyman, and there was no way he couldn’t have known what had happened to her there. “Excuse me,” she said, feeling suddenly very anxious, knowing that Abdu would be upset by her rudeness, but she was unable to help herself. She turned abruptly into a narrow alleyway between thatch-roofed market booths.

The market was crowded with blue-turbaned Tuaregs leading their camels down the narrow market paths, Fulani herders, and the ubiquitous Hausa buyers and sellers. She walked past the tailors laboring in the shade of their thatched awning.

Under a cloudless and impossibly bright sky the air was hot and dusty, smelling of spices, cooking meat, perfume, sweat, and animal dung. Sheryl soon caught sight of Diana, the Biodiversity volunteer team leader who was bargaining down the price of a length of red, flowered fabric in rapid fire Hausa in the center of the marketplace. The seller was a middle-aged Hausa man dressed in a blue coastal style boubou and white flat-topped cap.

It was hard not to envy Diana a little. She had it so together. When she had paid for the fabric and the seller had wrapped it up for her, Sheryl approached at last, squatting down beside her in front of the seller.

“Long time no see.” Sheryl smiled.

“I thought I might see you here today.” Diana returned the smile. She was dressed in

what Sheryl thought of as Peace Corps casual: a skirt of flower-print wraparound fabric, T-shirt, and flip-flops. “I wanted to talk to you yesterday but there wasn’t a chance...how was your day in the infirmary?”

“Oh, about what I expected it to be. I think I’m settling in well. Only problem is the dispensary director. He wants me to buy him a weekly supply of Nescafé.”

“That kind of thing is pretty normal.”

As they spoke, a blue-garbed Tuareg rider on camelback steered past them on the narrow market path.

“Diana. Maybe you’d like to come to my house? You’d be my first guest. What do you say?”

“Sure,” Diana said. “Let me just talk to Abdu Yusi.”

They found Abdu Yusi and Abdusalaam Mustafa laying on mats under a grass awning. They were neither smoking nor drinking tea. This puzzled Sheryl until the moment she recalled that the Ramadan fast was still in effect and would be for another two weeks. Abdusalaam had a grin that seemed to project a worldly irony. He had lean facial features and an aquiline nose not unusual among the Fulani ethnic group. As he shook hands with her, he smiled and nodded, and said, in French, “I’m genuinely pleased to see you again.”

“Likewise,” Sheryl said, meeting Abdusalaam’s intense stare with some discomfort. Sheryl had met Abdusalaam on her second day of work at the dispensary. She recalled the dispensary director telling her, on her first night in the village, as they walked along the Goulbi riverbed, that she should meet Abdusalaam. But the next day he’d told her that she needed to be careful with him and that he could not entirely be trusted but didn’t elaborate on the reasons why.

Diana told Abdu Yusi where she was going and then followed Sheryl back on foot to her compound. Sheryl brought out water for Diana and they sat together on her front porch under the flimsy awning of bleached, rotting millet stalks. Diana gave Sheryl a rundown of the Babban Iyaka Biodiversity Team to Sheryl. Diana quickly confirmed Sheryl’s impression of a woman who embodied the adjective judgmental by offering her candid and no doubt hastily formed opinions about the Peace Corps volunteers on her

team. According to Diana, Adam was a flake, Abbey was desperate for any male attention, and the marriage between Jason and Cynthia was a train wreck. But before Sheryl could comment on Diana's remarks, or even digest them, she steered the conversation in a predictable direction: "So," she said, wiping her sweaty forehead with a blue handkerchief, "Let's talk about you."

"About me, okay," Sheryl said. She was a little wary because she knew of Diana's reputation as a gossip hound. "But there's not much to talk about. I'm here. I survived my first day at work. I weighed thirty-nine babies today."

"Sheryl," Diana said. "I'm not going to beat around the bush. I'm aware of all that you've gone through. Lyle sat me down and told me, but only because he thinks it's important for me to be here if you need anything."

Sheryl was silent for a moment, considering just how to choose the proper response. "You think it's important to be available if I need anything."

"Of course I do."

"You're such a self-confident, secure woman," Sheryl said with a smile that was not really a smile. "I can imagine coming up to you unloading my problems and you saying 'Deal with it or go home.'"

Diana nodded her head, as if weighing her response. "Well no, you don't have to worry about that," she said. "Sheryl, after what you've been through, I don't think I'd be able to deal like you have..."

Sheryl was silent for a moment, considering her response. She then asked, "Does anybody else on your team know about this?"

"They know a woman was raped last summer. But they don't know who."

"They'll find out—it's inevitable."

"Well, I can't guarantee that they won't find out. But if they do, it won't be from me. Look, Sheryl. I know what a hard time you had, getting back in-country. Maybe you're right, the volunteers will put two and two together. But everybody in the bureau, those who know about this, respects your confidentiality. And I really do mean it about being here for you."

Sheryl took a deep breath. It was an attempt to stem the tide of anger welling up within her but it didn't quite work. "You really do mean it about being here," Sheryl repeated in a sneering monotone.

"Yes," Diana said.

Sheryl bit down on her lower lip, a nervous habit she'd had since childhood, and then let the lip slide slowly forward. "I'm not an emotional cripple, you know. I can handle myself just fine. You can tell that to Jack, to Lyle and to whoever else you can think of."

"Sheryl."

"I'm fine. You can tell everyone you know that I'm fine, okay?"

"We just want what's best for you."

"I can't begin to tell you how much I've heard that one. My parents, my psychologist, Peace Corps administration, you...you all say you want what's best for me but what I need most is time. That's all. And none of you can help me out with that one. Still, you keep on talking to me as if I've lost my mind."

"Of course you need time," said Diana, softly, leaning forward in her chair, her eyes projecting concern and even tenderness. "You haven't lost your mind. But you can't pretend that this never happened. And I can't pretend that I never heard about it. What good would that do you?"

"Diana," Sheryl said. She was angry with Diana for being so forward and blunt but the last thing she wanted was for her to leave. "I didn't mean..."

That did it. Something snapped within her, despite her intentions, she started to weep. She hid her face in her hands.

Diana stood up, slowly, approached Sheryl, and put a hand on her shoulder.

"You can let down your guard with me, Sheryl."

"I'm sorry."

"It's all right. Anyway, I gotta go now. I really do. I wish I could stay longer, but I have an appointment with the préfet in Maradi in an hour. I'll be back next market day. Why don't we do lunch then?"

"Okay," Sheryl said, wiping her tears with the back of her hand.

Just before dawn, Sheryl woke to the sound of roosters crowing. Cup of water in hand, she stepped onto her porch. In the time it took her to swallow a sip of water, the solar disc peaked over the skyline and rose as quickly as a balloon in a windless sky. Something in the speed of the African sunrise irked her. The thing she missed most about home was twilight, that indeterminate time between night and day when it was possible to see clearly yet, at the same time, get lost in the shadows. If you blinked during an African twilight, you'd miss it.

Sheryl wanted to rinse the sleepers out of her eyes but only a little bit of water remained in her large fifty-gallon clay water jar and every one of her round five-gallon water pots lined up in a row along the wall of her yard were also empty. She grabbed a round clay pot and left her compound, walking to the nearest foot pedal pumping station, which was about five hundred meters away from her compound.

The town of Gabi was too large to have a single village square. Instead, there were multiple gathering places in the shade of neem trees wherever the vendors sold their wares. She passed a few of them on her way to the pump but no vendors had even set up shop at this early hour in the morning. Later in the day she might have had difficulty making it to her destination on time. Having to stop and greet, or at least acknowledge the greetings of all these men would be too difficult.

Women and their children crowded the foot-pump wellhead. A teenage girl wearing a tank top and a faded cloth around her waist, with a baby strapped to her back, was riding the pump like a bicycle. A stream of water pulsed through a steel pipe and into the mouth of a clay water pot. Behind her was a line of women, all patiently waiting to fill their pots.

An old blind man seated a short distance away under the shade of a neem tree, collecting five CFA francs or a "dolla" for each pot of water filled. The collected monies would go towards a repair fund that was used to pay the French volunteer agency that serviced the foot pumps.

Sheryl walked towards the blind man. Wearing a white, shin-length gown and matching cap, he sat Indian style on the ground, chewing a cola nut. A walking stick rested in his lap.

The man put forth his hand, and smiled, revealing scattered, orange-stained teeth. He said, in Hausa, something that sounded to Sheryl like “the white woman who dreams of truthful things,” as Sheryl dropped the coin in his palm. She did a double take, looking at the old, blind man. Did he say what she thought he had said? Her Hausa wasn’t really that good, but there they were, his words and their meanings, already inscribed in her memory.

When the women in the line saw Sheryl, many started to laugh and talk among themselves excitedly. They tried to get her to cut. She wouldn’t. She waited her turn among the gossiping women, savoring their presence, admiring their ability to laugh amidst day-to-day hardships. She only wished that her Hausa comprehension was at another level so she could figure out what they were saying to one another. She had her own gossip running around in her brain but now the unexpected joy of standing in line with the Gabi women helped her put a lid on the well of darkness that had sucked her down so deep as of late. □