

..... AND THE GODS DID NOT AVENGE US  
(A Short Story)

By

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And my folks could not speak Mandinka. My mother was a Maraka housewife who used to go to the marketplace without wearing any makeup. It was fashionable then, among the Mandinka women, to put chole on their eyebrows. My mother had tribal marks: --three vertical scars on both cheeks and three chips on her forehead. When she spoke Mandinka, she always ended her sentences with some Maraka words. All the women in the marketplace knew she was a foreigner.

And my friends called me the Maraka boy. I did not like that. My father was very tall, and crippled in the right leg. He walked very fast to his destinations and did not have the elegance or nonchalance which were the trademarks of the Mandinka men. When my friends saw him coming, they always said, "There is the Maraka man." I did not like that either.

My father spoke some French; he used to work as a translator for the Belgians who had buying offices for the diamond business. The Mandinka boys did not believe my father could speak proper French, and they always laughed at the way he said "mbécile," instead of "imbécile."

Diamond business was good then in Kankan; my father was generous with his money. He used to distribute one franc each to me and my friends, and say "Tenez mes enfants, achetez-vous en des bonbons." We spent our money on movies at that time, but it was useless to tell him that we were not going to buy candy.

My biggest pain was to see my friends hiding their faces behind each other, choking their laughter, pressing their eyelids and exclaiming what French my father had just spoken. They argued that the "en" had no business there, that the "vous" was supposed to be before the "allez." Although I could understand French myself, I did not have a say because I was not fortunate enough to go to school. Every afternoon, when he came from work, my father stopped at the butcher and bought the best part of the beef. All the neighbors knew that. I was proud of it.

In January 1958, the Ramadan feast that my parents celebrated was our sixth one in Kankan. Kankan was the biggest city and the business center of Guinea. It attracted Europeans from

Belgium, France and Holland; Pakistani Indians, Lebanese people and Africans from neighboring countries (Maraka from Mali, Wolof from Senegal, and Hausa from Nigeria). The diamond holes were dug by the Maraka men and the Hausa men who sold the diamonds at a cheaper price to the Senegalese and Lebanese men, who turned them over to the white men to be shipped to Europe. The Mandinka men's position was the most enviable; they dressed in their best clothes to pray at the Mosque; they lay on the sand and took their naps under the shadows of big mango trees. They collected the rent from foreigners, sent their sons to school, and married new wives every year. The Mandinka women had a reputation for worshipping their men. They put warm water in the bathroom for their baths, knelt down to give them water to drink, and fanned them when they were hot. The Mandinka women were also known for their hard work; they went to the marketplace every day to sell their merchandise and came back in the evening to chop the wood and cook the food. My mother had no respect for them. She said that a Maraka woman would never chop wood while there was one man around. That used to make my father smile contentedly.

My father used to lodge many Maraka men in our house. When they came from digging diamond holes, they washed up and my mother put down a big calabash of couscous, and we all sat around and ate. The Maraka men ate as fast as hungry mules. I always wanted to take my share of the meat first, but my father forbade me because it was against etiquette. My mother also warned me against it: she said that the life force of one of the Maraka men might be against my personality and could harm me. If we all had our eyes fixed on one piece of meat in the dish and I happened to pick it up first, the Maraka man whose life force was more powerful than mine could make the piece of meat stick in my throat. She said that the situation was even worse in the case of fish; it was the bones that stuck in people's throats then. Every morning, before the Maraka men left for the diamond holes, they gave my mother fifty francs each for dinner. Then they chewed their kola nuts and left. My friends asked me if they were all my brothers. I said no.

My mother was able to cook dinner with half of the money they gave her and save the rest. She sent some to her parents in Mali and she said that she was saving the remaining money for the celebration of my circumcision. My father did not take the money from my mother like the Mandinka men did from their women. He was the only Maraka man working with the white men, and that gained him the respect of the Mandinka men. He went to pray at the Mosque at least two times every day, and he put me into the Koranic school where I had to memorize the Koran verse after verse. My father was very particular about that; every week he came to the hearth and inquired about my progress. At that time, my teacher would have me recite my verse loudly with the Mandinka

accent that I had mastered. He would comment on my deftness to my father and say that I praised Allah like an Arab. My father would give him some money and smile contentedly.

The first months of the Koranic school were fun. The Mandinka boys were on vacation from the white man's school and their parents had sent them to learn some of the Koran. My friends were not interested in learning the Koran; it was the cow-muscle-entwined whip they feared. The teacher whipped them every time their tongue slipped. I was able to learn faster than the Mandinka boys, so the teacher handed me the whip and made me supervisor of the other students. Although I was not brave enough to beat them, I was proud of myself. When I informed my mother of my promotion, she said it was only natural because I was a Maraka boy.

Soon came the time when the white man's school re-opened. My friends were glad to go back. They said that one could not learn anything but boring verses at the hearth, whereas at the European school, after a year, one could write his own name and even write letters to his friends. They said if I thought I was pretty smart, they would like to see me at the white man's school. There they read nice stories, and when they got tired of that, they did addition, subtraction, and multiplication. They said that those things required a real brain. I lost interest at the hearth and constantly pictured myself at the other school. My teacher started flogging me. His whip cut all over my back because he said that the devil had entered under my skin and he had to let it out. I told my mother that I wanted to go to the other school. She looked at me for a long time, then said that my father did not want me to.

General de Gaulle was coming to Guinea on August 27, 1958. Although his plane was only going to stop at Conakry, the capital of the country, his arrival was to be celebrated everywhere. In Kankan, they swept the streets and watered them to prevent the dust from rising. I saw trucks with cisterns on their backs from which water spat tirelessly. My mother said that they would not believe her when she said that white people's imitation of the rain was cheap. For, she went on, who could call this rain compared to God's which dropped from an immaculate and dry sky? I said that was not the point; my friends told me that rain was nothing but clouds in the sky. She slapped me and said that I was getting evil.

There were French flags waving on top of every grass-thatched roof. The red of the flags reminded me of the time when the roofs were on fire. The people painted white the trunks of all the mango trees along the street. At night the white trunks looked like the dead arisen on judgment day. From block to block there were long white cloths hanging above the street; each end was

tied to the branches of the mango trees on either side of the street. It was written in red on those cloths: "Bienvenu Mon Général de Gaulle."

I was the only Maraka boy who could march with the Mandinka boys on reception days. Most of the Maraka men did not know their right from their left in French. I could speak French before I went to European school; the Maraka men paid me money to march in French for them. I did not know all the words of "Allons enfants de la patrie," but I could sing it using my mouth as a trumpet. I always began the march like they did in the army; I said loudly, "Ahhhh vos gardes!" I saluted the invisible commander and said, "Gauche, gauche, gauche!" After I got used to beating the floor with my left foot and simultaneously raising my left arm to slap my thigh, I shouted, "Gauche, droite, gauche, droite, gauche, droite." I explained in Maraka that I was saying, "Left, right, left, right, left, right." Then I trumpeted the French hymn until the corners of my mouth were white with my saliva, and sweat ran down behind my ears. The Maraka men laughed until tears came to their eyes and they slapped each others' hands swearing that I was something else. When they finally became serious again, they shook their heads and said it was a shame I had become a comedian like the Mandinka boys. I was happy for that compliment.

Our uniforms for the march were designed by Lamine who was president of the "Comité des Jeunes." Lamine was the brother of one of my friends whose name was Kolo. Kolo told us that Lamine studied in France; he knew everything because he learned it from the white men themselves. I was especially impressed by our new uniforms since Lamine said that they represented the French flag. We had blue tennis shoes, white shorts, and red shirts. The committee delivered the uniforms to every family and our fathers paid for them. Kolo and I were the same height, so Lamine said that we would lead the march in front of the boys. We were to hold a board on which was written, "Soyez le bienvenu, mon général." I was very excited by the news; I, a Maraka boy, would be leading all the boys in the presence of everybody. Kolo said that he had arranged the whole thing with his brother; I thanked him and gave him five francs. Some Mandinka boys said that I would mix my steps and humiliate everybody, but I knew I would be fine.

When I went to bed the night before de Gaulle's arrival, I had a dream. I was dead and everybody was at judgment day. When the verdict was passed, I followed unconsciously those who were going to hell. My mother shouted at me and said that I was supposed to be in the other line. I woke up confused and afraid, for I did not know whether I had changed lines. I went back to sleep hoping that the dream would come back so I could find out which way I went. It was important for me to find out; I did not want to go to hell. But the dream did not come back.

My mother woke me up at six o'clock and said that my water was ready in the bathroom. I washed and put on my uniform. It was then seven o'clock and my parents' house was, as usual, full of Maraka men who came to take their breakfast before taking off for the diamond mines. As I walked out to join my friends, a Maraka man said, "You look like a Mandinka boy."

"He will be a Mandinka boy if he doesn't slow down," said my mother.

They all laughed, then my father said, "Never, I'd rather put him in the diamond mines first."

I like being compared to Mandinka boys or to white boys. My Mandinka hero was Sékou Touré. Some people considered Sékou Touré a rebel, a child who was not afraid of breaking the rules. People had seen him break many rules; each time they had crossed their arms and generously waited for something to happen to him. But nothing happened. Once he came to Kankan, dressed in a white uniform and riding in a jeep. He threw candies to us kids; while we were tackling each other and grabbing for the candy, he shouted "Vive l'Unité Africaine. A bas la France! Non à la colonisation!" People could not believe their ears; how could anybody say that? The smart ones just smiled; they knew his time was not long to come. Then they could say, "What did I tell you?"

But Sékou Touré survived all these abominations. He was like white people themselves; when they came to Africa and started burning our gods and thrashing our priests, we thought that the thunder was going to strike them. We were still waiting, for our gods had not avenged us yet. My father and my teacher at the hearth said that Allah was the most powerful of all gods, but even Allah did not seem to mind the white people. Sékou Touré was the only person who defied white people. He was special and that was why I liked him.

By seven thirty I had joined my friends. We marched towards the airport. As we approached, other groups of boys and girls merged with us on the Boulevard du Soldat Inconnu. We were all colors, like a field of corn beside a field of millet and a plantation of pineapples. The dust rose from the stomping of our feet, covering our heads and our eyelashes. It was said that Lamine made a blunder by ordering our shoes in the color blue; the French flag was red, white, and green. Whoever heard of red, white, and blue? But it did not matter. By the time we got to the airport, everything we had on was colored brown by the dust.

At the airport some men came and reordered us into a new line. Lamine was asked to step aside, and we were told to put

down our signs of "Soyez le bienvenu Mon Général de Gaulle." New signs were raised up. Some said "Vive l'Unité Africaine," "Non au Colonialisme," "La Guinée Indépendante," "Non à de Gaulle," "Vive L'Algérie," etc.. Others were flags, red, yellow and green, pictures of Sékou Touré, Nkrumah, Lumumba, etc. Lamine, our leader, was quiet; we imitated him.

It was very hot. The new signs were absorbing the sun like young plantations of corn and millet at sunrise. It was hard to stare at the signs for a long time. The heat seemed to be coming from them and the sun. I wanted to see what each of them said. There were tears in my eyes. At eleven o'clock the plane came out of the clouds and flew over us. We raised our heads and looked at it as it grew smaller and smaller. At that time a man roared "Non, Non, Nooooo!" pointing to the vanishing plane. Without knowing, we imitated the man and echoed "Non, Non, Noooooon!"

The morning after de Gaulle's visit the Maraka men brushed their teeth with little sticks of wood called cure-dents. I was the only person in my family to use a toothbrush and paste. As the Maraka men chewed on their pieces of wood and spat long jets of saliva out of the door of my parents' house, they pulled out of their gown pockets bundles of handkerchieves full of different kinds of diamonds. I like to put diamonds, like the Maraka men, in my palm, squeeze some lemon juice on them and apply my other palm on top to rub them with all my strength until they were clean.

My mother's griot once said that the diamonds were of three categories just like women. He called the industrial diamonds, which were small and black and which the Maraka men named "worthless," "Tubabu-Muso" or white woman. The diamonds in between, small and greenish white, were called "Mandinka-Muso" or Mandinka woman. The last ones, which were the color of clear water and the shape of carved things, the ones which could send the Maraka men home with their pockets full of money, the ones which had more followers than the Christian god and were as rare as the rain in the sahel, those my mother's griot called "Maraka-Muso" or Maraka woman. I did not like griots; the Mandinka boys said they were flatterers and parasites who lived off other people.

That morning, after de Gaulle's visit, as my mother brought in the breakfast, a Maraka man asked my father what he thought of the visit.

"Eh! Didn't you hear yourself the radio say that Sékou Touré spoiled it?" my father said, frowning.

"I heard that he did not even welcome de Gaulle in our

traditional African way; he did not even give him time to rest. He began speaking as soon as the man got off the plane," said one Maraka man.

I took that as my turn to speak and I said, "And he said to de Gaulle: 'Non! Nous préférons la liberté dans la pauvreté à l'opulence dans la servitude!'" I had memorized these lines the previous night with my Mandinka boy friends. I was proud of my delivery of it to the Maraka men.

"Get out of my house!" my father shouted, rushing toward the corner where he kept the whip. The Maraka men calmed him down. One of them asked, "Where did he learn French like this?"

"That's not what worries me," said my father. "It's how he uses French against French people, like that Sékou Touré; that's what worries me. What can Sékou Touré do but bring us all trouble, behaving as he does with Général de Gaulle?"

"What does he want?" asked my father's griot.

"Independence, isn't that it papa?" said I putting it in the form of a question so my father would not think that I was defying him. I knew what independence meant.

"What's independence?" asked one Maraka man.

"To chase all the white people out of Guinea," answered another Maraka man.

"But we need white people to buy our diamonds!" said another.

"Sékou Touré lacks responsibility and he does not care what happens to us," my father said.

"What I don't understand is: how can he chase white people all by himself? Where has he been keeping that power? Have the guns with which the French conquered our ancestors gone numb? What kind of weapon is Sékou Touré fighting with?" my father's griot said.

"He's not chasing them," my father said. "You know that no one has the power in Africa to chase whites. They are leaving because they are tired of us, of men like Nkrumah and Sékou Touré." My father did not like Kwame Nkrumah whom he thought started the irresponsible rebellion against the whites.

"Why did de Gaulle come here then," asked a Maraka man.

"Didn't you hear on the radio?" my father said. "They

said that he came because he cares about Africa. Responsible and well educated Africans like Senghor and Houphouët Boigny begged Général de Gaulle to come. Being very educated themselves, Senghor and Boigny know that Africa is not ready for independence. They begged 'Mon Général' to wait until other Africans are as educated as Senghor and Boigny to be doctors and professors. Then Africans can get their independence. Sékou Touré who has not had enough education lacks this kind of vision."

"So what's going to happen now?" a Maraka man asked.

"Général de Gaulle is upset," said my father. "He said that Sékou Touré could have Guinea. He swore that Sékou Touré would be sorry and would one day crawl on his knees to beg for forgiveness. I believe that we will all be sorry because of his irresponsible act."

"It must have been a sight to see a tall man as de Gaulle upset by a black man like Sékou Touré who I heard was dressed in a traditional all white costume like his great grandfather Samory Touré. It seems like old times again. I wonder if there were some griots there to tell of the scene?" asked my father's griot.

"If you call this a victory I will say that it will be short-lived," said my father. "You see in Ghana, Nkrumah did the same thing a year ago; he already regrets it. I heard that Ghanaians want to go back to British rule."

I knew why my father did not like Sékou Touré and Nkrumah. The Mandinka boys said that when Guinea became independent they would do as the Ghanaians did after their independence. They would kick out white people and all the Africans who worked for them. The Mandinka boys said that the Maraka men were not Guineans. They were diamond thieves for the white people. The Mandinka people wanted the diamonds for themselves. The French radio and the American radio had all said that Sékou Touré would kick out everybody and destroy the country's wealth. That was why my father was upset.

I knew that we would be fine after independence. Sékou Touré spoke on the radio for nine hours and said that after Ghana and Guinea it would be the turn of other African countries to become independent. Then there would not be a Guinea or a Ghana or a Mali. There would be an Africa. Every African would feel at home wherever he might be. Sékou Touré said that it was white people who divided Africa. After they left, Africa would be reunited again. He said that Africans who were not yet independent could come to Ghana and Guinea. If my father had listened to Sékou Touré on the radio instead of the French

and the American radios, he would have been less worried and less upset about him. He would have known also that Sékou Touré was not against him. I knew that the Maraka men would be fine after independence. And I would be fine too; I might even be able to go to school and become educated as the Mandinka men. I liked the way Sékou Touré defied de Gaulle. The radio said that there were other black men like Lumumba, Nyerere, and Modibo Keita who were defying white people and asking for their independence. My father's griot said that it was like old times again. Black heroes were rising once again.

That day after de Gaulle's visit, when I went to the hearth, I recited my verses until my teacher went to sleep in his chair. Zenebu and I slipped into his room, to play mommy and daddy under his bed. Zenebu was the only child of my teacher, who had four wives. My teacher was overweight, and my friends said that he could not make babies; they doubted if Zenebu was his real daughter. He had a bicycle that he made the students wash every morning. But the doctor had forbidden him to ride it because of his weight. He loved Zenebu and never beat her. If we did not recite our verses correctly, he always beat the devil out of us. Zenebu always stuck her tongue out at him when he asked her to recite her verse. He used to sit in his chair and go to sleep until the sun chased all the shadows and burned his skin.

When all the students left and the women went to the marketplace, Zenebu and I used to go under my teacher's bed and play mommy and daddy. I had seen Gary Cooper and Samson and Delilah, so I kissed Zenebu. We always made a lot of noise even when we did not want to. We wanted the blanket to cover all of us, yet we were uncovered whenever we moved. Zenebu said that I was supposed to pee on her but it always made me hurt inside after I had forced myself to pee.

The afternoon after de Gaulle's visit, Zenebu and I went to her mother's room to play mommy and daddy again. We were sitting facing each other when Zenebu's mother came from the well with her bucket of water on her head. I had my back turned to the door and did not see her soon enough. Her voice was shaky when she called out to my mother and said, "Look at your son climbing on my daughter."

"Give him a slap and he won't do it any more," my mother said. Zenebu's mother poured the bucket full of water on me and slapped me on my back. I ran in the yard and people started laughing at me. I wanted to cry but was too ashamed. Then it dawned on me that I was a big man now. I should be out doing grown-up things, not playing mommy and daddy like babies.

That was the year de Gaulle visited Guinea, and....