

AWAKENING

The deep, hollow thump, thump of mortar meeting pestle that wakes the sun and brings it from its horizon bed has not yet begun. The log fires are not yet lit to make the morning porridge.

In this dry savanna village of Africa, where noise and rhythm seem as perpetual as air, it is shocking to witness such stillness.

We are awake because we are waiting. My weary head is propped against a concrete pillar, as I look out from the thatch-roofed porch of the maternité. Fifty meters in front of us, the narrow dusty road at the entrance to the village of Marama-Ba lies flat and empty — temporarily relieved of the traffic of callus-footed farmers, flip-flopped schoolchildren, and the worn-smooth rubber tires of second-hand Chinese bicycles. Awa is sitting on the porch steps, her head gently supported by the shoulder of her mother-in-law, Mon. Aminata, the assistant midwife, stands watch over us like a soldier at attention.

A soft wind picks up, and the trees just beyond the main road that make up the “magic forest” whisper in their movement. It sends

shivers down my spine. The villagers of Marama-Ba believe that the spirits of the forest protect them from all harm, and so are reverent and fearful of entering into these trees, lest the spirits be angered. Of course I don't believe in sorcery, but I have never ventured into them either, unsure whether the comfortable suburban American reality that I know holds true halfway across the globe.

I arrived at the maternité early this afternoon, for what we all thought was the imminent arrival of Awa's child. But even now, the infant's soft head remains firmly wedged between Awa's too-small pelvic bones.

Hours ago, when I suggested that Awa needed a doctor, the midwife had said, “The hospital is too far, and she can't afford to pay.” Instead, the midwife pressed with both hands on Awa's belly, yelling “Push! Keep pushing!” Then, turning to me she muttered disdainfully, “These women are so lazy.”

Awa obediently pushed. Her lips pinched together into a pale thin line across her face. Her eyes shut violently, extending wrinkles along her temples. But she never allowed a sound to escape her lips. To bear their pain without sound



Donald Mulligan

AS THE SLOW, CREAKY WHEELS
OF AN AFRICAN EMERGENCY TURN,
AN AMERICAN HEALTH WORKER
COMES TO TERMS WITH THE REALITY
OF HER OWN LOSS.

BY RACHEL HERR

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was a source of pride for the Jula women. I felt her screams inside me, though, alongside my own stifled cries. Between contractions, her head dangled limply to one side, drops of sweat that had beaded up in the curls of her hair at her brow, ran in rivulets down her face and into her ear. Aminata dabbed her face with a rag. Awa's eyes were large vacant saucers.

I met Awa two weeks after I arrived in the village to work at the health center. I was helping the nurse with his monthly vaccination of infants when she confidently strolled over, sat at the register and proceeded in her slow and careful handwriting to record each child's vaccinations as if this was her job. When I scheduled "baby-weighing days," she came again, and helped me record each infant's weight. Effortlessly, she translated my French into the mother's Jula, slid wriggling babies onto the scale, and then recorded the weights.

On the first day, when I told one mother how beautiful her son was, and the mother gasped and stepped back in fear, Awa corrected me. "Bintou," she said, using the African name she had given me, "we don't like it when you say the child is beautiful. We think the spirits will hear you and come take all the beauty away. In Marama-Ba, you must always say 'Mama, how ugly your child is!' The mother will know what you mean."

Another day, after weighing the babies, she sighed, sat back in her chair, then turned to me and said simply, "Thank you, Bintou."

"Thank you? For what? You're doing all the work! I should thank you!"

"No, Bintou. After I married, I thought that this was it — I would never again get to use my French, and I would only work as a farmer in my husband's fields. Now I can use what I learned in school. I'm very happy."

Unlike other village women, Awa was confident, and willing to try new things even when they challenged her own beliefs and customs. I imagined her learning to navigate a Wal-Mart or surf the Internet, if I could just take her home with me. I believed that she could survive anywhere.

I was not really surprised, then, when I heard other village women talk about her. "She married for love!"

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they said quietly, with an air of drama. "How shameful!" they whispered and clucked their tongues, all the while blushing. They relished telling the story, each time adding more enticing details.

In its most basic telling, the story went like this: Four years earlier, Awa was married to a man in the village of Marama-O. But when she met Namory, a prominent cotton farmer from Marama-Ba, she fell in love, and they would sneak out to the cotton fields at night and make love under the stars. One night, Namory's friends snuck into Marama-O and "kidnapped" Awa from her husband's home, just as if she was a young bride being taken from her father's house. They brought her in darkness to the bed of the waiting Namory. Scandal arose the next morning when Awa's angry husband went to Awa's parents and to the village elders of Marama-O.

To settle the affair, the elders of the two villages met and listened to both the pleas of the scorned husband and the cotton farmer in love. Awa had sat quietly on a stool, head covered with a shawl, and was not allowed to speak. In the end, the elders decided to annul her first marriage and acknowledge her marriage to Namory, but decreed that she could never return to her home village. She would have to start a whole new life in Marama-Ba.

This evening, at sunset, the midwife went home for dinner and her evening bath. She told us to come get her when the baby came. Aminata, Mon and I stayed with Awa in the little cement room, which, like our spirits, grew dimmer as the evening progressed. To soothe her youngest infant, tied to her back, Aminata remained standing and swayed from side to side, sometimes reaching back to tap her palm rhythmically upon the infant's bottom. She paused only to periodically expose Awa's taut belly and listen with a small ear horn for the sound of the baby's heart. Each time when she went back to rocking her infant, I knew that Awa's infant was still alive inside her, and felt relieved.

After midnight, the midwife returned, glanced into our room, declared authoritatively that Awa needed to go to the hospital, then left to go to bed. The slow, creaky wheels of an African emergency began to turn. Suddenly people I did not recognize appeared out of the darkness to help. Aminata sent them off to deliver messages. Someone went down the road on a bicycle

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to find the man who owned a vehicle in a village 6 miles away. An hour later, a beat-up old jalopy bumped and clanged up the dusty road, bicyclist hanging off the back end, black smoke spewing out of the tailpipe, and dragged itself to a clumsy halt at the front steps of the maternité.

"Thank God!" I shout. "Let's go!" Aminata and I lifted Awa from her bed and, her arms around our shoulders, helped her to the steps of the maternité. But by then, the driver and the bicyclist had disappeared into the village. The truck sat empty, a wide line of smoke emanating from the hood. My jaw clenched.

"What is it now? Awa needs to go!"

"I don't know, Bintou." Aminata herself looks dejected for a moment, but then says calmly, "I think the men have gone to negotiate the price. They must think the price is too high, and the driver won't go until he is paid."

"Too high?! Tell them to go! Just go! We can figure out the price later. Or I'll pay! Just let them go!"

Aminata laughs gently, as if to tell me how naïve I am. "I know, Bintou. They will go. Don't worry."

"Aminata, tell me where they are. I will go and get them. Please help me do this!" I cry out. But then I realize from her defeated demeanor and silence that my words will be to no avail. Awa moans aloud for the first time, and the noise hangs in the air like an insect trapped in a web.

"Aminata? Aminata?" I plead, trying to keep tears back.

"Bintou. It's not up to us. God willing, they will return, and then Awa will go."

"God willing?"

"Yes, Insha'Allah."

With nothing else to do, we eased Awa onto the steps, and now, we four women are waiting.

In Marama-Ba I live alone in a two-room concrete brick house in the village chief's compound. Most people live in one room, and never alone, but I receive special accommodations as an honored guest of the village, because the villagers had been instructed that "Americans like to be alone." But in the evenings, the children's faces peeking in my windows and the little hands reaching over the sill remind me that I am never really alone.

When I am in a good mood, I sing children's songs,

making my hands into spiders climbing waterspouts, or I make my crooked elbow into a teapot. The kids laugh and mimic my gestures and sounds, melting my words into an alphabet soup none of us understand. Other times, when I'm homesick or frustrated, I sit as still as I can, hoping to be boring enough that they will go away. This usually does not work.

The best evenings are when Awa cooks for Namory. On those nights, she puts aside a portion for me and comes to sit with me until late in the evening while I eat. On one of these evenings, she playfully asked me, "Do you know why my husband's cotton grows so tall?"

Suspicious of where she was leading me, I drawled out, "Nooo ..." and looked at her to continue.

She eyed me for a moment, and then tossed her head back in great guffawing laughter. "Bintou! You know! Bintou, loooove makes my husband's cotton grow so tall!" She roared at her own joke, and I could not help but laugh, too.

When our laughter faded, she said with solemnity, "Bintou, I know what the women say about me, but I am not ashamed. I am happier than they are. My first husband did not treat me well. Namory has made me happy." Her youthful, 23-year-old face belied her courage and wisdom. She challenged me with an unwavering, steady gaze.

I asked, "Awa, do you miss your family?"

"Yes," she said slowly and quietly, "but I had to go away to be with my husband." She paused. "Now it is important that I make my own family."

She has had two miscarriages already. In a village where virtually every woman carries a baby on her back, Awa is among the very few who do not. Awa continued, "But, Bintou, I am worried."

Over a year ago, on a hot, still afternoon when most villagers were still in the fields, a small barefoot child came running up to me, "Bintou! Bintou! Bintou!" She used my name as a siren. She urged me to follow her, and I ran with her to Awa's dark, concrete-floored room.

"Bintou!" I heard Awa plead in a tiny, quivering voice as I arrived on the doorstep. I felt a shock of cold in my heart.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Bintou, help. Please." As my eyes adjusted to the darkness of her room, I saw her on all fours on top of scattered clothes and bedding. Underneath her, a small bloody heap lay on the rags. Her wrap-around

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skirt was pulled up around her waist, and blood covered her legs. She looked up at me, brow furrowed with worry. I hadn't even known she was pregnant. My hand flickered across my own belly, absent of scars, but once knowing that same loss, and I was frozen for a moment, unsure what to do.

"Awa, stay there. I'll get help." My heart pounding, I sent the child to find Namory, and I ran to the clinic to find the nurse. An hour later, we were helping Awa onto the narrow metal luggage rack on the back of her husband's motorbike for the long, bumpy, 20-mile ride to the nearest hospital. She was dignified, but silent in

her sorrow. Her shawl was draped delicately around her head and shoulders, sheltering her small frame. Her eyes looked downward. I couldn't believe this was the only option.

"Wait!" I ran home and returned with a small cushion for her to sit on. They roared off, leaving us behind in dusty silence.

A couple of days later, Awa was back. When she saw me, she smiled as if nothing had happened, and went about her work. Other women did not speak of Awa's miscarriage, lest they recall their own similar incidents, or curse themselves by saying one wrong word of hope.

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Awa moans softly, and her shoulders tense in pain. She is increasingly unable to hide her discomfort. Mon, or “grandmother,” lays her weathered hand over Awa’s and closes her eyes, seeming to draw Awa’s pain inside of her. The dark crevices, hollow cheeks and long eyes of Mon’s face are testament to the harsh conditions of her life. Mon has borne 12 children, of whom seven survived. She attended the births of all of Namory’s children from his two other wives. She is the vigilant mother, overseeing the household, helping the co-wives with their work, restoring peace among them when they argue, and caring for the youngest children while the able-bodied go to the fields. I usually see her at midday, slowly and methodically pounding dried palm nut kernels to make black palm soap, surrounded by a dozen young children attending to their own games. Now she sits beside Awa, watching over her protectively, holding her hand.

It’s been over an hour since the driver disappeared. My anger and frustration are growing. Every second feels like an eternal minute, and it’s all I can do to

restrain myself from screaming out, “Why here? Why now? This would never happen at home!” I begin to feel as though ghosts are surrounding me, and I want nothing more than to be away from here, as if my disappearance will prevent this scene from being real, or my ignorance of it will bring me peace. My own scene had been too unreal, too quick; I almost believe it was imagined. I was too young and naïve when I quietly withdrew three hundred dollars from my well-padded college savings account, to go to a nearby clinic. I disappeared from my classroom for a day, and was back the next Monday, as if nothing had ever happened. My parents and my boyfriend never knew. If not for the sound of the stifled cries rising inside of me now, I might, perhaps, still think it had never really happened ...

At last, out of the gray shroud of dawn, two men appear, walking briskly. Without a word or signal, the driver sits in the cab of the dilapidated vehicle and waits. Aminata and I help Awa to her feet, her neck too weak to support her head. We place her in the deep indentation of the torn cushion, ready again for the

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long journey. Mon clammers into the covered bed of the truck. What is Awa thinking? How will she manage that bumpy ride with her infant still wedged between her thighs? Are these spirits with her, too?

"It will be fine," I say.

"Insha'Allah," Aminata says.

The next day the men go to the fields. The women sweep their dirt floors, rhythmically pound the husks off rice, cook breakfast over open fires and soothe sleepy infants tied to their backs, oblivious to the slow drama of the night before. For Marama-Ba, it has been an ordinary night. Despite the blazing sun and swirling dust, I hop onto my bike and head to town toward the hospital. I arrive covered in sweat and dust. Mon is at the door of the maternity ward and looks surprised to see me.

"Bintou!" she calls brightly, despite her obvious exhaustion. She leads me into the large recovery room, where three rows of narrow cots are lined up in the dingy white-tiled hall. Three dusty ceiling fans turn lazily at the lowest speed; one, I notice, is dragging a cobweb through the air. The room is noisy and bright

with families and new mothers and the wailing of newborns. Mon grabs my wrist in her firm hand and leads me to a thin cot where a tiny infant lies alone, swaddled in Awa's colorful print shawl.

A lump rises in my throat. Fear and disbelief melt into my bones. My legs feel weak when I whisper, "Where is Awa?"

"With God," Mon answers solemnly.

I can no longer see. A hazy curtain of color and sound is drawn around me. Tears track down my dusty cheeks. My throat is so swollen that even mouth agape, only a strangled, high-pitched groan emerges. Mon lifts the infant from the bed. She turns to face me, her own face long with sadness. "Bintou, please..." she stretches out her weathered arms, offering me the infant on her two open hands.

As though guided, my own arms open to accept the child, and as I fold Awa's tiny infant against my chest, the noise and motion of the world slip away. I feel only the peaceful thump, thump of this small heart alongside mine. ■

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