

Fiction/Creative Nonfiction Third Prize

The Boiling Cauldron (an extract from *Ask for the Road: A Memoir*)

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SUMMARY *The very nature of fieldwork constructs the conditions for “exceptional experience.” Learning to inhabit an unfamiliar world and operate outside one’s normal frame of reference makes one vulnerable. The “participant observer” is inevitably changed. This may be especially true when the effort to bridge perspectives involves experimentation of a kind that not only engages the researcher in intense and intimate inquiry but also entangles her as an inextricable part of it. My investigation of the cryptic practice of divination in West Africa was such an entanglement. My memoir, *Ask for the Road*, is about my fieldwork on divination in Côte d’Ivoire—an investigation that, through the seers’ uncannily accurate readings, quickly turned into an exploration of my haunting past in that country. The diviners’ readings forced me to revisit the demise of my former marriage to an Ivoirian man and its continued hold on me. “The Boiling Cauldron,” a chapter from the memoir, is about a meeting with one of those diviners and a disturbing encounter that helped me decide to take leave of the past once and for all, and claim a new direction. [Africa, divination, memoir, witchcraft]*

No one had ever mentioned his leprosy, and I was unprepared. When we first met, his eyes fixed intently on mine, and I felt him waiting and daring me to look at the corroded stumps of his hands and feet. I’d always had a horror of deformity. Once, many years before, Simon and I were standing in the field of corrugated dried mud that served as makeshift station waiting for our bush taxi to leave, when a leprous beggar had approached me from behind and tapped my shoulder. I turned to the shock of a gaping hole where his nose should have been, and lips gnawed and dripping like wax. I caught my body’s sinking weight against the door of the old Peugeot. Simon chased him away and tried to make light of it. “I would have offered him a cigarette, but what could he have done with it?” he snickered. “Get it?” he urged, but I was still dizzy and weak. This time, though, I stepped toward the diviner and extended my hand. He reached out the shaft of his arm. When I took it his expression softened. He turned and led us out of the sun into his cool consulting room.

Diarra Souleymane was what the Moslems called him, but he was better known by his Senoufo name, Dé Tchéclezo. He was a sand caster. As I followed

him inside, I wondered how he would manage to etch lines in the sand without fingers. He pulled his caftan around him and sat on the mat rolled out across the cement floor. He extended his legs and crossed them at the ankle. He looked up and grinned. His lower jaw jutted forward, but because he was missing his bottom front teeth, his lip hung open like a wound. His eyes sparkled, as if he enjoyed submitting me to the spectacle of his ugliness.

He was not in a hurry to begin, but he asked me no questions. Instead he stroked his beard pensively with the stub of his palm and studied me. I avoided meeting the penetrating stare. His gaze was too intimate. The lid of one of his eyes drooped, red and weepy. The disgust rose in my throat. I focused instead on the sand pile next to his mat. He started to sweep the sand gently, drawing it down and across the floor with his stump, and began his divinatory process.

"I've been ill, you know, and normally I wouldn't have consulted today. But for you I'm making an exception."

Maybe he was curious himself about this white customer. Maybe he wanted to find out what I was up to in the backwaters of Korhogo, or maybe he just liked the look of me. I didn't ask why. I just waited to see what would come of this seer's reading.

He spat into what remained of his palms with a loud popping sound, and then reached out the stump of his left hand to cover the small wasp nest clinging to the wall behind him. He lowered his head, murmuring a prayer. Two wasps exited the knobby mud nest and crawled along the wall toward him, resting there as if taking in his words. The leper glanced over at them and then lifted his lids, checking to see if I'd noticed. He spat again into his palms and made another sweep across the sand.

There, in the corner just beyond the wasp nest, I caught sight of another puzzlement: a string was suspended between adjoining walls, with each end tied to a nail. The length dipped under the centered weight of an egg, impossibly balanced on the delicate cable. A sapling branch, bent at right angles, arched across the top of the egg, and on both sides of the branch a tiny wrapped packet dangled from a thread. The whole contraption and its precarious position in midair defied physics, but there it was before me. The egg was like a wheel on an acrobat's tightrope, and the branch and suspended talismans were like an acrobat's balancing stick. But where was the acrobat? How could it possibly remain upright? I stared in fascination. The diviner grinned, then set to work.

With his stump, Dé Tchéclezo smoothed the fine sand next to his mat to a level "writing" table, a palimpsest. Now with what was left of his thumb he began to scrawl onto its surface. With short vertical jabs from right to left, he traced lines across the sand table. He made a second pass, etching single and double marks in rapid succession, and continued on to draw another row. Across the bottom of the fifth tier he squiggled a horizontal line, circled the entire table with a dramatic sweep, and with a few staccato pokes he stopped. He asked my name, then chanted quietly. At last he sat back and looked up.

"Whether or not your work will be a success, that is what is on your heart. Everything that you are doing here to make it happen is what is preoccupying you the most. Don't worry; your work will advance. Others will appreciate what you do. You must pray ... You're looking for benediction. You are going

to be married soon, but your work is what is troubling you. That's why you've come. You want to know more about this practice, to see what it is I do."

He'd gone directly to the heart of things. How could he have known? He'd had no advance warning of my visit, no knowledge of who I was. Even if every white person who came to consult were a researcher, would it follow that they were investigating divination itself, trying to learn more about the practice? I thought it remarkable too that he'd seen my impending marriage, because I was forty-one and was wearing a wedding band, a decoy to protect me from unwanted advances during my solo journey. I made an unlikely suspect as a bride.

"Haven't you seen many other consultants before coming here? Didn't you see someone who uses cowries?"

"Yes," I answered. "I've seen quite a few."

"I see that one who used cowries did not see correctly. He told you to sacrifice a duck. Don't sacrifice the duck."

The Fâ diviner, the one that Margaux took me to see, had made that prescription. His little compound behind the railroad tracks in Vridi was sheltered under a stretch of coconut palms. A few of his followers saw me approach and quietly gathered to watch our consultation. "The cowries say you must sacrifice a duck to ensure your return to Côte d'Ivoire," he had said, "since the duck travels across water." Then came his terrible pronouncement: "You won't remember us." I would leave and not return; I'd abandon them all and my task. It had cast a pall over the rest of that meeting. When Margaux and I left we'd walked through the closing twilight market wordless and glum. Since then I hadn't made time to perform the rite and harbored a lingering guilt. The leper's dismissal of that prescription came as a surprising relief. Maybe that diviner had gotten it all wrong. How could I forget about them, the diviners who were the focus of my research, and my former in-laws who had embraced me so lovingly again? But he had put me in doubt. I realized I was beyond mere field-work now. I had seen so many diviners that my focus had shifted away from them. It was my own destiny I was tracking now.

"You were already told to sacrifice some meters of fabric. That is fine," the leper said.

This was the third time I'd heard that prescription. Madame N'Diaye in Dakar had been the first to insist that three meters of fine white percale would pave the way for the happiness of my forthcoming marriage. Abiba Diallo had said the same. Now it sounded like a tolling bell.

"Your spirits live in the water," the leper continued now. How often I'd heard this refrain, too—even before I'd left the States.

In my last semester of teaching at the college in Mississippi, a colleague and I drove down to New Orleans and ended up conferring with a Vodou priestess in the French Quarter. I consulted her about my broken engagement. Priestess Miriam told me of my water spirit who was ready to serve me. "Henry is coming back to you; Erzuli will make it happen." She wanted a mirror, two coins, white flowers, and some perfume. "Do it today," she'd urged me. "Do it before you leave town." I set the things adrift into the rippling waters with a fervent prayer. Hadn't he indeed come back? Nine months without a word and

suddenly, like a genie bidden to appear, my European lover was in Jackson with an engagement ring.

Dé Tchéclezo spoke again. "You have nightmares; the spirits bring them to you. But they are going to bring you your luck."

How my nightmares brought me luck, I couldn't fathom. I thought they were just about throwing off the disturbing pall of these regular forays into the occult. The parade of consultations with diviners was turning my research into an excavation of my soul. I had lost my way. My former sister-in-law kept warning me, too, that the diviners would only steal my star. "You don't know what you're getting mixed up in here," Hélène said. "These people see what you have and if they like it, they just take it." She recounted how her friend's stellar business suddenly collapsed soon after she had consulted, while her diviner's fortunes rose. As she sunk from debt to despair, the woman kept wailing, "That man stole my star!" It had worried me, more than I wanted to admit. I often thought with a shiver of the searching look of the first diviner I'd seen, Dr. Gonty, who leaned forward and gazed at me as if peering over the map of my life.

Over and over again diviners told me that the spirit who shadowed me and came to me in dreams was my "djinn husband" who supposedly loved and protected me, even to the point of jealously guarding me for his own. The old Senegalese marabout, regal in his billowing boubou, had convinced me to dispatch that genie. "You must send him away," he said, "or your new husband would never stay with you. He is jealous! That's what drove your first man away. Your husband didn't even know himself why he left."

I was haunted by that, and by the constant reminders of my marriage to Simon and our languid days walking together through the streets of Abidjan holding hands. Every day I revisited those places of our youth. At night I dreamed of it. We were once inseparable. Now I was in his country and he in mine. It seemed an impossible reversal. The last time I saw Simon was in Boston. He'd been calling me regularly around then, even a year after the divorce. When I came to town we'd wandered through a museum, peering through cases, pointing out strange wonders. It was almost like we were friends. When it was time for me to go, he walked me to the green line station and came all the way down to the platform to wait with me for my train. The subway car screeched to a halt. I leaned in to kiss his cheek. He remained rigid and still. As the train pulled away, he stood there, motionless, studying the void.

I had the marabout prepare the work to rid myself of the djinn. I placed the folded amulet into a wide tin basin and filled it with water. That night the electricity was out in Abidjan and there was no moon. In the flickering candlelight, I let my garments fall and stepped into the water infused with the text of the Qu'ran as the marabout instructed me. Crouched there in the basin I felt a looming presence gather behind me, as if something were watching from the shadows, but more with sorrow than menace. Had I made a mistake to send my djinn away? Was I spoiling my luck? Letting the marabout steal my star? I had dressed hastily and fled the emptiness of the dark apartment.

The leper's voice stirred me from my reverie. "You used to have heart problems, but now you're better." I wondered whether he was referring to the mysterious palpitations that had plagued my youth, or if by "heart problems" he

meant my love life and the tormented years with Simon at the end, waiting at the kitchen table at 2 a.m. for him to come home and the callous glance of disdain when he did. If the djinn had left me, the constant reminder of Simon's terrible betrayals had not. It was a permanent imprint in Abidjan. It had been good to get out of the city, to set out for this remote north country. Here the diviners were reputed to be stronger and there were no familiar neighborhoods to trouble me.

"Don't worry any more about work. You will succeed, as long as you don't just sit there. Do what is necessary, and you will find renown. You are a teacher, but you will be well known." I thought this reassuring prediction was the concluding statement of his reading. Then, he added, "You will be leaving this country and going abroad from here exactly fourteen days from now."

"Wow! You're right. That's amazing. Eh, you are really 'strong.'"

Dé Tchéclezo grinned proudly. He stood and the wasps made a jagged retreat and disappeared into the nest. The diviner excused himself for a moment and came back with a cigarette wedged between the tiny stump of a pinky and his palm. "If I weren't sick with a cold, I'd show you just how strong I am," he said. "I'd bring out a calabash and fill it with water. Without any fire, I'd make it boil right in front of your eyes."

There were always stories like this, the things that were vaunted as possible, but never witnessed first-hand. Like the Adioukrou "witches" at the Festival of Yams who supposedly used to cut a child in pieces in front of the horrified crowd and distribute the pieces among them, only to bring that child back out of the woods in the early evening hours. No one claimed to have seen it with his own eyes; it was something that had only happened in the "old days." "It's not done anymore," an old villager explained when I was attending the festival. "The last time, the child was just not right in the head. From then on it was forbidden." It didn't matter. It was part of the lore that added to the wonder of the spectacle. I didn't think that Dé Tchéclezo's performance needed the embellishment of boiling water, anyway. I was sufficiently impressed.

"You saw correctly. I've been researching divination and visiting many practitioners to see their methods and understand the work. Tell me, how did you learn to consult?"

"I had a master who taught me. He washed my face. After that, I could see what others couldn't. Then, there are the spirits who come to me and tell me things." I didn't have the patience for this familiar narrative anymore. I'd heard its variant so many times. Instead I pointed to the balancing egg and asked, "Can you explain that to me?"

"That is my instrument of work. It works through the 'genie,' my spirit guide. If I told you the secret, I would go mad."

"And the insects?"

"The wasps are like soldiers. They protect the egg. They will sting anyone who touches it. I'm the only one who has such an instrument. If, in their flight, the wasps saw someone else with it, they'd alert me. So, if you in your travels see someone else with this, come and let me know. The wasps are my messengers, and they do my work at my bidding. See?" He clapped his palms together, and two wasps wriggled back out from the nest and edged toward him along the wall.

There was something vaguely menacing in these explanations, a suggestion of mercilessness beyond an insect's sting. "Can you work evil as well as good?" I asked. "Suppose someone comes to you and asks you to help him cause harm to another? Would you do that kind of thing also?"

"I don't do evil. I believe in God and I know I'm going to die. God gave me this knowledge, and I just do my best to make good use of it. If someone wants to do harm, the evil will only turn back on him. Whatever he comes looking for, that will turn and find him." I nodded and he went on, insistently. "I have clients who were victims of sorcery. I go into the bush, and I find the herbs; the medicine that can help them. The spirits show me what will be the most effective remedy. Whatever happens, it is God who has commanded."

"Are you saying that destiny is predetermined and that it can't be changed? Don't human beings always have a choice? Isn't the very act of coming to consult an act of free will?"

This was becoming an issue for me as I slugged out my research. Over and over again I felt myself confronting the puzzle that I was to myself: Why had I really come? What was it that drew me back to Côte d'Ivoire in the first place, to the very place where the dreams of my youth had fallen away? I felt the pull that first drew me here twenty years ago had been about more than Simon, and more than my research now. There was some deeper undertow that I didn't understand.

"Yes, there's free will. Still it is God that grants even this. When you get up to do something, and you have the strength to do it, it's God. If you change your mind, it's God."

"Then why should we make sacrifice? Why do it if nothing can be changed?"

"The sacrifice is for you. Its effect is on you. Your nose, ears, and eyes don't belong to you. Do you understand?"

"No. What does it mean?"

"It's a proverb. Your nose can smell bad things, your eyes see what offends you, your ears even hear insults against you, but you are helpless and can do nothing to avert this assault, nor can you cut them off for having received these senses. But your hands, your feet, your mouth belong to you, and when you give sacrifice, you go with your feet, you make the sacrifice with your hands, and you pray with your lips. They follow your intention. They carry your will and are your responsibility. They belong to you. So, when you sacrifice you do it in the name of God so that things will work out for you. You are giving something to God, but you are asking something in exchange, since it is God alone who is capable of making it happen."

It wasn't until later that I thought of the irony of the leper delivering the wisdom of this particular proverb, this man with no hands or feet. It wasn't until much later still that it occurred to me that of all the diviners I'd seen up until then, he was the only one who did not prescribe a sacrifice of any kind.

"Your friend outside is ill. She has pains in her joints. I can help her. Why doesn't she come in?"

I was stunned by his reference to Héléne. As usual, my Methodist sister-in-law had remained outside. She didn't want to get mixed up with his kind and was even reticent about accompanying me on this ill-advised journey, sure that I was fraternizing with the devil. But I'd begged her to accompany me. She had

her pains, but she loved me. She wouldn't let me travel alone, and she would pray for me at night before bed. The leper hadn't had time to observe Héléne; he couldn't have known about her invisible condition.

Héléne was half reclined on a woven raffia mat under the shade of a mango tree in the corner of the compound. When we stepped outside, she stood and brushed her long skirt. As we approached, she threw me a glance that I read as both reprimand and warning. "Hey, I heard you all the way out here. So, he's strong, huh?" Her disapproving glare bore through me.

"Yeah, Héléne, you know, he says he can help you with your pains." She looked up sharply. There was surprise and maybe a flash of hope. Dé Tchéclezo brought out a white chalky clay nugget from under his garment. "Here. Squeeze a little juice from a lemon into your hand, then rub some of the clay into a paste. Put it here and here," he said, touching his neck and jaw. "Do it at night before you go to bed. Your pain will subside." Héléne took it reluctantly and thanked him with a pained smile. It suggested embarrassed gratitude, but I read in it a reproach for putting her in that awkward position. She was there, I knew, to save me from myself, not to consult or put her faith to the test.

Later that night, as I sat on my bed in our hotel room writing up my notes, Héléne took the leper's remedy out of her bag and readied the lemon she'd bought that afternoon. I busied myself with my notes, pretending not to watch. She tilted her head and rubbed her jaw with the clay paste.

"You know, Laura, I have to admire you. I wouldn't have reached out to take that leper's arm in greeting. It's when I saw you do that that I realized how much this research means to you." I didn't tell her that afterwards my fingers tingled from the thought of his disease, and the lingering sensation of having been polluted, although I knew there was little danger of contagion. "Did you see his young wife?" Héléne marveled. "Can you imagine her parents accepting that she go and be a wife to that old leper? And she had a baby." Héléne shivered.

"Was that his wife? How do you know? Maybe she was a relative."

"She told me herself. We chatted while you were in consultation. She's less than half his age, too. He's sixty-three, she told me."

"Maybe he got her through his powers," I teased. "Maybe it was his 'juju'."

That night I was visited by a suffocating nightmare. Or maybe it was more, to this day I couldn't really say. I was standing among some people, Africans, but I didn't know them. They were milling about a cooking pot and called me over to come eat. I'd thought to myself, "Aha. Now we'll see what this is all about, these tales that say if you are called to eat meat in a dream, you are being invited to join the coven of witches ... I'll do it. I'll eat the meat and that will show them." I chuckled to myself, knowingly, aware even in my dream that I was dreaming and that my defiance was more a test of the strength of my own beliefs than of them. I was the one who needed to see there was nothing to these tales of dark powers. I pulled the meat from the boiling cauldron. Just as I began to eat, I woke up with a start.

The room was in perfect blackness, without a hint of distant light or even a faint glow of moon. Still, I had my bearings. I could hear Héléne on the narrow bed next to mine quietly breathing. I lay there thinking about the challenge the dream had posed. I was almost amused at what I had done, the choice I had

made. I was glad I'd been so defiant and brave, pushing back against the swirl of superstition, tales, and warnings. The constant sense of menace was wearing, and I wanted to be done with it.

Then, in the dark, a strange distant noise began. A hissing, buzzing sound. At first, I thought that it was a mosquito spinning at my ear—or a wasp!—but it sounded farther away and louder. The hum grew to a drone, a distant murmur of a crowd mumbling strange syllables in a small room behind closed doors. The sounds started to swell, like the rumble of a motor or the growling engine of a train, growing louder and coming at me, approaching fast. I was stifled and paralyzed, pinned to the bed. The empty space weighted down upon my chest. I lay motionless while the hideous rumor of voices whirled in a gathering tornado. I wanted to scream but my mouth was clamped shut. “Hé-lène!” I tried to mouth the word to wake her. “Hé-lène!” My lips and tongue were leaden, and I could only muster a muffled keen. The thunder of the damned hammered on. “Hélène!” The syllables finally eeked through my tight chest and clenched teeth.

Hélène woke up and nudged me. “Laura! Wake up, Laura!” She shook my shoulder more and more forcefully until at last I felt my jaw relax and my chest heaved to take in air.

“Oh, my God. My God.”

“Laura, what is it?”

“My God, Hélène, I don't know ...” I lay there, tense with horror, still hearing the voices recede. I could tell she was trembling. Why should I scare her more? “Just a nightmare. I'm sorry. Go back to sleep.”

What else could I have said? I lay back down in the darkness. What had just happened? Had I still been dreaming and only imagined myself awake? I hadn't been frightened by the dream itself—the coven and the meat. It was only afterwards that I'd found myself paralyzed and trembling, my heart racing. I'd heard them, the cursed, and they'd been coming for me. I lay there unmoving, my open eyes straining against the blackness, listening for the terrible buzz, dreading its return.

“This is all getting to be too much,” I reasoned with myself. “You let yourself be impressed by the leper. Witches and curses, diviners and sacrifices—when did it start becoming real? Where is this getting you? Stiff with terror. Snap out of it.” How did I ever let myself get so confused? When I'd started out on this fieldwork, I still had some objective distance. I saw the diviners as economic refugees. They were traders in problem solving, peddlers of religious ideas, as much a part of the rough and tumble of the city as any “rogue” taxi driver. The weeks of tracking them had exhausted me. The readings had worn me down. Slowly I'd been giving way to the undertow of the waters in which I'd been swimming, an alternative reality where spirits swirled and diviners knew your fate. My objective lens had dissolved, it seemed. All my empirical analyses and political formulations began to seem hopelessly reductive and useless. I'd allowed myself to succumb to the idea that it was destiny that brought me here. Wouldn't it explain the inexplicable mess I'd made of all the years I'd spent clinging to a marriage, encased in disappointment and shame? I had let myself slip into the fantasy that the diviners would make sense of my past. But now I was sinking and all I felt was cold fear.

"I have to get back home, back to Henry and his hyper-rationalism, and the sooner the better," I told myself. I needed to stand in the clear light of reason. I could count on my fiancé to offer me that, and more. His steadiness would settle me. "It doesn't have to mean anything," Henry would say when I'd wring my hands about my past. He didn't believe in destiny or the existence of the disembodied soul. "It's just life, and there is no meaning." He didn't torment himself the way I did. He didn't try to unravel a story of regret. "It's all part of who you are," he'd said, "and I love you."

The next morning, Héléne asked me what had happened. I laughed it off as a dream, but she seemed worried. She took the cake of chalk from her purse and slipped it into the trash.

"Didn't it help you?"

"Oh, no, it did. It actually relieved the pain." She gave a long and knowing look and then a thin smile of apology. We said no more. I had pulled us both into the sphere of perplexing powers. She was heeding the warning. She'd given in to the temptation of the work of the "fetish" but now the good Methodist was penitent.

We closed our little hotel room door and went to meet up with another of Héléne's contacts. Madame Nguessan worked as head nurse at the Korhogo public hospital. Her office was sparsely furnished; a desk and chair in front of a window fitted with louvers of horizontal glass. She had someone bring in two folding chairs for us. Madame Nguessan moved slowly behind the wooden desk and settled her heavy frame into her seat. She pulled open the top drawer and withdrew an open envelope. She took out the letter that Héléne had written to announce our arrival and purpose, smoothed it on the desk and leaned on her folded arms as if she were about to make a momentous pronouncement.

"It's good you came here to Korhogo. This is where all the 'strong' consultants are. Even I, a professional cadre, consult with them. It would be foolish to ignore the fact of their powers. I myself was married to such a man. Too bad Nguessan isn't alive today. He could have shown you things." From behind her thick glasses Madame Nguessan seemed to stare beyond me. "Well, never mind. I do know one diviner you'll want to see. This one will surely impress you."

Madame Nguessan talked about her deceased husband all the way, while the taxi bumped along the dusty roads along the outskirts of town. When we pulled to a stop, there we were, right outside the leper's house.

"Ah, but we were just here yesterday. You're right, he's very good, but there's no point staying" I began. But we'd been spotted. The young wife sauntered by the car, balancing a wide basin on her head, and peered out at us.

"Well, let's go and greet him, at least," Madame Nguessan said, "now that we're here. It's only polite."

We got out and went to greet the leper's wife. At her invitation the three of us took our seats on the bench along the wall, under the shade of the tree. We could hear that there was a commotion inside, a radio blaring, and men talking excitedly. She ducked into the door of the tiny house. No one emerged for some time. Suddenly a blast rose from the radio, "Go-o-o-al!" A crowd roared; the voices of the men inside shouted excitedly. A soccer match was in progress. Dé Tchéclezo came hobbling out. He was wearing a tee-shirt emblazoned with

the colors and insignia of his team, and shorts and red high-top sneakers. The empty toes of his high-tops flapped as he hurried over to us looking both put out and embarrassed. I rose to greet him.

"Your reputation is so strong that another person has brought us to you today. We didn't know she was leading us here or we would not have troubled you again."

"Ah, so you have no more questions?" he asked hopefully.

"No, no. You completely satisfied me yesterday."

Dé Tchéclezo beamed. "Well, please, sit. Be my guests. Would you like some beer?" He turned and called out some instructions to his wife. He had barely greeted our companion, but then he announced, "Madame Nguessan and I are old friends; we go way back. I knew her husband. He was my colleague, my teacher, really. He knew better than I."

"Really?"

"She can tell you all about it." Another crescendo of excitement rose from the radio. He turned and shouted out to his companions in the inner room, certainly needing an update bulletin on the last play. Our timing couldn't have been worse. I could see he wanted to be free of us.

"Go back to your game and your friends. We'll stay and chat together here."

He was as happy as a restless schoolboy let out early for recess. The leper took his leave with the swift ceremony of a handshake and shuffled back to the match.

Sitting on the bench with her legs crossed at the ankle, Madame Nguessan delicately sipped her beer. Her eyes seemed to float behind her thick glasses.

"You know how I met my husband? I came to him as a client. Yes, he was a 'consultant' too. I'd been living in Abidjan, and I came to Korhogo because of his reputation. For two years I had been paralyzed. A specialist in Abidjan said I had a fifty percent chance of recovery but only if I sought out a traditional practitioner. So, in my room I prayed, 'Lord Jesus, if it is my sin that caused this illness, then take me. If it was someone else, an enemy, then heal me and cause them shame.' The next night I saw a person all in white appear. 'Go see Solange,' he said and disappeared. I said, 'Thank you, Lord.' I recalled I had an old friend by that name. I wrote her a letter and sent my son to town by bus to deliver it to her. When he got to the station, there she was, sitting right there, waiting for him. She said this man she consulted, Nguessan, had foretold of my coming. So, she arranged for me to come to Korhogo to meet him."

It was an interesting narrative for my work. I took notes. It would show how fluid a move it was between Christianity and indigenous practice, how saturated even the medical culture was between the healing arts it offered and the occult ones in this other world.

"I'm sure that if I hadn't come to him, I would not have survived," she said. "It had gotten so bad. As it was, I could barely make the trip. Nguessan showed me who was responsible for my suffering. It was members of my own family—witches. They were feeding on me in their night feasts. He gave me what I needed to protect myself. You know, in the end, they gave up. My own older sister confessed. She was the one who had given me over to them. She wrote me in a letter that she'd been in on it, and she asked me for forgiveness. But, you know, in the end, there was nothing to forgive, since I was healed."

Well there it was, this constant puzzle of witchcraft, always looming in the shadow of social intercourse. Strange tales and fearful suspicions were part of the regular buzz of everyday exchange and kitchen gossip. Why did people confess? I didn't buy the academic notion that it gave them prestige. No, their horrors never seemed to lead to material gain or social advantage. Those who were rumored to be witches were quiet villagers with odd, knowing smiles. They weren't outcasts but were avoided and feared. There had to be more to it than that.

As Madame Nguessan went on uninterrupted her voice took on an unctuous tone. "When Nguessan saw me, he wanted me, you know. He was very much older than I, but he didn't have to court me." Her voice slowed and dropped. "I felt he had used his power on me. I couldn't resist him at all. I loved him and I accepted that I would be his wife." She wasn't smiling. It wasn't a love story recalled with relish or charm. It seemed more that she was rehearsing what had happened for herself, puzzling on how she came to be with him at all and why she stayed. "He was good to me, yes. He gave me everything. He even offered to pass on his powers to me, but I refused. No, that is not for me. I'm a Catholic. I can't be a consultant." There was a hint of regret in her voice.

Once a Ghanaian friend had told me that her dying mother had wanted to pass her spiritual gifts on to her, but Alice was also a devout Catholic, and she refused them. For her it was witchcraft, and she wanted nothing to do with what she considered Satanic power. At her mother's deathbed Alice watched her cousin inherit instead. She winced when she recounted the ghastly details. The frail woman was propped up against the cousin's breast. Her mother coughed up something black and slimy and the cousin was made to swallow it quickly before the old woman breathed her last.

"So, my husband passed it all on to Dé Tchéclezo when he died," Madame Nguessan concluded. "He was the inheritor of my husband's power. So, you might say he owes me."

I considered Madame Nguessan's puffy face and vague gaze. I hadn't understood her until then. At first, I had thought that her long, dramatic tale was a grasping effort to make herself important, and maybe to make up for not being the one to introduce us to the diviner. Now I realized that she had been building up to a revelation. It was she who was the rightful heir to the power wielded by Dé Tchéclezo. She'd been called to the healer's art in the classic way, by her brush with death and miraculous recovery, by her dream and spirit guide, by her inexorable draw to the practitioner and into marriage with him. Her story neatly followed all the conventions that authorized her claim. I was ashamed of the way I'd been ready to dismiss her. Madame Nguessan's story was no less credible than the autobiographical accounts of the diviners themselves. It was all a reflection of the culture of belief, another mirror of the big picture of this religious world. We sipped our beer and she continued.

"I come here when I need protection. Dé Tchéclezo destroyed all my enemies. Did he show you his wasps? He can send them out to sting an enemy. It doesn't matter where. They'll find them and then come back to him. Those are no ordinary insects. They're his genies ... When they sting, you're finished. You won't be long for this world."

There it was. This soccer fan was a killer, God or no God. It made me shudder to think of it—this man's easy transition from offering sympathetic insight to dispensing a remedy with sinister designs. Power is power. It's meant to be used.

It made me think of Simon and me, and how it had all gone so terribly wrong. The diviner in Abidjan said he was caught in a witches' trap set in the woods. He'd stumbled into it innocently, and since then nothing could succeed. But our marriage was cursed long before that. In New York he gave up looking for work. He lay face down on the couch all day long. When he was offered a plot of land back home, he convinced me he could make it work; he'd set it up and turn it over to his nephew. He'd be a provider for his family. Then he'd be free to return, maybe go to grad school. We bought John Deere equipment and a second-hand truck. We shipped it from the docks of Lower Manhattan and off he went. I sent him funds and saved for a ticket to follow. I thought our destinies were entwined. They were just entangled. Why hadn't I let myself see he just wanted to be free, how much he resented me for every effort to keep it going, to prop him up? Sacrifice breeds contempt.

There was no witches' trap. Simon's trysts in the woods with a tourist turned that plot of land into a polluted and haunted place. Worms infested the melons we'd planted; the groundnuts grew mold. He'd gone off with that girl and left the well we'd dug uncovered and some animal creeping through the night met its end at the bottom of the watery pit. A horrible stench rose from the tainted pool below. The Mexican hammock I'd strung beside the little hut became an abandoned tangle of twisted knots rotting in the rain, and all its bright colors bled away.

We should never have stayed together. Once I found them out, I'd left and thought it was over. He'd begged for another chance; I should never have let him follow me back to the States. Why did I believe things would be different or that he could make it up to me? I helped him get into that graduate school. We moved to Boston so he could pursue his degree. I took out loans to pay our rent. I hadn't learned the lesson yet. "I'm sick of your generosity," he sneered at me in the end. "I never asked for your help. I could have done it on my own."

Nothing ever came of the farm. The plot was abandoned, the equipment rusted, the truck was sold. His nephew never went there anymore. "There are witches in that spot," he told me. "I'd hear strange noises at night. It's an evil place. I can feel it."

"You see?" Héléne said when we got back to the hotel that evening, "The old man got Madame Nguessan to marry him using his powers. That's just what the leper must have done to get himself that young wife. I told you. You think these consultants are good, but it's like I've been saying, they use their power and take what they want from you."

I thought of the leper's intense gaze and imagined him working his "juju" with lascivious designs. "Heh, Héléne, if I start telling you that I've fallen head over heels for the leper, please, just put me on a plane."

We both had a good laugh at that. It helped me to throw off my creeping apprehension as darkness fell. Maybe Héléne had been right all along. "If you go looking for a thing, it comes looking for you," she warned. Maybe it was

dangerous getting entangled in these matters of the occult. I really didn't know anymore.

I switched off the lamp at my bedside and crawled under the sheet. I lay studying the quiet breath of darkness, waiting for the buzz, the approaching drone, the galloping voices, the hideous army of witches.