

# A SOUL OF SMALL PLACES

by Mame Bougouma Diene  
and Woppa Diallo

My name is Woppa Diallo. My mother was Djinda Diallo, formerly Dem. A devout woman from Matam, where we live. The second-hottest region in Senegal. It's not much to show for, but you take what you can get. My father was Abdoulaye Diallo, a shepherd from Tambacounda. The hottest region in Senegal. I've heard that everybody will eat at least eight flies in their life. That's certainly true if you live in Tambacounda.

There's a large stone in my village, right on the riverbank, shaped like a naked woman. The nomadic herdsmen have ruined it since, but I remember the shape of her, her face and her breasts.

We're told she was a newlywed, raped by her new family's men on the night of her wedding.

As she bathed in the river the following morning, a water spirit found her crying naked on the banks, unable to put her soiled clothes back on, unable to take a single step back to that nightmare she had to call home.

"Can't you tell anyone?" the spirit inquired. "I can whisper into their minds for you if you wish . . ."

She'd refused. Her new family might kill her. Her own family might kill her. Even if she fled they would carry the burden of shame everywhere they went.

“Whispers don’t work that way,” she told the kind spirit. Instead, she tossed her clothes into the river and said, “I can’t go back there, but I can’t leave this place either. This is my home. Turn me into stone, right here over the waters where I belong, so they remember me, and every young girl has a place to hide.”

I go there sometimes to wash my clothes and my family’s and think about her.

My mother thought about her too and wanted to protect me even more. A soul of small places, I needed a big shield, she told me once.

So she took me along to Mecca for the Umrah.

This is no small thing. No small thing at all. The trip is expensive, a lifetime of savings sometimes. If one family could send one person that’s a blessing already, but taking a small child? Perhaps rich Emiratis could, but a mother and daughter from a small village in the hinterlands? My father was a good man. The others laughed at him.

I can’t remember much. A two-year-old rarely does. Heat, stifling, sharp like a whip. Dust, puffs of it eager to clog my flower bud of a nose, the itch in my throat I couldn’t scratch. The noise, the litany of prayers over melodies from loudspeakers, the dizzying press of bodies. White, everywhere, blinding, sweat-reeking, white. Clinging to my mother’s back as the universe conspired to crush me.

I remember her lifting me up, a black stone cast in silver, so dark my young mind couldn’t fathom the pits. It glowed ruby red inside, calling at me, whispering into my head. Three distinct voices a choir.

I heard later that in the days before Islam, when the gods of the desert tribes were female, women would rub the blood from their periods on the stone for good luck, fertility and harvest, and that it had left that distinct glow, deep magenta in black swells.

Oh the men who kissed it so eagerly! The would-be pious who secretly hate women and fucked goats. If they only knew . . .

My mother had lifted me up, the red swirls turning whirlpool in the black of a night that never dawns.

My lips had touched the stone. The choir of whispers exploded in my head. Three distinct voices. Three distinct names. Names that were gods. Names that were dead. Names that would never die. That could never die, because they were names of women, and we are resurrection and rebirth.

I remember nothing after that. I woke up in my parents' bed, in our small house in Agnam Thiodaye, on the outskirts of the village to the call to prayer. I was three.

"Are you ready for school, Woppa?"

"Yes, Mother," I answered as the rooster sang his first song. The goats in the backyard started bleating on cue, the heat already turning humid and thick. The women out in the fields, multihued dots of their head wraps dancing in the distance, dropping small seeds, singing and clapping their hands.

"You stick to the road! Understand?"

"Yes, Mother."

"And hold on to your sister's hand!"

"Yes, Mother."

"Don't let go of her hand!"

"Yes, Mother."

She nods but she's scared. She walks us to the door and doesn't let her gaze wander from us until we've turned behind the bush and the house disappears.

It's a long way to school, and I can only walk as fast as my little sister, Awa. She's only eight but tall for her age, taller than I was four years ago. She keeps up, but every so often she slows down, and I can't let go of her hand. My mother has eyes everywhere. If anybody sees us, she'll be sure to ask them, "Was Woppa holding her sister's hand?" If they said no I'd feel it for days, and Awa would have to slow down for me.

Senegal's a dry place. Matam one of the driest, but not where we lived. In most of the country you can see a house for miles. Not here. The sands by the river are a fertile brown laced with baobabs and bushes, small verdant trees that pop up throughout the land, distorting your sense of space. They pepper the way to school and beyond, the freshness of the water a thin sheen on the air, soothing your throat and sprinkling your tongue in the rising shimmer of heat.

It's in those bushes that the herdsmen ambush little girls on the way to school and rape them.

I hadn't always known what that meant. I'm not sure I did even then, but I understood that something wrong had happened. Sometimes a beautiful wedding would follow the horrible news. I didn't make the connection at the time. I do now.

Our mother's right to be afraid.

People think girls don't go to school here because we're ignorant shepherds. Attendance rates plummet when the seasonal herds of long-horned zebu turn towards our village and rise again when they leave and drop in another village further away.

It's not ignorance. It's fear. Keep your daughters home or else . . . or else the village might get another stone statue or another wedding . . .

The first people to live here settled in the lands north of where the village is now, in the Kadiel Mbaye Toulaye. There they encountered all manner of sorcery, and in its wake, death. So, they moved south to the Fonde Amadou Tall, where they found carnivorous ants who killed with a single bite. A man wandered through the village and found them dying and said: tiode nde ndo, live in the middle, which became thiodaye and they invited him to eat, aar niaam, which became agnam. Agnam Thiodaye.

Some said the rapes came from the old sorcery that had found new ways to torment us. But it didn't matter where you lived or the curse on your village. Keep your little girls home.

I refuse to stay home, school's important to me. It's important to my parents too.

I hold Awa's hand and never let go. Staying in the middle of the road and away from the bushes.

I'm protected. Allah saw to it in Mecca.

Everybody's eyes are on me. Amadou's are the only ones that matter. He's so handsome, smooth skin so dark he's almost blue, with deep-seated dark blue eyes, a straight nose and pearly white teeth.

All of them are staring at me, but I'm not sure why.

The teacher is praising me again, but I don't know why.

It's been happening since I started bleeding. The smell and dizziness of those lost moments in the Wahhabi desert surge over me, the voices whisper names, and . . . just as the year I lost as a child, I emerge moments later, my work done, the test passed, my room and the house cleaned, all to perfection and I can't remember a thing.

No one seems to have noticed, to them I was always there, always me, and I take the praise but shudder inside in shame at being a fraud, of being caught, of people wondering if there wasn't a little witch in me. At not knowing who I am . . .

"I'm very impressed, Woppa," the teacher says. "You're going places."

I nod and smile timidly. She thinks it's humility, the shyness we're taught to display, but it's the smile of the fool, happy because others seem happy, smiling because she's liked.

"Woppa," Amadou whispers, "let's talk outside." He winks as he walks past me, the white walls of the small classroom growing even smaller to the laughter of children in the yard, until it's too small for the two of us, forcing him near me, close enough to

smell his breath, close enough to kiss as I daydream and the class empties.

“Woppa!” I hear Ms. Niang tell me. “Woppa! Snap out of it! Out you go!”

I hope she hasn’t noticed but teachers see everything. Daydreaming over a boy . . .

“Yes, Ms. Niang.”

I pick up my books and run out, the day’s heat abated slightly in the late-afternoon sun. It’s not quite the time for spirits yet. Twilight still distant on the horizon.

Awa’s in the yard, playing jump rope with her clapping friends, she sees me, waves, misses a beat and steps on the rope. I wave back but I’m looking for Amadou. There he is, sneaking around the corner of the building, waiting for me to see him and disappearing behind it.

I scuttle after him, trying to tame the skip in my legs. What does he have to tell me? There’s a hundred girls in the school, I’m not the prettiest. I’m not the smartest, except that I am apparently. I’m too tall, too gangly, too . . . too many things to think about and I have no time to think, he’s around the corner, right there waiting for *me*.

I love my home. It’s the only one that I want. Many of the other girls dream of the city, most have never made it to Matam. They probably think Thies is Paris and Dakar is New York. I don’t know what dreams Netflix and Trace TV planted in their heads. The air here is full, the empty lands behind the school are rich and eternal, not corrosive like asphalt. They’ll crack open one day and fire like blood will flow out, yet eternal. I hear the cackle of the hyena if I close my eyes. Smell the distant smoke filtered through dry grass and trees, the swarms of crickets over the sunset, the river’s dreams of becoming a waterfall. It’s home. It’s where I’m one from the soles of my feet to my braided hair, binding earth to heaven.

“Hey, kai fi.” Amadou beckons.

“Ko jitda?” I’d do anything he says, but it’s the game. The banter

first. The boys will tease and get told off, tease more and I'd make a joke. He'd call me cheeky, holding my hand a lingering moment too long. I've never met a Senegalese boy who didn't think he was the champion of laamb, soccer's ballon d'or and Barack Obama all wrapped in one. Every single one of them.

Amadou surprised me.

"You're doing very well in school," he starts, almost timidly.

I don't know what to say. He gets closer.

"Look . . . I . . . You're not like the others . . . Maybe . . ."

*What is happening?*

". . . Maybe . . ."

*Yes?!*

He looks into my eyes, he's gonna ask me something, what is it?

His resolve falters and he mumbles.

". . . Maybe we can study together?"

That's not what he wanted to say nor what I wanted to hear, but somehow the crush I had on him blossoms. He's not the arrogant shit I thought he was. He's like me. Shy and good inside.

"Of course," I say, and we start talking.

I can't tell you how long we spoke, evening prayer came and went and I didn't hear a thing. Only when Awa started tugging at my dress did I notice the sun dipping beneath the horizon. It was time for the spirits. Long past time to be home.

Awa puffs behind me but holds on to my hand, her tiny feet blistering in blue plastic sandals never meant for running.

The time of spirits never lasts long, a mere thirty minutes before nightfall drops like a butcher's knife on a chicken's neck, and things much worse than evil spirits, more immediately real than evil spirits, cackle in the bushes.

It takes twice that time to get home.

It takes less than a second for lightning to strike.

I'm running right into my mother's whooping, but I almost

welcome the pain, I'm eager for it. Anything for Awa to get home safe, any . . .

Awa's sweaty palm slips out of mine, I hear her cry and hit the dirt road. I turn to see her rise without another sound and reach out to me. Her eyes pop in her head as two hands land on my skinny shoulders.

"Get the other one!" a withered voice orders behind me.

A form in a blue boubou rushes past me and I throw my leg out, tripping him before he can reach Awa. His chin lands on the ground with the cracking of his jaw and a spurt of blood.

"Run, Awa!" I scream before the man pulls me back, covering my mouth with a hand reeking of cow skin and urine.

Awa shakes off her sandals and runs, a blur of white and blue against the night. The man on the floor goes for her ankle, but she jumps over his arm and dashes away.

We're halfway home, maybe more. Will she make it? Will she run into more men hiding in the bushes? An eight-year-old who hadn't even bled yet? All that because I couldn't stop staring at a boy?!

"Forget her." The stinking man's voice snaps behind me as I struggle, muffled screams through his sweaty palm, I try to bite but can barely open my mouth and my teeth slice through my tongue instead, blood flowing into my throat and choking me. "This one's good enough. Help me drag her into the bushes."

He pulls me farther back. The dirt furrows into my legs, my sandals slipping off, my threadbare dress tearing in places, the slow rumble of the river close behind, thorns on the ground piercing me, scratching and scratching and scratching at my arms, nails tearing off from trying to hold on to the ground.

The other man gets up, touching his jaw, spitting a thick gob of blood and looming over me, shadow closing away the sky.

He sneers and reaches for my dress. I close my eyes. I can't watch. I think I might faint but the sweaty stench of acrid malev-



olence awakens something inside me. A choir rises, the sky roars thunder, a flash of lightning, and I can't remember anything.

It's the smell that wakes me up, I think. Something burning close by. Straw? Manure?

"La la illalah, la la illalah, la la illalah . . ."

The voices next, exhausted voices hanging on to every syllable for fleeting life.

I open my eyes. Two pairs of eyes on me, closing down, closer, closer!

Two soothing voices.

"Seese."

"Calm down."

"You've been home for weeks."

"My daughter. Mach'allah. You're safe."

My parents. I'm home. In bed . . . For weeks! What happened? What happened to me?!

My hand shoots down between my legs, but my mother catches it, covering it with kisses.

"You're fine," she says. "Awa told us what happened . . ."

Awa's safe. My head lands back on the pillow.

". . . Your father rushed outside. There was thunder, the wind knocked him flat on his back and it started to pour. Rain so thick we couldn't see through it. So hard it would have beaten us into the ground. We couldn't leave the house, Woppa! We wanted to! We tried! You gotta believe me, Woppa, we . . ."

She paused to catch her breath, sighing deep and fast, into my father's neck. How long had she held it in, hoping I would wake up?

"It lasted only a few minutes, or it would have wiped out the whole village," my father added. "The house flooded. The river spilled over too. Not for long. A few trees were swept away. The rain cleared out at once, and there you were, walking up to the

door, covered in . . . rain and mud . . . you collapsed inside the yard. Eighteen days ago.”

“Nineteen,” my mother finished.

She fed me a small cup of water.

“Where’s Awa?” I ask.

“She’s at school. Don’t worry. The Diarra take her,” my father said.

“But . . . she . . .”

“Hush,” my mother says, putting the cup down and pulling the sheets over me. “Rest more, you’ve had only thin broth for weeks. This is a miracle.”

The sheets are warm, my parents’ breath on my face is comforting. I fall asleep.

I recovered surprisingly quickly. After three days I was in the yard walking and running, but my mother wouldn’t let me leave the house.

Trees weren’t the only things the rain had swept away. The cattle were badly injured from being swept into the walls. People too, anybody outside when the rain bombarded them was bruised and beaten almost to death. The statue of the brave girl by the river was gone too.

Awa had thrown herself at me. When she hesitated to ask, I told her not to bother. Her stupid sister couldn’t remember a thing. She’d giggled and I was relieved. It had happened too quickly for her to be really scared. She’d cried for a few days after I’d returned but I was home and uninjured, and that was enough.

No one in the village had seen me come home. No one knew what had happened. My parents told everybody I got caught in the rain and almost drowned. I was home recovering. And Awa kept our secret.

I was allowed back to school after a week.

The yard turned dead silent as I walked in. Like Musa parting the waters, the random mass of students split down the middle, opening a clear path straight to my class.

I'm tempted to run, but I hold my head up and my back straight. If I play it cool they won't ask questions, but if I give them an inch they won't let me breathe, and our lie is a simple one, so easy to crack.

Amadou steps out of the ranks, eyes wild, his step uncertain.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I'm sorry, if I hadn't held you back the storm wouldn't have caught you. Really, I . . ."

I brush past him, his jaw dropping and a few girls giggling. I won't let a boy distract me again. I knew it was unfair to him, that he'd done nothing wrong, that it was in fact all me. I had lingered, I'd let the sky turn pink to purple to black and endangered my little sister.

It wasn't his fault, but looking at him I could feel the pressure of a hand on my mouth, the bruising of the bushes. I hope it'll pass. No one can live like this.

Lacking a show, the other students go back to playing, and that is that.

The day goes by and everybody's easy on me. Ms. Niang doesn't pick on me for answers and keeps me hydrated.

I hate it. I'm not an invalid. That's not what is happening. I don't know *what* is happening but it's not that.

Class ends an hour early. Ms. Niang has a family emergency in Djourbel and it's a long ride on the bus.

Awa won't be done for another hour. I'm not the only one with a younger sibling, I'm one of the few with only one, so we gather outside and wait. They're still itching to grill me, except Amadou, staring at his toes, throwing furtive glances at me.

No one dares talk, but I notice Mame Yacine has a small

pouch hanging from her neck and tucked under her dress where it touches her skin.

“What’s the gri-gri for?” I ask her.

Everybody turns to her. She clutches the charm through her dress.

“Haven’t you heard? A flesh-eater hides in one of our villages.”

The others gasp for air. I must have too.

Mame Fatou Dem, my great-great-grandmother, had known a soukounio. They were raised as sisters after Mame Fatou’s parents died. Fed from the same breast, as such they shared a soul. Her sister Sokhna. She had eaten eight people. Eight people who’d never know heaven.

They grew up looking very much alike, but to Mame Fatou’s mirth and Sokhna’s gloom. Perhaps the jinn had entered her from birth, perhaps it had found root in her envy of Mame Fatou, but my great-great-grandmother was safe from her hunger. Mame Fatou carved Sokhna’s heart out herself when she uncovered her secret. Tears so bitter at killing her sister they melted her heart in her hands. Mame Fatou birthed three daughters, two of them stillborn, and died delivering the third.

“They found two dead herdsmen crushed between trees after the flood,” Maya continues. “A couple of miles downriver, one eaten in half from his head to his waist. The second chewed through his stomach, a hole from neck to navel. That’s what my parents told me. My aunt made the gri-gri and . . .” She was shaking. We all were. “Do you think it’s true? Could it be true?”

She was asking me. They all turned to look at me. Even Amadou. How would I know? Except I did.

My father was silent when I ran into the house and told them what Maya had said. He looked at my mother, and her back at him, and away and back again . . .

“What happened when you found me?” I begged. “Please. I can’t

remember anything. They tried to . . . I can't remember anything!" I was crying. I was terrified. Scared to know, too scared not to, knowing what that would mean . . . what would it mean?

"We . . ." my mother started. ". . . You . . . When you came up to the . . . Your father told you you were covered in mud and rain. You weren't. You were drenched in blood, down from your hair, to your lips, bits of skin caught between your teeth . . ." She caught her breath, trembling. "We rushed to help but it wasn't your blood . . ." She looked at me, staring silently. I took in every word without fear. There was nothing left to be afraid of. "We knew you could never harm us, and whatever you'd done to those men they deserved it and more. You're our daughter, Woppa. You're our daughter. There's nothing wrong with you. You saved your sister's life, Woppa. We are proud of you. We love you . . ."

She trailed off. My father nodding, eyes to the ground.

I can't say I remember how I felt after that. It wasn't one of my spells. I just honestly can't.

News of the soukounio spread, and soon men started patrolling the riverbanks, escorting the children to and from school, lighting torches along the road at night . . . and there wasn't another rape for years.

My head is on Amadou's shoulder, the salt of his neck on my lips. Sitting on the riverbanks we're hidden from the road, our feet in the cold waters, small fish nibbling at our toes.

The river and its bushes changed with each passing season. We grew taller and the trees less intimidating. What felt like a jungle between the world and the river, we crossed in a few seconds, the bushes like hills to our younger eyes barely reached over our shoulders, and those of us whose spout of growth was quicker than usual towered above them.

A grave of preschool torture had turned into a nest of teenage love, or the rush of confusion, lust and doubt that passes for it.

I was certain it was love. It had to be. An empty carcass, I'd drifted a dead soul for months. I couldn't feel. Feel anything other than bone-deep sorrow, eating away at my marrow, and anger, anger so blinding my eyes seared blisters against the air.

Sad because I knew I wasn't a person anymore. I wasn't Woppa anymore.

My name's an odd one. Woppa is a ward. When you lose a child, you name the next with a ward, a name to confuse the evil eye and turn it away from the newborn. Woppa's one of those. It means go away. Snap it at someone and you're telling them to fuck off. Politely. Here you're telling the spirits to leave this child alone.

What warded me cursed me. My name. My mother's love. The murmurs of gods. They'd made me into something else, and all out of love.

Angry because dozens of brutalized girls didn't warrant watching the roads. Instead, the rapist got rewarded with a bride. But two men murdered, and heroic selflessness rears its cowardly head.

"It's getting late," Amadou says.

"You scared of something?" I ask.

He laughs.

"Yeah. Your father. You should be too. Plus, he's starting to warm up to me. Maybe . . ."

My father had, accidentally of course, set a bull loose on Amadou once. But he'd changed of late. He smiled when we locked eyes, crossing paths at the weekly markets. He'd walked him home once. I don't know what they'd said but he'd changed.

"You could take him out easily," I tease him.

He shakes his head and gets up, dusting off his pants. Amadou has joined the wrestlers. We're only sixteen but he's half a head taller than the tallest kids. Sweet, gentle Amadou. He'd waited months. Coming to see me every day, getting told off every day for a year until I caved in. Until the emptiness inside subsided somewhat and cracked open enough to let me breathe and let something else, someone else, in.

I rise after him, my wet feet sinking into the soft brown banks. Amadou holds my hand through the bushes and trees. He'll let go just before hitting the road or maybe hold it just a little longer, testing fate.

The torches line the road, unlit in two years. After a while the villagers decided the jinn must've moved on, and things went back to normal. There hadn't been an incident in the two years since, and I hadn't had a spell, and stayed on top of my class. We were finally safe.

Or maybe not.

The air changes, the choir rises, Amadou says something, all immediately drowned by screams, loud and angry, growing weaker, legs kicking, strength faltering, screams turning to whimpers and silent frightened tears.

I am screaming back. Teeth bared, every inch of me burning.  
"Woppa!"

Amadou shakes me. Shakes me till I stop screaming, the red heat abating to a brazier.

"Woppa! Are you all right!"

I am panting, hunched over. Two realities wrestling for my sanity.

"I had a . . . a flashback . . . the river flooding, I couldn't breathe . . ."

He nods and takes my hand. Of course, he'd believe that.

Something had happened. Just then. Something very bad.

We are not safe anymore.

There was no wedding this time. Whatever had happened and whoever she was hadn't told anyone. Not even her parents. She must've sneaked in, cleaned herself and hidden her bruises, lied about why her clothes were torn and been beaten for it.

A slither of hairy flesh slurps through my lips, trailing a lick of salty fat and sinew. It wraps around my tongue, soaking in the blood in my mouth, softening as I chew.

The thread of muscle catches between my molars; I dig it out with my tongue, pluck it with my fingers and flick it.

It's cold, but I am warm inside. The wind itself has no warmth. Not cold, just not warm either. I can feel its nonexistence like a veil. The moon inverts the colors around me, dancing iridescent, pulsing to my heartbeat the sky shines and cracks marauding pathways into other worlds.

I have never felt this way before. I want to feel this way forever.

I stand up and stop to look down for the first time since I started feeding.

His head, neck, arms and shoulders are gone. There is nothing there, no blood, no bone, no clothes, nothing. A hundred bites like teeth marks through a watermelon dig beneath where his heart was. It is in me now.

I'd never seen inside a person before. How enticing it is. Perhaps it's better that I can't remember my first time. Twelve-year-old me wouldn't have handled the ecstasy, the taste.

It is good to feed.

I had missed another attack, and another again. But when the visions came, I realized that beyond the raw emotions I could glimpse landmarks, spots along the road, the odd stone by the river. The bushes intertwined like two snakes kissing. I could find them.

The second time I noticed my heartbeat change minutes before the flashes hit. There were images too, vivid evil thoughts barely crossing into my mind, barely registering, because I wouldn't let them. I was holding on to Woppa. To the little girl who'd played with goats and kept her mother up at night. The little girl who was good at school, had a hot boyfriend and stole kisses by the waters.

I'm holding on to a dead girl. Alive in her skin I'm not that girl anymore. I could never be that girl anymore.

My body was not my own. The whispering voices rose, and I



embraced them, allowed the transient tempest to settle, to find a home in me. There was no friction, no torrential rain, no tearing of the skies to energies bursting against each other. The flood, the thunder and the lightning, they all poured into me, I stretched my legs, the wind whooshed past, and I was looming silently behind him, miles from home. He couldn't sense me, dressed in a brown boubou and a brown turban, his hands inside his pants, sneering up the road at two little girls hurrying home, carrying bags of rice on their heads.

My hand dropped over his mouth, my arm around his chest, and I dragged him back to the river, out of sight from the road in a small alcove of trees. One moment here, and there the next, as the girls walked by safely. My mouth stretching open, my jaw dislocating, his praying, struggling head sliding in, silenced and bursting open.

God created jinn and people just the same. We share the same loves and the same fears. Only jinn have more fire. Some jinn, like people, believe in God. Those are gentler spirits, if they attack you, you must've scared them. Back away and they'll stop. Some jinn, like people, don't believe in God. Those are wild spirits. Incomplete, they'll find in people the missing bits of their soul. And devour them.

My soukounio . . . I . . . don't know what we want. But I want more. The man's dying soul rages inside me. Stoking the fires with every droplet of his blood turning sweet nectar in my throat. His energies fading, always falling into the abyss, a scream that would dwindle and shrink forever, but never stop, never quite dead, always dying. An abyss that is me.

His existence runs electric under my skin, grafting itself to mine, a tiny pearl of consciousness that shines on a childhood so good, an adolescence so bland into an evil so deep.

I pat him on the stomach.

"I own you now," I say as I run a finger along his bleeding wound and lick it clean.

I should be getting home. I turn back to the half-eaten corpse gurgling on the ground, frayed nerves twitching the body like a puppet . . . I really should be getting home . . . but a few more bites won't matter . . .

My family hears the cattle bleating in panic as I walk into the yard and rush out to hug me.

I pity them. The animals could feel what they couldn't.

Your Woppa is no more.

We go to sleep soon afterwards. I wake up to a clamor outside our home. Someone has found the corpse. By nightfall the road is lit with torches once again.

It doesn't stop the herdsmen, and it didn't stop me either.

I moan softly as Amadou enters me. This will be my first time and my last. The softness of the sheet against my back. The press of his chest against mine. I should hurt but I don't. All I feel is warmth. Warmth radiating through both of us.

I can't bear to think of his heartbreak when he doesn't see me at school tomorrow. Never sees me again.

Amadou can't believe his luck. It's his first time too. It's perfect. Perfect and crazy.

Three more bloody stumps in the last month and all the neighboring villages in a frenzy. Patrols all day and halfway through the night. I push their minds away from us, they walk by but can't see us. Stretch their ears but can't hear us.

We're the only lovers in the world. And it's perfect.

Amadou walks me back and heads home, turning around twenty times to look back, grinning like the happy fool he is.

At least he thinks he does. He is walking down the road alone

and will keep walking until he is in bed and falls asleep dreaming of me.

I want this fantasy to be real, but I cannot go back, and a familiar tingle rings at the base of my neck.

The herdsmen don't believe in the soukounio anymore. I know this from my feasts. They think the villagers mutilate the bodies themselves and put on this farce to scare them off.

They know the patrols scour the roads and riverbanks, the clusters of trees and bushes. That we think our villages are safe.

Three herdsmen creep towards the Diarra house next to ours, where Hamadi and Coumba are playing in the yard. They will kill Hamadi and kidnap Coumba before the patrols are back. They think they will.

They are preparing to climb over the wall as I rip through the three of them.

Before the first body hits the ground, a hole through its stomach, I rip off the second's head and grab the legs of the third, climbing desperately up the wall, and tear his body in half, leaving him dangling dead from the white wall turning red from his waist to the ground.

I throw myself at his guts, drink from the fountain of his comrade's neck and reach for the other, but the animals bleat up a storm. Lights turn on and confused voices ring.

I look towards our house. It's so close I could slip in and no one would see me. I'd walk out looking scared, go back to sleep and head for school in the morning. But I can't. I can't go back. It's not my home anymore.

With each feeding the soukounio grows stronger, hungrier. The voices of others slowly choking mine. I'm still good inside. I think I am, but how much longer until I'm just a pearl of awareness screaming inside the jinn? How long until the darkness leaks and infects my family, Amadou, all those around me? It can't be what I leave behind. Pain from more pain. Where is the love I knew? The love I'd given up to this form.

I stretch my legs and disappear just as my mother's voice calls out for Awa and me.

She doesn't know I'm out. We'll never get to say goodbye.

My mother hadn't said a word but ran.

Maybe if she'd said something, anything. Her name, a scream, anything. Her voice would have broken the spell.

No one knows what to expect when they encounter a spirit, you imagine anything, a fire-breathing ghoul, a person melting before your eyes, covered in hungry mouths, a shadow that trails yours and smiles back at *you*.

She could've said a word when the patrol came running into the village with the clamor of men and beasts. When they found her outside the Diarra house, leaning over three oozing corpses, and charged. Something to make her human. Anything.

No matter what you imagine, no one expects a terrified mother.

Instead, she panicked and ran, a silent fleeing spirit, and nothing emboldens cowards more than someone fleeing.

They'd landed on her with clubs. My mother, recognizing the bleating of the cattle for her absentee daughter, had rushed outside and found the bodies, and the men had found her, and . . .

One of them had recognized her dress. He yelled and pulled the others away, but it was too late. My father ran out to find the circle of men opening to a bloody lump in the colors of his love.

She died a few hours later. Her eyes never opened again. I want to believe she heard the crying voices around her. That in her unconscious last few hours she perceived the pain of her loss, that in her dying moments she knew more than shock and horror, the last memory of the daughter three broken bodies on the ground. I want to believe that the first blow had knocked her out, that it was painless. That she hadn't felt the others.

But I know too much. I know people all too well from the minds that I touch. From the minds I consume. If my ravenous

feasts had showed me anything it was that though the body and mind are gone, the soul goes last, and it feels everything.

I'd saved dozens of little girls. I'd saved myself. I'd saved my sister.

I had killed my mother.

I breathe in deeply. My feet buried into the soil of the riverbank, the rich brown almost but not quite blending with my own skin, the thin sheen of sweat glistening on my leg a rivulet congealing infinitely slowly around my ankles, like the drip of water in a cave slowly growing stalactites.

There are worms down there nibbling at the bits of me that are still flesh; other insects that I would've run from just days ago bite and draw blood and die drinking it. The roots of the nearby trees reach out, tethering me to the ground.

The air and dust on the thin hairs of my nose smelling of sweet and sticky sap, of burning cow dung, grilled fish and melancholy. Emotions have smells too, perspiring glands collecting around the mourners at my parents' funeral.

Abdoulaye Diallo outlived his wife by less than a night. Awa's screams had woken me up in the morning. The screams inside her mind. Her loneliness. Our father hanging from the ceiling fan.

They are leaving the mosque now, the final prayers prayed. The men are carrying their biers to the cemetery, to bury them with Mame Binta, my grandmother, Mame Thiogo, my great-grandmother, and Mame Fatou, my great-great-grandmother who had known a flesh-eater, and her unnamed stillborn daughters. A slow, silent procession, Awa the first to trail the coffins, as the men carried the last of her family with them.

Awa alone. Eyes turning towards her. I shudder in the heat, knowing all of her feelings. She doesn't want to move to her aunt's house, she's heard nasty rumors about what she does to teenage girls. My uncle's there, spending the night to watch over her

before taking her in the morning. She doesn't like his smell, she's afraid, still wary of being alone with a man, even if he's family.

She's crying out for me. My name ringing in her mind with hope. That I'll come back, that I'll save her again.

I'll never come back, but I can still help her if she lets me in.

*The river, Awa.* I speak on the winds, tiny birds passing it on, chirping my message into her ears.

I hear my own voice in her head. Her gaze shifting away from the cemetery and towards me.

It's dark now, the blood inside my thighs has already turned solid. It prickles and stings but I'm getting used to it, my muscles and nerves slowly merging with my bones, my legs calcifying like ashy skin after a shower.

Awa appears through the bushes. She sees me and screams. Her voice like the steps that led her here, shielded from the world by me. Her eyes water, pearly drops running brown down her cheeks, and she throws herself at my neck. The same way she had after the flood. The same way she always had, ever since my mother had handed her to me as a baby.

She hugs me tight and looks into my eyes. Hers widen as she sees something beyond me inside of them, something that only she will know.

"Are you coming home?" she asks, her face buried inside my neck, the skin around my waist crackling softly as it hardens.

I'm never coming home, but I'm never leaving either.

My name is Woppa Diallo. My mother was Djinda Diallo, formerly Dem. I'm a soul of small places. And here I'll remain.

I put my fingers on her cheek, embracing her warmth while I can still feel. While I can still help her, the only way I know, the very way I was. I push my lips to her ear.

"Go home and sleep, little sister. I'm not going anywhere. Come back tomorrow and kiss me. You'll find me here, by the river. And I'll whisper to you."