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## PULLING A GEOGRAPHIC

“Ça va, ma collègue?” Alhous asked. *How are you, my colleague?*

Alhous was always at the office before me. Bald, mid-forties, he had an unblinking gaze and a measured way of speaking that seemed incongruous with the tropical shirts he liked to wear—today, a powder-blue button-down with a parrot print. At twenty-five years old and fresh out of grad school, I was his supervisor.

“Alhous is great, but we need an expat with attention to detail for this job,” the HR person at the French charity’s headquarters had said. I didn’t yet know Alhous, had never been to the West African country of Mali. Still, I flinched at the implication that Africans couldn’t be detail oriented. But I wanted this job, the chance to become something good—a *humanitarian*—so I said nothing.

“Ça va, merci, Alhous,” I said, sitting at my desk. *Fine, thanks.* What else could I say?

The yellow folder of photos and accident reports he assembled for me every day was already there, spilling out of itself. Inside: images of limbs blown off, a bleeding stub where a toe should be, faces mashed. I could look at them for only minutes at a time before turning to the window. Outside, rain cascaded down in gray sheets. On the windowsill, a red lizard trembled.

This was my job: writing reports for American and European donors, recounting the stories of Malians killed or injured by mines, bombs, and other ERW—explosive remnants of war. For two years, since 2012, rebel groups and government forces had been battling in the country’s north, leaving behind undetonated ERW. The charity I worked for conducted awareness campaigns on identifying and avoiding these literal death traps.

“Public health, sort of” was how I described it to my bewildered friends and mother.

I powered on my computer and started typing. *Mohammed Touré was only 12 when he lost his right leg . . .*





A few weeks after I arrived in Mali, an email arrived from my father. It said only this: *I see you're in Africa now. You're in my prayers. Yours, Appa.*

The ceiling fan whirred against the thick heat of rainy season. *How did he know where I was? Why would he pray for me? Why now? He prayed?*

We hadn't spoken since his divorce from my mother a decade ago, dissolving a marriage arranged by their parents in India. From the start, my father was devoted only to Jack Daniel's—a love that often led to his fist colliding with his bride's face. Twenty years, a daughter, and a move to Canada later, they finally divorced. When they did, there was no question about who I'd live with.

I didn't hear from him after that until last year, when he'd sent me a friend request on Facebook. His profile said he was living in Texas, but his timeline was a patchwork of elsewhere: images of white-sand Mexican beaches, the Grand Canyon, New Hampshire foliage in autumn. Sometimes he was in the pictures, sometimes he was smiling, always he was alone.

I deleted the email now just as I'd deleted the friend request then. Here in Bamako, I was six thousand miles from home, from the suburbs of Calgary where we'd last seen each other. And still, I couldn't escape him.

At the office, when the midday *adhan* sounded, Alhous unfurled his prayer mat on the white tile floor. I watched him covertly, admiring the absorption on his face—how he was here, amidst the fluorescent lights and gunmetal desks, but also someplace else.

“In praying, we leave ourselves to return to ourselves,” I'd heard a Muslim scholar say. Envy had spiked within me then, as it did now. How wonderful it would be to escape yourself, your doubts and half-formed fears, without even leaving the room.

Soon, it was lunchtime. All forty staff ate around a large round table in the cafeteria, all Malian except for me and Benoit, a tall, thin Frenchman, the *grand chef*—big boss—of the office. Amid the chatter and yells of “*passez le piment!*” (*pass the hot sauce!*), I was quiet, pretending to concentrate on removing the tiny bones of the *filet de capitaine*, the meaty fish caught fresh from the Niger River. Here, my brain felt coated in *mafé*, the gummy peanut sauce used in stews, unable to keep up with





the rapid-fire French, always missing the jokes and nuance. At times, I felt ten years old again, a new immigrant in a mostly white suburb, shy, nervous to speak and admit my Indian accent.

“Tu es fatiguée,” Alhous remarked nearly every day, his face expressionless. I couldn’t tell if he pitied, scorned, or felt absolutely nothing toward me.

I *was* tired but couldn’t admit it, reluctant to appear the pampered foreigner, exhausted by daily life in his country. “Ça va, ça va,” I always responded.

And that was also true: I *was* fine. At least I had my escapes. After work, passing kiosks selling airtime, gated government compounds, and women hawking soda and hibiscus juice from round bins balanced on their heads, between the motorbikes, lemon-yellow taxicabs, and gleaming Range Rovers, I could forget myself. Smells of diesel, roasted goat meat, and sewage walloped me, and I welcomed them. And the fashion—women styling in bright-patterned *pagnes* and towering heels, men outfitted in embroidered tunics and distressed leather messenger bags—cosmopolitan, fly, *très chic*, every sidewalk here a runway. The polyphony of Bamako was all-consuming if you wanted it be, and I did.

I got to the guesthouse as the first streaks of honey yellow appeared in the sky. Too early, I lay down on the thin mattress in my room. Staring up at the white mosquito net, I felt heaviness bloom inside me like a flower, unfurling all the way into my toes. Every day here was engulfing, a harmattan wind sweeping away all that came before; in its aftermath, numbness cocooned me. Every night, I fell asleep with the lights still on, a Nigerian soap opera playing on the tv. When I mentioned this to my mother, the line hummed with silence.

Finally, she said, “That’s exactly like what your father used to do.”

The move to Canada when I was ten had been my father’s decision.

“Where’s Canada?” I asked.

“As far as you can imagine” was all he said.

I didn’t want to imagine far, didn’t want to imagine anything outside our life in Chennai, where we lived with my grandparents and Chitra, our maid, in a two-story home that smelled of the jasmine tree out back. But for as long as I could remem-





ber, my father emanated discontent. It was in his long, terrible silences, in his breath that smelled of cigarettes and betel nut. Mostly, it was in his eyes, even during family vacations to Thailand, New Zealand, Malaysia—the way they were always glassy and unfocused, as if he weren't really there. He seemed as incapable of being happy in those places as he was on the way home, devouring the in-flight magazines and whiskeys on ice, already planning his next escape.

Kids yelled it out, voices shrilled by excitement: “Toubab, toubab!” A rare sighting.

I heard adults whispering it too, although never to my face. *If the toubab got angry, who knows what could happen*, I imagined them thinking.

When Alhous explained that *toubab* was the Malian name for a white person, I could only blink at him, stunned. Like my father, I was pale for an Indian but could never pass for white in Canada, my dark hair too thick and frizzy, my skin too umber. The label of *toubab* should have been reassuring, like a spell allowing me to become anyone I wanted here. Yet somehow, it felt more like a curse.

I had a third name here too: the office driver, Ali, baptized me “Aicha.”

“You’re in Mali now, so you need a Malian name,” he declared.

Ali was tasked with driving toubabs around to make sure we didn’t get robbed. He seemed to be afraid of nothing: not flatbeds carrying longhorn cattle that suddenly veered into our lane, not potholes like craters, not roads that simply disappeared into red earth. But he admitted he used to be afraid of toubabs.

“Our parents used to say, if we didn’t behave, the toubab would eat us!” he laughed.

Toubab was white. Toubab was powerful. God or monster. Maybe both.

Our first years in Canada were jigsawed with frustration for my father. For eighteen months, he couldn’t work, his degree from one of India’s most elite engineering colleges deemed worthless in our new country. After thousands of dollars spent getting “recertified,” he finally found a job where he reported to far younger colleagues who couldn’t pronounce his name.

Soon, he started drinking more—and swimming. He’d al-





ways been an excellent swimmer, growing up in Chennai, a coastal city, wading in the Indian Ocean before he could walk.

There's a photo of us in the YMCA pool in Calgary when I was eleven, a year after we arrived. In the photo, he's upright, holding my hands as I float. We're smiling at each other. I almost don't recognize us: we look so pleased. So peaceful.

Somehow, in the years that followed, I forgot those lessons entirely, my body becoming awkward and fearful in water. In the guesthouse in Bamako, there was a small pool in the back the size of a trampoline. Sometimes I got in, gripping the edges with both hands and letting the rest of my body float. When thoughts of my father surfaced, as they always did—*Is this why he loved it, this freedom? Did he still swim? Did he think of us underwater?*—I got out.

Four months after I arrived in Mali, Alhous invited me to join his family for *Eid-al-Fitr*, the breaking of the fast. I suspected the invitation was his way of saying thanks: during Ramadan, I too had skipped lunch, sipping water only when I was alone, away from the eyes of those also abstaining from liquids. I didn't tell him the truth, that although in the beginning I'd done it out of solidarity, as the days went on, I came to enjoy hunger's hollowness, the feeling of a body purified, cleansed of its sins.

*Only the memory of her silhouette remained, convex at the back with another life, pitching a gossamer parabola into the bleak waters.*

Ali drove me to Alhous's house, on the other side of the Niger River from the guesthouse. Now dry season, the river looked low and dull brown, its banks baked yellow. But fishing pirogues still bobbed; on one, a woman balanced on its upturned tip, a baby strapped to her back. As I watched, she threw a net into the water, the mesh arcing out before slowly sinking. Then, we crossed the bridge and she vanished from sight. I turned, craning my neck, hoping to catch another glimpse, but it was too late. Only the memory of her silhouette remained, convex at the back with another life, pitching a gossamer parabola into the bleak waters. Already, I knew her image would return every time I ate *filet de capitaine*.





When we arrived at Alhous's house, a whole roasted goat, muscles and limbs and even fur in some places still intact, was skewered on a giant metal stick laid across the courtyard. My stomach twisted. Alhous rushed to greet us, looking festive in glossy purple *bazin*.

"Ma collègue, *vous es la bienvenue*," he said. *You are welcome here*. Typical Alhous, I thought, smiling. Formal even at a party. He handed me a plate of pink goat meat and fried plantain before hurrying off again to greet other guests.

I found a spot on the straw mats spread out in the courtyard next to Fatima, a middle-aged woman with somber almond eyes. She was one of the staff who took the photos and gathered the accident reports I wrote about. Once, when I'd asked her if she found her job difficult, she'd shrugged and said, "La violence était partout au nord. J'en ai l'habitude." She'd grown up in the north of the country, epicenter of both the current conflict and previous rebellions by Tuareg separatists. Still, it was jarring to hear she'd become used to witnessing violence—that such aberrations had almost become routine.

We sat silently as she ate and I pushed the food around on my plate. The sun was sinking, sending tangerine ribbons snaking across the sky. Someone placed hurricane lamps on the ground, the flames lighting the bougainvillea clinging to the courtyard walls a neon pink. I looked at Alhous's house, a one-story, red-brick structure with iron roofing. I needed desperately to use the bathroom but didn't want to ask, reluctant to enter further into Alhous's life and home; somehow, I sensed I'd reached a limit.

On the other side of the courtyard, Ali and Alhous sat on plastic chairs, laughing about something. It was the first time I'd seen Alhous relaxed, the professionalism he wore so tightly now slightly loosened. Next to him, his wife, voluptuous in pink *pagne* fabric, was looking at me. I wondered if Alhous ever complained to her about me, the way my father raged to us about his colleagues.

"I could never be as far from my family as you are," Alhous had said to me a few days after we'd met. I'd felt sorry for him then, pitying that he was so bound to a place, unable to let new terrains enlarge his life. But now, as his wife smiled at him, as his young daughter hugged his leg, and he beamed, looking almost boyish, I saw he had no need for other geographies.





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*La violence était partout.* My father, my appa, passed out drunk in the backyard. My mother, my amma, indigo bruises on her arms, her left eye, and once, her neck.

*The violence was everywhere.* On a much smaller scale, contained within the borders of our family. The first country I'd known.

At work, I looked for any chance to go to “the field,” where the real work happened. With the sky still gilded by dawn, we drove out of Bamako, open-air markets and soaring concrete monoliths giving way to verdant marshes. Eventually, the green turned into red and beige, laterite cliffs and sand, thatched huts and adobe homes.

As the sky warmed to blue, we arrived at the IDP camps, the temporary homes of “internally displaced people.” Like refugee camps, but for people displaced within their own country after war came to their doorsteps. White tents with “UN” printed in block letters sat in neat rows, stretching into the rust plains. My Malian colleagues, led by Alhous, filed out, standing by water pumps and in the shade of thorn trees, dispensing brochures and advice on identifying and avoiding bombs, mines, or missiles that might still be scattered around the residents' former homes. I came to recognize the sounds of “it might look like wood or a toy” in Bambara, the most widely spoken local language.

Often, my colleagues drew huge crowds, kids play-fighting each other, adults clutching yellow jerry cans to refill at the water pump. Some nodded along with interest; others wore blank looks, shifting listlessly. It was hard to tell if they truly feared the ERW or if the sessions were just a respite from the monotony of camp life: waiting for food, waiting for news about family members. Waiting to go home.

On those days, my job was to photograph the crowds for glossy donor reports. Sometimes I took photos, which I showed no one, of the things people had salvaged and carried with them over hundreds of miles: a teddy bear, a brightly woven prayer mat, the Qur'an. Once, Alhous caught me photographing a tube of lipstick fallen on the ground. Thankfully, he said nothing, just gave me a long, curious look before turning away.

Those evenings, back in my room, I looked at the things I'd





brought from home: dog-eared copies of *The Shell Collector* and *Beloved*; a photo of my mother on the Chennai beach when she was my age, before she met my father, laughing and lifting up her sari as the ocean washed her feet; another photo of her and me in our backyard, a month after their divorce, smiling amidst grass long and littered with dandelions.

I was happy with what I'd brought, and it had been to sy to make those choices. After all, I knew I could—and would—return. Nothing forgotten was lost for me.

No wonder they called me toubab, privilege shining brightly through my pale skin.

My father became sober when I was a teenager. A few weeks after he quit drinking, he drove alone to Jasper National Park to see the northern lights, a spectacle he'd long dreamed of seeing. When he returned, there was a period of calm: for weeks, he didn't raise his voice, didn't ball his hands into fists.

"It was like looking into another world," he said, smiling. And my mother and I hoped a better world had arrived. For days, she hummed the Carnatic songs of her childhood; I played Spice Girls on my boom box. Our house, usually deadly silent, came alive with melody.

But that winter, the sky thickened into a carpet of gray that stayed, unrelenting, for months, and whatever peace my father had felt under that other sky, translucent pink and milky green, crumbled. Soon, plates were again smashed against walls; my mother's cheeks again reddened by slaps she didn't see coming. After the divorce, when I refused to see him, Steve, his sponsor at AA called me, pleading, saying how much I meant to my father. "He talks about you all the—"

I hurled the phone at the floor, where it bounced and lay on its side, infuriatingly intact. I didn't believe I meant anything to my father, but I did believe Steve knew sides of him—humble, vulnerable—I'd only glimpsed. Why couldn't those parts of him have lived within our home, with us?

*Might as well be going to Timbuktu*, my father used to say on long drives. Growing up, Timbuktu was synonym for remoteness, possibly not even real. When Alhous explained—as he always had to explain things to me—that *Tombouctou* was not only real, an ancient city in the very north of Mali, but also a





sacred site for Muslims, my face went hot with shame. It seemed Alhous and I each had a role to play here—he my patient and knowledgeable guide, I the ignorant toubab. I hated it all the more for not knowing how to change it.

We flew north from Bamako in a tiny UN plane, seats shuddering from the engine. Below us, the Niger River curved through green deltas and into the Sahara Desert. Descending into Tombouctou, we saw stone and mud-brick buildings with walls and roofs missing; in other places, only piles of rubble. The conflict had barely ended in the area, now littered with ERW.

In the city, sand seemed to occupy every available space, collecting between buildings, threatening to overtake the roads. Already, I could feel the particles between my teeth. On the way to the IDP camps, we passed camels, their riders' faces wrapped in indigo or olive-green turbans precisely to keep out sand and the immense heat.

Soon, we neared the region's three famed mosques that Alhous had told me about. Built in the thirteenth century from limestone, wood, and dried mud, the pyramid structures were huge, capable of holding thousands of worshippers, and astonishingly elegant, their lines clean and regal.

"You've never seen anything like it, *n'est-ce pas?*" Alhous asked, smiling proudly. Indeed I hadn't.

At the camps, skinny goats lazed around tents and domed huts fashioned from mud, grass, and animal hide. Stories of people maimed or killed by mines or by the rebels themselves flowed too easily. One

woman showed me the bullet holes in her husband's once-white, now red-streaked, *boubou*, the robe worn to Friday prayers at the mosque. I clicked, clicked, clicked, not allowing myself to think. Here, it felt like

*Here, it felt like thoughts could disappear into the horizon, perhaps returning as something else: a scorpion, a baobab tree, maybe a starling.*

thoughts could disappear into the horizon, perhaps returning as something else: a scorpion, a baobab tree, maybe a starling. Maybe this type of landscape—desert flatlining into sky, heaven and earth blurring—was what Alhous pictured when he prayed. *We leave ourselves to return to ourselves.*





At one point, Alhous called me over. Next to him stood a lanky boy, ten or eleven years old, in a faded T-shirt and shorts. His right leg was missing. He leaned on crutches that had been crudely fashioned from tree branches.

“He found a black ball near his house and threw it,” Alhous explained. “When he woke up, he was in the hospital.”

I swallowed. “What’s his name?”

Alhous turned to the boy, who looked terrified, and asked him in Bambara.

“Amadou,” the boy said.

I took out my notebook, writing down his name and the story of his accident that would soon be used to elicit money from across the world. Then, because I knew I had to, I pointed to my camera and raised my eyebrows at him. When he nodded, I crouched down so the photo would be at eye-level. *Click.*

Before he could ask, I turned the screen toward him so he could see himself. As he stared at the photo, his face seemed to fall apart, jaw loosening, eyes widening then shutting, as if to block out what he’d just seen. Did he have a mirror at home? Maybe this was the first time he’d visually confronted his altered body—and life.

He moved to walk away but was slowed by the ends of his crutches sinking and sliding in the sand. My head dropped. I looked at the camera that I still held and fought the urge to smash it, bury it where it couldn’t be found.

The sun burned the back of my neck when a hand appeared in my vision. Looking up, I saw Alhous. His face was grim but also kind. I took his outstretched hand. When I got up, Amadou was gone, disappeared into the shifting sands.

That evening, Alhous and I sat outside the guesthouse, the chill of the Sahara at night washing over us. The city relied on a generator for electricity that was switched off at sunset. Now the only light came from the sky, jammed with stars like a velvet jewelry box overflowing with pearls. *Like looking into another world*—my father’s words echoed. Usually, I’d be frustrated that thoughts of him found me even here, a place so remote I hadn’t believed it to be real. But this time, his words—the beauty he’d seen, its impossibility for our world—rang true: the cosmic map above us was supernatural, magnificent, unbearable. After the day’s violence, this interstellar splendor appeared grotesque.





“Bearing witness is the key to change,” a professor of mine had said, and I’d believed it. Now I wondered whose or what change was at stake.

That night, I dreamt of my father driving us unsteadily down an endless road, the scent of whiskey stinging my nostrils. And when I awoke, I felt crushingly the same as ever: anxious, unsure about my worth here or anywhere in the world. I’d thought this job would confer goodness onto me—that by helping people avoid death I would save not only them, but also myself. Instead, redemption felt more distant than ever, its coordinates eternally undecipherable.

A few weeks later, rainy season returned to Bamako, heavier than last time, streets melting into muddy rivers, winds bending palm trees, the guesthouse pool flooding. One night, awakened by sounds of the house being smashed in, I rushed outside, only to see ripe mangos hitting the blue stucco roof, shaken from the trees circling the guesthouse. As rain sleeted down and mangos plopped in small golden explosions, I stood transfixed, smiling at this strange nocturnal beauty. I hadn’t known how badly I’d needed to see something like that: a loveliness light and small, like a child’s. A loveliness utterly of *this* world.

Back in my room but no longer able to sleep, I surfed the internet, mind midnight-hazy. Somehow, I landed on an essay on addiction. The author, a former alcoholic herself and widely traveled, described the tendency among some alcoholics to relocate when they first became aware of their problem. In new places, they imagined their addiction would be less or disappear together. By “pulling a geographic,” they hoped to travel to a better version of themselves.

I read the passages over and over, searching for a different way of understanding. But the truth was there, unavoidable: all along, I’d thought my father had been trying to escape his life with us, but with every trip, every move, he’d also been trying to flee his addiction. To draw himself improved on the blank canvas of a new setting. But even when he’d found sobriety, there was no outrunning the violence that had become braided into him. For him, it wasn’t fight *or* flight—it was always both.

And there was also this: after all those years of not speaking to him, of putting thousands of miles between us, I couldn’t es-





cape being my father's daughter. In my pale-for-an-Indian skin as much as the desire to remake myself in new geographies, he was there.

After a year, there were some changes: my French had improved, so much so that I sometimes felt inhabited by a poltergeist, sounds and ways of framing thoughts emerging that I couldn't have imagined a year ago. But then I'd hear my accent, stubbornly North American, or someone would stumble over my name—the real one, that is, before I told them my Malian nickname.

"Bye bye, Aicha," Ali said to me in the car.

He was driving me to the airport. After a year in Mali, I was leaving, my contract expired along with at least some of the desires that had brought me there. There was no salvation, no purging myself of my father and his sins to be found in this work, this place, or any other. His specter would always be there—like the desert: a vast terrain flattened by loss, his and mine.

Both Ali and I were mostly silent on the drive. Not renewing my contract, even with the offer of more money, I knew, had been the right choice. Still, guilt stuck like a fishbone in my throat, especially as the conflict was reigniting in the North. But as I'd known all along, my presence here made little difference.

"You're wasting the charity's money if you replace me with anyone other than Alhous," I'd said to Benoit. He'd sighed, and for the first time, I'd noticed the dark pouches beneath his eyes. Just days earlier, I'd learned he'd come to Mali after a bitter divorce. It seemed all the toubabs here were fleeing something.

"Au revoir, ma chef," Alhous had said before I left, smiling. *Goodbye, my boss.* It was the first time he'd called me that. I was grateful he'd smiled as he'd said it, thankful we could at last voice its absurdity. Better than raging over its unfairness—maybe.

The road to the airport looked different from a year ago; its sides more crowded with small shops, more two-story homes circled by barbed-wire-topped walls and red hibiscus shrubs. Yet the road itself seemed wider, traffic less suffocating. Green fields appeared in the distance more often than before, speckled with boys playing soccer. Beyond them, the Niger River flashed silver, carrying and curving, unbroken across space.

