

EXTRACT

HarmattanBy **GAVIN WESTON**

harmattan *n.* A dry, dusty wind that blows from the Sahara across West Africa. [Probably from Arabic *haram*, a forbidden or accursed thing.]

NIAMEY

January 2000

The floor feels cool against my hands. It is how I want my face to feel. Instead, my cheeks burn and my hot tears, splattering on the ground, form tiny craters and are sucked into the dust; lost forever.

Like a giant, I crouch above the little landscape my tears have made. Cradling my throbbing left ear now, I rock backwards, forwards, backwards, forwards. I tilt my head to one side and then, cupping my ear, I swoop and sway above the tiny dunes and gorges, again and again, like a great, shiny aeroplane.

I think of the walks I used to take with Fatima and my mother – before I came to this house, this city. We would walk out into the bush, far from Wadata, and climb to the plateau where our ancestors lie. Sometimes my mother would weep. Often, on the way home, Fatima would be tired; we would take turns at carrying her on our backs. She was almost as heavy as me, but I didn't mind. My mother would fix my *pagne*, and make sure that Fatima could not slip.

"You are a good girl, Haoua," she would say, and it made me feel so proud. Beyond the plateau, the dust is swept into a rolling sea of red by the strong Sahelian winds. If you struggle to the crest of one of these great waves of sand, and look north, all that you will see is range after range of glowing red dunes, taller even than the baobab trees. The desert is very beautiful, but one day I would like to see the ocean. My father used to tell me that there was, truly, a Red Sea. I no longer believe my father.

I had been looking at my 'treasures' when Doodi hit me. I had my back to the doorway and did not hear her come in. I had sensed that she hated me from the very first moment Moussa had introduced me to her and Yola. Yola does not hate me, I am sure, but Doodi has eyes like stagnant wells.

My beautiful pictures lie torn and crumpled around the room. Most of them are so badly damaged that it would be impossible to tell what they had depicted without first gathering together many fragments. Over near the

window I can just make out the shape of the prow of a boat, on a piece of shredded postcard. Nearby, the mangled remnant of a treasured snapshot of my brother Abdelkrim, in his military uniform, lies forlornly by the door: the head has been severed and is nowhere to be seen. Tiny pieces of photographic paper lie scattered over the chair, the bed, the woven mat. It had been a gift from my mother.

Cautiously, I place one hand upon the seat of Moussa's chair and, holding my ribs with the other, I slowly straighten my back. A narrow shaft of sunlight cuts across my face and as I pull my head back with a jolt to shield my eyes, a searing pain shoots up my torso.

Yola enters the small room. Yola is older than me – in her twenties, I think, but much younger than Doodi. "Doodi has sent me to clean up in here," she says. Her eyes belie the coldness of her words and I know that she wishes she could help me. She stoops, uneasily, to pick up the debris and it is only then – although I have been here for some three months – that I realise she is bearing Moussa's child. As she works, she makes a small pile of the torn paper on the bed. When she has finished, she glances at me, momentarily, with something close to a smile. She scoops the fragments up, turns to leave the room, then pauses, handing me several larger pieces of the postcard and the twisted torso of my brother. I open my mouth, to thank her for this small kindness, but it is so dry that no sound comes out. As I watch Yola go, it occurs to me that she too has felt the wrath of Doodi.

When all is still again, I move my left knee and ease my most precious surviving picture from the earthen floor. This, together with the torn postcard pieces, the headless image of my brother and the one which I keep hidden, is all that is left of my collection. I raise the battered photograph to my mouth, to blow the dust away from the image. The faces of the two *anasara* children, smiling before me, somehow give me strength and I push myself up into the seat. With my bare foot, I frantically sift through the dust, in the vain hope that it might yield the face of my brother. But Yola has carried out her duty thoroughly: not a single shred of paper has been overlooked.

When I have caught my breath, I carefully place the crumpled pictures and the fragments onto my lap and begin to smooth them out. The familiar, pinkish faces are like old friends, although I have never actually seen or spoken to these children – *Katie* and *Hope*. In the photograph they are standing in a compound, of sorts. Locks of their strange, almost golden hair stick out from beneath their bright, knitted hats, and the ghostly vapour of their breath, in the cold air, frames their happy faces. One of them (*Katie*, I think) holds a gloved hand out towards the person who has

taken the photograph. In it she holds a ball of snow! (I have seen pictures of snow before – in Monsieur Boubacar's beautiful reference books in my school – shrouding the mountains of places far away, cool and clean and whiter than *Solani*.) Behind the children, more snow lies, caught in thick pockets on a tall, dense hedge and beyond that again, on top of a hill, stands a huge, grey stone building with a tower. Near the building, spindly trees are silhouetted against an almost white sky. In the top right hand corner, a black bird flies high above all of this.

The building reminds me a little of the great mosques at Niamey and Agadez, which are also depicted in Monsieur Boubacar's reference books. I am not supposed to think of my school, of my wonderful teacher Monsieur Boubacar, or of my friend Miriam. Moussa has told me I must put all of that behind me, now that I am a woman.

When I have smoothed out the photograph of *Katie* and *Hope* as much as possible, I set to work on the postcard. It was a beautiful picture before Doodi's rage. In their letters, my *anasara* friends said that the place in this picture is called *Portaferry*, and that it is the village nearest to their home. When I start to piece it together, I realise that more than a quarter of the image is missing now. Still, I can make out a cluster of brightly painted wooden boats on a dark blue sea. It must be quite a small sea, rather than a great ocean, because beyond it I can see the mountains of another country – blue-green mountains, nestling under fat white clouds, in a sky much bluer than that in my photograph of the children in the snow.

Monsieur Boubacar once showed me a wonderful book with a map of Ireland, where *Katie* and *Hope* live. It looked so tiny I could hardly believe that anyone could live there. On another page, Africa looked so big, and Niger so far from its shores, that I doubted if I would ever see the ocean. But Monsieur Boubacar said that anything was possible. He had travelled – to Benin, Burkina Faso, Ivory Coast and Liberia – and I had no reason to doubt his words.

That was before my twelfth birthday.



Haoua Boureima
Child Ref. NER2726651832
Vision Corps International
Tera Area Development Programme
C/O BP 11504
Niamey
Republic of Niger
West Africa

10th April, 1995

Mr N Boyd
Member No. 515820
Ballygowrie
Co. Down, N. Ireland
Dear Sponsor,

Good morning! Your sponsored daughter is very happy to be your new child and my parents greet you a lot for this. They are very happy. I am very happy to receive your letter and your beautiful photograph. Thank you very much, you and your family. May God bless you.

We live in a village called Wadata - in a house made with bricks. The weather is so warm in our country. I have a sister called Fatima who is two years old, a brother called Adamou ten years old and a grown up brother called Abdelkrim. My father grows millet and sorghum and my mother is a house keeper and grows okio and ground nuts.

I am schooling now, but I am in primary one. Friends make the world go round. Some of my friends help me to draw our country map (Niger Republic). I like so much to draw. I and my family are greeting you. It is my supervisor Richard Houeto that helps me to write this letter.

Affectionately yours,
Your child Haoua (8 years)

I first heard about *Katie* and *Hope* when *Sushie*, an *anasara* nurse, came to visit my parents one day. I had just turned eight and had never seen an *anasara* before. *Sushie* was strong and tall and elegant, with large white teeth and brown, wavy hair – not braided, but bunched together, untidily, in one gathering at the back of her head. The oddness of her pale face unsettled me at first, but soon I grew to think of her as beautiful.

I was pounding millet in front of our little house when she called out to me, "*Ira ma wichira bani*," she greeted me, in *Djerma*. "Is your mother here?"

I stared at her without answering. It was not fear that kept me fixed to where I stood, but the strangeness of this creature before me.

She smiled at me, her great white teeth flashing in the sunlight, then made the hand gesture which my people do whenever they want to say, "Well, what?" without actually

saying anything: the right hand is swept, lazily, to the left, then flipped and dropped, palm outwards, under its own weight. It can be used as a question, as Sushie had done, or as an insult, in which case it is usually accompanied by air being drawn in through the teeth, noisily.

I dropped my pestle and went to fetch my mother.

When my father came home, later that day, he and my mother went inside and talked for what seemed like a very long time, while I bathed Fatima in the red, plastic basin outside. I will always remember how happy my mother looked when she came back outside to tell us that our family was to join the Seed Loan and Education Programme run by Vision Corps International.

"God has smiled upon us," she said. "In time, they may even give us a sewing machine!"

Not long after that, I started to attend Wadata's small school. Letters and packages began to arrive from Katie and Hope soon also; and, of course, the photographs and postcards which gave me glimpses of their lives. The first package contained gifts for my entire family – candies, brightly coloured trumpets and whistles, picture books, a little doll for Fatima, a rubber ball for my brother Adamou, and watches for my father and mother. Even my older brother Abdelkrim – who had joined the Nigerien Guard – received a gift. Some weeks later he sent a note, from his barracks in Niamey, asking me to thank Katie and Hope's parents for his tiny transistor radio. It gave me great joy to be able to read a few of his words myself. (He had learned to read and write in the army.) I think it was then, really, that I began to understand how lucky I was to be at school, while many of my friends would continue to spend their days pounding millet, washing clothes, fetching water from the river, herding animals, cooking, gathering firewood and tilling the dry ground.

My father immediately took his watch to the market and sold it. A few days later my mother was unable to find hers.

My most treasured of these gifts was a small, soft bear with bright orange glass eyes. And, needless to say, the photographs and postcards which our new friends sent to us. For the most part, I kept the bear hidden in my *pagne*, but at night time I wrapped the toy carefully in a piece of fabric and placed it under my bean hay mattress, along with Katie and Hope's letters and pictures. One morning, not long after I had begun going to school, I discovered that the bear was missing. I was sure that Adamou had taken it, to sell or swap for something else. I went outside, into the cool morning air. My mother was cooking sorghum and *beignets* and preparing tea for my father.

"Adamou has taken my bear!" I said.

"You do not know that, child," she replied.

"It is wrong to accuse others without just cause."

"But he has taken it from me before, Mother!" I protested.

After school, my friend Miriam Kantao and I went down to the river and found Adamou and a handful of his no-good cronies, as usual up to mischief. We all knew that we were not supposed to go there without an adult, but it was a favourite pastime for the boys of the village to taunt crocodiles, with sticks and stones, from the safety of the river bank.

"Give me back my bear, Adamou," I pleaded.

"I don't have it, stupid girl!" he said, looking to his friends for confirmation.

They grinned inanely, like the crocodiles, which were there – like Miriam and I, so far as these boys were concerned – only for the

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pleasure of tormenting.

"*Fawako* enjoyed it immensely!" one of the boys called out, pointing to the river. *Fawako* (butcher) was the name we had given to the largest of the male crocodiles. There were stories of how he had devoured many people over the years, and of how two children from the neighbouring village of Goteye had gone missing and only their water pitchers had been found. In truth there was only one incident which we knew to be factual. It had happened the previous year, when a government surveyor, working with aid agency volunteers, had lost a leg, while preparing a report for a proposed water tower and borehole for the Wadata region. We were also aware that crocodiles do not actually devour their prey instantly, but instead first try to drown them, lodging the carcass underwater, on a submerged tree trunk or the like, where it can rot and be picked at, according to the creature's urge.

I looked out over the lazy, fetid water and knew that I would never see my little bear again. As we turned to go back to the village, one of the boys fired a stone at us, from a slingshot which he'd fashioned from a twig and an old piece of inner tube. It struck me just above my right buttock, stinging sharply.

"I will tell Father!" I promised, through my tears. My threat was greeted only with wild cackling.

The walk from the river to Wadata takes thirty minutes. Twice that if one is carrying water.

When we got back, my father and three or four of the other village elders and griots were sitting on palm-leaf mats in the shade of a woven reed canopy, playing dominoes and drinking mint tea. I was fearful that he would be angry with me for being home late, and that he would guess that Miriam and I had been to the river. I respectfully greeted him and his friends, all of whom remained engrossed in their game.

My father patted my back, absentmindedly, barely pausing to look at me even. "Help your mother now, Haoua," he said. "There's a good girl."

I decided not to mention the bear.

Mademoiselle Sushie visited our house quite often, sometimes bringing with her other *anasara* workers – doctors, photographers, teachers and interpreters. One of our

visitors – Richard he called himself – had grown up in Goteye, studied in Niamey and Washington D.C. and now worked for Vision Corps International, the same organisation that had brought Sushie into my life. Richard opened up my world further still. Through him, the strange words which Katie and Hope and their father wrote to me became real, mine. Richard translated their letters from English to French, and, when necessary – which was often at first – from French to Djerma. At first I had nothing much to say to my new friends in Ireland. Monsieur Boubacar showed me how to make a thumb print, in ink, at the bottom of a little drawing, but it did not occur to me that I might actually reply: I did not think that they could really be interested in my life in Wadata. But Katie and Hope wrote often, asking me questions about my family, my school, my village. They enquired about my father, my mother and all of my siblings – even Abdelkrim – and I began to want to tell them more.