

DONATO NDONGO-BIDYOGO

*The Dream*

I'm young. It's only been twenty-five years—I think—since my circumcision. If I asked myself what I'm doing here with the water up to my neck, I'd be the stupidest man alive. My grandfather, old Diallo, was always right: "too young to know so much." It's been twenty-five—I think—years since I was circumcised in a nowhere village on the banks of the Casamance. My blood spilled into that river; I learned to swim in that river. Warm waters, other waters, like mirrors sharply reflecting the firm breasts of the young ladies from around there. I don't know the reason exactly; I don't even know when it happened. All I know is that I was uprooted from my village so that I could go to school in Bignona. I spent four years there, four years of any old life.

When I got to where I could put up with the mosquitoes and the hunger without complaining too much, when I was considered a good black man who could work, they sent me to a plantation. We grew rice for the white owner; I never tasted it. And the years went on, and I really wanted to get out of there; the misery, the poverty; it was too much. I was going to marry Black Traoré; she was prettier than the darkest night, but I didn't have the twelve cows for the dowry: those twelve cows, the twelve cows of my downfall.

I had four cows. I wanted her to trust me, to see I was hard-working, that I was capable of anything, anything for her. My cousin Tello had gone to Gambia to make his fortune, and he came back with twenty cows and two oxen. My other cousin, Lamine, had gone to the land of the Mandinga, in the north, over the Senegal River; he came back with something called a bicycle. He said it was worth more than all the cows in the world, but I never wanted to believe him. What in this world could be worth more than a cow? My cousins left and they were the ones who lost faith in the people. The people no longer counted on them. Grandfather Diallo, who still remembered seeing the boat grounded on the sands of Joal Beach in the land of the Mandinga, told them that none of our women would marry them for their scorn and for having an eye for white women.

For me I knew what Grandfather Diallo was saying. How can you compare a bicycle to a cow?

Cows are harder to come by. It was taking me too long to get hold of them, and Black Traoré was getting impatient and threatening me with hooking up with a more clever man. But I am very poor, what can I do? The same day I was about to hand her over the fifth cow, she gave me back the other four. I even had to pay her for the grass the other four cows ate!

So I left. I was beginning to see the advantages of the bicycle. At least it doesn't eat grass. I bought one. I was working on a peanut plantation in the land of the Mandinga. The owner was black, blacker than the light of day. The white man who owned the rice fields was better, and in the big city, the ladies didn't want cows, only bicycles; sometimes they didn't even want anything.

When my mom died, I went back to the banks of the Casamance. And I saw that girl I never would have looked at years ago. That's life. I'd rather have married like my father did, with cows not with bicycles, or with nothing. How can a women respect you if you haven't given anything? So once again I was all tied up in the cow problem. I took off even further. I got as far as Dakar, the biggest city I'd ever seen. When I wrote to Dikate, I told her we would live there in one of those flats like beehives, where men are like insects, but where everything is more comfortable. But of course, Dikate still had a few things to learn. She didn't even know how to ride a bicycle.

In Dakar you could earn enough to live on but not fast enough. I didn't want Dikate to leave me like Black (too black) Traoré had done. I had to get the twelve cows very soon. If I didn't, everyone back home on the banks of the Casamance would think I wasn't man enough to get married. Life isn't worth living if a man can't be a man.

Bad company! Grandfather Diallo had always warned me about it. When I left for Dakar, it was like going to either heaven or hell, in both cases very far and forever. Grandfather Diallo had told me that those kinds of places are like a combination of heaven and hell. He was so right! He knew all about men: he saw the birth of everyone in my tribe. He saw the white men arrive on the boat grounded on the sands of Joal Beach.

Every day Dikate was putting more pressure on me. I had to do it. One of the "bad company" men spoke to me in a port they called

Las Palmas, where you could get the equivalent of seven cows in one year. I didn't think much of it; it's the truth. Like Grandfather Diallo says, if you don't take advantage of the first chance, you've lost the second, so there I was two years in Las Palmas working in the biggest port I had ever seen. Much bigger than St. Louis, and even bigger than Dakar. But my pockets weren't getting any fuller. It's true that I was making more than I was in the land of the Mandinga, but here—and I know this even now—the money seemed to disappear from my hands. For one thing, it was the dirty white guy who made me give him half of what I earned. It's true that he was the one who helped me cross the sea at night in his little boat; if it weren't for him it's possible that I'd never have gotten here. But I saw that he was charging too much. And the second thing was that I couldn't resist the temptation of making it with the white whores of the port. The money just flew away from me, but I couldn't stop going. It was too much for me.

Then I met that clean and sweet smelling Mandinga who told us we could make lots of money if we went to France. We loved the idea. Why didn't we think of this? There's nothing like being ignorant. If only Dikate knew that I was going to stroll down the streets of Paris, that I'd see the Eiffel Tower with my own black eyes, and that I'd get to visit the President of the Republic, and speak to Napoleon... All that was worth more than all the cows in the world! I paid the Mandinga all that I had saved up till then. I even promised him the five cows I had on the banks of the Casamance. Fortunately, he didn't eat beef.

He took us by boat to Algeciras, and then by train to Barcelona. You can't imagine, Black Dikate, these white-man's-lands are amazing. When I'm in Paris, when I see the Seine—which is probably a lot bigger than the Casamance, I'll try to describe it, ok?

You just can't imagine Barcelona, no matter how much you try: it's immense, so bright, it's... I don't know...

Two days after we got there, they put us to work on a highway far from the city. We couldn't take our breaks together. They made us go two-by-two or three-by-three. It was for our own good: that's what the clean and sweet smelling Mandinga told us. As for the wages, they gave the money to the Mandinga. He took care of everything and gave us a little bit for our expenses.

I don't want to tell you more. I forgot about the cows, thinking about all the splendours of Paris. Our little town is nothing compared to the whole world! What's the worth of twelve cows if after all nothing is worth the trouble? What are you?—only my downfall. Will I ever even see you again?

We spent six months in Barcelona. We slept by threes in a stinky hammock that pinched into our bare backs. We didn't go into the city, not even once. I didn't get to make it with any of the whores in the port. We could barely do anything of our own free will.

They took us by train to the border. The Mandinga told us that someone there would take care of us and that he would not abandon us until we got to French territory. My heart was beating fast. All my misery would go away in a few hours. Maybe, if I found work I could call you soon, your father and mother too, and our brothers and sisters...

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The man has come tonight. You can't imagine how cold we all were. I don't know if it's at all possible for you to get any idea of winter. We were all huddled in the train station, where we agreed to meet, trying to create some kind of warmth from our contact. When he finally arrived, we could eat something a little more substantial than soup in the station's cantina.

Before we set off, he told us we wouldn't need Spanish money any more, so he made us give it to him. Halfway there, in the middle of a lush dark forest, almost without our noticing, he takes away our passports, "I'll give them back in France," he says. And we're at the river. I don't know its name or where I am—I imagine on the French/Spanish border. Dawn was breaking. I was tired. We've had to wait around two hours. At last a few lights. It's the sign. The little boat is getting closer.

We were discouraged, trying not to let anyone see us; we kept on rowing. We hear the *Hands up!* An explosion. The boat has overturned. The freezing water, my love. I'm frozen. I know I won't arrive at either of the banks. This feels like it's ending. No more cows. My only recollection is our broken illusions. I don't know if you can hear my death-cry from over there in the other river. I don't

believe in our spirits anymore, but I'll prey to Grandfather Diallo for you. I...

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I woke up. She was sleeping next to me. She had a dreamy look on her face. Her dreams were not like mine. They were a white woman's dreams. I felt the cold in my bones. I felt a lump in my throat. I felt I was going to die. Slowly, delicately, I woke her up. I needed to be sure I hadn't died, that it was all a dream. She looked at me puzzled.

"Now?" she said.

It was necessary to be just then and only then.

I was coming back to life.

*Translated from the Spanish by Michael Ugarte*

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Translator's note: This story was first published as "El sueño" ("The Dream") in 1973 by Ndong-Bidyogo, an African exile writer from Equatorial Guinea (a former Spanish colony) who moved to Spain. The "dream" is something of a prophesy given that its protagonist is all too typical of an increasingly troubling global phenomenon, the immigrant in search of the mythical North—in this case, out of Africa to Spain. Although there were relatively few Africans living in Spain in 1973, today there are hundreds who reach the Spanish coast on a weekly basis. Today many find it remarkable that Ndong could have spoken in such a farsighted way about a reality that would become so glaring decades later. Ndong has written novels—*Las tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (*Shadows of Your Black Memory*) and *Los poderes de la tempestad* (*Powers of the Tempest*)—stories, poetry, and essays concerning the history of his country.