CAROL SPINDEL

In the Shadow of the SACRED GROVE

"I was unprepared for the quietly gathering power of this respectfully inquisitive study of modern life in a small West African village. It poses, and answers, questions about the lives of a proud and shy people that have long preoccupied those of us to whom Africa represents the universal continent of birth." —Alice Walker

VINTAGE DEPARTURES

IN THE SHADOW OF THE SACRED GROVE

CAROL SPINDEL

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CONTENTS

PROLOGUE ix
ARRIVAL 3
GREETINGS 15
LA FETE DE CAROL 34
FIELDWORK 60
THE MAT, THE CLOTH & THE AFRICAN SKY 77
THE TALE OF YARDJUMA'S MARRIAGE 109
A SACK OF RICE 120
THE DRY SEASON 129
THE COTTON HARVEST 141
LEARNING DYULA FROM SCRATCH 154
THE AMBIVALENT INTERMEDIARY 162
AFRICA 192
THE WOMEN POTTERS 196
BLESSINGS 211
BOOK VACATIONS 217
WHERE THERE IS NO DOCTOR 224

MARRIAGE IS VERY DIFFICULT 242
CARRYING STONES 250
THE HOUSES IN HEAVEN 268
MANGO AFTERNOONS 272
NAWA LEARNS TO WORK 284
WAITING FOR RAIN 290
INSIDE THE GROVE 299
LEAVING 305
EPILOGUE 315

PROLOGUE

WHY AFRICA IN PARTICULAR, OF ALL THE PLACES IN THE world, should have called to me I cannot say. Why I wanted to cross over and experience life in another culture is easier to tell. I had grown up in a home of two cultures—my father was born in Brooklyn to a family of Sephardic Jews and my mother in Arkansas to Southern Baptists who can trace their roots to the earliest settlement in the Arkansas Territory. All my life, I crossed back and forth from one of these cultures to the other, learning Jewish history in the synagogue and how to gig for catfish from my grandfather. As I ate *latkes* and homegrown collard greens, I studied the grown-ups, alert for clues that would show me how to pass as an insider in these two very different worlds.

When I finished college, the first thing I did was to pack a backpack and head for North Africa. A friend and I traveled for months third class, from Morocco to

MARRIAGE IS VERY DIFFICULT

FOR WEEKS, THE DYULA WOMEN HAD BEEN TALKING ABOUT the wedding. For the past two days, guests had streamed into the Dyula part of the village, arriving on foot from small villages in the bush, tired and dusty, their heads loaded with food and bundles, or grandly, swathed in expensive cloth as they stepped out of taxis from the city. Others came on mopeds, the women sidesaddle on the back, miraculously not falling off without appearing to hold on. On every cooking fire a thirty-gallon pot of rice simmered. Mariam, who had to count each franc with care, had bought twice as many spices as usual just to feed her guests. As for me, I walked the long way around to the potters' quarter, going twice as far in the afternoon sun, just so that I could pass through Dyulaso and observe the bustle.

"Come and cook with us!" the women called. "There's lots to do."

"I can't today," I called back. "I'm going to make pots."

"All you do these days is make pots. But we haven't seen you at the market selling them. You must be selling them in the other towns and getting very rich. When are you going to give us some of your pots?"

"Soon," I promised vaguely, as I went on my way. When I was put on the spot, the important thing was to give an answer; any answer was better than none.

The next day was the first day of the week-long Moslem wedding. Three brides were being married at once, two from my adopted family, the Traores, and a third girl who was a Silla from Sillera.

As soon as we heard the drums start up in the afternoon Adama and I walked over to watch. A large crowd had gathered. In the middle of the crowd were the three brides. Matching cloths were twisted around their waists to form long skirts, but to my surprise, they were barebreasted. They wore necklaces of brightly colored plastic beads, and on their heads, like crowns, were hats made of origami-folded foil, as if they were going to a New Year's ball. They also wore sunglasses with heavy black frames. I hadn't expected white eyelet, but these outfits took me completely aback.

"Why don't they wear shirts?" I asked Adama. "I thought Moslem women always wore shirts."

"Not on their wedding day," replied Adama. "It's to prove they're virgins."

"How can we tell?" I asked.

"Because their breasts are small," he said, giving me an odd look. "They aren't pregnant."

"What are the glasses for?" I persisted.

"To make them beautiful," he replied solemnly, gazing at the brides with rapt satisfaction.

Behind each bride danced a supporting chorus of her younger sisters and friends. They carried towels to wipe away the sweat and the tears, both of which were shed copiously as the afternoon progressed. Some held aloft full-length portraits of the brides' boyfriends, large black-and-white photographs about sixteen inches tall, framed in glass with red tape on the edges, taken by a photographer who came to Kalikaha sometimes on market days.

The institution of boyfriends and girlfriends is a traditional custom in Dyula society. When a girl has accepted a boy, he goes to her parents and presents them with a gift of kola nuts. If the kola nuts are accepted, he is officially recognized as her boyfriend. She is allowed to spend nights with him in the house he shares with other youths at the edge of the quarter. Sexual intimacy is encouraged, but intercourse is strictly forbidden. The boy must protect the girl from other boys and men, and if, on her wedding night, she is found to be a virgin, this is held up not only as a credit to her family but also as a sign of the good character of her *petit ami.* It is his reputation that is on the line, not hers. One day, perhaps with very short notice, she must forget this young lover that she chose and marry the man her family chooses for her, a man who is often twenty or thirty years older than she is.

Several young men played drums and the older women shook gourd rattles, but the bulk of the music came from the three brides as they sang continuously in a repeating rhythm that rose and fell. The young men swarmed around them with jumbo-sized bottles of baby powder and toilet water, dumping both on their bare shoulders. Admirers ran up and attached thousand-franc notes to their foil crowns. The women who followed the brides had on their best outfits, and the giant, brightly

colored designs seemed to swim through the village, as if they moved independently of the women who wore them. Multi-colored butterflies and flowers, black and yellow television sets with rabbit ears, alphabets and inkpots, papaya trees, cotton bolls, and huge geometric motifs striped and dotted and *x*ed their way along the paths in red, purple, black, and orange. If I had thought that this part of the wedding had anything to do with the solemnity of marriage or their future husbands, I was totally mistaken. At midnight, the girls would be given to their grooms, dressed in white from head to toe, prayed over and blessed with solemn chanting. But this afternoon was the final fling, the last revelry of youth. It reminded me of a parade in New Orleans at Mardi Gras.

The three brides sang their way from quarter to quarter, and I followed in the crowd, feeling like a sparrow who has wandered into a flock of peacocks. The girl from Sillera, who was cross-eyed, didn't sing with the same gusto as the other two, yet she hung on to a picture of her boyfriend, sang as best she could, and cried constantly. I did not know her name, but the two Traore girls were named Biba and Jiata. Biba was to marry the tailor, a young man of twenty-five. Jiata would be given to a man in his fifties, a cousin, who already had two wives. Cross-cousins are a preferred marriage among the Dyula.

Many of the women stared at me with odd, curious, even distrustful looks, and I realized that these were the guests from other villages. I had already forgotten how it had been when I first came to Kalikaha and was regarded like that by everyone. For gradually, I and the villagers had drifted into a mutual acceptance, and my presence was now more or less taken for granted. "She lives here with us. She speaks Dyula," I heard the women from Kalikaha whisper over and over with a proud, proprietary air that surprised me.

From quarter to quarter we paraded, the brides singing the same tune over and over, the crowd following after, the young men sprinkling baby powder and toilet water until the brides turned white. The young men handed out candy and cigarettes to the spectators, and when something especially pleased them, they threw handfuls of candy into the air, and all the children scrambled after it. Young girls meandered through the crowd selling fried dough balls and paper cones of peanuts.

One of the brides pulled a young man out of the group and danced sensually in front of him, flipping the hair whisk she carried across his face playfully. Everyone laughed, candy flew into the air, and Mariam told me that he was her boyfriend.

The older women, dressed in flowing robes and scarves, formed a benevolent chorus on the steps of the mosque. The young girls came to them and asked for blessings, which the women chanted softly in unison. I stood near Mariam, who looked saintlike in flowing white, and let the soft chants of the choir roll over me.

From time to time, one of the brides would go up to a woman and sing to her, standing very close, their faces nearly touching. Then, inevitably, the older woman would break down and cry. Tears, in odd contrast to the carnival atmosphere, flowed everywhere. The brides cried often. Everyone cried except the young men who were having their last day of fun before their childhood friends left them to become wives and mothers. Adama and I had become separated in the crowds, so I couldn't ask him what it all meant. I thought that they cried because, as one traditional song went, "marriage is very difficult" and because the brides did not want to leave their boyfriends for husbands they had not chosen.

Finally, in the dusky light of evening, Biba and Jiata broke off and headed for the house of the elder of their family, El Hadji Traore. Everyone must have known this was coming because the cement terrace of his house had emptied of people, and he was seated there alone, as if on a throne, an enormous man bedecked in white robes and red hat, holding his prayer beads in his plump hands.

The two brides made their way toward him singing and waving their black whisks. What remained of their voices was hoarse and strained. They had started singing at one in the afternoon and it was now after six. They could barely get out the words, but they sang on determinedly, supported by the young girls behind them. They sang sadly, their tired voices raspy and broken. I couldn't understand the words, but I imagined that they were pleading with him not to marry them off to strangers, not to send them away from the tight circle of the family. They went down on their knees in front of him, swaying and brushing him with their whisks, chanting the same refrain over and over. El Hadji's face was pained; he didn't look directly at them; it was as if he could not bear to. He kept his eyes fixed on the prayer beads in his lap. Finally, he raised his hands slightly, his palms toward them, as if to say, Enough. Please, no more.

But they kept on, their hoarse voices rising and falling. Finally, I saw one single tear flow out of his eye and roll down his cheek and it fell on his hands, bedecked with silver rings, where he wiped at it. At this, Biba and

Jiata turned and danced, tired but triumphant, down the steps. All of the old women and many of the young ones were crying freely.

I stood not far away from the corner of his terrace and stared at El Hadji. It was a strangely moving sight, the old patriarch who wields so much power over the lives of his family, who could by a word marry these girls to whomever he chose, brought to shed a tear by the pleas of the hoarse, sweating young women with supple shoulders and dark, ripe breasts. I couldn't take my eyes off the old man, although everyone was leaving the quarter and I knew that I would soon be conspicuous, staring at him like that. He pushed back his heavy sleeve, glanced at his watch, and then bent his head and stared intensely once again at his prayer beads. He looked strangely satisfied, although why this should be I had no idea.

Adama and I walked home with Noupka, who had been in the crowd. Wherever there was music and dancing, you could be sure Noupka would be there, no matter what the event. "You should be ashamed," Adama admonished her, "to come to the wedding without a shirt. It isn't right. You were the only one." Noupka shrugged and handed me Mama, who was trying to jump off Noupka's back into my arms. Mama had spent the afternoon tied onto Noupka's back, being jogged up and down, and she was ready for a change. As for me, I was sweaty and tired and my T-shirt and my hair were coated with baby powder, sprinkled on me by way of salute from the young men.

* * *

The next day, I went to see Mariam to ask what it all meant. Each bride makes up her own songs, improvising

on the spot, Mariam told me. When she sees the young men, she sings, "Come and dance! Today is my great day!" When she sings before the chorus of elder women, she asks them to give her blessings, to ask Allah to give her health, children, and a harmonious marriage.

When she sees a woman she knows, she sings of the woman's sorrows, the children she has lost, for example. That is why all the women cry when the brides sing to them. Then the brides give blessings to comfort the women. Through the brides' songs, the tragic events of the past year are brought forward and remembered. On that afternoon, when they are no longer children and not quite women, the brides have the power to bring forth tears. After the tears have been spilled, they give blessings for solace.

When the brides want to end, they sing before the elder of their family. It seemed to me that they pleaded with him not to marry them away, but I was wrong. They sang to him of his life and of the tragedies of the last year, the wife who died, the babies that were lost. And then they gave him benedictions to console him. "It is Allah's will," they sang. "Be comforted." And that is why he cried.