

CHAPTER 7

My Cousin, the Fat Pig

Stretching my legs after the cramped bus ride from Dakar, I wait for the porter to throw my backpack down from the roof. I am in the small village of Samba Dia on my way to the Sine Saloum Delta. Taking advantage of the delay in classes starting, I am in search of ripe mangoes, lush mangroves, or anything else that will help me forget how far I am from my family back home in Wisconsin on a weekend I feel particularly homesick.

I look around the village bus depot, a vast, dusty field lined with small boutiques and filled with groups of juice sellers waiting for the next arrival. I see immediately that today is a lucky day: I have arrived on the one day of the week that the bus stop transforms into a busy market.

In search of a snack for my next ride, I stroll up and down aisles of vendors who are squatting next to their goods. Faded second-hand T-shirts folded in piles three feet high. Bunches of bananas reaching from the vendor's mat like a hand with dozens of edible yellow fingers. Multicolored plastic buckets and teakettles. Sticky pyramids of red and green mangoes, their leaking nectar glistening in the afternoon sun.

Finally, I find what I am looking for—an old woman sitting on an overturned wooden crate displaying peanuts for sale. She has forty plastic bags, each holding a handful of either plain or sugar-coated peanuts. Her head is wrapped in a fluorescent pink piece of fabric, folded like a crown. Gray hair peeks out at her temples. She is chewing on a *neem* branch, a favorite toothbrush of many rural

Senegalese. When we start to talk, she does not take out the branch but, rather, pushes it to the corner of her mouth, where it bounces with her every word.

I greet her in Wolof, eager to practice. Three days of navigating from one small town to the next have improved my language more than months of classroom lessons. I launch into the customary greeting, ask about her family, ask if she feels at peace, and then we both praise God. Eventually, I get around to asking her how much the peanuts cost.

My Wolof is not native enough to avoid getting quoted the *toubab*, or foreigner, price. I decided to bargain her down in Senegalese style: taking my time with friendly small talk.

She asks my Senegalese name.

“Kumba N’dour.” I reply. By sharing my adopted last name, I am revealing that I belong to the Serer, one of the dozens of ethnic groups in Senegal. I know that if she is also Serer, I will have no problem negotiating. The Senegalese believe in solidarity.

“What a terrible name,” she says, with a straight face. “You must be very stupid.”

Without flinching, I ask her name.

“N’daiye Diatta.”

Her last name tells me that she is Joola, another of the tribes. In fact, the Joola are considered cousins of the Serer.

I look her straight in the eye. “Joola?” I ask, raising an eyebrow. “You are selfish and love to eat rice, you pig.”

The two vendors on either side of her have been listening with mostly disinterest until this point. At that moment, they burst out laughing, repeating what I have said.

“Kumba N’dour. *Begg na cebb*.” One of the women slaps her knee as she laughs.

Other vendors on the periphery hear and stroll over to check out the commotion. As I try to reassure myself I have said the right word for pig, my hands grow clammy and I become aware of the circle of strangers closing in around me.

The peanut vendor has not smiled once. She still looks stone cold, the neem stick dangling out of the corner of her mouth.

“*Begg na cebb?*” she asks. “I like rice? I don’t think so. You,” she says, pointing at me. “You are my slave and I know you spend all day eating peanuts.” At this point the growing crowd around me erupts in laughter. The woman smiles, and with relief, I start laughing too.

As members of cousin ethnic groups, the Joola and Serer, we are “joking cousins.” This means that when we meet, as a sign of friendliness, we insult each other without hesitation. Every ethnic group in Senegal has at least one or two joking cousin groups, so meeting one is rare enough to be a delight but common enough that the teasing and insults are protocol.

Once everyone surrounding us settles down, she sells me the peanuts for half the original asking price.

“Kumba N’dour,” she says. “Come eat dinner with my family tonight.”

I thank her and say I will next time. As I settle into my bus seat and wave good-bye, I feel like I am not so far from family this weekend after all.