

The Search for the Genuine

I am sitting in a room: concrete floor, pocked and peeling walls. A bare light bulb hangs from the ceiling. A beaded curtain, perfectly still in the dead heat, keeps the flies at bay, their manic geometries iridescently imitating the “stars” you see when somebody punches your lights out. Six simple tables stand in the room. I sit at one of them, the only person in the place. A plastic tablecloth hangs limply in the heat. Outside the temperature hovers around 126° Fahrenheit. A liter of water stands half empty on the table.

The man serving offers me a choice: cow’s liver or steak with rice. I order the liver. When it comes it is overcooked, tough and dry. It looks like the crushed and desiccated soles of my rubber flip-flops that have spared my feet from the ochrous skin of West Africa for six months and tastes like what it is: the wizened organ of one of the emaciated cattle I have seen prowling the scrub along the banks of the Niger. It is covered with sautéed onions. It bears only a remote resemblance to the dish my mother would cook for me as a boy. I order a beer. I wolf the food down in a dozen ravenous bites. It is utterly unappetizing and weirdly delicious.

Is this genuine?

Tombouctou is a vestige of the trading center it was five hundred years ago. When I arrive I immediately set for myself the task of finding a way out. I had come up river by *pinnace*, a seventy-foot dugout filled to the gunwales with bolts of fabric and bags of millet, rice and corn, from Mopti. People are splayed out under straw awnings that stretch fore and aft, prostrate in the heat. In the evening women light fire pots amidships and cook steaming pots of rice. At dusk when it becomes too dark to navigate, the pilot eases the boat to shore. People clamber down the gangplank to the banks of the

river and build fires to keep warm as the thermometer drops sixty degrees. The women bear the pots of rice to the fires. People sit in circles and partake of the communal meal. I contribute tins of sardines that my fellow travelers break on their bowls of rice. This is dinner.

Is this genuine?

After supper people linger by the fire telling stories in muted tones. Some wander off to sleep in the hollows formed by the sand. I take my pack, worn blanket and water jug, find a burrow, roll out my sleeping mat and wrap myself against the chill desert air. I fall asleep to the croaking of a thousand bullfrogs and the soft snorting of hippopotamus drifting from the muddy expanse of the Niger.

Before dawn, at the first inkling of light, a man nudges me awake with his foot. I shake out my blanket and mat, take a long draught from my water jug—this will be the coolest the water tastes all day—and follow the stream of people back to the boat. By the time the boat pulls out into the current and as I'm lulled to sleep by the purring of the motor, the women are rekindling the fire pots in the hollow well at the center of the *pinnacle*.

I awake a couple hours later. The heat has mounted, the sun glinting on the river. Sorko fishermen work the shallows, standing in their *pirogues*, flinging their nets in well-practiced and graceful arcs, rhythmically hauling them in hand over hand. Occasionally a small fish catches the sun, flopping like a spangle of silver in the mesh of a net. Bowls of breakfast rice, thickened with sweetened condensed milk, are passed fore and aft from the fires. Flecked with cinnamon, it is marvelous and silences and soothes my gurgling stomach. I am again returned to childhood by its flavor.

Is this genuine?

Somewhere between Niafouké and Diré the *pinnace* pulls into shore. From a small village a line of Fulani women emerge, their indigo robes billowing in the desert wind, their ears and necks and wrists bespangled and tinkling with golden jewelry. They carry calabashes of thick cow's milk on their heads, their hips swaying under the weight as they walk like goddesses in the sand. A horse and its foal graze idly on an islet in the shade of a languorous willow. The women wade, laughing, into the shallows and hand the gourds over the rail. A girl hovers before me like a vision, her blue robe clinging to her glistening body, offering a gourd of the cool milk. She is smiling, laughing, her white teeth catching the sun. All the fears we are raised with about raw milk, dairy products in the tropics, eddy in my mind like the tiny whirlpools lapping at the hull as it gently rocks in the water. I throw caution to the wind and take the calabash and drink the rich, creamy milk in deep draughts. It is the sweetest, most delicious milk I have ever tasted, and probably ever will taste, in my life.

Is this genuine?

I wander not because I crave sensation but to quiet the demons that torment me, to lay bare the landscape of my soul, to discover the self stripped of artifice. Along the way we eat many things, some exotic, most simple. Their tastes are grounded in the specific place of our sojourn. Colored and flavored by seeds, roots, stems and leaves, fresh, dried or cooked, left whole or ground, shredded and flaked, each imparts the character of a place which we carry with us forever, talismans of our journey, the flavor-symbols of our search. But what am I searching for?

I finally found a way out of Tombouctou. I had taken to lurking around the one hotel frequented by Europeans. A typical scene: the loggias silent, the ceiling fans spinning lazily in the limpid air, lizards scuttling across the flagstones, the African servants standing distractedly at semi-attention in white robes. I half-expected to see Sidney Greenstreet plopped in a corner, his hands neatly folded across his enormous belly, nursing an iced pink drink. At the bar one afternoon I met a British geotechnical engineer who had come to Mali at the behest of the government to search for oil. The Malian government insisted the firm hire native drivers for their fleet of Land Rovers, and the company needed to return the six Nigerians who had driven the Rovers across the edge of the desert to Kano. I described my plight. He doubted it would be a problem. They had found a local who owned a Rover. The Brit's guys were camped out in a compound tuning the vehicle and preparing it to make the trek back across the edge of the Sahara. Without enough money for plane fare and with lorry traffic undependable, I knew that buying a spot on this trip was my only ticket out.

That evening I made my way there. The scene in the garage was riotous. Lamps were trained on the chassis. The hood was propped open. Bits and pieces of motor were arrayed on a ground cloth. "High-life" blared from a cassette deck. Men stood around sipping beer and Coca-Cola. Two of the Nigerians lay on their backs under the engine tinkering, calling out for wrenches and clamps and screwdrivers. Arguments broke out, and the fine points of car repair were debated with a vehemence befitting the politics of war or a soccer match. The air was festive, manic.

It was unclear when they would leave. "*Quand le Rover est prêt.*" And when would that be? "*On ne sait pas... Ce soir, demain. C'est impossible à dire.*" I was afraid that if I left to get some sleep they might leave without me. And the owner was unsure if he would let me come. He was convinced that the jeep was already overloaded: the six drivers, two other passengers, his own driver and himself; one oil drum of gasoline and another of water; two spares; all the baggage; and the grates you needed to embed in the sand if the Rover got stuck. We negotiated. He declined. I begged. He shrugged. I stood around sipping tea, talking to some of the men. He gazed anxiously at his vehicle which had by then been completely disemboweled by the mechanics who were examining and lubricating every scrap of metal. The owner and I studiously avoided each other. Around one in the morning, convinced that they would not be able to put the thing back together, I returned to my threadbare room at the *hostellerie* to sleep. In the middle of the night a bolt of lightning and a thunderclap sent me flying out of my cot like a character in a cartoon.

I rose at dawn and hurried to the compound. I passed seven trees, their roots torn out of the sandy soil by the storm, strewn across the street. The place felt abandoned, but the Rover was there. Most of the people who had been there the night before had left. A couple of men continued to work on the Rover at a desultory pace. I inquired about the owner. Where could I find him? When would he be back? No one knew.

I wandered down the wide boulevards of the town, never straying far or for too long, checking back periodically, a paranoiac suffering from delusions of abandonment. I made my way into the market to escape the sun. Arab and African women sat clustered on mats, cloth and straw stretched above them to provide shade. Plates of tin and plaited

fiber displayed dried fruits and nuts. I bought a little bag of peanuts and another of dried dates. These two flavors, commingled in my mouth, have always exemplified Tombouctou in my mind: the meeting of North and sub-Saharan Africa. What could be simpler and more complex?

Is this genuine?

Late in the day a crowd gathered around an old woman wrapped in scraps of faded cloth. Her skin was dark and weather-cracked lines scored her face. Bangles of tin, iron and brass ran from her wrists to her forearms. At first slowly, her whole being turned inward as it seemed to find the source of rhythm, she began to turn her hands in infinitesimally small movements, and then faster, turning, spinning, her bracelets jangling, she became ecstatic. Her eyes caught fire. The crowd started clapping and a man broke into song. She seemed ancient: mother, virgin, old wife, the goddess of all creation disguised as a crone. Her dance seemed to reveal the mysteries of the universe. When she finished, collapsing on the ground, I fled gasping for air. I felt feverish as if in a delirium. I could think of nothing else for days and her image kept erupting into my dreams.

I raced back to the garage. The heat had dissipated, the scene of the night before recreated, this time with less hilarity. They needed to get going. The owner was having second thoughts. No one knew if this was a ploy to exact more money from the geotechnical company or if he was really thinking of scrapping the trip. He had doubts that the car would survive the drive. I appealed to his sense of penury and upped my offer. He would need every *sous* he could raise to cover the expense of this madcap journey he had agreed to, and anyway, what did he care if one more body had to be

crammed into the back of the Rover? He would be sitting up front with his assistant and whoever was driving. He finally relented, instructing an underling to take some money as a deposit.

I hurried back to the hotel, gathered up my stuff, paid the bill and returned to wait it out. He would have no problem taking my deposit and leaving without me. I sat against a wall and dozed on and off. Tempers flared now. Arguments broke out at every decision. The owner threatened to bag the trip if they couldn't get the Rover the way they wanted it. Around three in the morning it was done. A simple, "*Eh, bien. Allons-y.*" They packed the roof rack with the luggage. One spare wheel was affixed to the front of the Rover, and the other was placed flat in the rear between the drums of gasoline and water. Who would drive first? His colleagues elected "Whisky." The owner's assistant, with whom he would make the return trip if the vehicle survived, sat in the middle of the front seat. The owner naturally took the window. The eight of us piled into the back, our knees jammed against the steel drums, arrayed on two benches facing each other. Was this really how I was going to travel 867 kilometers, Tombouctou to Niamey? What a lucky sardine!

This trip was not pleasant. The Rover lurched and shuddered. A few kilometers out of town, the dirt road all but evaporated, the desert track rock-strewn, rutted, barely visible. "Whisky" ground the gears with a speed and finesse that boggled the mind, double-clutching, moving seamlessly through all fifteen combinations of two and four wheel drive. Once in the desert, the Rover would mire itself in sand every twenty or fifty yards. We would all pile out of the back, set the mesh in front of the wheels and push, inching the vehicle out of the soft, liquid-like sand. After reloading the grates, we would

clamber into the bed of the Rover and carry on. And then repeat the ritual when we got stuck. Over and over again.

I was feverish, gut-sick, my skin dappled by a fungus that had crept onto my limbs in Dahomey. The delirium of the drive was exacerbated by the screaming chatter of conversation that rifled back and forth across the benches like a linguistic cat's cradle. French, Hausa, Yoruba, Bambara, English. Deafening and incomprehensible, the Babel-stream of languages devolved into an Esperanto of gibberish that reached my ears like the cackling of demons in the sweltering heat.

We stopped to wait out the heat of the day, propped up in the shady lee of the truck or stretched out beneath a mat draped over the spindly branches of a scrub bush. After a mere half day of driving the owner discovered that the rivets holding the armature of the canvas awning that covered us had loosened. Wrenches were produced to tighten the bolts.

We resumed the drive after an hour or two, the heat barely leavened by a few degrees. Now, with each stop to free the Rover, the rivets were checked, and we watched in progressive horror as the steel stanchions of the armature began to crack, tiny fissures at first that, with each wrenching shake of the vehicle, split and widened.

That night we slept on the edge of the desert. A tin of sardines and warm water. At dawn, the track again visible, we resumed the journey. By noon my brains had assumed the consistency of a frothy milkshake. In and out of fever, my mind could barely follow the thread of conversation that had grown testy in the heat. Sometime in the early afternoon we pulled into Bamba. The shade trees on the plaza where we parked provided a kind of heaven, the heat a little less stifling. Several of the men went off to have a drink

and buy some food. The ones who remained lashed the armature to the body of the Rover with wire in the hopes that it would hold long enough to get us as far as Bourem. It seemed doubtful.

I asked how “Whisky” had gotten his name. Acknowledged by all as the most accomplished of the drivers, his prowess at taking a Rover through impossible terrain had assumed the stature of legend. These drives would sometimes last twelve, fourteen hours. After a day of such grueling work, they would pull into whatever small town or village they had found and make their way to the bar. “Whisky” would order a bottle of Dewar’s, Johnnie Walker, J&B, whatever they had, and finish it in a single sitting all by himself. The next morning, fresh as a daisy, he would repeat the extraordinary feat of the previous day.

That night we pulled off the road around ten or eleven o’clock. In the near distance I made out the silhouette of what seemed an enormous citadel, the cubistic masses of earth rising behind an adobe wall of massive dimensions. One of the drivers built a fire. Bottles of beer and soda were passed hand-to-hand. One man brought out some dried fish he had bought that afternoon. I had seen this stuff in the markets lining the streets around the port at Mopti: awful, fly-strewn things laid out on reed drying racks in the blistering sun, the skin coppery and withered, the tails furled by heat, eyes glazed, and mouths and gills frozen open as if the poor creatures were gasping for their last breath. I had never dared touch them. They seemed a certain route to a gut-wrenching death, and I could see my body racked by convulsions, my eyes silvering over, my body wasted in a fetal curve, vomit, shit and pus oozing from every orifice. Now my companion was offering me a desiccated filet.

“*Non, merci,*” I demurred. “It’s fine,” he said. “Try it.” “I don’t think so,” I muttered in limp rejoinder. “I don’t believe it’s safe. I’m sick.” “It’s good,” he insisted. “It won’t kill you. The flesh is completely clean inside. Look, I’ll show you.”

He peeled back the thin filament of skin. It looked like a less succulent version of the smoked sablefish I buy at Zabar’s. To hell with it, I said to myself. I’m half-dead anyway.

It was delicious: delicate, sweet, tender and moist, sun-cooked rather than smoked, flaky. I pulled the tiny bones from my teeth as if it had been a perch or wall-eyed pike. I smiled. “*Delicieux,*” I said and we both laughed.

Is this genuine?

By mid-morning the next day the awning swayed with each lurch of the Rover. The whole thing seemed precarious, about to topple over. We could see our bags being lost on the side of the track, the tossed cookies of Hansel and Gretel’s impossible journey, clues to a path it would have been folly to retrace. They stopped the truck. The temperature was hovering just shy of 130°. As we climbed out, the light was blinding, the glare of sand and boulders burning the retina. An examination of the joints proved decisive. They had ripped right off the side of the truck, the awning held on by wire alone. The owner was furious: his Land Rover was being destroyed. Against his protestations we unloaded all the baggage. As we circled the vehicle a further discovery was made: one of the wheels had cracked under the shock of the drive. Now the gas and water drums were hoisted out as well. The wires were cut and the whole apparatus—steel armature, canvas awning, luggage rack—was pitched to the side of the road. The Rover

was jacked up, the wheel removed and rolled away to collapse next to the awning. Once the spare had been put on, we realized fully the nature of our predicament: the motley of bags—duffels, battered suitcases, my rucksack—were sandwiched under and between the benches and around the two steel drums. We climbed back into the rear, cursing and muttering, wondering how we would survive the sun.

I left them in Bourem. They didn't know what they would do. The owner was beside himself. His precious Land Rover had been ravaged. The drivers wondered whether they would find another way of getting to Kano. I walked the market and finally found a seat on a pick-up truck that was leaving for Niamey within the hour.

That night a thunderstorm of unrelenting ferocity washed the road out, the track taking on the aspect of a rushing torrent. Around midnight we found an abandoned garage in Ansongo where we parked to sit out the storm. We slept on the concrete floor, water dripping through the roof and soaking through our blankets and clothes. I caught a chill and suffered nightly sweats for the next decade. I don't remember what I ate that night or if I ate at all.

I am in Paris two days later. I walk the streets for hours. I am numb. I can't tell if I'm dreaming or if I am the dream myself. When I'm hungry, I stop at a little corner bar or café, order a glass of *vin rouge*, an *omelette nature*, a *baguette* with *jambon crû* and *Gruyère* or a *crêpe* with *champignons* or spinach. This goes on for three days. I have been saved by French civilization.