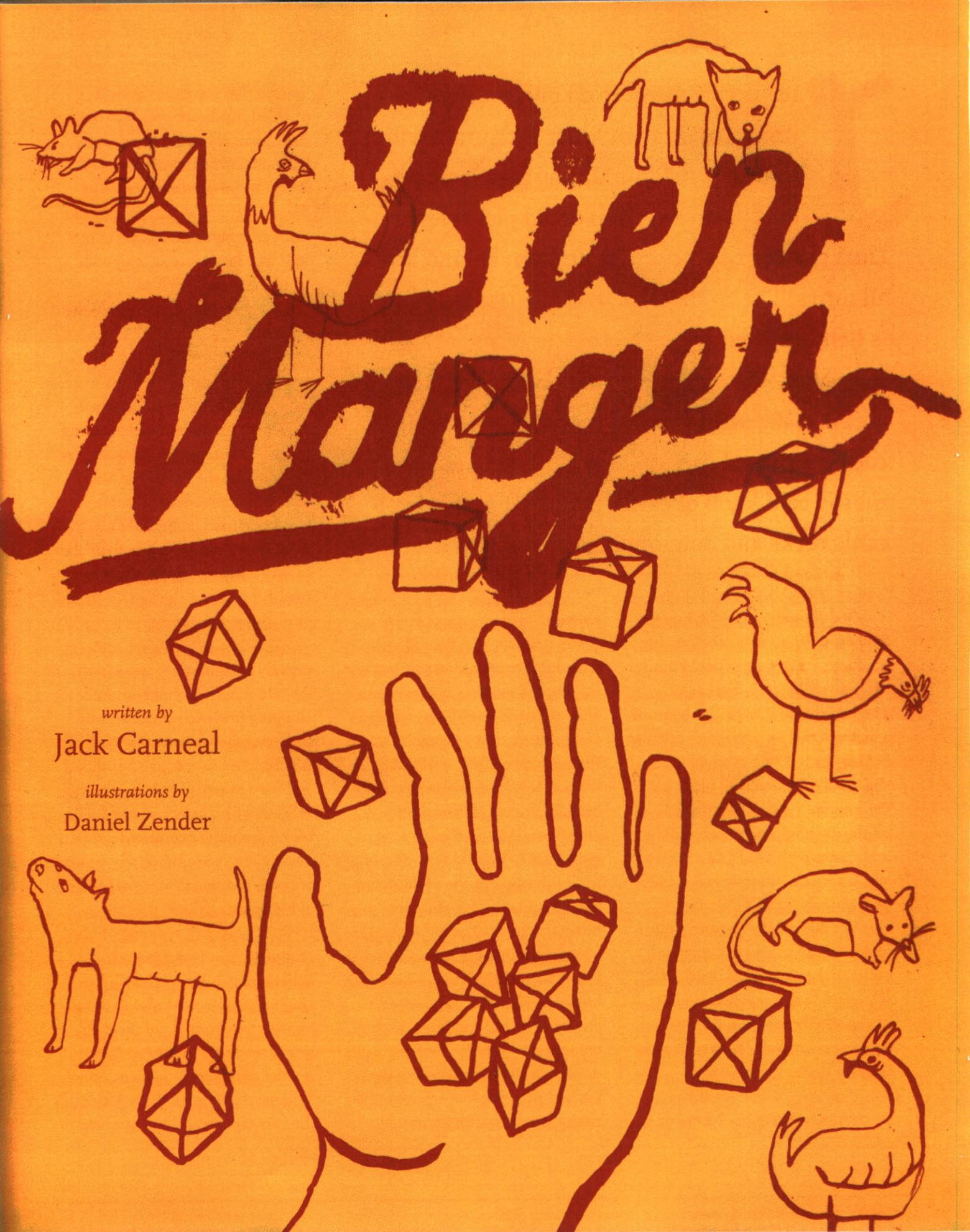


Bier Marger



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Just up the street from our house in Bougouni is an outdoor restaurant with a large thatch-hut dining area (*paillette*) built from a section of old picket fence. Dual plumes of smoke rise up from behind it at all times. The restaurant's name, BIEN MANGER, is hand-painted in blue on the building next door. Bien Manger itself consists solely of the dining area and the space behind it, where two women cook over wood fires. Just beyond the building is a mostly bald knob of earth, peppered by scaly volcanic rocks and outcroppings of sharp grass.

One should never look into the kitchen at Bien Manger before dining there. In fact, one should think twice about looking there at all. The kitchen, as it were, lies beneath a tent situated on a slight slope behind the *paillette*, overlooking a shallow ditch filled with black water. On a recent visit, a girl squatted on the ditch's lip, scrubbing pots and dishes with sand and a burlap rag. Chickens loitered nearby and pecked in the mud for scraps. A cloud of flies migrated from a pile of dead fish lying on a platter to joints of meatless bone, then on to eyeless goat carcasses, mounds of sun-dried catfish used to flavor sauces, and raw chickens with skin purpled from exposure.

The cooking area itself has no counters or butcher blocks or

stoves or refrigerators or fryers. It's an open-air, dirt-floored area where two barefoot women wrangle infants and toddlers as they stir rice and stews and deep-fry plantains and potatoes over a couple of wood fires. Every so often, one of the women will cram another mango branch into the embers. One afternoon, I watched as a young girl pulled herself up by the lip of a huge tub wherein one of the cooks was dropping purple chickens into a marinade. The girl dipped a hairbrush into the tub up to her elbow, then slurped at the hairbrush hungrily. The cook watched without interest, and continued to chop onions with a brutish-looking blade.

Between the *paillette* and the kitchen sits a ten-foot-square unlit cinderblock hut with a battered

tin roof that serves as the walk-in. Piled inside are pots of sauce, huge enamel bowls of rice, whole fish and chickens, and hunks of beef. The proprietress stands in the shadow of the hut; you pay her through a yard-square hole in the wall. She takes your money with hands shiny with grease.

It goes without saying that the food at Bien Manger is excellent, particularly the Senegalese-style *poulet yassa*—chicken stewed in a sauce of onions. Our son particularly loves the drumsticks, nodding his head in exaggerated pleasure as he chews on the bone. The Malian dishes are immediately likable, too: a rice fried in fat called *kame* (similar to the Senegalese *tyep*); the peanut-based sauce *tige dege na*; fried fish; stewed chicken, beef, and goat; and potatoes fried in palm oil.

The food is both alien and vaguely recognizable: aside from the odd tongue-jabbing or tooth-chipping presence of feathers or rocks or sand, there is also the familiar presence of salt and rice and fried potatoes and the yielding softness of long-cooked meat. The very definition of comfort food has never been clearer: food that tastes of some distilled essence of home; of my grandmother's psychic caretaker Evelyn's cooking; of my grandfather in Hampton standing at his range in his leather slippers singing "Sweet Kentucky Babe" as he fries hamburgers; of the soft, aggressively spiced dishes I ate during the four years I lived in rural Tennessee. Here, in West Africa, is the very taproot of Southern soul



food. These Malian dishes seem like the distant but direct culinary forebears of the African-Appalachian food I grew up eating in Tidewater, Virginia.

Five months ago, my wife, Chris, and I quit our lease, had a yard sale, left our home in north Florida, and moved to Bougouni, two hours south of the capital city of Bamako, with our two year-old boy, Tabb, in tow. We're here because Chris won a grant to do her PhD research on rural schools in Mali. Back home, all of our lives are packed in storage bins in our parents' garages in New York and Virginia. Here we live in a cinderblock home with screenless windows. At night, the mosquitoes chirrrzz around us until we can no longer stand it.

We're beginning to realize that there will be no end to adjusting here: no normalcy, no plateau of rest where everything becomes familiar and navigable. The *harmattan*—the eerily persistent seasonal wind that travels from the east, across the Sahara and across north Africa—blows ceaselessly. Each of us has unpleasant lung infections caused by all the dust. My sinus infection, which peaked during our last visit to Kolondieba, is recurring now. Our boy pukes regularly and coughs constantly, and we've been told to never let him go barefoot unless we want hookworm larvae to burrow into his soft feet.

Additionally, we've just found out during a rare call from home that Chris's grandfather, an apple farmer in upstate New York, died two weeks ago. He's already been buried. His death was no surprise;

we visited him in Geneva the month before Chris came to Mali and, leaving him that day last November, we all knew that it would be the last time he'd see his granddaughter and first great-grandson.

Still, the news reaches us during a span of days in which we are being struck by our first real homesickness, our first painful loneliness. On the plane to Bamako, a rotund French monk dressed in an olive tweed suit and matching bowler said to me, about Bougouni: *You will be very far from the rest of the world.* His words, at first aphoristic, are beginning to feel real. My mother-in-law has been trying to reach us for weeks, but the country's phones were down, and no one at the bureau in Bamako has access to e-mail. We can't help but wonder who else might have been trying to reach us.

You will be very far from the rest
of the world.

Bien manger" is French for "eat well," but aside from the former commandant's house up on the hill and a few French-era buildings surrounding it, the only real legacy of the French is the surprising affinity the people of rural Bougouni have for French-style bread. We were thrilled to see, recently, that the cinderblock hutch being built down the street from us suddenly had the word BOULANGERIE painted on its side. Every afternoon, now, no matter how miserably hot, we walk down the road to buy loaves—fresh and light and hot out of the oven.

Also along the stretch of road leading out of Bougouni toward Sikasso is Jimmiss

Sports—pronounced Jimmy's—where one can buy grilled guinea fowl or a plateful of other sautéed fowl, chicken livers in onions, and a salad soaked in Maggi-and-oil dressing for about two dollars. The food is conscientiously prepared by a lone woman working in a furnace-hot closet; either her son or the ultra-casual eponymous owner brings the food to your table.

In an attempt to kill the micro-organisms that could cause internal wear, Jimmiss often treats lettuce and raw vegetables with bleach-water. Sometimes, if the lettuce is bruised, the bleach will leach into its fibers, and a glycerin sheen will make the leaves slick and lifeless; the crunch is dulled, and each leaf submits to the tongue and teeth like some soft, greasy underlayer of skin. Otherwise, the salad is crunchy and the tomatoes are nice

and tart. It has made us pretty sick on a couple of occasions, but for an hour, it also makes us very happy.

Another place not far from Jimmiss—I can't recall the name—features spaghetti noodles with palm oil and Maggi cubes, plus a few scattered canned peas. They also serve what is without a doubt the rockiest, sandiest tige dege na in town. It's like eating peanut butter smeared over gravel.

The gauge of any cook in Bougouni is the quality of her tige dege na, the ubiquitous Malian peanut sauce. Slow cooked with meat—goat, mutton, chicken, or beef—and served with overcooked rice, it's delicious. The tige dege na at any Malian restaurant, as I've mentioned, will inevitably include small bits of sand and rocks. Perhaps the peanuts are corrupted when they're crushed in the mortar and pestle, or in the huge oil-powered grinders that can be rented by the hour. Perhaps the peanuts were never cleaned in the first place. One crunches away without thinking too much about it.

Also added to tige dege na is the pulverized oily powder of the seeds of the *néré* tree, whose lacy, dangling flowers remind me of wisteria blossoms. The seeds are encased in a six- to eight-inch-long pod. Breaking open the pods between the thumbs, one finds the hard seeds nestled in a sweet, yellow medium with the consistency of cotton candy. The black seeds inside are removed and roasted, pulverized with onions and



Maggi, then formed by hand into black conical shapes that look like huge cylinders of hash. Odiferous and pungent, this richly flavored spice—called *sumbala*—is among the more unique and specific elements of Malian cuisine. As it's being prepared, the aroma is altogether animal and not at all vegetable: a sour, fleshy, rotten smell that reminds one of the odor of a bone-yard. It imparts a taste not unlike Vietnamese *nuoc mam* fish sauce, a musky flavor with notes of rot.

I'm told by the old-timers that *tige dege na* used to be a lot better, before the Maggi and Jumbo bouillon-cube people arrived and steamrolled many indigenous culinary keystones into nonexistence. Chris remembers the cubes from her days as a Peace Corps volunteer in the Central African Republic. As ubiquitous as Tabasco is elsewhere, Maggi has come to define the taste of Malian cuisine.

Older men bemoan the popularity of the Maggi/Jumbo cubes. Developed in the early part of the century by Julius Maggi, an Italian industrialist who devised a method of reducing the nutrients of vegetables and meats into a convenient cube, they've since been enhanced with huge amounts of monosodium glutamate and salt. The older men claim that the Maggi/Jumbo cube has led to the ruination of Malian cooks and cuisine. They say that many natural herbs and flavorings have been abandoned in the last five years.

One day, I'm invited to visit a community garden sponsored by

the organization that brought us to Mali, where among the tomatoes, eggplants, peppers, and lettuces grows a plant with thick, broad cabbage-like leaves.

"Many women don't know what this is anymore," says Alisane, an employee of the Bureau in Kolondieba, with a far-off, distracted glaze in his eye. He rubs the leaves fondly. It is a plant, nearly extinct, he says, that once flavored *tige dege na*. He plucks an aubergine Malien, rounder and plumper than the Western eggplant, from a nearby branch and deftly slices two thick slabs from the vegetable and hands me one. I bite into it. It is cool and awfully bitter and tastes strongly of earth. He eats the vegetable with a look of pure joy on his face.

Later, in the truck, he goes into a brown study. His sulk becomes more apparent. "You do not know real Malian food," he says suddenly, rubbing his forehead. Then, looking out the window, clutching the dashboard as we bounce through a ditch, he says, mostly to himself, "No one does."

He slams the dashboard with his open hand and turns suddenly in his seat.

"Women don't know what that plant is anymore," he says, thumbing back at the village we'd just left. "Everything is *Maggi, Maggi, Maggi...*"

Alisane is right. The cubes seem to be added to everything. They're cheap as dirt and used indiscriminately, added by the handful. The cook at a rich ex-pat's compound in Bamako used them in spaghetti

sauce, in mutton stew, in *poulet haché*, in just about every dish that had a savory element. Like canned stock stateside, Maggi is a shortcut.

In Bougouni, a place far from my familiar world, where lunch might take three hours to cook, what's relevant isn't shortcuts, but *shortage*. Fridges are rare and freezers unheard of—there's no luxury appliance for storing savory stocks or stews. There's also no such thing as leftovers. I've watched an old man toss a chicken's rib cage into his tooth-challenged maw and gum the bones down. Tabb—nicknamed Abdoulaye by the locals—basically eats his drumstick down to splinters. If there's anything left, it gets chucked into the street, where a goat will wolf it down within minutes.

I've come to view the cubes as akin to fast food: easy, cheap, tasty, and entirely unnecessary. We know enough about the cubes and their constitution to know we shouldn't be eating as much as we do, but they're impossible to avoid. Roadside beef brochettes are served with a sauce of palm oil, chopped tomato, onion, and crushed bouillon cubes. A salad dressing might be oil and crushed cubes. Packaged cubes are served as salt and pepper might be elsewhere. Handpainted billboards in the Bougouni *marché* proclaim the cubes' excellence, and the cooks of Bougouni—and throughout the *brousse*—are happy to purchase them by the gross. The men and women of Bougouni are equally happy to eat foods infused with the stuff, even as it gives every dish the same three characteristics—a soy-sauce-like

explosive saltiness, and the wild sweet-savoriness of monosodium glutamate. Alisane's sentimental pining for lost seasonings is not widely shared.

No spices, no leftovers, no storage: just Maggi and Jumbo.

Halfway down our road is a painted sign that says BAR RESTAURANT. Bar Restaurant is also known as Chez George. Chez George is our sanctuary. The courtyard is shaded and quiet; the meals are served family style on battered tin trays with mismatched dishtowels. The beers are very cold, the charbroiled chicken blessedly un-plump and rich. The fries are greasy and often undercooked; the canned beans, floating in red palm oil and seasoned with Maggi, are delicious.

Whenever we're here, Tabb consumes his chicken and fries quickly and then calls out for his new friend. A small girl comes over from the courtyard and grasps his pink hands and tries to get him to dance. Her brother comes out too, and they prop Tabb up on the other boy's bicycle. Chris and I continue to eat and drink under the paillote. We order another round of beers.

Next to the dining area, the proprietor and his family lounge around a TV, watching soccer while his daughters and wife prepare our food. Tabb is comfortable enough with the proprietor's family to disappear from our table and join them for their nightly television session, eating french fries on the house and drinking Fanta cocktail de

fruits while reclining with adoring teenage girls and watching soccer. We often have to drag him away from his fan club.

While the beer is always cold at Chez George, that is not the case at the bar/radio station/whorehouse, Le Songhai. There, the lopsided, dying refrigerator is lorded over by Maba the Dogon as it moans and shudders, proffering lukewarm beers that taste strongly of formaldehyde. Maba looks alarmingly like the actor Yaphet Kotto. If intimidating and enormous Maba isn't manning the bar, his elfin assistant, Sidi P'ru, another Dogon, will be. Sidi has a long sharp nose and small lively eyes, and looks as though he could perch on Maba's shoulder. His voice is pitched in the ether, almost as if it's defective. Often, we have to call out upon our arrival at the mostly empty bar; both Maba and Sidi live close by, and one or the other will come wandering over to answer our call for beer.

Among the astronomically inclined, the Dogon are known for having a very strange and eerily accurate knowledge of the heavens. Their ancient celestial maps include stars in the Sirius cluster invisible to the eye, discovered only after the invention of powerful telescopes. Much of their cosmology is based on an invisible star they've long claimed was a smaller companion to Sirius A. Westerners scoffed: even with a telescope one couldn't see this supposed star. It wasn't photographed until 1970. The Dogon calendar is based on a fifty-year cycle—the time, they

claimed, that it took this long invisible smaller star to circle the larger. They also claimed that the smaller star was "made of the heaviest matter in the universe."

In fact, it does take fifty years for the smaller to orbit the larger. Cycles of stars, the earth turning: these concepts of the passage of time have never meant more to me than now. Time passes too slowly here. Time stretches out like taffy; what used to be a day is now something like a cluster of days. We miss friends and family; we hope we're not causing the boy permanent damage by subjecting him daily to the myriad means nature has designed to kill us. Each morning, we crush up his antimalarial pill, mix it into pancake batter, and cover the pancakes with Aunt Jemima purchased at the embassy canteen in Bamako.

Every night I'll pluck one of the unripe citrus fruits that grows in our yard—I don't even know what they are, some kind of small orange—and squeeze it for a cocktail. I'll pretend it's a lime and I'm knocking back a gin and tonic while looking out over the expanse of dusty tan-brown windy brutal Bougouni, and I'll pretend I'm somewhere gorgeous and exotic and elsewhere: India, perhaps, or Morocco.

But no, I'm drinking cheap and heartburn-inducing vodka we stole from a Peace Corps party, out of a hot cup that tastes strongly of cheap plastic because it is made out of cheap plastic. Meanwhile my son rambles naked in his baby-blue

flip-flops as carnivorous flies chase him around the yard, my wife scoops from her papaya, and the insane puppy next door yaps and yaps. We live in a house with no toilet and relieve ourselves in a deep pit on the edge of our yard. It's no stretch to say that our abundant fruit trees have benefited from a few decades of human waste fertilizing their voluminous roots.

Chris got new glasses and a pageboy haircut before we left the States, and appears to be quite a different person than she was when we lived in a bungalow on Jackson Street in Tallahassee. Not long ago, I cut my own hair with a pair of toy scissors. We have no mirrors in our home, and it was only recently, when I stood in the bathroom of a wealthy expat in Bamako, that I saw what I looked like: a cartoon character named Hayseed, short hair up

top and absurd tufts puffing out on either side of my head.

Sometimes I think about tracking down someone who can cook in the old pre-Maggi style. And not too long ago I found myself eating with a Malian family en brousse. They served a very strange (and rocky) sweet rice. It was unsalted and virtually tasteless, but my host poured a measure of white sugar onto the rice just before we ate. I found myself longing for the tongue-stunning salts of other Malian food, for something cooked beyond recognition and bony and greasy, instead of this oddly sweet, cold rice. Another local dish, *toh*, a slimy grain porridge, is so absolutely free of taste and structure as to be inedible; one doesn't chew it but rather lets it slide down the throat. I wonder: Are these the dishes Alisane misses? I for one miss Maggi when it's absent; perhaps I'm becoming

addicted to its pleasure-center-pleasing chemicals.

It occurs to me that my vodka-and-unripe-citrus drink is warm and unpleasant. I toss the dregs.

I do some figuring. We have a pile of West African francs inside, no more than twenty or thirty dollars. It's enough to get us through the next week or two before we have to make it back to Bamako to pick up more cash. So I suggest a walk up to Chez George. We'll order some cold *castel bilibili*, a rat-shaped chicken or two, a mess of white beans and canned peas doctored with Maggi, and listen to our waiter complaining—yet again—about the hicks out here in Bougouni, the *broussards*.

Tabb perks up immediately. Chris throws the rind of the papaya she's been attending to into the yard.

"Let's go," she says. "Allons-y." ♦

