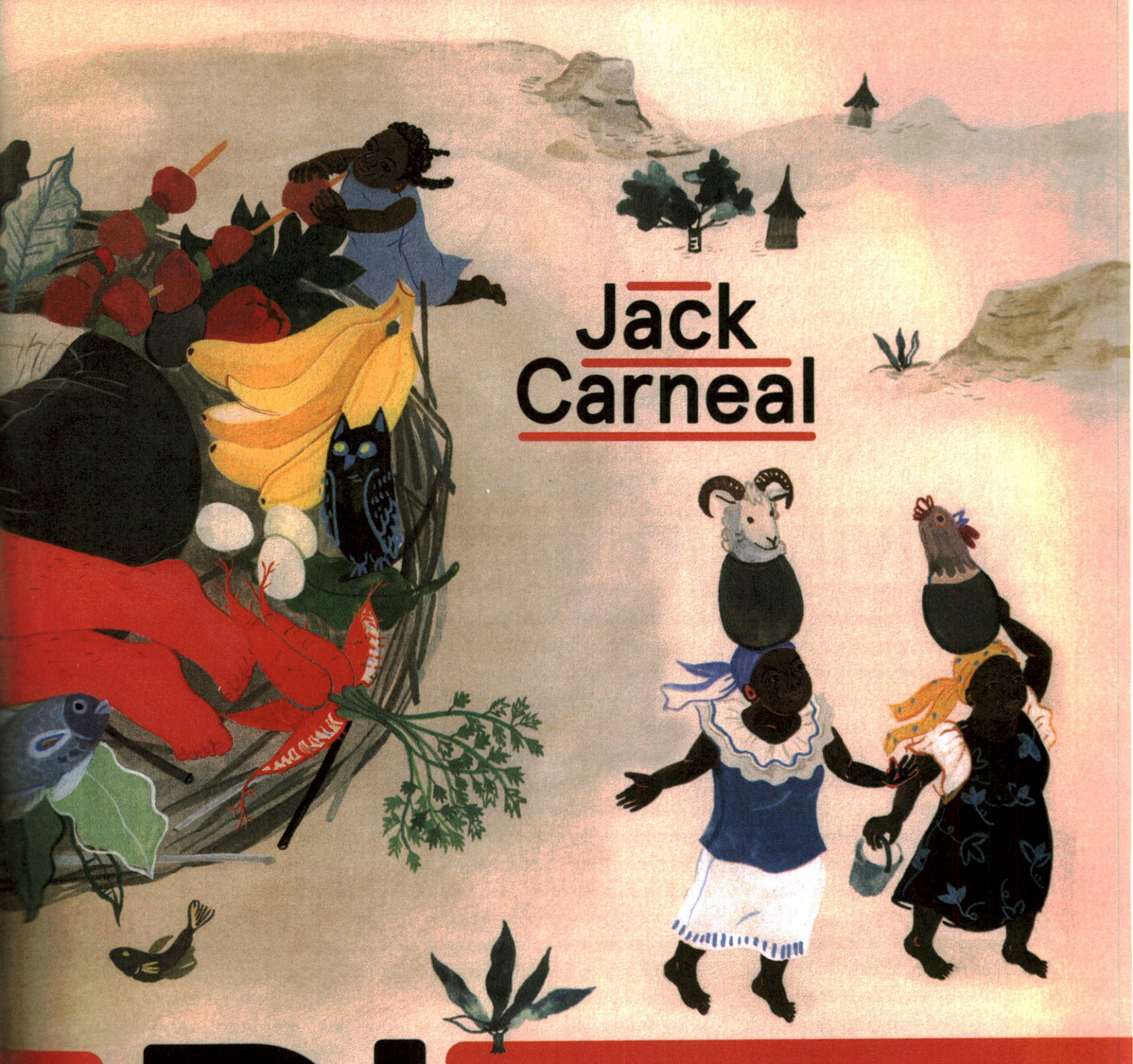
Lost in



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Place

Illustrations by Hyunyoung Kim

Arriving in Bamako, Mali

and seeing the familiar smoke-enshrouded city from the tarmac, I experience an almost narcotic rush, equal parts excitement and anxiety: I'm returning to a place I'd lived with my family for a difficult, brutal, often beautiful year.

When we left Mali, in 2000, I didn't know or care if I ever saw the place again. But here I am. I've come back to meet Yoro Sidibe, a legendary Malian hunter-musician, whose status as a cultural icon is almost impossible to relate to Western standards. Sidibe is one of the *donso ngonifola*, special musicians whose spiritual role is to play music that girds the hunters for the act of chasing, tracking, and killing game. A few of his cassettes purchased in the local market feature, on their covers, Sidibe posing draped in the donsos' mudcloth uniform, festooned with gris-gris, standing over animals he'd shot. I'm here to talk to him about releasing his music in the U.S. on my non-profit Malian folk-music label, Yaala Yaala.

"Yaala Yaala" was a saying I heard daily in Bougouni, a response to the oft-asked question *Ça va*?, or *How's it going?*

Just wandering, it means.

The taxi route to my hotel takes me on roads I've traveled a hundred times, but suddenly we're in a quartier that is entirely unfamiliar, and a weird panic sets in. My taxi driver has not uttered a single word to me since I told him the name of my small hotel. I entertain the idle worry that he might drive me into some dark backstreet and shake me down. But then the taxi driver sighs, waves at a friend along the roadside, and mutters under his breath as a young man on a moto cuts in front of us with inches to spare. I see a familiar bodega and relax.

There wasn't a day during my year living in Mali that I did not feel lost in some way. Where I lived, in Bamako and Bougouni, streets aren't laid out in a neat grid. That year, I grew used to pushing my son in his stroller on absurd unmarked paths and red-dirt roads. Once, we came across a small clearing where the ground was black and the air filled with an inhuman stench: we'd found Bougouni's abattoir. Then there was the general discomfort of living in a cinder-block shed in the naturally inhospitable Sahel during the dry season. And the language barrier. At first, I spoke neither French nor Bamana; eventually I learned a little of both. I spent most days in a glazed state.

A dozen years later, at my modest hotel, I order a sandwich of beef *brochettes* with *jus* fortified by Maggi cube, fries, and a *castel bilibiliba*—familiar food and drink. The gamey beef has been cooked over a wood fire; the bilibiliba is a bumper of lukewarm beer, and the fries are cooked in palm oil, rich and salty. They're flavors I recognize; the food is orienting.

Traveling alone in a foreign place reawakens childhood senses of excitement, but also isolation, abandonment, your own freakishness, insecurity, and impending doom. Food, however, can quickly make us un-lost. It's a lesson we learn young: what we like, what makes us feel comfortable. Taste something familiar, and we're home. What we think we won't like—what might force us away from comfort into some new realm—creates the same insecurities that being lost engenders. Food is such a strong symbol of safety, of home, that spying a McDonald's in a foreign place can elicit sentimental feelings even if the food tastes like salty plastic.

Such anchors do not occur in Mali, where there is no McDonald's, no KFC, no Pizza Hut. Instead you are surrounded by women fanning fires, girls with trays of bagged peanuts, boys with trays of cassettes, and food vendors selling their wares to men slouched streetside, watching soccer on black-and-white TVs plugged in to car batteries.

Finding I can't sleep, I take a walk. The prospect of night descending in any foreign place, especially Bamako, can be daunting to any traveler, but I know enough about Malians to know that I will either be greeted politely or left entirely alone. The Malian night has a blurred, soft quality. There's the smell of burning things in the air, the horizon lit not by gazillions of watts of sodium lights but instead by thousands of cooking fires. Music blares, and the street is filled with the scent of cooking oil, of exhaust, the sounds of sheep bleating as they're led along the roadside.

Night finds the sound of *djembe* drums and *griot* singing wafting through the thick air. I pass fetish and apothecary stands displaying an array of skins and teeth and blood-mottled skulls.

Several hours later I find myself on a dirt street completely without lights. I've walked north on Route de Koulikoro and taken a left into a neighborhood I thought I recalled, but now I'm in an alien place. The men have turned off their TVs and I'm surrounded by the chitter of Bamako's nighttime insects, birds, and bats. In the distance I hear the whining moan of a call to prayer, then another—a roundelay across neighborhoods, a descending orientalist melody from the numerous mosques scattered around the city.

I look around and sense that familiar panic: I am lost. The hills flanking Bamako, my lodestar, aren't visible in the dark night. I remember the lesson I learned years ago in Bougouni, where I'd gotten lost uncountable times: when lost, keep wandering. Don't panic. Small roads lead to big roads.

You'll find your way back.

And so I keep wandering until I find a small, wooded clearing; I know the road passing it will lead me back through the neighborhood I've been wandering through and out to Koulikoro, the main road into town. Within an hour I'm beneath the mosquito net at my hotel reading Patrick O'Brian.

I don't think most Malians would have much sense of what being lost is, or that any of my fellow Bougounians have shared in this existential dilemma, which seems stereotypically Western. Being lost demands that the victim, the lost person, be interested in what will happen to them in the future, even fifteen minutes from now; it's a desire for normalcy, for a return to the comfort of home. Muslims—at least in Mali—view looking into the future as a sin. Any kind of handwringing about the self or self-improvement is sinful. It's presumptuous to think too much about yourself and your future. You are doing the job of Allah when you do this, and most people in Bougouni have a very in-the-moment attitude about just about everything. The future, in effect, does not exist the way it does for most Westerners. A Malian once told me: "In the U.S. you say *time flies*. It goes away from you and you spend energy trying to catch it. In Mali we say *time comes*. It always did. It always will. Nothing to do but wait and watch."

This Malian mindset might be akin to the kind of lostness that travelers become addicted to: the liberation of letting go, of banishing any anxiety about expectations, of recognizing that it's fine not to know the language, fine not to know what I'm putting in my mouth, fine, even pleasant, if not outright desirable, to not really know where I am or where I am going.

During my year in Mali, eating rich, salty local dishes that reminded me of Southern comfort foods was often a way to feel less lost. And when I became exhausted by the constant need to have things—food, places, sights, and sounds—make sense, trying new foods became a symbol of my willingness to surrender to the state of being lost. Accepting unfamiliar foods became a way of forfeiting

conventions and responsibilities—to order, to expectations, to my *own wants*.

Once, I was handed a plastic baggie filled with a semi-frozen red lump the size of a tennis ball in appreciation for taking some photographs of a family. They'd dressed up for my arrival: the woman resplendent in her *bubu*, same as the man; the two children in their finest. I accepted the frozen thing knowing that Westerners called these treats "sewer pops" because of the poor quality of the water used to make them. I'd been told to avoid them at all costs.

But it's a popsicle, I thought. It's 112 degrees outside. I'd eaten tons of stuff more jarring than this.

I ate the entire thing, noting its barnyardy taste, a kind of bile-y funk underlying the sweet. Within minutes, my mouth tasted of pennies, and by nightfall I was feverish and emptied and limp as a sock. I've never felt worse.

Another day during that year, I awoke early to meet a truck to go deep into the brousse. I was a photographer for an organization sent to document rural life. The trek took hours, corkscrewing through increasingly tiny and ill-marked paths until we made it to a village that had not changed demonstrably in hundreds of years. Upon my arrival I was led into a hut and introduced to the chief, whose hands had been gnawed digitless by leprosy. He gestured with his pinkish stumps toward an enamel bowl. In the bowl was what looked like a brown leather basketball cut in half. Upon closer look, I saw the liver, intestines, and pillowy piles of fat of a sheep. The man tapped his chest. "Out here the *foie* is the most important for these people, the most nutritious." I was feeling sick, but accepted a small knob.

Outside, a young girl went into convulsions. Epilepsy, the people muttered as she was led away. A young boy arrived excitedly with a half-rotted cucumber. He expertly peeled away the rotten parts with his prominent front teeth and ate the good parts, handing the gnawed cucumber over to a friend, who, after his few bites, gave the tattered nub to another child. Soon someone else showed up with another cucumber, this one also rotted. Boys clamored for a bite of the sodden cucumber and each passed it politely from one to the next, tallest to smallest, until it was gone.

A bottle of cold water was placed in my hand, and soon I was hearing drums in the distance. I was seated in the shade of an open straw hut as three drummers and a group of young dancers entered the courtyard. They were accompanied by a masked man, a dancer who was channeling the *chi wara*, the Malian spirit beast sent to earth to teach farming.

The dancer screamed and leapt and, following this sudden signal, the djembes began a furious salvo. Around the dancer's ankles were braces of hundreds of bottlecaps, which hissed and shook. The dancer's head remained completely still; his feet thrummed the ground below. The drums echoed loudly across the barren space; a band of sun crossed into our previously shaded spot; hot wind pushed the sweat on my temples in rivulets into my eyes. I had to grip my chair more tightly, to keep myself from jumping up and dancing with the animal-man.

Time did pass in Mali, no matter how arrested life felt. We'd been childishly excited about returning to our friends and families, but at home, our parents looked older. Our friends had changed too. Coming home reminded me of the dizzying passage of time.

We moved to Baltimore and got jobs, bought a house in Hampden, had another kid, started looking for schools. We woke up at the same time every day and headed to our jobs at the same time every day and ate the foods we'd missed while in Mali: pizza, burgers, pork roasts, the normal stuff. We'd never had a credit card in our lives, but suddenly we did, and were using it; we'd never had a mortgage either, and daily I watched as so much paper—more paper than we'd used in a year in Mali—came tumbling through our mail slot: heating bills, electricity and water bills, bills for taxes for our car. One night it snowed twenty-plus inches and when the snow melted, a waterfall poured down the inside of our house. We loved Baltimore, loved being home, but there were cold days when I would sit in our cold kitchen drinking coffee and missing being lost in Bougouni.

In the morning I'm driven across town to meet Sidibe. We wander along more endlessly bumpy dirt roads, past men leading flocks of sheep to slaughter and women in their brightly colored wraps.

After a half hour or so we pull up to a typical Bamakan compound where a man about my height

stands. I recognize the face as the same one that's glowered back at me from the covers of so many cassettes: Yoro Sidibe, the king of the *donsos* himself.

For centuries donsos were the lifeblood of farflung villages. They were the providers of meat, of protein that villagers might find nowhere else. Sidibe remains the lone provider for an extended clan, many of whom gather around us as Sidibe and I sit in the shade together. Still, my image of the donsos as intimidating alpha-males is not far from some version of the truth: as wild game became scarcer throughout Mali—because of droughts, continued deforestation, the slow southerly creep of the Sahara Desert—donsos have had to go farther into the brousse to find it. The bravest, most intrepid donsos are the ones who can travel the farthest without fear of thirst, of hunger, or of running up against the wild. It's these donsos whom singers like Sidibe praise.

Legend has it that Mali was founded by two wandering hunters, the Traore brothers, in the eleventh or twelfth century. From Mali's earliest days, these hunters were honored by *djelis*, or praise singers, who were often hunters themselves.

In *donso ngoni* music the riffs plucked on the six-stringed ngoni are bunched tightly together without a rest, giving the songs a headlong, tumbling gait. Like much of Malian, North African, or Arabic music, donso is circular, breathless, endless; there is no bridge or chorus. The melody and rhythm are established in the beginning and the same melody and rhythm will gallop, lope, or trot in the same way as long as the song lasts; maybe ten, twenty, or forty minutes, or maybe a hypnotic two hours.

The hunters and their accompanying donso ngoni singers are pure badass. Their recordings are frequently punctuated by the blasts of shotguns, and the covers of the cassettes often feature stony-faced men in fantastic cotton uniforms, scowling into the camera's eye, sometimes holding ngonis but just as often displaying huge flintlock muskets. Some pose with lions or dead pigs. Some proffer the empty, off-camera stare of someone who might not really want his picture taken in the first place. I remember my friend Moussa saying that among these musician-hunters of Southern Mali there remain members of this unique guildlike clan who, by village decree, retain the right to kill anyone who displeases them.

So I'd imagined Sidibe as a towering linebacker type: broad shouldered, gruff, uncommunicative. Here the man in front of me—the greatest living donso ngonifola, one of Mali's most important cultural figures—is an avuncular fellow in glasses, apparently about my father's age, seventy or so, a gentleman of the old world. I give him the camouflage jacket I've brought from Baltimore, a few boxes of shotgun shells, and a headlamp. As small children run circles around us, screeching and pointing at me while Sidibe chides them gently. We communicate in that pantomime familiar to anyone traveling through a country in which he or she doesn't don't know the language: grunts, laughter, handshakes, simple nouns.

As travelers, we worry about being lost: about not having the stomach or heart or strength or skills to deal with what we don't know much about, or what we don't understand. But in Mali, especially among the donsos, the unknown, the confusing, the uncanny, is allowed to remain present without the childish urge to poke at it, to needle it, to *figure it out*. In Mali, being lost is a given—especially if you're a hunter tracking a wild bush pig deep in the brousse.

There is no reason to think beyond now. Yesterday is gone, and why should you think about tomorrow? Do you know, are you sure, that Allah plans for you to be alive past sunset? Of course not.

Wait and watch. Time comes.