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# Under the Baobab Tree

*The Gambia, Africa 1761*

She heard it again—that unmistakable *bwaamb, bwaamb* sound. It came from far away, but she was sure it was the *tama*, the talking drum.

Janxa stood still, straining to hear. She waited. Though she could do nothing about the buzz of insects and chattering of monkeys over the wet rice field, she barely breathed. Yes, it was the rhythmic *tama* voice carrying through the forest. The tonal variations sounded like a man talking.

“What do the drums say, *Maamanding?*” Janxa could pick out a few words, but her mother understood the language of the drums. “What are they saying?”

“Hush.” Her mother had been bending over the young rice plants all morning, weeding and thinning. She planted her hands on either side of her back and straightened her body up, rubbing circles on her back. Her dress—her

*mbubba*—had been tied up between her legs to keep it out of the water as she worked. She reached down to untie it as she continued to listen to the talking drum.

Other women who'd been working the rice fields stopped to listen as well. Janxa could see excitement light their eyes.

"What?" she asked her mother.

"The *tama* is from the village downriver. The *griot* is leaving their village. He will be here before the sun goes to sleep."

The *griot*!

Janxa wrapped her thin arms around herself as if she needed to squeeze in her excitement to keep it from exploding. Janxa had been birthed just before the start of the rains. But now, she had already passed her seventh rainy season. At seven, she was big enough to help her mother in the rice field and to keep her little brothers entertained back in the village. And, at seven, she had seen the *griot* at least that many times. Maybe more. She knew the fathers had been expecting him, but they never knew for sure when he'd arrive. Sometimes he had to stop in a village for a naming ceremony or to sing praises for the visit of an important person.

She had heard that some villages, very big villages, had their own *griots*. What would it be like to have the storyteller in your village every single day? How would you get any work done?

Her mother reached down to pick up her basket. "Come, child, we must go back and prepare food." She called out to the other women as they gathered children and tools. "What will you cook?"

"I have groundnuts to prepare," said one of the young

mothers as she took a length of bright cloth and tied her baby around her chest for the walk back to the village.

The thought of groundnuts made Janxa's stomach rumble. She loved them no matter how they were cooked. She especially liked to eat them fresh.

"I will prepare *couscous*," said Dunxa. "My son supplies me with more millet from his last harvest than I can possibly use."

Janxa smiled. She knew the other women had grown tired of hearing Dunxa brag about her son. Today it wouldn't matter though. The *griot* was coming. Tonight would be a celebration.

As she balanced her mother's tools and hurried to keep up, she couldn't help thinking about the *griot*. She wondered if he'd bring his son.

"Why must the *griot* pass down his calling to his son?" she asked her mother. "What if a new storyteller were to come from another family?"

"It goes from father to son because it is Allah's will," her mother answered.

She should have known. That was the answer to everything. "But what if Allah chose someone else to become a *griot*?"

Her mother didn't answer. She just picked up her pace.

Janxa had to run and hop through the thick elephant grass to keep up. "What if a girl wanted to become a *griot*?"

Her mother stopped walking and turned to look at Janxa, who stopped as well. *Maamanding* spoke no words, but her look told her daughter she had asked one too many questions. "Come, daughter. We have work to do." Her mother turned

again toward the village. "Women's work."

When they got to the village her mother went straight to their hut to begin making maize porridge. "Go fetch your brothers home," she said.

As Janxa drew close to the grandmother's hut she saw her little brother, Baaku, playing with sticks on the packed dirt outside the door. The grandmother sat on a bench holding the baby. Baaku ran to Janxa. "Did you hear the *tama*? Did you hear about the *griot*? He's coming."

"I did," she said, laughing at the excitement in her brother's voice. She turned toward the grandmother. "How do you fare today, Grandmother?" The grandmother was not her own grandmother, but everyone called her that out of respect.

"I fare well, Janxa." She jostled the baby to wake him. "I hope this one's not too sleepy to walk."

"I can carry him."

The grandmother made a hooting sound. "You are too thin to carry this one." She squeezed the baby's thigh. "Little Caaman is nearly your size already."

Nothing irritated Janxa more, though she would never let on so as to dishonor the grandmother. She knew she was small, but it didn't mean she couldn't do things. It was true, her brothers were both born plump and sturdy. They had broad features and a rich dark skin. When her mother rubbed palm oil on them they were beautiful. Why did her own build have to be thin and delicate?

"He will walk," she said to the grandmother as she helped Caaman wake. "If they are good, I'll tell them a story while *Maamanding* prepares food."

Both boys clapped their hands. "We love Janxa's stories,"

Baaku said. He began to run ahead but stopped and came back to the grandmother. "Thank you for taking care of us today."

She patted his head before he took off. Janxa and Caaman followed.

"Slow down, Baaku. Caaman cannot keep up with you."

"Can you start the story?" he asked as he slowed his pace.

Janxa took a breath and began to wind out a tale in the soft tones of their Wolof language. Anyone listening closely could catch the rhythm of the talking drum in her telling. The rise and fall of her words conjured up crafty baboons, wise elephants, and no-good hyenas. Her brothers slowed their pace so as not to miss a single word.



The *griot* had been as good as his word. He arrived in the village just as the sun slipped behind the trees. He was welcomed by all the fathers and given the place of honor under the giant baobab tree. The oldest and most honored men sat nearest him, followed by the younger men and then the boys. The women and girls served food, carrying large decorated bowls made from calabash gourds. Even Janxa carried food.

The *griot's* son sat on the ground near his father's feet. He must have seen about ten or twelve rains. Janxa offered him a maize cake. How fortunate he was to be the son of a great *griot*.

Following the meal everyone stood to stretch. The women cleared the baskets and gourds and carried them to the huts. As soon as they returned, the drummer began to beat out a rhythm on the *tama*. It started slow but rose to a fevered pitch as dancers jumped into a clearing in the center of the

swaying people. The *griot* joined the beat of the *tama* with music from his *kora*. Janxa loved watching the explosive movements of the dancers. They'd jump and lift their knees high into the air, colorful *mbubbas* flapping, all while keeping perfect rhythm.

After the dances and the food, everyone settled back to listen to the *griot*. The women sat apart from the men and boys but close enough that they didn't miss a word. Janxa settled herself against a nearby tree to listen.

The village elder began by asking questions about the other places the *griot* and his entourage had visited.

"I will tell you in due time," the *griot* answered, "but first let me sing of your village." He placed his *kora* in front of him and began to pluck the strings and sing.

You offer shelter to the wandering.  
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.  
You feed the children and the ancient ones.  
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.  
Your fields yield rice, juju beans, and millet.  
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.  
You tend to the goats and chase the baboons.  
Under your tree the wise ones sit and talk.

He continued to sing praises of their village. Janxa watched his son mouthing the words after his father. Before he could become a *griot* he'd have to learn how to measure a village at a glance and create a song for them without any practice. He'd also have to be able to recite all the history of their people from as far back as anyone could remember.

U n d e r t h e B a o b a b T r e e

Once the *griot* finished the praise song, he began to sing songs and tell stories of the great deeds of their people. How did he remember all the names, generation after generation? As her mother stood up to leave, carrying a sleepy Caaman and trailing a reluctant Baaku, Janxa begged to stay. She looked over at her father and he nodded, so her mother let her stay.

She could have listened all night. The *griot*'s stories would stay forever in her memory, mingled with African night sounds—birds fussing as they settled in to roost, the roar of a faraway lion, the eerie laugh of a hyena scavenging for food, and the soft wind rustling the leaves of the baobab.

“After morning prayers,” the *griot* said finally as the fire began to die, “I’ll tell news of other people and about the great trouble.”

No one dishonored him by asking further questions, but Janxa could see that many wanted to hear the news tonight.

She hadn’t realized how tired she was, but when her father came over and picked her up to carry her back to her mother’s hut she didn’t protest. As she snuggled into his arms, she thought, *This is my happy seat—right in the middle of my family.*



Janxa watched her brothers sleep while her mother went out before dawn to draw water. Caaman made little sucking sounds with his lips as he slept. What kind of men would her brothers become? Would they be great hunters like their father?

She sat in the doorway of the hut so she could witness the



beginning of the day and smell the richness of the damp earth before the hot sun began baking it.

Janxa watched her mother coming back with the gourd filled with water. For as long as she could remember, her mother had greeted the sun by raising her gourd high above her head and pouring a drizzle of water out as an offering. She'd then fall to her knees in prayer. Janxa loved watching her mother, straight and tall, lifting water to the sky.

"Come," her mother said as she brought the remaining water to the hut, "let's feed the family and go to the baobab to hear what the *griot* will tell us. Take this bowl to your father. When he has eaten you may go with him, and I'll meet you there."

Janxa took the bowl of porridge to her father's hut and waited quietly while he finished it. She washed the gourd with sand until it was clean.

"Will you go to your mother or come with me?" her father asked.

"May I come with you?"

He smiled at her. "Yes, little one, but you know you cannot sit with me."

She knew that. The fathers were honored and always sat apart. The boys as well. Her father even lived in a hut set apart from theirs—that was the way of her people.

As they drew closer, they could see that the *griot* had already started to sing a song of the morning.

When he finished, they all sat silently, waiting for him to begin.

"The treachery of the *tubaab* grows."

Janxa knew the word *tubaab*. It meant people with no color

—white people. She heard the stories whispered often, but she'd never seen a *tubaab*. She had seen a white baboon once, but never a white man.

“The *tubaab* continues to steal our people. He's now taking more than just the slaves captured in battle.”

Janxa knew that when one tribe fought another tribe, they took captives. Her village had not fought in her lifetime, so she didn't know anyone who'd been taken, but the mothers talked about people they once knew who never came back. They believed those captives had been sold to the *tubaab*.

“More often now, *tubaab* has African helpers who ambush warriors caught alone in the bush or young men guarding goats or crops.” He stopped and pulled a piece of elephant grass from the ground. “They disappear never to be heard from again.”

“What happens to these captives?” the elder asked.

“None have returned to tell. There are some who believe the *tubaab* take our people to eat them.”

Janxa's heart beat hard against her chest. *Eat them?* She looked at her father. What would she do if someone took her father? She jumped when she heard the sudden chattering commotion of a group of monkeys far up in the branches of the baobab. Had they seen something? She looked at the faces of the fathers, but no one seemed concerned.

“They've begun taking many more of our people than ever before. We need to be on the lookout for these evil ones.” He stopped and put a hand on his son's shoulder. “Even more troubling is that they've been taking children when they can't find men or women.”



Children! Janxa looked around for her mother and scooted closer to where she sat with Baaku and Caaman. Who would ever take a child away from family? What kind of people were these *tubaab*?



## Song for a Gazelle

The *griot* and his travelers had been in the village for nearly a moon when Lamin died. He'd been older than Janxa—old enough to go out and tend goats. It had been goats that had caused the trouble. Janxa heard her father telling her mother that one of the baby goats had gotten tangled in underbrush and Lamin, without poking the bush with a stick first, reached in to free the kid's leg. A snake bit him.

After one of the boys came to get help, she watched the fathers run to the field where the boys had been grazing the goats. As Lamin's father carried him back, Janxa could see that his arm had already started to swell.

For three days everyone hushed when they neared his mother's hut. Sometimes Janxa could hear his mother crying out. She wondered how long it would take for Lamin to get well.

"Lamin died," her mother told her in a whispery voice that morning. "It is a good thing since the *griot* is still here."

How could it be a good thing that he died? Janxa had seen enough death in her life to know it was *not* a good thing. She remembered the time she'd walked to the rice field with her mother just in time to see a leopard leap from a tree on top of a gazelle calf. Janxa could not look as the cat killed the helpless baby while the gazelle mother watched, frozen in place.

Janxa's mother had hurried her on to the rice field, telling her it was the way of nature, but as Janxa looked back she could see the leopard dragging the lifeless body up into a tree to feed on later.

As she worked beside her mother that day, she composed a praise song for the tiny gazelle.

From your mother's side you walked.  
You feared not the predator.  
You walked in trust.  
You never knew, you never saw, you never felt.  
I hold the memory of you forever.

She repeated it to herself, but she didn't dare tell her mother. No one but the *griot* made praise songs. She didn't have a *tama* or a *kora*, but when she was alone, while her mother cooked the meal that night, she upended her calabash bowl and, with a stick, beat out the rhythm of her song.

How she wished she could sing the song for her village. She wondered what it would be like if her song were to be remembered forever, just as she promised to remember the gazelle.

"How is it a good thing that Lamin died?" she asked her mother.

## Song for a Gazelle

Her mother looked up from grinding the couscous. “What do you mean, a good thing?”

“You said it was a good thing Lamin died because the *griot* is still here.”

Her mother made a high-pitched keening sound—almost a wail. “No, no. I only meant that his memory would last from generation to generation because the *griot* will make a song for him. It is not good that he died.” Her mother ground the millet harder with her pestle. “But it is the will of Allah,” she said, as if only remembering belatedly, “so maybe it is a good thing.”

The will of Allah. Janxa had heard those words for as long as she could remember. What did they mean? Most times the words were followed by a shrug of the shoulders. It was almost like when the Harmattan raged—that great wind that blows off the Sahara. When Janxa had only seen two or three rains, she once told her mother, “Make it stop, *Maamanding*.” She hated the way the sand got in her eyes and nose. She felt like she was eating dirt the whole time the Harmattan blew.

“It blows, little one,” her mother said. “It blows where it pleases and stops when it pleases.”



Soon after the burial of Lamin, the *griot* took his leave and things settled back to normal in the village. The grandmother cared for the little ones. The mothers tended the rice fields. Dunxa still bragged about her son. The goats were herded to fresh grazing and the fathers hunted. They were moving toward harvest time and much work had to be done.

Janxa spent her days helping her mother or minding her little brothers.

The only darkness that intruded was the increasing talk of *tubaab*. Janxa had learned to recognize the word, so when she heard the drums telling another story of *tubaab* evil, her heart thudded along with the drums. The *griot* had said they even took children.

One day, toward the end of harvest, Janxa followed her mother to her father's hut to help carry food. When they got there, she noticed that her father had his robe tied across his shoulder, ready for travel. He reached out a hand to touch *Maamanding*. Janxa didn't often witness their tenderness, so she turned her head.

"I will go to the Fula," her father said. "I will buy a calf for us."

Her mother smiled. Nearly everyone had goats, but cattle were rare. "The harvest was good?"

"Yes, very good. Allah be praised." He turned toward Janxa. "If I allow you to accompany me, can you walk a long distance?"

"I can. I can." Janxa could hardly believe what her father was suggesting. She looked at her mother. Would her mother let her go?

"Can you carry her if she tires?"

Her father laughed. "She's just a wisp of chaff. Do you think she's too heavy for me?"

Janxa was so excited she could not even take offense. She could see her mother relenting.

"Let me go and pack food for the journey."



## Song for a Gazelle

They had been walking for much of the day when her father stopped by a stream to rest. He took maize cakes out of his pack and filled their gourds with water from the stream.

Janxa felt too tired to talk.

They had only rested for a short time when her father stood up and walked around their resting place, his eyes on the ground and a worried look on his face. “Come, daughter, be silent,” he whispered. “We must leave.” He had barely hoisted her onto his hip and slung his bundle across his head when he silently took off, skirting toward the brush.

He continued to move, watching from side to side. Janxa wondered if he’d seen lion tracks or the spoor of some other predator. She knew not to ask. Her father hardly made a breathing sound. As night fell, she listened to the sounds of the nighttime jungle—a faraway roar of a lion, the crashing underbrush caused by some nocturnal hunter. Each noise seemed familiar. Her father’s wariness eased.

“Climb down, little daughter. We can rest.”

“What did you fear, Father?” Janxa asked.

“I can’t be sure. I saw footprints that had no toes. They were made by no animal I recognize. Perhaps they were made by a tool of some kind.” His forehead creased. “But they were shaped like a foot.”

He gathered her into his lap and wrapped his cloak around both of them. “Sleep, Janxa. I will keep watch.”

She didn’t know how long she’d slept, but she woke to her father gently shaking her, with a finger placed over her lips. As she shook off the mist of sleep, she heard clumsy movements nearby. Dawn had only begun to streak the sky, so all she could see were dark silhouettes against the lightening sky.





A flock of birds startled and flew up into the trees right beside Janxa, but she managed to stay still and silent. What had startled them?

She soon caught an unfamiliar scent—something cooking? Something burning?

She heard a string of sounds. It was a human voice—she knew that. The words didn't sound like any words she'd ever heard. It wasn't Fula or Mandinka. She felt her father stiffen. She understood what his body told her. Don't move. Don't swallow. Don't breathe.

A deeper voice spoke. It sounded slow and clipped. At the end of one group of sounds, the voice went up, as if the man asked a question. What kind of tribe spoke like that?

Back and forth. There were two men, she could tell by the tone of their voices, but they spoke gibberish. It sounded like a bitten-off tooth language instead of a rich, round language using the throat, the tongue against the roof of the mouth, and lip sounds.

As they moved off, she caught sight of them. They wore strange clothing and their feet looked like hooves of some kind. She caught her breath. *Tubaab!* Their skin . . . they had hair coming out of white faces.

They continued to move off. They hadn't heard the thumping of her heart against her chest. She knew her father had felt it though. His arm had tightened around her.

"We must go back to our village and warn our people," her father said when they were sure the *tubaab* had gone.

Janxa didn't even ask about the calf they planned to buy. It didn't matter anymore. She looked down and saw footprints like the ones her father had seen last night. Now she un-

## Song for a Gazelle

derstood what her father described. The strange hooves of these *tubaab* made the prints.

As they retraced their steps, her father kept them close to the brush. Janxa kept looking up at the trees. The skin on the back of her neck prickled, and she flinched as if a leopard stalked them. Would they reach their village by nightfall? How she longed to snuggle next to *Maamanding* on the sleeping mat and listen to Caaman making suckling sounds and Baaku snoring. She hurried her steps.

High up in the trees a group of quarrelsome monkeys made a ruckus. If the monkeys felt safe playing in the trees, she knew there could be no leopards sleeping there. As long as the monkeys chattered, they were safe. Besides, the sun was high enough that the cats would no longer be hunting.

Father stopped and listened hard. He put his fingers over his mouth to warn her to be quiet. The monkeys fell silent as well.

*Snap!* She heard the sound of a stick breaking as someone moved through the brush. Her father scooped her up in his arms just as two men stepped out from behind a tree. She couldn't tell the thumping of her heart from the wild beating of her father's, but as the men stepped forward, she could see that they were not *tubaab*. Both of them had color—rich deep color. Relief washed over her. These were her people.

“Brother,” the tall man said, “where is your family?” His words sounded strange, as if he came from a different tribe.

“Here and there.” Her father tried to shrug his shoulders, but Janxa's arms were wrapped around him and she could feel the tenseness of his back. Something was wrong. Why did Father not tell them everyone was back at the village?

“Call to the other hunters so we can meet them,” the other one said, smiling.

“He does not hunt,” said the tall one, nodding and squinting his eyes against the sun. “He has no weapons, and he’s traveling with a child.”

Father tightened his grip on her and shifted the bundle tied across his forehead. “Do you have need of something?”

The men moved closer. As Father stepped back they moved to either side of him. Father gracefully let his bundle slide down his back. He set Janxa down and moved away from her. “Stay back,” he whispered.

Janxa nodded. She didn’t know what was happening, but she knew her father was wise and strong. She would stay out of the way. Pushing the bundle toward the brush under a tree, she stood next to it.

As the tall man kept talking, the other one rushed her father from the side, swinging a thick stick. Janxa flinched as she heard it hit her father with a thud, but before she could even cry out, her father grabbed the stick, twisting it out of the man’s hands, and landed a ferocious blow against the man’s head that sent him reeling. The other man dived at Father’s knees, throwing him off balance. The man and her father both landed with a thud.

Janxa squeezed her eyes shut. She wanted to cry out to Allah for help, but it seemed so useless. This was probably Allah’s will just like everything else she ever asked about. She still found herself crying silently for help.

When she opened her eyes, both men were on top of Father. The tall one was fastening metal bracelets of some kind on his hands.

Song for a Gazelle

“No!” she cried out. “What are you doing?” She ran toward her father, but the shorter one kicked her away.

“Do not touch her!” Father screamed, thrashing even more violently. He swung his manacled hands and struck one of the attackers.

“What do we do with the girl?” the shorter man asked as he shifted out of reach of her father. “She’s hardly worth the trouble. Look at her—skinny and sickly looking. She won’t last a week.”

“Just leave her for the hyenas.”

Her father pushed the remaining man off and rolled to a kneeling position even though metal bands and chains tied his hands together.

“Watch out. He’s a wild man.” The taller man rubbed his face where he had been struck by the metal. “This one’s dangerous even with shackles. He’ll fetch a fine price, but how will we ever get him to the island?”

*The island? What do they mean?*

Her father kicked out with one leg toward the tall man again. The shorter man reached over and grabbed Janxa, squeezing her. He put his hand across her face. His hand was gritty and smelled like dirt and blood and sweat. Her stomach lurched and she started to gag.

“Do not harm her.” Father stood up, hands shackled in front of him. “Let her go back to the village, and I will go with you.” His voice took on a pleading tone she’d never heard.

She gagged again.

“Take your hand off her mouth unless you want the contents of her stomach all over you,” said the taller man.

