fugue
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THE BAKA

Huts bordered a red clay road that not long ago was a footpath crossing the eastern Cameroon rainforest, sanctuary of hunter-gatherers and trees so massive as to test the mind. Logging trucks rumbled through the village of Ngola, hour after hour on their long journey to the port. One thatched hut had a door blocked by a stone the size of a head. Within the hut, lying on a mildewed foam mattress and unable to walk, was a fourteen-year-old girl named Clarisse, a girl of the Baka tribe, *Pygmies* in the pejorative, those who for millennia have made the forest their home. Clarisse was walking the clay road a day prior when a Bantu, using his motorcycle as a taxi and carrying *four* passengers, with children riding on the gas tank between his legs, lost control of the bike and slid into her, mangling her foot in the spokes of his rear wheel and cutting her Achilles tendon. The local custom of the Bantu, the dominant tribe, was for a family to take possession of its problems, and the driver's father had locked Clarisse in his house, her plight standing for the history of subjugation suffered by the Baka, in whom the government had tried to *create new needs* to lure them out of the rainforest into permanent roadside settlements so the trees could be logged. Violence befell the holdouts until all were displaced, the Baka enduring Bantu abuse, in decades of forced labor for wine, women seized, dominance in the bloodline.

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Three days before seeing Clarisse, I puttered into Ngola on the back of a cheap Chinese motorcycle because I'd heard that off in the jungle were rare Baka living by the old culture away from roads. But

entering the forest without the blessing of the local Bantu big man had earned me threats of arrest and harm in the past. "It's not safe for you to stay here," said a Bantu woman in Gabon. "You have to leave. The men—they'll hurt you." My crime was having made friends with a sister tribe of the Baka without involving the Bantu, who tried to command everything that went on around them. So upon arrival in Ngola, I asked a crowd of surprised and smiling villagers to be taken to the headman. Richard was his name, father of twenty-five children, a Bantu as wealthy as the rest of the village combined, his French more assured, house trimmed out in tile and ornamental ceilings, inconceivable luxuries against the backdrop of thatched huts.

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On my second full day as a guest in Richard's house, three Baka stormed into the living room wearing clothes that had taken on the permanent brown of village life. One of them, Andres, the oldest of the local Baka, was barefoot. Andres pulled me by the arm away from Richard to the far end of the couch. He gripped my hands, spoke, and searched my face for a promise greater than the bond we'd formed chatting in the dark outside his hut. Born in the unbroken forest, Andres did not see a road in the first twenty-seven years of his life. That we sat together at all was a wonder, I born in Houston to a family of engineers and entrepreneurs. To be sought out and needed by such a man, to be touched by him, caused me to feel the thread running through all that was shared.

Andres had the wide Baka nose and smelled of alcohol and in labored French he told me what I'd heard in rumor that afternoon about the motorcycle crash. "You can help her," he said, certain that I, as an outsider, could rescue Clarisse over Bantu prohibitions. One of the younger Baka, Samuel, shouted at Richard, who as a Bantu didn't accept that they could address him as equals. "Lower your voices," Richard said in French, "and stand away from me."

A plastic hula girl danced on a table under power of Richard's generator. Andres begged for my help in the plight of his grandniece. Perhaps it was when he grasped the tenuousness of my position, where interference risked expulsion, that he released my hands. He stood, pointed, and shouted at Richard in *Langue* Baka, and somehow I understood: "We have no money, and you have a car. Why can't you get the girl from that hut and take her to the hospital in Yokadouma?"

Blaise, Richard's Bantu brother, strolled in chewing on a matchstick. He pulled out a chair and sat at the table with his back to the Baka and said, "David, let's eat," and nodded toward the chair he wanted me to take. Blaise, who had seventeen children but only three boys, claimed he would stop having kids when he had six sons; "It's a matter of honor when I go before the angel Gabriel." Blaise lifted the lid off a pot. "These are sweet plantains," he said, wholly unconcerned about the Baka pleading with his brother just feet behind him. "David, the plantains are delicious. Try them."

Racism that was the relegation of the Baka to non-beings.

Blaise did not so much as glance at them. He joked about the mundane, about village life.

Andres no longer paid me any attention.

I felt sick and struggled to chew.

Then Andres turned and led the Baka back out into the night.

Don Williams, an American country singer revered in Africa, sang from the stereo, though the speed of the tape player was off and pitched his voice too high. Richard ignored my questions after dinner about Clarisse and asked me instead what jobs in the U.S. pay the best. He looked at me, chin in hand, in an almost flirtatious manner through our discussion of wealth. Then I squared my shoulders to him and said, "I am a guest in your house and a guest in Ngola. But if I walk to Andres now and give him 5,000 francs ($10) for transport to get the girl to the hospital in Yokadouma, if I say half the money is from me and half from you, will you give me permission?" I figured it was best to honor his authority through inclusion.

Richard sat back without answering, so I repeated the question.

"If you give them money," he said, finally, "they'll just drink. They'll use it to buy beer and she won't get to the hospital. There's no point."

Here was the old justification for the mistreatment of indigenous people, for paying them with tattered clothes, for paying them with liquor. I lay that night in bed, within Richard's locked house, boots on as a promise against my cowardice.

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Logging trucks shot through the village the next morning loaded down with ancient African mahogany, the trees making their way abroad, the Bantu of Ngola as mistreated by the government as the Baka were by the Bantu, who as Francophones in the eastern forest occupied the bottom of a political hierarchy on which the Baka didn't even register. Petrol and container trucks rattled over the road like crashing loads of loose metal—in commerce benefitting people elsewhere. The village was serene, full of birdsong and children, and the aggression of the roaring trucks was incomprehensible. And incompatible with the slow pace of rural Africa; on a similar road a week before I'd seen a Bantu man sprawled out in his blood, killed by a logging truck whose driver hadn't stopped.

I was chatting with Richard near his porch when a Baka passed on the road.

"How's the girl?" I called out in French.

"She's still in the house," the man said and motioned in front of him.

I turned to Richard. "Let's go. You and I." And I stepped toward his old red hatchback. To my surprise, Richard shrugged and pulled the keys from his pocket. We drove south and picked up an older Bantu man walking the roadside. Richard, who didn't know the names of many of his neighbors, had run twice for village chief and failed. Ngola now had no chief, and though made mostly of thatch and mud it was less a village than a suburb.

We arrived at the house of the motorcyclist's father, Simon, who was off in his field. His wife led us to the next hut. She rolled aside the heavy stone and opened the door, allowing in the sunlight. Foodless and without water, Clarisse lay on a yellowed foam mattress, her face streaked with dirt, foot wrapped in gauze, a soft incarceration with a long precedent in the world.

"It's best to wait for Simon to return," said the older man we'd picked up. "He'll take care of things."

"Two days have passed," I said, "and she hasn't seen a doctor."

"It's best to wait for Simon," said the old man. "She saw a nurse, and the nurse put in sutures."

The nurse ran an infirmary without electricity in a village just to the south.

"People who saw the accident said her ankle was cut through," I said. "The nurse didn't fix this. The only important thing is whether the girl will walk. Everything else is secondary: who has responsibility, what the law says, whether Simon will be offended." I didn't like the sound of my sanctimony, but it was the best weapon I had.

The old man stepped away, to distance himself from me. Richard, maintaining eye contact, seemed to want to hear more, perhaps out of respect for the power in my strangeness. "Richard, she needs a real doctor," I said. "I'll pay for gas. I'll pay the hospital bill. The time for waiting for Simon to do the right thing is over. Let's go. You and I. Right now." Of course there was a limit to what I would do, but I figured I could at least get her out of that room.

Richard entered the hut without saying a word and reappeared cradling Clarisse. He walked to the car and laid her in the backseat.

She wouldn't look at my face.

The hospital was in Yokadouma, a frontier town that seemed to have been built all at once from the same three or four materials by men working with no coherent plan. The Bantu doctor inspected Clarisse's foot as he might have glanced at something dead on the ground. He said, "We wait two days. If the foot is better, she'll heal. If it's worse, she'll have to go to Bertoua. We can't do such a surgery here."

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I was alone in the hospital courtyard that evening when three men stormed up.

"What's your name?" one man said.

Another removed a small notebook and a pen from his shirt pocket.

The third was Simon. "You dishonored my family and myself!" he said. "You went into my house and yelled at my wife and took the girl without my permission. You made a serious mistake. *J'ai souffrais. J'ai porté la fille á la médicin. J'ai payé pour la fille. J'ai souffrais.*"

"You've suffered?" I said. "You suffered more than the girl who was actually cut?"

"You committed a crime," said the man with the pen. "We're going to the police."

My first thought, as fear struck, was of ways to leave Yokadouma. My second thought was of the absurdity that the Bantu had created a conflict about honor and responsibility more important to them than Clarisse's health. My third thought was that a little groveling would probably disarm them of their ferocity.

I apologized for being ignorant of their culture. I apologized to Simon for dishonoring him. I said I'd done only what I thought was right.

"Did you see all the Baka in the room with her now, her mother and sisters? They're all here because of you," he said. "Who's going to feed them? I can bring plantains from my farm tomorrow but I don't have money to feed them tonight."

"I'll get food," I said.

"If you see Richard," said Simon, "tell him he's in danger."

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The Bantu settled Ngola in the 1930's, their connection to the land as tenuous as that of most settlers, who were better at altering environments than preserving them. The Bantu were farmers, and farming meant clearing jungle. The Baka had no cropland or grove of fruit trees, few possessions and little to defend. With a vast forest around them in which to hunt, they fled from conflict and moved elsewhere. Until the forest filled up with farmers and loggers and there was nowhere left to flee.

With Clarisse in the hospital, Richard and I returned to Ngola the next morning. Then he led me into the forest. He wore rubber boots, a hardhat, and a knitted red hood with a hole for his face. "Let Simon do what he wants," Richard said, gripping a double-barreled shotgun that he'd brought to hunt animals. "I'm tight with the judge."

Several Baka, one carrying a chainsaw, were coming to work for the day on Richard's farm. In the entourage was the Baka Samuel who'd agreed to lead me to the remote encampment. That he'd brought a friend for our journey reminded me of something Andres had said: "When a Baka works alone, he becomes weak. If there are two Baka together they flee. They are strong enough to run away."

The sun raged where the canopy had been felled. Richard pointed to forest in the distance and said, "*Ca c'est la forêt vierge.*" The virgin forest. "And this is my plantation, where I grow cacao." His work that dry season was a clearing, five hectares of trees lying on the ground as though toppled by the gods. Just before the rainy season, Richard would set the felled trees aflame, the surrounding jungle wet enough not to burn. His mother, sister, and wives would plant seeds, plantain suckers, and cassava in the ash. They would also plant cacao, a permanent crop in a shallow soil. With twenty-five hectares under cultivation, Richard had earned a relative fortune on the rising international price of cacao.

He snapped the chain onto his meter-long saw, patted his hardhat, and yanked the cord. Silver smoke surged from the hissing saw as he held the throttle, walked to a thin tree, and made incisions in the trunk. A section of canopy fell away. He angled the saw into another tree, carving with the tip. The tree rattled to the forest floor in a crack of flying wood. Richard sliced his way through the shade, one chainsaw and a global marketplace allowing a single man to blur the line between an agrarian and an industrial society.

The Baka Samuel sat beside a fire in the distance roasting plantains.

Richard hauled the saw to a tree so large that three men could not have joined hands around the trunk, the tree covered in vines, lichens, flowers, the saw, propped on Richard's knee, slicing upwards into the wood. I thought of Wendell Berry, who wrote, "If you have no land you have nothing: no food, no shelter, no warmth, no freedom, no life...People who have been landless know that the land is invaluable; it is worth everything."

"Stay close," Richard said to me as water trapped within the trunk streamed forth from his incision over the sawdust. He set the whirring saw on his thigh and pressed into the wood. Out of the wounded bark water gushed, and he withdrew the blade.

"The water will keep the tree from falling."

"Where did you learn how to log?" I said.

"The Belgians. Tell your people you met a man who knows how to cut wood."

He set the chainsaw back into the groove and cut three-quarters of the way around the trunk, the saw whirring nearly beyond his control, the man standing at a point it was easier for me to deny I occupy; I own an old red car slightly nicer than Richard's hatchback but I didn't have to fell five-hundred-year-old trees to get it.

The mammoth was tipping.

Richard grabbed my arm and we dashed away as the tree sheared off the tops of two others and thundered down like a pedestal.

*

Richard had given me his blessing to visit the remote Baka. But when I told him Samuel and I were heading there, he seemed to change his mind, the man concerned, perhaps, that my true intentions were in line with those of most outsiders in the Congo Basin who came hunting mahogany, mercury, and gold. "I'll see you in a few days, Richard," I said and turned away, though not without worry.

The growl of Richard's chainsaw faded as I slipped through the trees behind Samuel, who wore foam sandals and shorts, who'd brought nothing but a chandelier of plantains for our journey, and who sliced a path through the vines as though the machete were an extension of his arm. The words came now from Samuel's lips, unsolicited: "*Forêt vierge*." Just beyond there. Beyond the farms. Toward the Bangui River. *There*, both the Bantu and the Baka said, full of elephants and gorillas, was the untamed world. We followed trails through the afternoon, passing trees Samuel said marked the start of the great forest. But just as quickly the trail led us back onto patchwork cassava farms hacked and burned from the jungle.

And we reached the encampment.

Perplexed Baka emerged from bamboo huts. Two fires wove threads of smoke. An old Baka, his vision failing, groped for my hands. A muscular teenager arrived with a clutch of fish and a spear. The teenager looked away when our hands met, avoiding my gaze as Clarisse had. Ten Baka sat around me in the unfinished room connected to the elder's house. They laid palm leaves over the roof beams to cast me into the shade.

I asked the elder how life had changed since he was a boy.

"Nothing has changed."

I mentioned Andres, who'd said it was impossible to return to deep forest. I pointed to the plantains growing in a plot beside the village. I mentioned logging. There was little I cherished more than talking with elders, though I'd learned over the years that living *out* of context or having traveled was often a prerequisite for perspective.

"Yes," the old man said, "if they cut the forest where are we supposed to live? Baka just want to be left alone." It was possible the thought extended to me.

The forest buzzed with insects and birds through the night and into the morning, when I mixed instant coffee in my canteen. In a village of some twenty people, there was but a single half-melted plastic cup. I gave the canteen to Benjamin, Samuel's friend from Ngola, who poured a taste into the one cup for each Baka to drink in turn, my act at least partly related to *creating new needs*. How difficult it was to imagine that continents full of people could afford to replace what broke. Save for a few sacks of cacao they harvested each year and sold to buy razors, machetes, and salt, the Baka here were independent in terms of survival.

We walked into the trees to explore. Women came along to dig for tubers. The teenager followed with his spear. Samuel made stilts and slashed into a tree for honey. His deftness with a machete—arcing blows high off the ground—was a skill rooted in childhood, like the perfect accent of one's native tongue. The noise I made cracking through the jungle and tripping on roots was as much proof of my foreignness as my ignorance of *Langue* Baka. I was shedding weight and shaky with malaria that I didn't know was about to emerge. But to walk with Baka was to answer questions from loved ones about why I didn't crave a more normal life, though a normal life, by older measures, was one more like the Baka's.

We reached a tree with thick vines dangling down from the canopy like braids of hair.

I said, "Can Baka climb something like this?"

"To hunt monkeys," Samuel said.

The muscular teenager set aside his spear, grabbed the vines, and swung himself off the ground. He climbed straight up, hand over hand, legs enwrapping the vines, climbed to a height perhaps twenty times his own, in one instant offering proof of what it meant to be born in that place, proof of the genes passed down by those who'd

thrived there. The boy climbed so high into the shadows that I lost sight of him.

"Samuel," I said, "ask him what he sees."

"I'm not to the top," the boy called down.

Claude Levi-Strauss wrote, "...there was a particular tribe which was able to see the planet Venus in full daylight, something which to me would be utterly impossible and incredible." The Baka were masters of their environment. The Western version of communing with nature, a voyeuristic one, made an incomplete argument for why the forest was good.

The boy led us onward. The plantations, Samuel said, were behind us, the great jungle ahead. We all seemed to share the urge to enter old growth forest, something beyond influence, a world not yet counted.

"Samuel," I said, "what's your Baka name?"

"Emola."

The shadows lightened. The canopy thinned. And we crossed out of the forest onto a dirt road.

"What is this?" I said.

"The road of the company cutting the wood."

The road curled through the forest east of Ngola, the work of a Lebanese logging company, the hierarchy of abuse reaching from the Baka to the Bantu to the government and across the planet. The reality of a shrinking forest had yet to break down the mythology of untouched land.

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It was dusk when we returned to camp. A man sharpened his machete with a file. A boy played with the tin of sardines, now empty, that I'd given his mother. One of my t-shirts had caused a fight. I sat on a cracked drum as we ate unsweet plantains and the shoulder of a monkey, good meat meant as a gift for me. Samuel pointed to the heavens and asked about the stars. I moved close to

the fire, grabbed a pair of papayas, and tried to explain the rotation of the earth, shooting stars, and why it was only sometimes light. Samuel nodded. Other Baka stood and walked away, unconvinced or rejecting the hierarchy of teaching in a culture that learned, not through instruction, but imitation. The words that left my mouth I had merely borrowed. "Thinking is a public activity," Clifford Geertz wrote. That I possessed some knowledge of the solar system I could credit only to my having been born in a place where we were exposed to a decent part of what man had figured out. But we'd lost nearly all knowledge at the individual level of how to survive in the natural world—the hundreds and hundreds of plants Samuel knew, the behavior of birds and mammals, technology for making tools and weapons from wood, and the reading of the forest for the presence of change. I was illiterate in ways I had failed to notice.

When I'd asked Andres whether it was still possible to live by hunting and fishing, he said, "If we go far into the forest, if we leave, the Bantu will find us and bring us back. No matter how far we go. They will make us work. Life in the village along the road is not good. No. Life is good in the forest, but the Bantu will find us."

There *were* two Bantu women staying in the camp.

Cold settled into the trees. Samuel moved burning logs inside the hut that the old blind Baka had vacated for us to sleep in. Benjamin put the stick door in place and lay in front of Samuel, two grown men turned the same direction on a bamboo bed in a pure statement of a lack of needs. The gift I would give Samuel for leading me through the forest he would use in part to buy batteries for a radio, which, of course, brought voices from elsewhere. I stretched out on a sleeping mat beside a leafy wall as brittle as dried tobacco. Other Baka, who I'd thought were asleep, began to drum and sing a song perhaps passed down in just that way through a number of generations no one had any need to count.

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Back in Yokadouma, Clarisse sat in the sun on a porch at the hospital, her disheveled hair curling out from her head, the anguish now absent from her face. The doctor had declared that her foot would heal without surgery. For the first time she turned and met my gaze. But slight mobility in the foot, I learned later, did not guarantee the Achilles tendon was intact. I wanted to sit and chat with Clarisse, but the gender divide, added to the cultural one, seemed like too much for us to overcome. So I left her in peace.

Richard's brother Blaise spotted me near the hospital. He ran into the road, took my hand, and led me to a bar where he introduced me to his friends as a professor of literature, philosophy, and economics, of which I am none. Beers began to arrive, from Blaise and Bantu I'd never met. "I'll prepay so you can drink on my tab as long as you're here," Blaise said, his friendliness toward me difficult to reconcile with his racism toward the Baka, until it occurred to me that selective warmth *was* racism.

Richard sat off to the side playing checkers, the board balanced between his knees and his opponent's, the game a barrage of quick moves and taunting. He said, "David, I forgot to tell you; there are so many Baka who are sick. While you were in the forest, I brought another woman from Ngola to the hospital."

The Baka needed the help of men like Richard, whose people had seen them as obstacles to possession of the forest. Settlers everywhere had done the same and then convinced themselves the land had been empty. With differences in ways of life ebbing, the Baka needed everyone to see them as equals, as masters of the oldest kind of learning. f