

# Being There

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*Learning to Live Cross-Culturally*

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### 3 Mad to Be Modern

*Alma Gottlieb and Philip Graham*

*Alma: Welcome to Our Village*

"Goal!" the boys next to us shouted.

"Which team scored?" I asked Philip, who answered, "No one's wearing uniforms, so who can tell the teams apart?"

"Then how do they know who's on their team?" our son Nathaniel asked.

"Hmmm," I started, having no idea how to answer our six-year-old child's perfectly reasonable question.

We'd brought Nathaniel along on our latest extended stay in the Beng villages of Côte d'Ivoire, and these first days he'd clung to us closely. But today, when some older boys had jostled into the compound of my old friend Amenan and passed back and forth a scratched and dirty soccer ball in need of air, collecting an audience for a game they were about to start, nine-year-old Bapu had grasped Nathaniel's hand, then his scrawny younger cousin Medá held the other hand, and they led our son away for the impending fun. As Nathaniel smiled tentatively at all the attention, Philip and I followed.

"Jouez, jouez!" a growing group of children called out as we all marched to a flat field facing some squat, concrete block buildings that

served as housing for the village's elementary schoolteachers. Small wooden stools were found for Philip and me; Nathaniel, too young and shy to play, settled into Philip's lap.

Now, with the field filled with the cries and laughter of the players running back and forth through the dust they kicked up, we could barely follow what was going on.

"Bonjour."

Philip and I turned to see a young man who had silently settled on the ground beside us without our noticing.

"Bonjour," we responded, surprised that he hadn't greeted us in Beng.

"Bienvenue à notre village," the short young man continued, in a French that sounded like it came from the village rather than from school.

He shook our hands, and I asked out of habit in Beng, "Ngwo mi si paw?"—What's your name? Again he answered in French, "My name is Emmanuel. People call me Matatu, but I don't like that name." His gaze lingered on us a bit too long, his easy familiarity a bit too easy, but then a dusty scuffle on the field diverted our attention.

### *Philip: Casting Spells*

I looked up from the table, and there was that fellow we'd met at the soccer game, the odd one. He stood too close to me, smiling, but I'd grown used to my sense of personal space being violated—the Beng standard of curiosity demanded close quarters.

I went through the usual exchange of morning greetings and prepared to return to my typewriter when he backed away a few steps and brought something he held in his hand up to his face, positioning it. It looked like one of those Marlboro cigarette hard packs. Avoiding Beng once again, he said, "Bonjour," made a clicking voice, moved a foot to his left, and clicked his tongue again.

The cigarette pack, I guessed, was his idea of a camera, and when he clicked again I decided to go along with the joke. I sat up straight and drained my face of all humor or expression—the typical stiff expression of a Beng person posing in front of a camera. Two could play this game of cultural reversal.

A few people in the compound laughed at the sight of me. The fellow—I couldn't remember his name—took this as encouragement and framed me in his sight again and again until the joke lost its energy, became strained. I returned to my noisy typing, the keys' clacking competing with his clicking sounds, which he now directed toward Alma and Nathaniel. Soon enough, he gave up the game—but then pulled up a chair and sat beside me. I tried to pretend he wasn't there, but he held out his cigarette pack for me to admire, and I gave it a glance. It had been altered somehow, and when he saw my interest, he smiled and motioned for me to hold it.

He'd cut out a circular hole near the top of both sides and used the excised cardboard to fashion the raised rim of a lens. He'd even rigged up a little square in one corner as a viewfinder. Clearly his little joke was more premeditated than I'd imagined.

"It's my camera," he said in French, "and me, I'm the prime minster."

I nodded, admired his prized creation, gave him a nod of respect, and then showed the cigarette pack to Alma, then to Nathaniel. Our son carefully examined its intricacies, then raised it and took a picture of the young man, who feigned unhappiness that the fiction of cultural reversal had been broken. He demanded his camera back and soon left the compound.

"Wow, what a comedian," I said to Alma, though I couldn't help wondering if there was something more to this encounter; his unhappiness at the end had seemed a little too real.

It wouldn't take long for us to find out, since Amenan was already making a beeline to us, her juicy-gossip face firmly in place—at times like this, Amenan was most Amenan.

She found a seat, smoothed a few crinkles on the *pagne* skirt over her legs, and said, "That was Matatu. He's mad, you know."

"Mad?" Alma repeated, unsure she'd heard correctly.

"He used to be the village barber. He's been well for over a year, but since you arrived in Asagbé..." Amenan paused. "Now he's back to saying that he's the prime minister of Côte d'Ivoire."

Alma glanced at me, her face stricken. What I thought had been a performance of village stand-up now slipped from the realm of entertainment onto another stage, one on which there was little laughter. Anthropologists like to think they can be invisible while conducting fieldwork, even if they know that's impossible. Now our simple presence might actually be triggering a young man's return to mental illness.

Or was our presence here really all that "simple"? In this village with no electricity or running water, we'd brought with us a caravan of Western goodies—examples of a world far beyond the reach of the villagers. Just on the table before me sat my typewriter, a hand pump for purifying water, and Alma's tape recorder. Our material entourage was anything but invisible.

THE FOLLOWING EVENING, AS WE scarfed down bowls of rice with bits of smoked fish and tomato sauce cooked for Amenan's family by her oldest daughter, Matatu returned to the compound. After the usual call-and-response of Beng ritual greetings, we invited him to join us for dinner, but he shook his head. Over his shoulder was slung a large sack that he set down beside us, taking out an offering of oranges and pineapples.

It was a generous gift, and we thanked him. Matatu smiled and announced, "I really worked hard this morning!"

The flashlights on our table caught Matatu's eye, and he picked them up one by one, admiring their various details. "C'est jolie, c'est intéressant," he repeated, with the air of a connoisseur. He flipped knowingly through an abridged edition of *Robinson Crusoe* I'd been

reading to Nathaniel at bedtime, then stared intently at Alma's watch. In a spirit of exchange, he produced a weathered rectangle of a card for us to examine, from the Centre de Santé Mentale in Bouake, which recorded his name and diagnosis: *manifestation psychose*.

Was this an admission of his madness, or did he not know what it said? Cautiously following Matatu's lead, I said, "C'est intéressant, c'est jolie," and he nodded his head solemnly, accepting my appraisal. Then, as if some test had been passed, he dug deeper into his sack and pulled out what he presented as treasures—an empty matchbox, a brown zipper, two empty perfume bottles—while saying almost pleadingly, "Ce n'est pas bon?"

"Oui, c'est très bon," Alma and I replied, a call-and-response exchange we continued as Matatu took out of his bag in succession a cassette without a case, an old leather wallet, an empty medicine bottle, a crumple of tinfoil, and a discarded wrapper from a pack of cookies we'd given Nathaniel as a treat. Matatu must have found this last treasure by scrounging through the garbage at the edge of the compound. Alma and I exchanged careful glances.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Matatu announced, "In Abidjan, I'll drink ice water!" Before Alma and I could fashion a polite response, he reached into his bag again and drew out a tin of sardines. He opened the can and demanded a plate from Amenan, saying, "I am the prime minister of Asagbé." After emptying the oily fish on the plate, he began eating with his fingers, gorging himself in a kind of miming, I imagined, of Big Man behavior. Between bites, he declared, "I have a car made of gold," and, "Tomorrow I'm going to buy a bicycle and give it to my father." Alma, Nathaniel, and I sat as if pinned to our chairs, watching in fascination, and I fought the impulse to cover my son's eyes, afraid I might call attention to the disturbing edge of Matatu's strange performance.

By then a crowd had gathered—the usual village reaction to any diverting behavior. Someone said something to Matatu in a derisive

voice. Matatu stopping licking his fingers and responded with a shout in French, "You're a bad guy, I'm going to throw you in prison!"

Everyone laughed; I grimaced inside at the crowd's casual cruelty. Matatu pretended not to hear, but in short order he collected his bag of tricks and left.

As the crowd dispersed, Alma's college-educated research assistant Bertin, who'd been watching from a corner of the compound, walked over and said in a whisper, "It's witchcraft that made Matatu mad." I offered a noncommittal "Hmmm," though I secretly agreed. The witchcraft, however, was not the village variety; instead, it had the pedigree of Western culture, and Alma, Nathaniel, and I appeared to be its inadvertent practitioners. Like it or not, we were casting spells.

### *Alma: Chasing behind Us*

The alarm beeped—too loudly—in the pre-dawn darkness, and Philip groaned in bed as I turned it off. Though this was early for us, the women in our compound were already up, some preparing a fire for the morning meal, some marching off—with empty basins balanced on their head—to gather water at the village pump.

Within minutes, Philip, Nathaniel, and I were dressed, our bags already packed from last night, and we hurried to haul our gear into the car. Amenan clucked at us that we wouldn't wait for breakfast, but we wanted to leave as early as possible for Abidjan, where we'd stock up on medicines for the villagers, and familiar foods that Nathaniel would eat. What I didn't tell my friend was that we hoped to leave before Matatu woke up, to avoid a scene. If he caught wind of our plan, no doubt he'd insist, in that strange imperious way he could slip into, on coming with us.

We'd already disappointed him recently. A few days earlier, Barbara Brown, a development officer from the U.S. Embassy, had visited the village because she hoped to contribute funds to projects we were planning with the Beng, using the royalties from our newly published

book on the Beng, *Parallel Worlds*. I'd introduced Barbara to the Asagbé elders, and then, as we'd prepared to drive to Kosangbé for another meeting, Matatu tried to worm his way into the Embassy car. Of course—he was the prime minister!

Barbara's expression of curiosity quickly switched to alarm, and Philip had to take Matatu aside and tell him that the Embassy lady felt unworthy of his presence in her car, and that's why he couldn't come along. This explanation seemed to satisfy him at the time, but in the following days he'd grown increasingly moody.

So now we bade Amenan good-bye and hopped in the car. We drove along the edge of the village toward the main road, hoping that the echoing, resonant *clunks* of the village women pounding corn meal in wooden pestles would disguise our car engine's pattering, all the while keeping a lookout for a young man who might be chasing behind us.

WE RETURNED FROM ABIDJAN IN disarray. While in Abidjan, Philip had received a fax sent to him at the American Cultural Center that his father had passed away from a long battle with cancer; the fax had reached us too late to return in time for the funeral. Distraught over the loss of this possible closure, and inspired by the need to honor his father, Philip had asked me, "Maybe we could hold a Beng funeral?"

I'd immediately agreed. I knew some sort of ceremony would be necessary for my husband to work through his grief. Though we'd been to many Beng funerals as observers, not active mourners, perhaps a village ceremony—with its long lines of ritual wailing, all-night singing sessions, and animal sacrifices—might give Philip a new emotional vocabulary to help him mourn. Yet the entire drive back to Asagbé, I could see on his face his conflicted emotions about this choice, that perhaps we were traveling in the wrong direction.

Now, as we shared our grim news with Amenan, she immediately met with her uncle, Kokora Kouassi, one of the Beng's most revered

religious leaders, who then offered a prayer for Philip's father. Soon the plans for a funeral that would extend over a few weeks were set in motion.

At the first quiet moment after our arrival, Amenan took the opportunity to fill us in on local gossip. Shortly after we'd left the village, she reported, Matatu had come to our compound, asking about us. When she'd explained that we'd gone to Abidjan, Matatu announced that he'd follow us. He picked a fight with his older brother, who wouldn't lend him a bicycle.

"Matatu got angry and attacked his brother with a machete. So his family strapped him to a big log on the other side of the village. And that's how he's been for the past few days."

Amenan paused to let the weight of this new drama sink in. Then she added, "But he's been struggling to free himself. He's pulled so much, the hand that's tied to the log has really swelled up. They'll probably free him because of the swollen hand—even though he's still crazy."

"My god, this is terrible!" I burst out.

Philip said nothing, but I thought I could read the misery on his face. This summer in Africa he'd not only lost the opportunity to be at his dying father's side, but he seemed to be reawakening a young man's madness.

I winced, and kept to myself another fear. What else might come of Matatu's increasing obsession with our family?

### *Philip: Border Crossings*

I pounded away at the typewriter keyboard, its clatter and slowness intruding on the pace of the novel I was shaping, when I heard Germain arrive in the compound and offer his greetings, followed by Alma and Amenan's responses. I decided to stay put and try to dig deeper into a scene at a bowling alley where Gladys, my fictional mother, was spooked by the face made by the three finger holes of a bowling ball.

Alma peered through the screen door. "Germain is here with Matatu's father, Yao. You might want to be part of this."

I did. This was another drama I felt bound to, even a part of, however unwillingly. And eerily enough, Gladys's descent into madness, in this novel I'd been working on for a couple of years, echoed Matatu's present troubles.

I'd grown accustomed to these sorts of eerie, border-crossing correspondences. During the various ceremonies of my father's village funeral, Kokora Kouassi had been visiting me in the mornings to report his dreams—in which my American father appeared, now adjusting to the Beng afterlife. Though my father was being given an elaborate Beng funeral, it had never occurred to me that he would now be considered an ancestor in Wurugbé, the Beng afterlife. Knowing that the Beng believe the dead exist invisibly among the living, I found it comforting to think of my father's spirit hovering in our compound.

I left my desk and sat beside Alma on one of the chairs that Amenan had set out in a circle. With typical Beng formality, Germain began to speak for Matatu's father, asking us to go to Bouaké to buy some medicines for his son. Though Alma and I had become accustomed to Germain—as the village representative of the country's main political party—trying to squeeze some financial or political advantage out of any situation, I could see that, in this case, he was only here to represent Matatu's family.

I turned to Alma. "What do you think?"

She kept her voice low, even though we were speaking in English. "I don't think drugs are the answer."

"I agree, they didn't help him the first time. And anyway, we couldn't buy that sort of medicine without prescriptions."

"Maybe an African solution would be better," Alma said, and she turned to Amenan. "Aren't there good healers among the Djimini," Alma asked, "ones who treat madness?"

"I know a Ghanaian man who healed a woman in Asagbé," Amenan offered. "She used to be mad, but he cured her. He's very good. He lives in a little village nearby." Alma and I looked at each other. This might be a way to return Matatu back to his village culture. Maybe it was worth a try. Certainly it was worth discussing.

A WEEK LATER, THE GHANAIAN healer Kouadio Ajei sat scrunched in the backseat of the car beside Alma and Nathaniel, while beside me sat Nya Kofi, Amenan's husband, warning me of especially impressive upcoming potholes. As if I couldn't see them myself. The French word for a narrow little trail like this was *piste*, but a true *piste* boasted superhighway status compared to this horror. Crevasses and faults in the dry soil constantly required maneuvering—which meant that the banks on either side of this *piste*, like the dry bed of a tiny stream, were close enough to scrape the car. Then there were patches of sandy soil that sucked the wheels to a stop, and Kofi and I had to get out and push while Alma gunned the engine, the healer and Nathaniel standing off to the side. Worse, whenever we came upon a five- or six-foot-high termite mound in the middle of the trail, I had to squeeze around it—sometimes with the wheels high on the edge of one of the raised banks. It was the nastiest road I'd ever driven on, calling for constant attention to the slightest trick and trap, and the trail went on and on, kilometer after kilometer, as if it would never end. I grew sure that this was a little hell assigned to me for all my sins of weaving in and out of traffic when I drove a cab one long-ago summer in New York City.

Finally, after emptying everyone from the car once again for the third or maybe fourth termite mound, some tenuous constraint snapped inside me. With the latest obstruction safely behind us, and the car full once again, off we drove. But now added to the dutiful *rrrrrr* of the engine came first a murmur, then a full-throated string of the worst insults in any language that I could summon, a rising and falling, a

rolling along of a twisted eloquence that surprised even me. Once started, I couldn't stop. There was no internal ignition key to turn and switch me off.

### *Alma: Buying Back the Spell*

Another day I might have bored a hole in the back of Philip's head for this nonstop string of curses let loose within hearing range of Nathaniel. But I had to acknowledge that my husband's foul-mouthed inventiveness was less a protest against this path-in-the-guise-of-a-road and more an outpouring of pent-up sadness at his father's death back home.

I decided to take diversionary advantage and talk to the healer about his life. I posed questions in English to Kofi, who graciously translated to the healer in Fante, then back in English—and Nathaniel, sitting beside me, had the rare experience of actually understanding what was said around him.

The topic piqued his interest, and he joined in, suggesting new questions for me to ask. At first, since the subject of the interview was so—well, adult—the mother in me didn't want to upset Nathaniel. But my young son seemed to have developed the same anthropological curiosity that motivated me. After all, in a ritual held during our first week in Asagbé, he'd already accepted without question his new village name of Denju—a name that marked him as the reincarnation of an important clan ancestor.

"Do you know why Matatu went mad?" I asked the healer, waiting for him to invoke witchcraft, that all-purpose explanation when things go awry.

"I do know," the healer said quietly, after Kofi translated, "otherwise I couldn't cure him. I can't discuss it now. But I've spoken with Matatu."

"Really?" I hadn't heard about any recent visits the healer had paid to our village.



"I heard Matatu speaking to me in my mind, just as a diviner would do. I could hear that Matatu speaks nonsense."

Nathaniel piped up. "What's the medicine the healer will use?"

I repeated the question to Nya Kofi, who translated.

"The same I use for any mad patient, though I use a very strong version of herbs and plants for people who are very mad."

"Ah-heh," I said noncommittally. I'd expected some ritual approach to reposition Matatu in his social universe—not an herbal cure. Maybe the healer sensed my skepticism, for he added, "I can cure a lot of other diseases, not just madness. But I also tell a patient if I don't know the cure for whatever disease they may have."

Nathaniel joined in, and Kofi translated, "How come Matatu is crazy?"

"I might find that a disease is caused by witchcraft," Kouadio Ajei hinted ominously. "Then, one night while I'm alone in my house, I beg the witch or witches to reverse the spell. I ask what they need for this, and then I buy back the spell from them with whatever they ask as payment. It might be a sheep, some money, or alcohol—or just a chicken or some eggs."

As the healer continued, Nya Kofi translated, "Last night, I talked with the witches who bewitched Matatu."

Kouadio Ajei paused while this statement sank in, and Nathaniel's eyes widened.

"I met the witches," the healer continued, "and they said they wanted money, nothing else."

"How come they didn't get arrested?" Nathaniel asked me quietly.

"I think he meant they met invisibly. Like in their dreams," I explained. Nathaniel nodded, accustomed as he now was to hearing of his grandfather appearing in Kokora Kouassi's dreams.

"The witches said they'd need 200 CFAs—all in small change," the healer concluded. "To pay them, I'll give the money to the children in the village—one small coin to each child—and then the witches

will undo the spell on Matatu. Then, when I give Matatu my herbal medicine, the witches will allow the medicine to work."

"But who *are* the witches?" Nathaniel asked.

The healer remained silent for a few seconds after Kofi translated, then said quietly, "Actually, the witch responsible for Matatu's madness is his own mother."

Now it was my turn for my eyes to widen. I should have been able to predict this accusation: Beng witchcraft always operates in the maternal line. Still, I glanced at my son. What might Nathaniel make of this unexpected, perhaps unthinkable answer? A new set of especially bumpy bumps claimed our attention, and we were left to ponder the upsetting news in our solitude.

### *Philip: "Denju, Denju"*

Alma was off somewhere interviewing a young mother, and who knew where Nathaniel might be, scrambling around the village with his friends. Sitting at my desk in our mud-brick house, puzzling over Gladys, the mother in my novel who kept trying on different identities, I heard Matatu stroll into the compound and greet a circle of Amenan's extended family lazing about and enjoying the rest day. If recent encounters were any predictor, soon he would come to the screen door and peer at me, pretend to take another photo with his cigarette box contraption, and, if I were lucky, that would be enough and he'd wander off to find more of his constituents. Or maybe I could buy Matatu off with the gift of a coveted aspirin—a bribe to entice him to take the herbal medicine the Ghanaian healer had prescribed and that he was reluctant to take. No "African" medicine for him, he insisted—a prime minister required a Western cure.

I decided to switch from my typewriter to my notebook—if Matatu didn't hear me, maybe I could avoid another session of his ministerial adventures and proclamations.



On the other hand, I thought, maybe a visit from Matatu would give me the creative spark I needed. I was having trouble with the mad mother in my novel, not sure what she'd do next in the kitchen while her children sat frightened at the table.

I heard the murmur of Matatu's voice outside, followed by bursts of laughter from Amenan's family at what must have been one of his wilder assertions of power and dominion. Then, increasingly, I heard his rising tone of anger, and his usual threat of capital punishment—"Je vais te condamner à mort!"—I condemn you to death! Then, stone silence. A bad silence. I pushed back my chair and walked to the screen door.

Matatu held the sharp edge of his broken scissors against the neck of Amenan's younger sister, Ti. No one moved, all eyes on that blade. "I'm the prime minister! I'm the prime minister!" Matatu shouted. Her neck arched back painfully, her eyes on him, Ti managed to say through pressed lips, "Yes, you are the prime minister."

With a satisfied grunt he stepped away from her, bent down, and rummaged through that bag of his. Everyone else went back to hushed nervous chatting, trying to pretend nothing had happened.

Still feeling the adrenaline rush of fear inside me, I returned to my desk, but moments later I noticed Matatu crouching on the ground, only a few feet away from my screen door. Still searching through his magic bag, he pulled out a small wooden box. Then, with his scissors he began dismantling the little box, piece by piece, all the while singing an improvised song in an eerie, childlike voice, and I realized this song had only one word: "Denju, Denju, Denju, Denju."

Matatu hacked away at what was by then a former box, hacked it down to chips, still chanting my son's African name while I watched in hypnotized horror, watched Matatu as if he were slicing my child with every arch and sweep of his arm. Where was Nathaniel, anyway?

Off on his usual adventures in the village, safely far from the compound, I realized. But what if he came back, this minute or the next?

I shook off my shock, stood up, and reached for that stick of wood, the table leg that never was, which Nathaniel had collected from a carpenter. No way was Matatu getting near my real flesh-and-blood son. By now Matatu was sweeping the tiny wooden pieces into a cupped hand and returning them to his bag. Who knew what other transformations they might go through in his troubled mind before he was done with them?

Matatu stood, slung the bag over his shoulder, and left the compound. Suddenly my distant son was not so safe. I rushed out of the house and saw our compound-mates staring, stunned, at Matatu's departure. So they had seen what I had seen.

"Where is Denju? We have to find Denju," I blurted out, and then I remembered that Alma was off at an interview, oblivious to whatever Matatu might be planning. I could imagine Matatu catching a glimpse of her, sitting on a tree bark mat with a young mother and child, chatting casually about baby bathing techniques or childhood stomach complaints, and then he'd approach her, that unsettling smile on his lips.

Who should I search for, protect first?

### *Alma: So Many Prime Ministers*

My interview with a new, nursing mother over, I returned to our compound where I found an agitated Philip atypically locking the wooden door to our mud-brick house. Why would he do this?

"What's up?" I asked.

I listened, nearly numb, as Philip quickly recounted the two frightening scissors incidents. "Who knows what Matatu's planning?" he blurted out. "We've got to find Nathaniel!"

Amenan's family had already fanned out through the village in opposite directions, searching the tracks that Nathaniel's sandals made on the dusty paths, and before Philip and I were able to join them our son was soon returned to the compound, safe and sound. Oblivious to

the danger he might have been in, Nathaniel started happily building a new Lego construction with his friends.

Meanwhile, Philip sent word to Germain, and soon a gathering of village elders convened. Matatu was truly acting erratically and violently. No one could feel safe with him around, nor was anyone convinced that village remedies—"African people's medicines"—could help him. Quickly the elders reached a decision: they would send Matatu back to the psychiatric hospital in the city.

As soon as he got word of the plan, Matatu protested so loudly he had to be restrained and tied up again. But he managed to escape and run away, and in the days that followed, too often I thought I saw him lurking in the corner of my vision.

ONE EVENING AFTER WE SETTLED Nathaniel—worn out from another day of playing hard under an African sun—into bed and sleep, Philip and I returned to the courtyard and sat around the hearth's dying embers. There we revisited with Amenan the latest act in Matatu's drama, his possible fate, as we'd received word today that he had been found wandering on foot on a dirt road some eighty miles away. Exhausted and compliant, he was promptly delivered to the hospital in Bouaké.

Why didn't I feel relieved?

"You know," Amenan said, "Matatu's not the only one."

Philip looked up from the mesmerizing embers. "What do you mean?"

"A few other young Beng men are crazy too," Amenan explained. "And in just the same way Matatu is."

"Really?" I said.

"There's another one who's even crazier than Matatu," my friend continued. "He went to a hospital in Burkina Faso, and they cured him with some medicines. But he escaped and walked all the way back to Asagbé! When the rice ripened, he went mad again. His family has no more money for another cure."

"Have we met him?" I asked.

"I doubt it," Amenan answered. "He lives alone in the savanna. He's not violent, though. He laughs a lot. He can speak well. And he calls himself the *premier ministre*—just like Matatu."

"Mon dieu!" I exclaimed.

"There's a couple more, in some other villages. They all say they're the prime minister," Amenan said, "and they threaten to condemn you to death if you insult them. Strange, isn't it?"

Philip and I had long suspected that Matatu's creative delusions of grandeur, his claims to wealth, and his imagined collection of Western goods fashioned from cast-off scraps somehow meant more than the tragedy of one young man whose life had gone awry. Now, learning that Matatu was not alone in his symptoms, I wondered if this was less madness than almost reasonable despair. In recent years the government had shifted from moderate to extravagant corruption, the world commodity prices for the country's agricultural products had collapsed, and jobs for high school and even college graduates had vanished in the smoke of development's broken promises. With little hope to grasp at, Matatu had joined his fellow prime ministers in imagined power rather than face the near certainty of lifelong poverty.

Philip seemed to have read my mind as he said, "When I think of how we showed up with all this *stuff*—cameras, a typewriter, even a car, for God's sake—it must have undone the guy. Every day, we pushed in his face how poor he is and always will be. We're lucky we haven't driven anyone else nuts."

I nodded. Though the healer's explanation—which was now the village's—made sense for Beng religion and family structure, I felt hard-pressed to accept it. Amenan's announcement that many more prime ministers populated the Beng landscape underlined for me the troubling territory between madness and the modern, and what my family's privileged presence might have sparked in Matatu's precariously balanced inner life.

## BEING THERE

In the silence that claimed Amenan's revelation, I became aware of a child tearfully protesting a late-night bath in a neighboring compound, then the crackling of the hearth's dying fire. I rested my spiral notebook on my lap, turned on the flashlight I always kept with me in the dark, clicked open my pen, and began to write.