

A DIVINATION OF DEATH

by Edith Maxwell

Destination: Burkina Faso

In a country where divination is a part of daily life, the solution to the death of a young man may depend on a dying statement and a fortune-teller's ritual.

The round hut, dark and cool, held mysteries I would never know. We had come with only one to solve.

It was a scant week since Issa Diallo—Mariama's brother and my new love—had been killed on his motorcycle here in southwestern Burkina Faso. The police had ruled it an accident, but I wasn't so sure. Mariama wasn't either.

She and I had driven this Saturday to visit a fortune-teller in Gouinduguba, a tiny village in the dry quiet of the region. Usually we laughed and talked as we traveled the countryside. Not today. Mariama, my research assistant and translator, was subdued with grief, and my own heart also hung heavy. I still couldn't believe Issa was gone. He and I had been friends, and for the last month, lovers, too. Tall, with both a brilliant smile and an adorable dimple, the university-educated scholar had returned to his hometown to teach teenagers.

Mr. Ouedraogo, the holy man we'd come to see, looked like a little old Japanese farmer sitting in the January heat under a big shade tree, with his hooded eyes that twinkled, his long dark hand-sewn robe, his crocheted skull cap with an incongruous yarn pouf at its peak. His jaw was edged with a white-gray beard like a rim of grizzled cotton.

He ushered us into his divination hut. Every diviner's office I'd seen was small, as if the compact space concentrated the fortune-teller's power. The high threshold was worn smooth from decades of bare feet passing over it. Eland horns, a dried gourd on a string, a bunch of dusty herbs, and a bird's tail feathers hung from the thatched roof. Cracks crept like snail trails along the mud-plastered walls of the cylindrical structure.

The old man reclined on his side and threw a handful of cowrie shells onto the ground, picking up three. He selected a page from a dusty unbound book written in an arcane script. He murmured over

the shells, then asked me a question in Joula, his gaze intent on my face.

“He wants to know if you are having a fight with somebody over money, Aiseta.” Mariama translated into English for me, but used my Burkinabe name instead of Alice, the name my parents had given me twenty-eight years ago. She smiled, her smooth dark skin glowing beneath a purple damask headscarf tied like a turban rather than a hijab.

I thought. “Yes.” I was an anthropology doctoral student studying diviners and their objects, and I’d been living in the small town of Banfora for a year. I knew by the time the two years on my research grant were up I’d only have dented the surface of the diviner culture. Issa’s sudden death had slowed things even further. I was going to have to defend my need for a funding extension of at least a year.

Mr. Ouedraogo told me to perform a sacrifice. “Take a live ember, pour water on it, and pick it up. Speaking to your heart, say the person’s name three times, then bury the ember in the ground.”

I nodded that I understood and that I would do it. Mariama whispered that the actions of the sacrifice are related metaphorically to the problem. In the States we bury hatchets, in Burkina Faso they bury embers: same difference.

“Ask him,” I prodded her. We’d agreed on the way over that she would see if the diviner had something to say about Issa’s death.

She took in a deep breath. Sadness was written in her drooping eyes as she spoke softly in Joula. I caught only her brother’s name.

The old man threw the shells on the ground again, tapped two that fell apart from the rest, and turned the pages of his book. He reached for the gourd on the string, loosening the string until the gourd moved freely on it.

“Lift it all the way up,” he commanded.

Mariama obliged. She stared at the pale gourd.

The old man spoke directly to the gourd in his low divining voice, different from the one he used when he talked to us. “If Issa’s death was a violent one, come down,” Mariama translated in a whisper.

My palms grew sweaty. She had to be nervous, too, but I kept my gaze glued to the gourd. What should we do if it dropped? The gourd descended halfway down. I gasped.

“If you’re lying, and the death was accidental, come down all the way,” the diviner said to the gourd. It stayed put. He asked Mariama to try to push it farther down or move it up, and she couldn’t make it move. The old man smiled, a sole top tooth

remaining in the middle of his pink gums.

Mariama, college-educated like her brother, finally glanced at me, her eyes wide. Consulting the diviner is a routine part of people's lives in this region. They need to find out what is causing an illness, whom to marry, or why the millet crop failed. They seek help with impotence, incompetence, infertility, and infidelity. Everyone does it, even in the big city, even Christians and Muslims. My assistant was no different.

"Do you know what this means?" she whispered to me.

"Not really." It could mean the gourd got it wrong. It could mean a little old diviner was pulling a scam. Or it could mean we were right in thinking Issa was murdered. I had no idea which of those was the case. I suspected the last.

"What are those rings?" I asked the diviner, pointing to a bowl holding twisted metal hoops.

"Those are to prevent accidents, and these prevent poisoning." The diviner warned me that poison might not be the same in my country, and Mariama explained that poison could mean someone wishing you ill, or giving you the evil eye, or other non-ingested means of harm.

"I'm going to ask him one more question," she said.

I nodded. Mr. Ouedraogo first shook his head in response, then held out his palm. Mariama laid another 100 CFA coin on the ground in front of him. He took her right hand in his. With his left hand he shook a gourd that rattled, and clinked a large ring on a metal knife in rhythm as he chanted. He stopped, then prescribed a sacrifice that would tell her what she wanted to know. Mariama translated as the diviner told her she should buy a silver ring and then put four coins on the ground.

"Pass the ring over the coins four times, give the money to a girl, and wear the ring," he said. "Do this on a Sunday and you will have your answer."

We thanked him and stepped out of the hut. On our way to the car we passed a woman sitting against the wall under a tree, but Mariama did not greet her.

"She's a sorcerer," she whispered to me. "This woman did bad things to people. You know why her leg is bandaged? She has a sore that never heals because of an evil spell she cast on someone."

We climbed into the car and I pointed it back toward Banfora.

"If only Issa had been wearing a ring like this one." Mariama extended her hand as we drove, showing off the anti-poisoning ring I'd bought each of us. "He might still be alive."

"Did you believe the diviner's gourd?" I asked.

She nodded slowly. "Do you know what I asked him at the end?"

“No.”

Her voice came out a hoarse whisper. “I asked him who killed Issa.”

Along the way Mariama pointed out sacrifices—a few palm fronds and a hoop of vine, a white chicken recently killed, an upturned pot topped with feathers and roof straw, a pile of kola nuts—I never would have seen otherwise. The sacrifices that the spirits ask for can be endless, she told me, since the spirits are quite capricious. Just like humans.

“How will doing the sacrifice tell you who the murderer is?” I glanced over at her.

“I don’t know. But I am going to carry out his instructions. On Sunday.”

Tomorrow.

“Aiseta,” she continued. “I didn’t tell you this before, but when I went to the hospital, when Issa was dying, he whispered something to me.”

I whipped my head to the right to stare at her. “He did?”

She nodded, gazing straight ahead. “He said, ‘Killed me.’ When I asked him who killed him, he whispered something like ‘Sa’—but his voice was so weak I could barely hear him. If there was more to the name, I’ll never know.” Her voice broke. She shaded her forehead with her hand as her shoulders shook. After a minute, she sat up straight again and wiped her eyes. “It was the last word he spoke.”

“So all we have to do is find someone whose name begins with Sa, who wanted Issa gone?”

Mariama nodded. She pointed to a small road coming up on the right. “Turn into that *quartier*. We have to visit my mother.”

I slowed. “Are you sure you want me along? Your mother must be deeply mourning Issa’s death.”

“We all are, but I know she likes you. It will help her for us to visit.”

I made the turn and we bumped down a dry dirt road with ruts so deep it was an inverted obstacle course to drive around them. I parked under a baobab tree massive enough that a dozen people holding hands wouldn’t reach around its trunk. We walked slowly and greeted people as we passed by tidy round houses connected by adobe-plastered walls. Flowers splashed color on a building in one compound next to corn flour spread out on a piece of plastic to dry.

Mariama’s mother sat on a low stool in the shade of her house.

A woman in her twenties squatted beside her, picking small stones out of a basket of peanuts.

“That one was Issa’s girlfriend before you,” Mariama murmured to me before we reached the women.

My eyes widened. Issa had told me his ex was furious with him for ending things with her, and she blamed me. He’d said she was pressuring him to marry her, and that was why he’d broken off with her, not because of me.

Mariama greeted her mother.

“Please tell her I am very sorry for her loss,” I told Mariama, and listened as she spoke.

The mother held out a hand for mine, her sad rheumy eyes gazing at my face. I gazed back as we exchanged four rounds of the ritual greetings.

“This is Salamatou.” As Mariama introduced me to the woman cleaning peanuts, she shot me a quick glance, as if she was trying to tell me something.

My insides turned cold. *Sa*. Salamatou. Could she have been so angry with Issa she killed him? But how?

Salamatou barely glanced up. “*Bonjour*,” she said in heavily accented French. Such curtness was the epitome of rude in this part of the world.

A girl in her mid-teens sat on a mat nearby. She laughed and cast her wild happy eyes around: the village idiot. Mariama said her name was Yabil. As I greeted the girl and shook her hand, she chortled with delight and uttered only, “*Herebe*,” in a high-pitched, almost robotic voice.

I responded with the ritual, “*Here doron*.” Peace only. I remembered some wrapped candy I had in my bag and handed her a piece. She whooped like she’d won the jackpot, tearing off the paper and popping the sweet into her mouth.

“I think we should examine Issa’s motorbike,” Mariama whispered. “Maybe somebody messed with it.”

My eyebrows went up, but I nodded. She led the way to a lean-to at the far corner of the compound. Yabil tagged along, tossing her head to peer grinning at a plastic bag caught on a tree branch overhead. Mariama pulled off a tattered tarp covering the bike. I winced to see the scraped-bare metal, the twisted fork, the flat front tire, all evidence of a bad crash, and my eyes filled.

I caught Yabil watching me. With a suddenly sad look on her face, she reached out to touch my arm. Her rough fingers stroked my skin with a feather touch. I gave her a gentle smile.

“How can we tell if someone tampered with it?” I asked, not entirely sure why I was whispering, too.

“The police said it hadn’t been messed with. But my uncle? He’s a mechanic. He thinks there might have been sand put in the gas tank.”

“That would make the engine malfunction, causing Issa to crash.”

She nodded. “My mother won’t let Tonton take the bike apart, though. She treats it like a shrine.”

She covered it again, and we visited with Mariama’s mother for a little longer before making our way back to the car.

“Yabil almost died at birth,” Mariama told me as we strolled. “Her brain was a bit damaged, that’s why she’s, how do you say *fou*?”

“Crazy?”

“Yes, but not bad crazy. Just empty. Simple.”

“She seems happy, though,” I said.

“She is. She even has a job. She cleans the floor at the bar in town.”

Once we reached the road again, it was only two more kilometers to Banfora. My mind roiled with thoughts of Issa’s death.

“Mariama, where was Issa before he died? I mean, I know he was out on his motorcycle after dark. But where had he been, and where was he going?”

“He was teaching the adult literacy class. It’s held at the same school where he teaches children during the day.”

“And he was riding home from there?” It wasn’t easy to navigate these roads at night, even in a car.

“The police said he’d been drinking.”

“He must have gone to the bar after class.”

“*Oui*.” Mariama nodded. “I think we should go to the bar. Ask them what they saw. But first I have to buy a silver ring.”

I steered the car through the narrow streets of Banfora until we reached the only bar in town, which was next to the open market. As I climbed out, the day’s third call to prayer floated out from the mosque tower a block away, a haunting melodic chant that would always sound like Africa to me. The irony of the bar’s location was obvious. Devout Muslims wouldn’t be caught dead at an establishment serving alcohol.

Mariama and I wandered into the market. Five o’clock was late in the day for commerce, with many of the permanent stalls already closed, but she walked straight to a nearly hidden merchant tucked in a corner. By his lighter skin, narrow face, and blue Arabic-style tunic and pants, I guessed he was a Tuareg, one of the nomadic people from northern Mali and Niger. They were known for their

silver craftsmanship.

She spoke in French with him, and after a few back and forths of bargaining, she came away with two shiny silver rings. She handed me one. "Here."

"You got me a present?"

"Mine matches, see?" She held up the ring clasped between her index finger and her thumb. The ring widened in front and featured an intricate pattern etched in black. "We will remember Issa with our rings."

I gave her a hug.

"To the bar?" she said, squaring her shoulders.

"To the bar." I was ready for a cold beer. Inside I paused, letting my eyes adjust to the mostly empty cool darkness. A couple of men perched on stools at the bar, and only one of the tables around the edges of a dance floor had people sitting at it. The plastered walls had been painted blue a long time ago, judging from the cracks and the faded color.

"You coming?" I murmured to Mariama.

"Let's do it."

I smiled to myself. It always sounded funny when she used a slangy English phrase like that. I followed her to the other end of the bar from the two guys. Mariama was already exchanging greetings with Celestine. The bartender was a robust woman in a green print dress, a matching headscarf tied with a flourish. She looked at me expectantly, so I started the round of greetings in Joula.

"Peace among you," she answered.

"Peace only. How are you?"

"There's no trouble at all."

"Ah. The family?"

"There's no trouble at all with them."

"Ah. Good. Peace," I finished. No quick *hi-howareyas* around here.

"Do you want a Castel?" Mariama asked me.

"Twist my arm."

Celestine brought over two local lagers and frosty glasses. She said something in Joula to Mariama, but I understood only Issa's name.

"She's saying she's sorry about his death," Mariama said.

The bartender switched to French. "If I had known that night was Issa's last, I would not have accepted his money." She leaned closer. "I think somebody poisoned him."

"Poisoned?" I asked in alarm.

"I didn't see it," Celestine said. "But it's easy enough to drop

poison in a drink. I can't watch every glass all the time."

Mariama sucked in a breath. I thought about the effects of almost any potent drug combined with alcohol and a motorcycle at night on bad roads.

"Was he here alone?" I asked.

Celestine made a *tsking* sound. "No, he was with Samou, and the tall *toubabou*."

Samou was a friend of Issa's, and I knew the Joula word for foreigner. "Do you mean Brian?" He was an American who'd been fired from teaching at the International School in the capital and had thought he'd landed the teaching job here that Issa snagged instead. I was surprised Brian was still allowed to be in the country, unemployed as he was. Or maybe he was here illegally.

"Brian is not the name," Celestine said.

A *toubabou* could be any European or Australian, anybody with pale skin, really. Just because I wasn't aware of the dude didn't mean he didn't live here, or hadn't stopped in as part of a trip.

"Look, Samou's over there," Mariama said. "You know he's Salamatou's twin, right?" She pointed to the other end at the nearer of the two men, whose back was to us.

She might as well have pointed to her brother's dying words. *Another name starting with Sa*. I hadn't even thought about Issa's friend's name. I barely knew him and wasn't aware he was the twin brother of the woman who'd felt wronged by Issa breaking up with her.

Mariama called to him. The slender man turned and raised a hand in recognition. He lifted his bottle and moved down to our end.

After a couple of quick rounds of greetings, Celestine urged, "Samou, tell Aiseta about that night. The night Issa had his accident."

"I met him here, you know, for some beers." Samou spoke to his reflection in the big mirror behind Celestine, smoothing his hair.

"With Salamatou?" Mariama asked.

I shot her a quick look. Why was she asking about his sister?

"No," Samou said. "She doesn't like to drink."

"I've been trying to find my friend Brian," I said. "Was he here, too?"

Now I had Samou's attention. He turned to look at me, but when he spoke his gaze slid over my left shoulder.

"Our local *toubabou*? Yeah, he was here. He bought us a couple of rounds."

“Did he find a job?” I asked. I hadn’t seen him in a few weeks.
“No.” Samou checked himself out in the mirror again. “He’s staying with me now.”

“His name isn’t Brian,” Celestine interjected. She set her fists on her ample hips. “Not the *toubabou* who comes in here and puts more beers on his account than he can pay for.”

I wrinkled my nose. That sounded exactly like the Brian I knew.

“That’s because his Burkinabe name isn’t Brian,” Samou said to his reflection with a tired air, as if he couldn’t believe we didn’t know.

“What is it?” I pressed.

“Sawadogo.”

I stood next to my car outside the bar, but my hand shook so much I couldn’t fit the key into the lock. After what Samou said, I had laid money for the beer on the bar and rushed out. I had to talk to Brian, *aka* Sawadogo—another name starting with the syllable Sa. But what if he’d killed Issa?

Mariama appeared at my side. One look at me and she grabbed the keys. “Come on. We’re going to visit the *toubabou*. Samou’s apartment is only two blocks that way.”

In my upset, I’d forgotten where I was. I let her lead me along the quiet streets that smelled of meat roasting on the ubiquitous charcoal brazier mixed with a hint of sewage from the barely covered ditches at the sides of the road.

As we walked, Mariama murmured, “I picked up an interesting fact from Celestine after you left.”

“Oh?”

“Not now.” She rapped on a blue-painted door set into mud-plastered walls, announcing, “*As-salamu alaykum*,” an Arabic greeting that persisted even in this corner of West Africa that was more Christian and animist than Muslim.

The door creaked open to a yawning Brian, barefoot, sandy hair mussed, and clad in an undershirt and tie-dyed drawstring pants. He started the expected response of, “*Alaykumu as . . .*” but trailed off when he saw who it was. “Hey, Alice, Mariama. What’s shakin’?”

Now that we were here face-to-face with him, I didn’t know what to say. ‘Did you kill Issa?’ wasn’t quite the effect I was looking for. Luckily, Mariama stepped into the breach.

“We were just over at the bar and Samou told us you were staying here. Celestine says you’re devastated about Issa’s death.”

I stared at her. She had?

Mariama went on. "As we all are." She paused, as if expecting to be asked in.

Brian finally got it. "Of course. Um, come on in." He backed into the darkened room. "It's kind of a mess right now, sorry about that."

I stepped in as he threw open the shutters, revealing a veritable pigsty. The air smelled of dirty socks, marijuana, stale beer. Clothes were tossed on the cement slab floor, and a ratty blanket trailed off the rattan piece that was trying to be a sofa with no cushions. I didn't go any farther in.

"Sorry, I'm sleeping on the, uh, couch for now," Brian offered. "But I'll probably get Issa's job, now that he's gone."

He didn't even notice Mariama wince at his thoughtless remark.

"Then I can get my own place," Brian went on.

Mariama stayed in the entrance, her lip curled ever so slightly. "My mother has hired a *griot* to memorialize Issa tomorrow and she wanted to be sure you and Samou were invited to the feast."

I blinked at her. *Feast? A praise singer? Tomorrow?*

"Me?" Brian looked as surprised as I felt. "OK, sure. I'll ride over with Sam. What time?"

The next afternoon Mariama and I again sat with her mother in the shade. Salamatou painted her nails nearby, and Yabil sang softly to herself, rocking from one foot to the other, happy eyes focused on a vulture perched on a neighbor's roof. No praise singer—*griot*—was in evidence, nor a feast. Mariama had asked me simply to trust her. I rubbed the back of my new silver ring with my thumb.

A motorcycle's putt-putt grew nearer until Samou pulled into the opening in the wall. Brian rode on the back. Both, expecting festivities, wore nice shirts and slacks, now slightly dusty from the ride.

Brian slid off and looked around with a bewildered air. "Where's the *griot*?"

"And the feast?" Samou directed his question to his sister, who shrugged.

Mariama rose and grabbed two more stools from the house, then gestured to the men to sit. My heart pounded in my chest.

"Yabil?" Mariama called to her. Yabil laughed at the vulture before joining us. She squatted in front of Mariama.

Mariama drew out the four coins and the silver ring. We all

watched as she laid the money in a square on the ground. She passed the ring over them four times with a solemn air, her lips moving to the words of a prayer, an incantation, or something else I couldn't fathom. She slid the ring onto her right hand and picked up the coins. She took Yabil's hand, and closed the girl's palm around the money.

"Those are for you. Yabil, can you tell me who poisoned Issa?"

Yabil nodded. Brian swore in English. The girl looked around the circle, from Salamatou to Brian to Samou. Samou's eyes narrowed. Salamatou examined her nails as if nothing special was happening.

The tension was unbearable. Did Yabil really know? And if she did, could she communicate it?

Yabil pointed to Samou.

"I didn't!" He stood knocking over his stool. "She's crazy, everybody knows it."

Yabil then moved her finger to point at Salamatou. Yabil's face looked worried, but her hand didn't vary, didn't shake.

Salamatou pushed up to standing. "I was right here when Issa was killed. I had nothing to do with it." She tossed her head.

Yabil crossed her middle finger over her index finger in the sign for twins and pointed at both siblings, back and forth. The next time she pointed at Salamatou, Yabil cupped her hand around her ear.

Mariama stood and clapped her hands. Two uniformed police officers emerged from the dark of her mother's house. "Yabil is telling us she heard Salamatou tell her brother to spike Issa's drink so he would crash on his way home. Celestine at the bar said she saved the glass Issa was drinking out of that night. Yabil was there cleaning, and she saw Samou put poison in Issa's glass. I think you'll find Samou's fingerprints on it and traces of something toxic inside. If you search Salamatou's room, you'll probably discover the drug she gave her brother to use."

Unlike Yabil or his sister, Samou was shaking. "I didn't want to kill him! He was my friend." His voice was desperate. "Sala told me it would just make Issa sick, that she wanted to teach him a lesson."

"Liar," Salamatou shrieked. She stalked toward her twin, her face a mask of fury, but one officer caught her arm, handcuffing her hands behind her back, telling her she was under arrest. His colleague did the same to Samou, and they marched the two away.

Mariama's mother just nodded to herself, unfazed by any of it. Yabil grinned at the coins in her hand, stroking each in turn.

I looked admiringly at Mariama. "Your talents are wasted as a

translator, girl. You should be a detective.”

She smiled. “Maybe I will be. But don’t you think I should consult Mr. Ouedraogo first?”

