

# CANARY

October 10th, 2022

Nicole's heart is beating at a mile an hour. Her mother's little red car managed to take them to her grandparents' house from Yaounde International Airport. The neighbourhood has changed a lot. As the car drives through the narrow streets, Nicole struggles to recognize the houses. In her memories, everything was just brushwood. She remembers a few villas, but certainly not the street vendors, the shacks, the unfinished houses barely covered with some cement eaten away by mould.

Nicole and her mother stop in front of a large red gate. She hears a couple of dogs barking fiercely while the gate opens. Nicole recognizes the face of her young uncle, Denis, who comes to meet them. He asks Mireille to park on the side. When Nicole gets out of the car, she expects to see the dogs jumping around but then remembers that they were most of the time chained to the entrance of their kennel. It should normally be near where the car is parked. Was the barking in her head?

Nicole looks around. She recognizes the courtyard, the veranda and this particular smell that was very reassuring when she was a child. She has not set foot in this place since she left for France at the age of nine. At that time, she couldn't cross the small stream that ran through the garden at the entrance of the compound. Now twenty-one, one step is enough for her to cross over and reach the front door of the main house. Nicole can hear her grandmother's voice inside the house coming closer. She is singing in Duala, a song that Nicole knows well. The lyrics celebrate happy days and the invisible forces that make them possible. Nicole's grandmother opens the front door and embraces her for a long minute. When she finally pulls away, Denis asks Nicole to go and say hello to her grandfather who is relaxing on the veranda.

Nicole is intimidated. Her grandfather has always been a role model to her. When she was little, he used to spend his days in his office, which no one was allowed to enter except for her, when she wanted to say hello or hug him. His office was a real time-machine, filled with books that Nicole had never seen. Nicole would sometimes hide in the office when her grandfather was away and everyone thought she was taking a nap. In the old books, she discovered a history of Cameroon that none of her teachers spoke about at school, a history that included attempted revolutions before, during and after the independence. She also found philosophical and theological books and articles questioning the future of Africa, some of them written by her grandfather. Of course, at the time, she barely understood any of it. In Nicole's eyes, her grandfather represented a library of knowledge. Even as a little girl, any conversation with him was fascinating because he always made the effort to explain complex

matters in a way she could understand while sharing his values and his vision of the world. She had missed him enormously for the past twelve years.

Nicole gets on the veranda. Her grandfather embraces her and asks everyone to go inside to give them some privacy. Nicole pulls herself together.

- "So, your mom tells me you have a project?" Her grandfather asked.
- "Yes," answers Nicole. "I came to explore the link between modernity and tradition in the artistic practices of young Cameroonians."
- "You came... ?"
- "To research the link between modernity and tradition in the artistic practices of young Cameroonians", Nicole repeats.

Nicole's grandfather looks at her doubtfully.

- "I did not understand," he says.

Nicole is wondering if he didn't hear what she just said or if he didn't understand her subject. A part of her feels guilty because she has been given very little news during the past twelve years and today she is coming to ask for the support of her grandfather to realize her project. Is he questioning her motives?

- I applied for a scholarship from a French association supporting the education of young people through travel. They gave me their support for the realization of an expedition to Cameroon.

Nicole's grandfather looks at her attentively.

- "So French people gave you money to come back to your home country to learn more about your roots?" Her grandfather asks.

Nicole nods her head.

- "And what is this project you want to undertake?" Her grandfather asks.

Nicole feels uncomfortable. She doesn't know if her grandfather wants her to repeat the subject of her research or if he just wants to know more about it.

- "In my project proposal, I questioned the presence of Street Art in Douala and Yaounde, among other things," Nicole explains.
- "What?" Her grandfather asks.

Nicole starts assuming that her grandfather has hearing problems. She decides to increase the volume of her voice.

- “In France, for example, Street Art is very present in some cities as young people use it to express their concerns. Street Art is subversive and given the political situation in Cameroon, I was wondering if young people here were also using art in the public space to show their discontent.

After a silence, the grandfather shakes his head. Nicole feels a little more uncomfortable. She is scared of disappointing him by choosing a subject that would seem futile or out of context. She doesn't want to appear ignorant in front of her grandfather.

- “I'm having a hard time understanding you.” Her grandfather replies.
- “What do you mean...?” Nicole asks hesitantly.
- “What do you mean?” Her grandfather repeats with a sarcastic imitation of Nicole's tone.

Nicole stares at her grandfather in dismay.

- “Why are you talking like a canary?” Her grandfather asks calmly.

Nicole finally understands that her grandfather is referring to her accent. She smiles.

- “I'm not doing it on purpose...” Nicole replies with embarrassment.
- “Why are you talking like that?” Her grandfather asks again.
- “I dunno... I guess it's because I've been in France for all these years...”
- “I have also lived in France and Italy, but I don't speak like a canary.” Her grandfather states firmly.

Nicole is offended by this remark. She never thought her grandfather would be so judgemental about her accent. She looks at his strict face and wonders if he really wants to know the answer. She remembers very well the moment she started speaking like that and feels ashamed.

- “I changed the way I speak and forced myself to adopt the French accent a few months after my arrival because my classmates were making fun of my Cameroonian accent... especially when I was reading.”

Giving this explanation is painful for Nicole. It brings back memories of the never-ending identity crisis that started the day her plane landed at Charles de Gaulle International Airport. Since then, she has done everything possible to fit in, including faking the French accent until

it became more natural. Now, it's impossible for her to speak with her grandfather without sounding like a stranger, like an imposter.

- "You should never be ashamed of your accent", her grandfather replies calmly. "You should never be ashamed of who you are, of where you come from, of where you've been. That is what makes you richer than any African dictator."

Nicole's grandfather smiles at her with compassion, then grabs her arm and asks her to follow him into his office. When they step inside the office, Nicole gets a familiar feeling of warmth. The bookshelves, the office table, the armchair, the curtains, the smell, nothing has changed. It is as if time had stopped in this room. Her grandfather looks for a book on the shelves. Nicole is afraid to touch anything. For her, this place is a museum hosting tremendous precious archives. She gazes at several book titles: *The African Origin of Civilization: Myth or Reality* by Cheikh Anta Diop, *African Art as Philosophy: Senghor, Bergson, and the Idea of Negritude*, by Souleymane Bachir Diagne, *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy*, by Fabien Eboussi Boulaga.

Nicole's grandfather finally grabs a book and contemplates the cover. It's a French copy of the *Dictionary of Black African Civilizations* edited by Georges Balandier and Jacques Maquet in 1968. He hands the book to Nicole.

- "Your journey begins here," he says solemnly. "I am really proud to see my granddaughter becoming a historian, an anthropologist and an artist. At least, my work won't be in vain."

Nicole is honoured to hear her grandfather speak about her in those words. Even though she is just a student finishing an undergraduate degree in filmmaking, they are the best compliment she could have wished for. As she grabs the book, she doesn't know yet where life will take her but she is happy to start her journey at home, exploring her roots with the support of her Elders.