The God Jar
& The Chain of Names



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Before she was a number chalked on a slate in a stone fort, she had a name: Ramatoulaye. Before the salt and the dark and the cold and the rocking that never stopped, she had a family and a home. She knew the names of all the two hundred people in her village, except for the very youngest children, who were too small yet to have been given them. She knew the loud, ringing call of the fish eagles, and every year she watched a pair come back to the same stick nest, a massive platform high in a riverside tree. She knew other birds, too: honeyguides and drongos, bulbuls and babblers, robin-chats, sunbirds, bush-shrikes, glossy starlings, ox-peckers, widow birds and bishops and waxbills and weavers. In her own language she knew the names of them all. She knew several sorts of monkeys, too, and fruit bats, Nile Monitor and Rainbow lizards. She was clever, and she knew a lot. None of it would be of any help to her.

She had been born in the dry season, in a village of mud-brick and conical thatch set back from the banks of

a broad brown river. It was a day's walk inland from the great river, on rising ground where the millet and the upland rice would grow. There was a wall of thorns around the compounds, against lions and hyenas and against men, although in those years the men who could be stopped by a wall like this were not the ones to be feared. There was a baobab tree at the centre of things, older than anyone could remember, its trunk wide as a hut. Beneath it the elders would sit, and beneath it the children would be told stories by the griot. Stories that contained the long lattice of names that held their world together, and kept the line of their heritage alive.

Ramatoulaye's father, Demba, was a prosperous man, respected in the village. He had two wives, a stand of mango trees, and a reputation for fairness that brought neighbours to sit in his courtyard and ask him to solve their problems and settle their quarrels. She was the third of seven children, and she was the loudest of them. She had been promised, when she came of age, to the son of a family two days' walk to the east. She had complicated feelings about this, and she discussed it at length with her closest friend, Maimouna, when they fetched water from the river at dusk. She had an older brother who had gone to take a wife in another village. There was another, who helped her father, taking over much of the heavy work. Her youngest brother, Lamin, was nine. His job was to mind the goats, but instead he minded the business of everyone within shouting distance. And there was a baby, a sister, still tied to their mother's back, who had no name yet because she was new. And there was her grandmother, blind in one eye and sharp as an axe blade in the other, who sat in the shade and spoke.

The days were all the same; at least, they were then.

Ramatoulaye would wake before cock crow because she liked the hour when the world belonged only to her and to God, with the grey light, the still warm ash of last night's fire, and the muezzin's reedy voice calling the faithful to the dawn prayer. She had memorised four chapters of the Qur'an, scratching the letters onto a wooden board with ink her teacher mixed from water and charcoal. It was laborious work, and she made mistakes, but she was determined. When she got something wrong, she would wash off what she'd done and start again. She was good at it, better than her brothers. She knew it, and she made sure that they did too.

At other times she would stand with the women at the mortar, pounding grain. They would sing, the same songs over and again, keeping a steady rhythm and passing the pestle one to another so that no one's arms grew tired.

She especially relished watching her mother, Awa, at the dye vat, transforming everyday white cotton bought from the traders into the prized deep blue of indigo. Her mother could produce a colour so intense that women came from three villages away to bargain for it.

Ramatoulaye would stand beside her as she added dried balls of crushed indigo leaves and ash to the river water in her vat. The potion would be left to ferment, and when her mother was satisfied, she would dip the cloth repeatedly in the vat, take it out, expose it to the air, then re-immerse it. This was done many times, until she judged the colour to be good. Then she would take the cloth out of the vat and hang it in the shade to dry. Now it was Ramatoulaye's turn. Her task was to beat the dry cloth with a wooden paddle until it took on a shiny glaze. It was hard work in the sun, and although she

enjoyed seeing the finished result and hearing her mother's praise for a job well done, she looked forward to the time when she would be allowed to get her hands in the vat and see the dye marking her skin, labelling her as someone with a mysterious and special gift. Someone like her mother.

She was happy, although happiness was not a concept that was ever described or defined in her village. Her father prayed five times each day when the holy man called the hours, pressing his forehead to the earth, his land. When her mother cupped Ramatoulaye's face, her palms left a faint memory of the blue-black indigo on the girl's cheeks, a thing that Ramatoulaye remembered as the smell and the stain of being loved.

Her name meant something. Her grandmother had told her this so many times that the words had worn smooth. Ramatoulaye. It had come down out of the desert with the men who taught the Book. It was a name that had been carried south on caravans, and it meant 'the compassion of God'. A name was not a small thing. A name was a chain that ran backwards through her mother and her mother's mother and other mothers before them, and had no end.

That evening she sat with her grandmother, gazing into the embers of the fire and day-dreaming.

'You are not listening,' her grandmother said.

'I am listening,' Ramatoulaye said. She was listening, but not to her grandmother. She was listening to the boys arguing, which was more interesting.

'Then say it back.'

Ramatoulaye sighed and said it back: the line of her people, the grandmothers behind the grandmothers, and the other grandmothers behind them. The name and the

name and the name, in a long chain all the way to a woman who had crossed a river that no one could remember, in a year so long ago that it was beyond counting.

'Good,' her grandmother said. 'Now you carry it. A person who forgets who they are is a person already stolen.'

She said it lightly, the way you say a thing you have said a thousand times. Neither of them knew how true it would be. That was the mercy of that evening; that they didn't know.

Ramatoulaye was fifteen. She thought she understood the shape her life would take. She was wrong, but not in any way she could have imagined.

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about Ramatoulaye
and the story of the God Jar,
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