

A Gift From Fouta Toro  
By Sophie Kane

I seemed to be the only one shocked to see the puddle of blood sinking into cracks in the hot cement...well, me and my sister - at whom I didn't have to look back to know her face exhibited a similar expression of abhorrence as mine. I was guided away from the horror film-worthy spectacle around to the back of the house before any of my relatives could read the sentiment blatantly displayed on my 12-year-old face. By the time I had arrived at the back of the house I had rid myself of emotion, but I had not gotten over what I couldn't, for the life of me, unsee. The worst part was I knew the corpse that this blood belonged to, and I knew all this was done in my name.

This was the Fouta Toro, or simply "the Fouta" -- the mystical place that had all too suddenly become a reality. It was the place "bad American children" were sent in northern Senegal, to in order to become "industrious and polite African children." Threats of long summers in the Fouta in which we would "shape up" were common in our household -- and the customary response to this threat was an eye roll or perhaps a shaking of the head by the youth of the household. But now, through no fault of our own, a summer in the Fouta had become a reality.

The locals had promised me un cadeau when we had first arrived. I had smiled, deeming this the appropriate response. It was then explained to me in English what a gift really meant here. It was a honor to have a sheep sacrificed outside of an Islamic holiday. I was not honored. I tried to convince them that they really didn't have to kill a sheep for us -- ce n'est pas necessaire I repeated -- but they just laughed. I didn't laugh. The conversation quickly switched to Pulaar, the unapologetically loud language of the Fouta, shutting me out of the discussion.

Despite the unpleasant experience of meeting our dinner, my stomach rumbled with hunger as we sat upon woven mats trying to press ourselves into the shadow of building in order to escape the late afternoon Sahel sun. The red in my cheeks, which had nothing to do with the heat, began to lessen as I grew accustomed to the eyesore of a sight of our Costco-sized tent in the back courtyard of this little home. Yes, this is where we would spend the night, in a tent that almost surpassed the size of the humble home of our hosts. And if that wasn't enough to make me want to bury my head between my knees, our monster-sized Acura SUV was parked parallel to the tent that fueled my embarrassment. Instead of burying my head in between my knees, I buried it in between the pages of my book, so no one would be able to decipher my expression.

After trying to milk the cow, failing, trying again and failing I was beginning to grow tired of our little family vacation. Meanwhile my family yelled all sorts of advice such as "Bend your knees!", "Adjust your grip", and "Pull harder!" I grimaced, arching my back so that I kept my face far away from the pinkish underbelly of the animal. The Senegalese just laughed at my futile attempts. Once I dared to venture to the outhouse made infamous by my sister as "the cockroach bathroom", but I didn't plan on returning there anytime soon.

Around three in the afternoon the conversation was limited to a chorus of questions from my sister and me with a similar theme: “Where is the food?”, “Is the food coming?”, and “Are we ever going to eat lunch?” followed by the same vexatious response of “Soon” delivered by my parents. Finally the meal arrived, served on a large communal platter as is the Senegalese custom. I scrambled into the circle forming around the plate and took a spoon from the pile being passed around. After a chorus of Bon appetit (French) and Bismaillah (Arabic) I hesitated, remembering where this food had come from. The hesitation lasted only for a moment, though, as I dug into my favorite Senegalese meal. This was where my food came from, and if I wanted to enjoy it, I had to be brave enough to face that fact. And I took comfort in the fact that despite my reservations about the Fouta, these sheep probably enjoyed their lives here where they could roam freely. My decision also might have had something to do with the hunger caused by the disparity between the habitual American and Senegalese lunch times.

I woke up the next morning sore, from falling asleep with only a sleeping bag and the thin fabric of the tent between me and the concrete, and tired from the lack of sleep. I discovered that in the Fouta the sun doesn’t need to be in the sky for it to be uncomfortably hot. All there was for breakfast was tea and tough chunks of bread, but I had no complaints, for tonight I would be going home to the Senegalese capital of Dakar and civilization. But, hours later, as I peered out the window of our large air-conditioned car, I suddenly felt guilty for leaving. For our hosts, this was their reality. I then realized that out of sheer dumb luck I was the one sitting in this car and they were the ones spending another night on the cement.

Was I being arrogant for thinking my lifestyle was better than theirs? The most uncomfortable moment of my time in the Fouta wasn’t sitting in the scorching heat or avoiding animal blood dripping through cracks in the concrete, but it was the driving away not knowing if I should feel lucky or ashamed.