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### La brébis galeuse

“Honey, a farmer’s market here in Long Island, what does it look like?” I inquired, as I was holding Abigail’s right hand, the little girl I babysit. She didn’t even let me stop talking when she replied, “Aww! The farmers’ market? It is awesome, it’s a big circle, no a kind of square. Trust me, you are going to see the most beautiful, colorful tomatoes, onions and papaya. Sometimes they even have horses! Thank you Michelle; thank you for bringing me there.”

Unlike Abigail, the word farmers’ market evokes in me more than that. Where I come from, a market is not just a place where buyers and sellers gather to sell goods. It is a place of communion, of festivity, where one can get an education no school on earth can provide. Even if Abigail and I have different understandings of the farmer market, we still share the same excitement for it.

On our way to the farmers’ market, I couldn’t stop thinking about my early childhood in Cameroon, an incredible country in the tropical wet zone of West Africa. Every July, I used to travel from the city of Yaoundé where I lived to visit my grandmother and attend the seasonal farmers market in the village of Baham. Each single trip was a load of emotions and discoveries.

I recall a sunny Sunday morning in July 2000, when my grandmother decided that I was old enough to spend the day with her at the village farmers’ market. As we were sitting on bean bag chairs under a broken, rusty umbrella, overwrought by the burning weather, I suddenly noticed an unusual phenomenon taking place around us. Strange creatures were shouting, screaming, and lifting the dust with unusual dance footsteps. Their black clothing and their white face masks with red eyes and animal horns on their heads made them look like a mixture of half

man, half owl. The only trait that kept them linked to humankind was their feet. They seemed like ghosts coming out of nowhere. For the little five year old I was, the spectacle was too noisy, scary, and bizarre. What scared me more was looking at people around me enjoying the show and even contributing to it with piercing screaming. For the first time, I witnessed the “Kamsi” dance. One of the most important event of my childhood. I discovered that I was part of a culture. The Baham farmers’ market was my place.

I belonged to that group of weird people.

From that summer on, as soon as the school year was over, I begged my mother to send me to Baham—she always thought it was because I missed my grandmother; only I knew that I longed for all the dry humid mornings in that tiny village. Baham is 400 miles away from the city where I lived with my parents, a close-knit where everyone knows everyone, away from all the noise of the city, with chirping birds in the morning—a community of honesty and conviviality.

During those visits, as soon as the sun struck my eyes, I jumped out of my bed, packed all the merchandise and stuff I needed for the day, brushed my teeth and waited for my grandmother to call us for breakfast a delicious brown porridge made with wheat. Then I waited for my aunt, cousins, and siblings to get ready. I remember my grandmother yelling at them “why don’t you guys behave like Michelle? Just a quarter of her enthusiasm and you will come back home with empty bags.” My aunt and her sons were not happy with that, but in front of my stringent grandmother, they couldn’t do anything besides frown and grumble.

As soon as everyone ate breakfast, I headed to the market ahead of the others. During the three miles walk, I could hear them in the back making jokes, “Don’t rush girl, we don’t get gifts for good actions here,” they said. “Look at you, do you really think you can come here and be

better than us?" They would have preferred me to be as lazy, stylish and self-centered as the other teenagers of the city.

For years, I didn't care about their cracks, but as I grew older, remarks like, "Granma girl" and "pushy town baby" became frequent. Each action I did, from helping my grandmother cook to making the best sales at the market made me out to be the "goodie goodie." Sadly, during puberty my fluctuating hormones did not make things easier. I became sensitive. I cried every time one of my family members teased me or asked me to go back to where I came from.

One day, when I was about 13, as I was arranging potatoes on a piece of cardboard placed on the floor, Judith, my supposed lovely aunt started mocking me in front of the other vendors, "Stop trying to be like us, you will never be part of this community," she said.

I kept my eyes on the potatoes and tried to avoid hers to hide the pain her words caused me. At that precise moment, I felt as if a knife had been plunged into my heart. I knew what she meant by that. *How could she dare tell me that again? My mother, grandmother and ancestors were born here on this same land! I always acted like they wanted! I was one of them!* All those thoughts passed through my mind as I was placing one after another of potatoes onto the cardboard. She was still staring at me. I breathed. I clenched my teeth, but it was so painful that by the time my eyes met hers, I burst into tears, wiped my face, and finally said, "Why are you so mean to me? Why don't you just leave me alone?"

She stared at me like my sobs and tears didn't arouse any sort of sympathy. After a few seconds, which seemed like an eternity, she stammered and added: "You are my niece, and I love you, but..." She stopped, and then the tone of her voice went up. "I hate fake people. We all know that the only thing that matter for you it's to look good in front of Grandmother. No matter what you do or how much you think you love being with us, you will never have a place here."

My aunt never and cousins gave a chance to city person. I fought to get my place in Baham for a long time, but I couldn't stand their behavior anymore. I longed to be considered a part of that village, but unfortunately they didn't want to see me as the person I am inside. They could only see me as the stereotypical city person. Being different was not acceptable to them. I then got up, ran to my grandmother's house and headed to the backyard. I collapsed on the floor and fell into tears. I tried to stop, but as soon as the tears stopped coming out, sobs followed. I kept asking myself, "*What am I doing wrong?*" *Why do people I love always reject me?*" Even in the city, I was considered a tourist; my sisters and some of my "friends" couldn't stand my unstylishness. They always put me down. Both side of my family rejected me; in few words, I was what we call in my native language "la brébis galeuse," "the black sheep."

As I write now, I live thousands miles away from Cameroon. I'm now a so-called and admired New Yorker, yet I still struggle with my identity. I have a hard time trying to relate myself to a specific group. I am neither the typical Cameroonian rural girl, nor the fashionista city girl and least of all a high-class Long Island girl. However, with time, I have learned to accept the person I am and promised myself to keep authentic whether I am accepted or not. While I am open to new horizons, a part of me is still in that tiny village of Baham in West Africa.