Colonel Tandja's Country

PETER CHILSON

Not long ago, a man I used to know lost his job and went to prison in the space of a few hours. Months later and just as abruptly he returned home, charges dropped, with little explanation. His name is Mamadou Tandja. He was once a colonel in the army of Niger, a West African country more than twice the size of France and covered mostly by the Sahara. He became, years after I met him, the twice democratically elected civilian leader of an African nation state—an anomaly on a continent of dictators.

Tandja's ten-year reign over Niger ended February 18, 2010, during a cabinet meeting at the gleaming white presidential palace overlooking the Niger River in Niamey, the capital city, when shortly after noon mutinous soldiers blew open the palace gate. This began, *The New York Times* reported, "a day of gunfire, explosions and nonstop military music on the radio" during which a few soldiers and civilians died. Mutineers burst in on the cabinet and hustled Tandja to a car, unharmed. They kept him a few days at an army base before moving him to house arrest in the servants' quarters of a palace villa, and accused him of taking more than $100 million in foreign aid and other funds. A year later, in March 2011, Niger's military rulers demoted Tandja again, this time to Kollo civilian prison outside the capital. There, among thieves, at the age of 73 he awaited trial, complaining of poor health and harsh quarters—until May, when he left Kollo a free man, all sins forgiven for lack of evidence.

Yet the criminal stain, the notion that he took the money, haunts me. I feel betrayed by a man I had hoped stood for something. For two years I was a teacher in Niger's Tahoua region, which Tandja ruled through drought in the 1980s. Governor Tandja owned a spot in the mind of every civil servant,

tangling us in fear, desire, and guilt—fear of being noticed and punished as if we all deserved a stint behind bars; desire to be blessed by his power; and guilt for not working to his standards. Tandja jailed a clerk for losing track of rice stores, an act that made him a man of the people, protector of the food. He locked up others for keeping unclean offices. He jailed a farmer jaywalking on a rural road as his motorcade approached. One man I knew was imprisoned for having a broken water faucet when Tandja visited his home.

To my knowledge, no one he sent to prison died, but to this day I cannot decide whether to despise or admire Tandja. He has wandered a Shakespearian path, sometimes Richard III, ruthless and vindictive, or Prince Hal, triumphing over personal vice to lead a country. Tandja-the-devil drank hard and pilfered food aid as his people went without. Tandja-the-last-honest-man tried to be everywhere at once for his people.

Under Tandja, half of Niger's 14 million people starved in a famine he claimed the international press invented. Yet I cannot condemn him. It's easy to damn a leader for negligence in a land for centuries mired in drought and ethnic conflict. Niger ranks 186, second from last (above the Democratic Republic of the Congo) on the 2011 United Nations Human Development Index—a measure of life expectancy, education, literacy, and standard of living. After a half-century of independence and billions of dollars in aid, Nigeriens barely scratch a living in Saharan heat. They die young in a nation, the borders of which were drawn in 1904 by Frenchmen so frustrated by persistent poverty that they later dubbed Niger a "phantom colony."

Colonel Tandja's country.

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I first met Tandja one bright morning in March 1986, when a desert-brown light tank rolled to a stop and cut its engine outside a concrete school building in Bouza, the village where I was a Peace Corps English teacher working with fifth-graders. My students and I watched through the French windows we'd opened to cool the room. The tank had four great tractor wheels and a gun like a giant finger that swiveled around to point at us, its tip inches from the center window. It was a threat too sudden and weird to protest so I ignored it. I clapped my hands: "Okay everyone," I said, "what day is today?" My students fidgeted, eyes darting from me to the windows. Aissa, in the front row, twisted the edges of her skirt and chewed her lip. In back, Abdou, mouthy and lanky, stood at his desk, eyes wide. He pointed out the windows and hissed at me in French: "Monsieur, ils viennent. They're coming." I turned to see men in uniform walking the gravel path to the classroom doorway.

We were expecting the provincial governor, Lieutenant Colonel Mamadou Tandja, touring his domain on "inspection." He entered the room with a uniformed aide and the school headmaster, who wore a flowing white robe called a *boubou* and clutched blue file folders against his chest. Then came a handful of soldiers, taking positions at the windows, rifles in hand. Tandja, in crisp fatigues and lime-green beret, stood between the headmaster and me. His large brown eyes took in everything, unblinking under a deeply furrowed brow like a fleur-de-lis, the middle fold pointing up into his forehead. He had a wide mouth with a trace of pencil-thin Clark Gable mustache, framed by deep lines like tusks from the bridge of his nose to his chin. When he spoke he revealed a gap in his front teeth.

That morning, at the headmaster's request, I'd written two names on the blackboard—the best student in red chalk and the worst in yellow, with their grade percentages. When the colonel asked the top student to stand, I studied the floor. The headmaster, face shiny with sweat, called her name, "Aissa Adamou!" in the front row, one of five girls in a class of 40. She rose to her feet, stocky in flower cloth wrap and T-shirt, chin quivering as she rested her fingertips on the desk. The colonel nodded and she sat down. Then, a row behind her, a barefoot boy in T-shirt and khaki shorts jumped up before the headmaster could read his name. Lowali Issoufou faced us as if awaiting a bullet—eyes wide, hands flat against his thighs. He pursed his lips.

Tandja walked up between the rows of desks until he was looking down on Lowali, rapping his knuckles on the boy's desk. "Bottom of your class!" he said. "You disgrace this country." No one smirked. No one laughed or whispered. Tears rolled down Lowali's cheeks, cutting dust on his skin from the walk to school, seven miles across sand and iron-rich red hardpan in heat so thick it robs you of breath. Many students hiked miles to school every day, leaving their villages in the predawn darkness to arrive in Bouza after sunrise.

I gawked at the colonel, thinking I'd misunderstood something about adults and children in Africa, or maybe I lost him in the French. But my gaze caught the barrel of that gun still pointing at us from outside the window and nothing else mattered. I was watching a cannon, a governor, and his armed

entourage bear down on a boy with bad grades who hadn't had a decent meal in weeks. The land was emerging from drought that had spread famine from Senegal on the Atlantic coast across northern Africa to the Indian Ocean. What was happening in my classroom day after day was not about teaching and learning. Students starved, they endured disease—hepatitis, malaria, guinea worm, giardia, dengue fever. A few died. I worried for them but didn't feel responsibility until that moment with the colonel. I still don't know whether to praise or damn him.

"But, Colonel," I protested in French, "You don't understand."

My words showed on Tandja's face as if I'd poked a lion with a stick. His brow tightened, lips parted, baring his teeth and drawing my eyes to that gap in his incisors. I had never felt more exposed. Right then, face to face, I realized I stood inches over him in my sandals. The power structure vanished—the tank, the students, the soldiers—leaving the colonel and me: a middle-class American kid, 22, rail thin, six-foot-three, under floppy red-brown hair I kept wiping out of my eyes. As we stared at one another, it occurred to me we also shared a question: "Who the hell are you?" I wanted to explain the boy had missed school because his family needed him during planting season, something that Tandja—himself a child of this land—well understood. Instead, I glared at him with the rage of the powerless. To glare was all I could do.

I've struggled with authority, not always knowing when to concede or fight, when the greater power is right or wrong—my parents, older brothers, teachers and coaches, senior colleagues. Authority seldom dispenses clean judgment. Parents favor certain siblings. Teachers punish students for talking out of turn as others cheat. Big countries invade small ones. My mother was an alcoholic while my father pretended not to see.

Maybe Tandja saw this in me. In front of the class he said, "Monsieur l'Americain, you must work harder," words I heard with an undercurrent—*No one is exempt, not even you*. To the class he added, "Everyone must work harder."

I nodded, head bowed. Tandja walked out, his aide, the headmaster, and soldiers following. The tank roared, backed up, and made a sharp turn to fall in behind.

Tandja might have experienced more than anger, perhaps empathy, when that boy Lowali stood up in class. Maybe the encounter moved the colonel to a kind of *if-I-survived-then-you-can-too* tough love attitude. Like Lowali, after all, Tandja had grown up trekking the bush, herding his family's animals along Niger's border with Nigeria near Lake Chad, three-days' drive east from Bouza. In 1951, when Tandja was 13, the border separated not countries but colonies—French Niger from British Nigeria—likely dividing his family between colonial identities until independence nine years later when those identities became nationalities. Africa's political borders are rooted in arbitrary lines drawn at the end of the 19th century by colonial powers that ignored clan, religion, language, and ways of using land. Tandja's immediate family found itself on the French side of that line, in Niger, and for Tandja himself there has never been an alternative. He is fiercely "Nigerois."

Lowali, who shed tears under Tandja's gaze, came from a Muslim farming family in a Hausa village that had been home to generations of landed farmers. Tandja, on the other hand, grew up in a Muslim family of shepherds. They were not farmers. His father was Fulani and his mother, Kanuri. They traveled with their livestock, a practice that puts them at odds with sedentary cultivators like the Hausa, largest of Niger's ethnic groups, speakers of one of Africa's major languages, and who number 30 million across West Africa. The Fulani, on Tandja's father's side, are close rivals who broke up the Hausa empire 200 years ago, before the colonial time. Herders and farmers in Africa have been in power struggles for centuries over differences in religious practice and control of land. Grass for cattle versus cropland for farmers. Tandja had likely grown up with conflict, watching over his family's animals, leading them to water and grass, familiar with the dangers of the bush, where flat-topped acacia trees hang on with the giant baobab, undisputed ruler of the West African forest. Wind peels back the soil, leaving hard-packed red dirt like burnt skin. On ground like this trees grow more like bushes, close to the earth alongside dwarf mesquite whose thorns turn to nails when the rains stop and everything turns brittle. Big wildlife is gone: no lions, no hyenas, or elephants, not in 40 years. Cobras and carpet vipers roam the brush, puff adders as well, and more than a dozen species of killer sand snake. You don't reach the age of 12 in this country unless you are damned tough.

Every June in Bouza, the monsoon rains brought violence. The medical dispensary—poorly staffed and supplied—filled with Hausa and Fulani wounded. Men and boys attacked each other using homemade machetes in

pitched combat over land. Women joined the fray, clawing and biting, gouging out eyes. Often, farmer fought farmer and herder fought herder.

Once, drinking tea at a roadside table near my house, I watched two boys fight bitterly for tea leaves my host had tossed in the sand. Another time, I watched a small riot break out after a sack of food aid biscuits fell off a military truck and burst open in the street. People scrambled for the spoils until a soldier broke it up. In Bouza and all of Niger, life was and is about food—finding food, growing it, guarding it, fighting for it.

Three thousand people lived in Bouza, a district center like a county seat, in Tahoua province. Tahoua sits on the road to northeastern uranium mines valuable to the Americans and French. But all the uranium profits in the world can't replace the curse of Niger's landscape: 630,000 square miles of rock, sand, and dwindling savanna, part Sahara and part grassland Sahel that French colonial mapmakers locked deep inland. When I arrived in Niger, drought had nearly wiped out a critical food resource—livestock, millions strong—and left the country dependent on foreign aid, as it is today, after Tandja's fall. A third of Niger's budget of $320 million—comparable to the operating costs of a major American university—comes from foreign aid, much of it focused on food. Tandja's accusers in the military allege that as president he squirreled away an amount of money equal to one-third the national purse.

Yet Tandja himself built his career pointing the finger of blame. As a young officer in 1974, he helped engineer Niger's first military coup. The new junta, under Colonel (later General) Seyni Kountché, took power after accusing the civilian government of corruption during a time of famine. Kountché gave Tandja tough assignments, like governor of Maradi—the region Anderson Cooper profiled in his superb 2005 famine reporting for CNN—and interior minister, and governor of Tahoua, where land conflicts were rife and many towns, including Bouza, became refugee camps. Kountché survived three coup attempts and died in office in 1987 of a brain tumor. By then, writes political scientist Samuel Decalo, most of his original ruling circle "was either dead, purged, or disgraced."

But not Tandja. He survived for his loyalty to Kountché and by staying away from the capital city. As governor of Tahoua, he played the hard-ass man of action in a country of starvation where bureaucrats stole food aid and resold it in open marketplaces. Twice a month during my time in Bouza, a military truck laden with food rumbled through the village and parked in an open field. There, under the gaze of soldiers, men in blue smocks dispensed protein biscuits and soup mix to hundreds of people. Many walked long distances for this food in order to feed large extended families.

On one of his inspection tours, Tandja reportedly found a trader in a village market selling rice from a burlap sack with foreign aid markings on it—something I saw dozens of times in Bouza. Witnesses told me that Tandja dragged the man by his collar to a truck to be taken to jail while his soldiers distributed the foodstuffs for free. And yet my headmaster and the Bouza police chief stacked bags of rice with United Nations markings in their homes and offices. They sold the stuff openly. I wondered if the trader's real crime was that he had not shared his profit with Tandja. I had no way to verify these suspicions or the stories I heard. I knew only what I saw, like the fact that the police chief used his official Land Rover to unload bags of U.N. rice to be sold at the tin shack grocery stall near my house. With every delivery, the merchant handed the chief a wad of West African francs. No attempt to hide it. The school headmaster did business straight from his office, where burlap sacks bearing the U.S. flag with a red, white, and blue handshake leaned against the wall.

Tandja will probably never answer for his years as governor in Tahoua. But as former president he did his year of house arrest and two months in a prison outside the capital. Less than three months before his release, the military held elections for a new president and parliament. Through it all Tandja denied wrongdoing, and someone heard him. In early May, Niger's court of appeals ruled his arrest warrant invalid for lack of evidence and dropped all charges. The court also ruled that the civil court judge who signed the arrest warrant had no authority over a head of state. Tandja's freedom carries no conditions, which means he can stand for a seat in the parliament he dissolved almost four years ago. To date, he has not announced his intentions, content perhaps merely to watch as Libya's collapse to the north and the end of Muammar Al-Gaddafi's regime have flooded the region with weapons. As a result, Niger and other Sahelien countries are struggling with a sweeping rebellion of Tuareg tribesman and Islamic jihadists, some trained in Gaddafi's army, who have declared an independent state deep in the Sahara desert of northern Mali, Niger's troubled neighbor to the west.

Tandja's release must have felt bittersweet, perhaps a bit like back in 2002, in the months leading to the Iraq War, when the United States accused Niger and Tandja himself of selling yellow cake uranium, a raw ingredient of nuclear weapons, to Saddam Hussein, only to have the claim withdrawn for lack of evidence. The affair famously involved a CIA agent, Valerie Plame, and her husband Joseph Wilson, a former diplomat in the U.S. Embassy in Niger, who revealed there was no uranium sale to Saddam. Uranium happens to be one of the few natural resources Niger possesses that is of great value, especially to France, where nuclear reactors power most of the country. I wonder as well, with the same curiosity I had during our classroom staring match, what logic Tandja followed five years ago, his people struggling through another drought, when he banned foreign reporters from traveling outside the capital and issued a decree making it a crime punishable by prison for any citizen to utter the word "famine" in a public place. That must have gone down well in the rain-parched countryside where granaries stood empty and many newborns were dying because their mothers were too ill and malnourished to breastfeed.

Yet, as African dictators go, Tandja is not in the league of the frighteningly corrupt and bizarre, like Ethiopia's Mengistu Haile Mariam, who in 1974, legend has it, buried the emperor Haile Selassie under a latrine before launching his reign of terror. Two years later, Jean Bedel Bokassa proclaimed himself "emperor" of Central African Republic and clubbed to death school children who protested his rule. In Nigeria during the 1990s, General Sani Abacha amassed a $4 billion fortune before he died of a heart attack in the presence of teenage Indian prostitutes. Mobutu Sese Seko, President of Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), looted his country to emerge as one of the world's wealthiest heads of state until he died of cancer in 1997.

Soon after assuming Niger's presidency, Tandja released a list of personal assets, including six villas, a thousand head of cattle, and two vehicles. Fairly modest when compared to his peers among Africa's Big Men. Tandja pressed "hard work" as a theme of his government. He adopted the motto "To reconcile Niger's people with work," which is to suggest that for Niger's citizens—farmers and herders most—just surviving on one of the planet's most inhospitable landscapes was not enough for him. Like his mentor, Seyni Kountché, Tandja jailed journalists and dissenters, but Tandja is no killer, unlike Kountché, a dour ascetic who frowned on displays of wealth. He famously had three sets of clothing: his khaki dress uniform, stripped of most insignia; a white *boubou* robe and Muslim skull cap; and the dark business suit he wore on visits to western capitals. Kountché was not much of a thief but he organized an impressive secret police network, executed rivals, and imprisoned critics in underground cells deep in the Sahara. A few dozen died. A teacher I knew went to prison for speaking disrespectfully of Kountché in a bar. Routine dictator stuff.

Tandja has little blood on his hands, but plenty of personality. In fact, it's that cult of personality, the image of Niger's last honest man, that for decades threw his countrymen and people like me off his scent. What comes to mind is a July 2009 interview Tandja gave to *The New York Times*. Tandja had raised a fuss by announcing he would extend his rule beyond the constitutionally imposed limit of two five-year terms. To quash dissent and legal obstacles, he dissolved Niger's constitution, parliament, and high court, promising to put in place a new constitution. Tandja, the *Times* reporter wrote, "beamed" during the interview, claiming "the people" were "begging" him to stay on. "The people demand it," he said. In the hallway outside the president's office the reporter noted a large mural of Tandja, "arms raised, in the center of lush fields, surrounded by tiny citizens with arms reaching out to him."

Tiny citizens. Tandja's people.

I witnessed a live version of the mural when Colonel Tandja's convoy roared into Bouza months after the incident in my classroom. I was standing with my students and hundreds of other people in the central square in front of the prefecture, across the street from my house. I was the only white face, impossible to miss. Tandja saw me and smiled, holding my gaze as if we were old friends. Mortified, I watched him push through the crowd toward me, touching heads as he went. He put his hand on my shoulder. "English teecha," he shouted, that hand moving to my neck, pinching the tendons. I didn't dare show displeasure. He grinned at me. I stared at the gap in his teeth and the pistols with ivory-colored handles he wore on his hips, teasing adornments that distort personality. Like the fashion quirks of Libya's late leader, the self-proclaimed "guide" of Africa, Colonel Muammar Al-Gaddafi, whose

frizzy rock star hairdo billowed out from under his famous hats, and whose uniforms seemed to come from the wardrobe of Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. As president, Tandja got on well with Gaddafi, but he stuck to plain suits and pastel-colored robes. As governor, Tandja was a field man, preferring crisp camouflage and polished leather combat boots, his fancy pistols in polished leather holsters. Tinted aviator eyeglasses concealed his eyes just enough.

Hand on my neck, Tandja announced in French, "The teacher's house is dirty. Someone show this man how to sweep!" I smelled the alcohol, sour like old onions, and I could see it in Tandja's watery, bloodshot eyes.

This happened on one of his "inspections." Tandja came to Bouza half a dozen times a year, traveling 90 miles over dirt roads from the regional capital city, Tahoua, which was also the name of the region he ruled. His fleet of blue Land Rovers with khaki canvas tops tore up the dirt main street, throwing dust and gravel over cheering townspeople. Early the morning of each visit, the police chief drove village streets with an electric bullhorn, informing citizens to be at the town square by a certain time. Then, hours late, Tandja, not quite six feet tall and powerfully built, would step from his vehicle as his solders fanned out. He'd stride right to the crowds, convinced, I guess, that everyone loved him.

I smiled sheepishly at Tandja's critique of my housekeeping, stunned to my bones as if he'd been talking about my face or clothes. I had no idea what he meant. Laughing, he patted my back and moved on through the crowd, flirting with schoolgirls, running his fingers over heads and shoulders. Tandja, to my knowledge, had never been in my house or my yard enclosed by mud walls, facing the square where we now stood. He spoke for a few minutes about the virtues of hard work and then drove off to a different town, leaving us all in another cloud of dust.

Later that day the local prefect sent a soldier to my house. He was about my age, taller and skinnier. "I am sorry to bother you," he said. "I have instructions." The soldier belonged to the Republican Guard, the unit that protected government buildings and officials, his green uniform distinguished by a red beret and shoulder boards. He handed me a reed hand broom, its foot-long bristles bound with twine, and motioned me to follow him outside to the street. I hesitated, fearing that Tandja would be waiting there. A few yards behind, I followed the soldier out the gate and around to

the street at the front of my house to see only a couple of old men drinking tea at the grocery stall. A few boys played soccer with a stuffed sock. There, he faced me and gestured with one hand at the ground along the wall. We stood in the street looking at each other, me holding the hand broom. I was still thinking ahead to a darker fate. Maybe he was escorting me across the street and public square to the prefect's office, where of course Tandja would be waiting and I would be harshly scolded and pressed into some kind of labor or taken away in one of those blue Land Rovers to be deported.

"Sweep," the soldier said. "I am supposed to watch you sweep."

"What?"

"Sweep," he repeated more loudly. "Colonel Tandja has ordered this."

I smiled involuntarily, out of relief, not amusement. The soldier frowned, taking my happiness for disrespect, and stepped toward me, pointing again at the ground. I did as told, breathing freely for the first time in minutes, bent over, sweeping pebbles, leaves, bits of paper and plastic into the center of the street, moving in a zigzag pattern from one end of the wall to the other, clearing the front of my house. I kept glancing at the prefect's office across the square, where not a single official vehicle was parked, my hope growing that this would be the limit of my punishment. A few people gathered to watch as the soldier studied my work, arms folded. An old woman stepped forward to finish the job, but the soldier raised his hand.

"No," he said quietly. "He must do it."

From that day on for another six months until the end of my service, I repeated this chore every morning and afternoon. My students taunted me, calling out "teecha sweepa!"

Weeks later, Tandja was said to have failed in an attempt to punish another of his subjects, a species of green monkey common to the West African Sahel. The animal breached an official outdoor ceremony, as roaming monkeys will do, by jumping on a table to spit on the colonel's uniform. This I heard from a German Red Cross doctor who came through Bouza to drop off supplies at the medical dispensary.

"It was incredible," he said. "Tandja actually stood up and pointed at the monkey as if it had just attempted to assassinate him."

"You saw this?"

The doctor laughed. "No," he said, "but I know people who were there. Apparently he ordered soldiers to chase the thing down."

I mentioned the monkey incident at school. The headmaster told me a different story. He said that Tandja had drawn his pistol and fired at the monkey, which got away. "It was just a drunken joke," he said.

Tandja wasn't joking a few months later when he commandeered my house for five days during a cultural event in Bouza, the equivalent of a state fair for the Tahoua region. Early one morning, the day before the fair, the soldier who oversaw my sweeping project delivered the message at the gate to my yard. He handed me Tandja's written order in the form of a telegram to the Bouza prefect in red type on thin onion paper. From memory I recorded the message in my diary later in the day:

> HIS EXCELLENCY COLONEL MAMADOU TANDJA, GOVERNOR. OF THE DEPARTMENT OF TAHOUA, HONORABLY INFORMS YOU THAT THE GOVERNOR WISHES TO STAY IN THE RESIDENCE OF PETER CHILSON . . . MAKE ALL NECESSARY ARRANGEMENTS

I glanced up and the soldier snatched the message from my hands.

"You'll have to get out of your house by this afternoon," he told me.

"But where—?"

"Where you sleep is your problem. Colonel Tandja will be here in the morning." The soldier shrugged. "But he may come today. So be sure your house is clean."

Frantically, I cleaned house and organized belongings, mostly books and clothes, in a metal chest I left on the floor in a corner of the main room. Then, I stuffed some clothes in a bag and went to the house of another teacher, where I would sleep on a foam mattress in the yard. I took my papers with me, including passport, letters, and photos. I packed my lesson plans and grade books in case Tandja decided to inspect them. I resigned myself to public humiliation, maybe even a few days in the Bouza gendarmerie, convinced that no amount of cleaning would appease the colonel's whims, and that he and his soldiers would confront me in the street and haul me off to jail.

Still, it would have been conspicuous not to show my face during the festival. So, each day I attended events, like the camel races where Tandja sat with local dignitaries in the shade of a pavilion. He wore his field combat uniform, neatly pressed. I went to a drumming contest and a dance performance of women from a nearby village, and I listened to a speech Tandja gave

on the virtues of hard work during hard times, poking his index finger in the air. I wrote down one line: "Le travail vous donne la liberté." Work will give you freedom. I expected the worst, but Tandja never cast me a glance.

What I did not know until the day his convoy blew out of town was that Tandja had changed his mind about my house and taken the home of a local forestry officer named Moctar. Tandja, villagers told me, threw Moctar in jail because the water faucet in his yard malfunctioned so Tandja and his entourage had water carried in from a nearby well. During the festival, I was too afraid to go near my house so I never noticed it was empty. When I returned, I found no one had gone inside.

I never learned what prompted Tandja's change of heart and neither did the local prefect, who smiled and shrugged when I asked him. "You are lucky," he told me. No doubt, but I felt a little insulted, as if my quarters were not good enough for Tandja. Meanwhile, Moctar's fate burned the lips of everyone in Bouza and my feelings turned to guilt. Tandja, standing shirtless in the yard, reportedly flew into a rage when he found the faucet did not work. Moctar's terrified wife fled the compound and spread the word through the village while Moctar tried to apologize and fix the faucet. Tandja sent him away and remained in the house when he could have dislodged me, the prefect, the police chief, or the headmaster from our homes.

I didn't know Moctar well. He was a couple of years older. Bouza was his first government posting after graduating from the national forestry school. I saw him the day after the festival, marching with a handful of prisoners through Bouza on some work detail, guarded by a couple of gendarmes. The prisoners wore blue shorts and T-shirts. Moctar, standing tall with his head newly shaved like all the prisoners, smiled at me as I stood along the street. He had on his gray forester's beret. I tried to walk along and talk to him, but a gendarme waved me away with the butt of his rifle.

The Bouza jail was a few hundred yards from my house, through a thicket of eucalyptus trees. One day I visited Moctar with a box of Chinese green tea, which Africans prepare extra sweet, and a couple pounds of grilled goat meat wrapped in newspaper. I chose the time on a weekend around noon, when I knew the guards and prisoners would be taking tea and eating, like most villagers. A collection of pathetic mud buildings formed the jail in a dusty yard ringed by neem trees, whose thick and rounded leafy canopies cast pools of shade. Sheets rather than doors hung in the buildings' entryways.

Moctar, a half dozen inmates, and a few guards sat on empty buckets as a guard prepared tea, nestling two kettles on a mound of hot coals in the dirt.

When he saw me, Moctar raised his hand in a closed fist, a Sahelien gesture of welcome and solidarity. "Monsieur Peter," he said, "bienvenue!" I shook hands with everyone and produced the tea and meat, delighting the guards. I passed the meat around. Moctar fetched a bucket and turned it over in the dirt for me to sit on.

"So what do you think of my new home?" he said.

The guards laughed as if his question was the funniest thing they'd heard in months.

"I like your neighbors," I nodded to the group. "But I don't understand why you are here, Moctar."

One of the guards, a little breathless from laughing, said, "Tandja is a hard man." He added his own twist to the monkey incident—that Tandja captured the animal himself and ate it. Everyone laughed.

A month or so later, Moctar left jail and went back to his wife, his home with its newly repaired faucet, and his regular job. I wonder where he is now—in a good place I hope, perhaps not so surprised about Tandja's release and maybe relishing those few months when he knew Tandja the prisoner had no say over what he would eat or when he would sleep and no way of controlling the rumors that swirled around his years in power and stories about kickbacks and arms deals and huge sums of money.

I saw Moctar at his office before I left Bouza and Niger in 1987. We drank tea and I asked, "Have you heard from your friend Tandja?"

Moctar smiled nervously. "He has forgotten me."

"If you are lucky."

Moctar's smile vanished. "Monsieur Peter," he said, "you are the lucky one."

Talk

NATON LESLIE

"Just a minute. Your father wants to talk to you," my mother says. I have just called, and I'm surprised she is handing me off to him. In the last few months I've been calling more often. My father's illness is now severe, and because I live 500 miles away, calling is the only way I can easily help.

Sunday used to be the only day I spoke with my father. A Depression baby, born in June 1929, my father only called on Sunday when the rates were lowest, a nickel an hour before unlimited long distance service became the norm. He'd talk about politics, the economy, or tell me stories. We'd talk for about an hour, though I never got to say much. My father said what he wanted to say, and when he was done he got off the phone. It often infuriated me, because he never seemed to be listening, only talking. I tried to keep it from bothering me, though. We'd had a pretty troubled relationship, as fathers and sons will sometimes, and I wanted to make peace with him. These Sunday conversations erased many distances.

On this day I can tell he is on the phone when I hear his breathing. It takes a few seconds for him to talk.

"Hi," he says inside an exhalation

"Hey, how are you doing?" I ask automatically, and inwardly chide myself for my stupidity. My father is the kind of person who will *answer* that question. I already know how he is, and don't really want him to describe it.

"I've been better," he says, followed by silence. I am surprised at his terseness.

My mother prompts him from the background. "Tell him our snow is starting to melt."

"Our snow is starting to melt," he says. Then silence recommences.