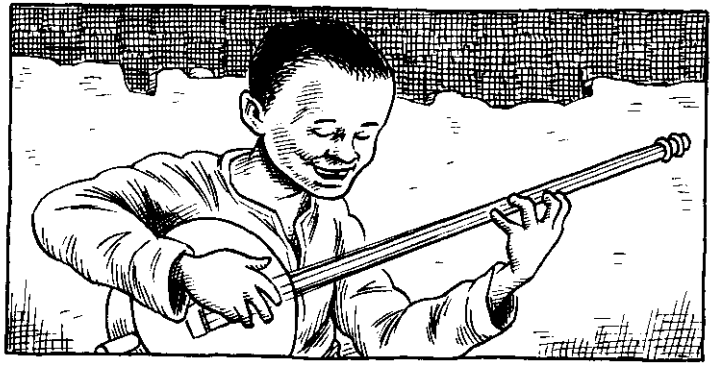


Chapter 1

Hundreds of horns gleamed in the African sun. Hundreds of tails flicked to and fro. Hundreds of hooves trudged through narrow streets. This was rush hour and Sophie Brown was being jostled along in a crowd of cows which were heading out of Gorom-Gorom to graze. The animals moved in one great mass, eyes fixed on the ground – like Londoners on their way to work, thought Sophie. Even after three years living in

Africa, she still couldn't help thinking about England. Most of her friends were back there, after all.

Except for Gidaado the Fourth of course. He lived here in Gorom-Gorom and was Sophie's best friend by far. Gidaado didn't know when his birthday was but he looked about ten, which was the same as her. He knew hundreds of songs and jokes and he had a very cool albino camel called Chobbal. What more could you want in a friend?

Sophie put her hand over her mouth to protect herself from the clouds of dust being kicked up by the commuting cows. She screwed up her eyes and squinted at the mud-brick houses to her left and right, trying to remember where Madame Maasa's place was. This morning Sophie was on a very special errand for Gidaado – he had given her a pocketful of money and told her to buy three thousand pancakes.

There was the house! And there was Madame Maasa, sitting outside on a small wooden stool. She was hunched over her frying pan and gazing

into it intently, like a fortune-teller over a crystal ball. Sophie elbowed her way through the herd of cows and entered Madame Maasa's yard.

'Hello,' said Sophie. 'Did you pass the night in peace?'

'Peace only,' said Madame Maasa. She did not even look up from her frying pan.

'How much are your *maasa*?' asked Sophie.

'Ten francs each.'

Sophie looked at the pan. *Maasa* were small African pancakes – blobs of batter fried in vegetable oil. They smelled delicious.

'What if I buy a hundred?'

Madame Maasa flipped a pancake with her spatula. 'In that case,' she said, 'five francs each.'

'What if I buy three thousand?'

Madame Maasa shrieked with laughter in mid-flip, causing one of her pancakes to sail through the air and flop down in the dust at Sophie's feet, where a chicken began pecking at it. 'If you buy three thousand *maasa*,' chuckled Madame Maasa, 'you can have them at three

francs each, and I'll even give you this stool I'm sitting on.'

'Deal,' said Sophie.

'What?'

Sophie held out a green banknote. 'Here's five thousand francs. I'll give you the rest when you've finished.'

Madame Maasa spluttered. 'But...but ... you can't...I can't...'

'I'll pick up the first thousand tonight,' said Sophie.

'But—'

'I've got to go,' called Sophie, breaking into a run. 'Peace be with you!'

Madame Maasa scowled and hit the chicken on the head with her spatula. Three thousand pancakes! What could this addle-brained white girl want with three thousand pancakes? Still, she thought, it was a good deal. Nine thousand francs could buy a lot in this town.

Sophie's next stop was the marketplace. Today was market day and the town was full of buying, selling, gossiping people. Muusa ag

Bistro was pacing the streets selling extra-long turbans. Baa Jibi Norme was shouting for people to come and buy his cheap designer sunglasses. Salif dan Bari was in his usual spot, selling New Salif Extra-Plus Anti-Snakebite Pills. And in the middle of it all was Gidaado the Fourth. He was standing – yes, *standing* – on the snowy hump of his albino camel, and an eager crowd was gazing up at him.

'There are two types of people in this world,' Gidaado was saying. 'Firstly, there are those who love General Alai Crêpe-Sombo.'

'THAT'S US!' shouted a voice in the crowd.

'And secondly—' Gidaado paused.

'Yes?' cried the crowd.

'Secondly—'

'YES?'

'Secondly, there are those who ARE General Alai Crêpe-Sombo!!!'

The crowd fell about laughing.

'The second group has only one member!' shouted Gidaado and the front row of the audience began to cheer.

Gidaado must be loving this, thought Sophie. *He always did like being the centre of attention.*

Gidaado the Fourth was a griot, which meant that he spent all his time telling stories and singing the praises of Very Important People. These days he was working for General Alai Crêpe-Sombo, helping to drum up support for his election campaign. The election of a new president was only three days away.

'Give me a Crêpe!' shouted Gidaado.

'CRÊPE!' yelled the crowd.

'Give me a Sombo!'

'SOMBO!'

'Give me a Bombo-Combo-Wombo-Zombo-Thombo-Crêpity-Sombo!'

'BOMBO-COMBO-WOMBO-ZOMBO-THAhahahahaha . . .'

'Who do you want for president?'

'CRÊPE-SOMBO!!!'

'Time for a song!' shouted Gidaado. 'Somebody please pass me my *hoddu*.'

The crowd stamped and cheered. Gidaado reached down to take hold of his three-string

guitar, then stood and began to pluck the strings. Sophie grinned and squeezed in amongst the spectators.

'Actually,' said Gidaado, 'I don't think I should. This song might give you nightmares.'

'Sing it!' cried the crowd.

'I really don't know.'

'SING IT!'

'All right. Don't say I didn't warn you.' Gidaado the Fourth, official praise singer for General Alai Crêpe-Sombo, swelled and began to sing in a high-pitched voice:

'One night Alai Crêpe-Sombo was a-
shepherding his sheep
Along a moonless footpath in the Scary
Fairy Wood.
Two hundred scary fairies were awoken
from their sleep,
And they sneakily surrounded him as scary
fairies do.'

The crowd had gone from mad excitement to

deathly silence. Sophie knew what the scary fairies were; they were forest djinns which lived in trees and came out at night to cause trouble. People in Gorom-Gorom were terrified of them.

"Who's there?" said General Sombo and his voice was loud and deep.
"Are you friend or are you foe or are you something in-between?"
"We're foe," said Scary Fairy One. "We're gonna eat your sheep,
And if you try and stop us we will also eat your spleen."

"Eeew," said General Sombo and he gave a gallant laugh.
"That sounds to me a thoroughly unappetizing feast.
Your hunger might just vanish when you're splatted with my staff.
You lily-livered fairies do not scare me in the least."

What followed was as bloody as the Fall of Timbuktu,
As heroic as the capture of the Koupiela Keep.
Crêpe-Sombo gave those wicked djinns a lesson in Kung Fu,
He de-fairy-fied the forest and defended all his sheep!'

Gidaado's audience breathed a sigh of relief and began to clap. The song had pushed all the right buttons – fear of the dark, fear of djinns and love of sheep. Crêpe-Sombo was a hero.

Sophie joined in the clapping but something seemed not quite right. After all, General Crêpe-Sombo was a soldier, not a shepherd. She nudged the girl next to her.

'What do you think?' Sophie whispered. 'Truth or legend?'

'Truth, of course,' said the girl. 'You think the General would think twice about beating up a few djinns? Look at him. You can see his muscles rippling even under his uniform.'

It was true, General Alai Crêpe-Sombo was a fine figure of a man. There he stood, more than six feet tall and built like a comic-book hero. The rows of medals on his barrel-like chest gleamed in the midday sun. As Sophie watched, the General crouched slightly and bunched his fists, then sprang onto the bonnet of his Land Rover and up onto the roof rack. The crowd went wild. Ground to roof rack in two leaps: quite a feat.

A small bearded man wearing a red beret clambered up onto the roof of the Land Rover and stood beside General Crêpe-Sombo. Sophie recognised him as Furki Baa Turki, the loudest town crier in the entire province.

'*Hommes de Gorom-Gorom!*' cried General Crêpe-Sombo in French, shielding his eyes from the sun. 'Men of Gorom-Gorom, I stand here today and I am filled with compassion. I see you bumbling along, bleating to each other, Which way, which way, which way should we go? Men of Gorom-Gorom, you are sheep without a shepherd!'

Furki Baa Turki translated the General's words into Fulfulde. His voice was so loud that Sophie had to put her fingers in her ears.

'He's so right,' murmured the girl next to her.

'Men of Gorom-Gorom,' roared the General, 'let Crêpe-Sombo be your shepherd!'

'LET CRÊPE-SOMBO BE YOUR SHEPHERD!' yelled Furki Baa Turki, and the crowd nodded.

'Men of Gorom-Gorom,' roared the General, 'follow Crêpe-Sombo!'

'FOLLOW CRÊPE-SOMBO!' yelled Furki Baa Turki, and the crowd beamed.

'Men of Gorom-Gorom,' roared the General, 'vote for Crêpe-Sombo!'

'VOTE FOR CRÊPE-SOMBO!' yelled Furki Baa Turki, and the crowd applauded.

'Women of Gorom-Gorom,' roared the General, 'that goes for you too!'

'WOMEN TOO!' yelled Furki Baa Turki.

Sophie turned and pushed her way through the crowd. Interesting though it was to watch Gidaado the Fourth and Furki Baa Turki, she

had more important things to do. She hurried around the various market stalls, buying batteries for her radio, goat meat for her dad and cucumbers for her tortoise.

'Did you remember to order the General's pancakes?'

The voice at Sophie's shoulder made her jump. It was Gidaado.

'Of course I remembered,' said Sophie. 'Three thousand pancakes coming right up.'

'Good.' Gidaado seemed relieved. 'What do you think of the rally?'

Sophie curled her lip. 'Women of Gorom-Gorom, that goes for you as well,' she mimicked. 'I don't like your boss's attitude.'

'You have no taste,' said Gidaado. 'Personally, I think he is magnificent.'

'He pays you to think that,' said Sophie. 'What was all that "One night Alai Crêpe-Sombo was a-shepherding his sheep" stuff?'

Gidaado grinned. 'That was my idea,' he said. 'It makes the herders love him. It makes them think he's one of them.'

'So it's not true.'

'Not strictly, no. It's an epic poem. It's a praise song. It's a part of our tradition.'

'It's a pack of lies,' said Sophie.

Gidaado grinned. 'You know nothing,' he said. 'See you later.'