

Also, he wouldn't even entertain the idea of taking the witness stand in my defense.

In his opinion, events I believed had derived from transcendent interference would be impossible to explain. It would be out of the jury's question to imagine it under the government's cross-examination scrutiny.

Suddenly, the prosecutor's voice changed, his speech fading to a level I couldn't follow. A rare distortion of my vision set in as everything became an old, scratchy, and jittery silent film. My attorney continued taking copious notes at the table regardless, the court reporter transcribing every word spoken uninterrupted. Then, a powerful, recognizable force gripped my attention, replacing the government counsel's remote and meaningless distant words.

The drive carried the mystical traditional consecrated African percussion instruments I had known as the *Batá drums* or *tambores*. It filled me with immense hope and passion since their function was to worship and set up a medium between believers and the beckoned gods. It often announced the flamboyant deity *Shangó*, the drums' virile patron.

At this instant, my heart raced, and I shivered. A state of unrest mounted, prompting an urgent need to turn in every direction in a search for the beat's source.

I lowered my ear against the cold tabletop, seeking to listen, but the pulsation originated elsewhere. The table shook from the intense vibration. I noted the distant, intoning sound of a soloist, *Gallo*, singer, and an enchanting chorus responding to his lead.

The dynamic drumming conveyed the rhythmic mantra filling the courtroom.

I revered it, spanning my surroundings again. Still, no one else experienced the energy approaching the hall or hailed the reverberations. Instead, the drumbeats increased their strident tempo, burrowing deep into the center of my chest. Still no reaction.

On impulse, something drove me to lift and pivot my head, this time searching for the source of a fantastic whisper in my ear. "Listen,

listen.” I alerted the faithful wide-eyed blackbird. The spirit of the dead had, at last, broken its silence.

“Relax. Relax,” the voice said in a prolonged, soothing timbre.

It elicited me to open my eyes and embrace the prophetic words complemented by worship’s pounding cadence and adoration. I had no reason to fear; the voice reassured me as if someone had instructed it to prepare me to brace for the unknown’s comfort.

Then, all of my senses jolted in response to a strong tremor.

A booming crash followed from the public seating area in the back of the courtroom. Unnerved and startled by the dynamic impact, I slid around in my seat, explosive energy rattling apart and pulling open the double hardwood doors wide open. It announced the mixture of sounds prepared to engulf the room. The brutal force was nearing, like the approach of a locomotive speeding with fury to its last station. The courtroom’s entrance had shifted into a distant and uphill slant. Something had set a reverential stage.

A thin, older black woman with vibrant air emerged from a drifting mist outside the tall, shadowy doorway. An all-white folkloric dress with a matching headpiece enriched her presence of deliberate grandeur. She captivated my attention, taking her time stepping through the courtroom’s threshold. Then, dancing unhurried, she advanced down the long middle corridor in a rhythmic spell; her brash and enigmatic laughter overrode the undetected drumming instruments. Finally, she nodded as if moving to a single-minded, inaudible tune, pausing amid her sacred dance, throwing her head back and halfway lowering her body into a squat position.

She widened the stance of her lower legs, placing her hands on her knees after a repeated clap. Together, she sensually exposed and rolled her naked shoulders back and forth, followed by her hips’ seductive rotation. The appearance of extreme pleasure, almost arousal, adorned her face.

The intruder turned from smooth steps to an intense, defiant force.

Her head jerked nonstop, shaking her entire body. The full flar-

ing skirt's quick transfers and patterns were like hoisting a flag in a violent storm. Once again, she paused, peered over the room, and engaged in a passionate solo of widespread awkward hand motions and facial contortions on par with Mick Jagger's high-energy stage performances.

Now, she dipped her head and torso over and under imaginary obstacles, scouting for something specific yet unknown. Her bright brown eyes searched with persistence until she found her prey, locking them onto me. Then, as straight as an arrow aimed to kill, she stretched her slim arm parallel to her shoulder's height, pointing at me and hollering in a celebratory tongue. "Aché de Egun!" she cried. The dead's blessing. It suggested she had found her intended target, bearing fixation on me from that point onward, determined to seize. In adoration, she raised her arms and opened her hands high. And she praised.

Electrifying dance strides followed, transferring and shifting her skinny legs.

Then, in conclusion, she raised her knees to her chest, snapped out the lower part of her limbs, and drove down her elongated bare feet. The fast, repetitive, and crisp slaps of the uncovered soles over the glossy marble floor set off like firecrackers. As she advanced farther into the hall, she twirled in place in jubilation and froze again, striking a statue-like pose I sensed for my exclusive delight. *Vogue*, I would later come to redefine them. Also, the postures suggested she wished to stress her next abrupt devotional moves.

Beyond question, her presence commanded the room, whispers changing into an incessant and eerie childlike giggle that proclaimed a euphoric cry. "¡Fiesta!"

Several faithful servants surfaced, *creyentes*, trailing the woman in a line down the footpath.

They looked to incite prayer in harmony with the thunderous, exultant drumbeats, a mix of black and brown-skin-toned men and women loyal to the unmistakable spiritual leader.

The women in the group, dressed in white garments, wore simi-

lar headdresses and lacked footwear. They sang and clapped uninterrupted, executing every move with deliberate passion and devotion. Shirtless, the men exposed their lean, defined, muscular torsos glistening with sweat. The amateur body tattoos denoted unapologetic religious affiliations.

They'd fashioned extended, colorful schemes of sacred beads into necklaces and bracelets to bedeck them. I distinguished them by the name *collares* or *elekes*. The beaded charms signified the individual's faithful relationship to the orishas—the *Santería* religion's holy symbol, the deities and spirits entrusted to navigate their lives.

Followers called upon them whenever needed, considering the amulet an intimate sanctuary providing bearer protection, control, and spiritual unity.

A lone black child who couldn't have been older than eight also appeared and paraded as a part of the assembly. "Eleguá, Eleguá," he prompted me to call him on impulse as he moved past, ignoring me. I thought to have identified the bug-eyed boy as the familiar orisha deity of roads depicted as a young child. He wore a formal dark suit, tie, and a red dress shirt, yet his tough guise bore an unsympathetic and extreme disposition. At his side, he gripped a compact blemished hatchet. And undisturbed, he stepped barefooted straight forward, entering the judge's chambers.

The group numbered between twelve and fifteen, or maybe even more.

They executed rigorous devotional dance steps in unison, some toting and whirling live frightened birds, including roosters, chickens, and doves. Others shook bunches of leafy twigs, flowers, and dried branches, creating a worship path of loose feathers, petals, and greeneries.

Then, the formation advanced, rocking the line forward, backward, and side-to-side in rhythm and zealous expressions.

At long last, they made their way to the courtroom's floor in a bold approach, the projected center stage. "Ven, ven," the women called to me, beckoning with their quick motion in accord with stoic

looks. Drops of heavy sweat dotted the men's bodies, occupying the circling air. The Batáleros gave the impression of having been in a nonstop performance.

Soaked silhouettes of those pounding with fury on the three horizontal, dual-headed, hourglass-shaped Batá drums were more pronounced. Of varying sizes, each drum performed its specific musical functions. *El bembé*, the jubilee, had begun.

The drum was the African gods' music, an inimitable sound born in the continent's deep jungles. They said worshippers delivered messages to the gods through the sacred instrument's beat. *What is the meaning?* I wondered. A follower towed a resilient and boisterous goat at the grouping's rear, pushing, pulling, and twisting the tight rope around its neck, dragging the poor animal past the defense table. It swiveled its head to watch me, letting out a harsh-spoken bleat that expressed a last-ditch plea to end the cruelty. "Don't. Don't. Don't."

Beyond doubt, the mammal's repeated cries would turn into predictive words of fate. Shrinking back in fear, I didn't act in response to its desperate outcry.

Another man at the worship line's finish cradled two devil-horned statuettes, conveying a sense of an entitled benediction. I couldn't discern the tumultuous scene, rigid with tension before my eyes. In sequence, I brought the slow touch of my shy hand to my forehead, lower chest, and shoulders, accompanied by the Trinitarian formula, the Catholic expression of the Holy Cross sign comforting me for a slight instant. During moments of dread and insecurity, but at my convenience, I pursued the Christian faith for protection.

When they entered the room, the lamps' fixtures dimmed until everything darkened. Yet, there were no signs anyone else had spotted the invaders. In the meantime, the rapid pulse in my temples and my overloaded heart's thudding signaled extreme anxiety. The place had been downright overtaken, and they established the stage to deliver an uncanny form of justice.

Undisrupted by the legal proceedings, the group intoned an ancient African chant that invoked the deity Shangó. I also recalled he

was the powerful orisha of lightning, war, and male sexuality. Following the soloist's lead, the chorus answered with zeal.

I repeated a chanted prayer, praising and honoring the deceased ancestors, words buried into my subconscious under my breath in an impetuous reaction.

*“Mala de Kawo,  
(Aina Uka)  
Ayala de Kawo,  
(Aina Uka)  
Shangó de Kawo,  
(Aina Uka).”*

I leaped out of my chair when I finally recognized the eccentric religious leader transfixed on me: *Minga*. She was the old Brooklyn neighborhood's spiritual healer and notoriously dubbed ruler. We called and knew her by multiple names: Bruja, Witch; Espiritista, Wizard; Cubana, Sorceress; Babalocha, Magician; and the Santería priestess.

Since my childhood, I hadn't seen her in the flesh.

Long ago, they'd told me she'd been dead for several years. *So how can she be here?* I wondered if the spirits had sent her to invoke the gods and set me free.

I became engrossed in the whole thing, soon recalling vivid experiences that marked the innocence of my youth back in the city. In particular, the intriguing involuntary encounters with Minga, her devout followers, and her occult practices. Other impressionable images and short-lived moments also flashed through my overburdened mind.

“Ibaé Bayé Tonú,” Minga shouted, invoking ancestors and asking them for their help and strength before beginning the ceremony.

I rubbed my face, attempting to bring back rational thoughts. Minga stepped toward me, gawked into my eyes, and wafted her hands over my head. In vain, I struggled to endure the transcendent confrontation.

Then she took my hand and led me away, asserting the African proverb, “If you want to know the end, look at the beginning.”

An indescribable form of energy forced me to travel with her through a dark, spacious, serene void. In this journey, I had to accept the logical order of earlier events and trust the persistent calling ahead. Seized by fear, I raised my arms and cried for help at the top of my lungs.

But no one could hear me.

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee ...”