

## **The Door of No Return**

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Gorée Island is a place of memory. It holds the key of the West African coast and opens the ghostly path towards the Americas. There is a place on Gorée that has a door – they call it the Door of No Return. It is at the end of a long dark corridor on either side of which you can still smell the bodies of the women and men and children who were kept in these rooms with no windows. The door opens up to a tide which breaks on the rocks at an uneven pace and you find yourself lost in a time. Just by standing there you could never understand the secret this place harbors. There are no ships to which you'll be chained, no one next to you is drowning to save their dignity, but if you're quiet for long enough, the waves sound like the voices of hundreds of human beings telling you their stories. If you turn your back to the waves and walk back to steadier land, you see the little rooms under two stairwells where, cramped and hungry, people would be punished. Nelson Mandela crawled into one and cried, and Pope Jean Paul II made the sign of the cross and said a prayer. If you look up and walk out into the sun of the courtyard, you become surrounded by people with cameras, white and black, listening to tour guides tell of the horrors of this old building on Gorée Island, in Dakar, Sénégal, West Africa. You're in a world of a sudden, and slave-traders lived above these dark rooms with their wide windows and beautiful porches a long time ago. People hold hands. People are quiet. They're thinking. But the farther you get from the Door of No Return, the farther away you get from the sadness that this island represents. You leave the gates of the Slave House and you're surrounded by kids playing football on the sidewalks, and music from the elementary school right next door.

Gorée no longer becomes a place of sadness and transforms itself before your eyes into a place of joy and youth. It bursts with color and history; it tells the story of generations gone by, and those who live there today welcome you to their community with open arms. The beach is filled with children and dogs, and those young adults fleeing from the busy-ness of Dakar. You can smell grilled fish and chicken and pick up a madd and suck the sour fruit of the juicy seeds which, depending on your taste, can be flavoured with pepper, salt or sugar. The beignets are amazing and hot and melt on your tongue. The tuna sandwiches are what the boys buy, and we go and sit on the docks and soak in the calm sun.

Gorée is life. It's technicolor life. It's technicolor history. It is a place that many hold close – for history's sake – it is a place that I hold close, because it represents my childhood, like many other childhoods, and a place where new beginnings are possible. It is a place where pasts and pain can be honored and not lost, but where you will always be looking for a smile.