

Translated from Italian by Anne Milano Appel.

Baboucar led them single file, one behind the other. Right behind him came Yaya, a few yards back the other four: Robert, Ousman and the two from the Ivory Coast. They proceeded along, the railroad tracks beside them and buildings whose ground floors were crammed with Pakistani markets and Western Unions. Cars sped by briskly, the sun was still high even though it was now seven o'clock in the evening. They had gathered an hour earlier at the entrance to the station, then moved to a square two blocks away where they could talk in the shade of leafy trees scattered around the perimeter. At the center of the square stood a large palm tree; on the side opposite the benches where they sat was a pink carousel decorated with kiddie designs above shuttered glass partitions. "So then, tomorrow morning we leave at seven," Baboucar said, and started explaining the plan. No one objected, although it was clear that there was a rather obvious problem. Counting the two Ivorians, in fact, there were six of them, and there was only room for four in Maia's car. Baboucar, however, skipped over that, and only talked about the schedule they had to keep to and about the money, about the tickets to Foligno and about risks they should avoid. The fine he had gotten on the way up there was more than enough. Besides, deep down they all knew, they more than anyone, that the Ivorians would have to find another way to return to Perugia. They would do what they had intended to do from the beginning, that is, get back on a train and retrace the way home in reverse. And everyone knew, no exceptions, that it wouldn't be a big hitch. Yaya asked Baboucar whom he would be interpreting for in court, but all Baboucar knew was that they were two Senegalese and a Gambian, he had no idea of their names. Ousman was silent the whole time because he was thinking about his own court hearing, about the denied request for asylum, and he saw no reason to do anything other than remain mum and wallow in his dejection. Robert understood, more or less, and wondered who his interpreter would be when it was his turn to go before the committee.

The other question to be resolved now was that of where to spend the night. Yaya had asked Ousman to tell him what the carabinieri had said to him, but Ousman wasn't in the mood to talk, so it was Yaya who did, asking the others by pretending to wonder himself whether or not it would be better to sleep on the beach. At that point there was a bit of discussion.

"But there are a lot of us. There's no danger," Baboucar had said. Yaya snorted impatiently, and said he had no desire to skirmish with some thug. Then he suggested they take a look around the factory with the smokestacks, which was farther away from the station, so they set off and started back up along the railroad. There were some disreputable looking characters on the doorsteps of the Pakistani shops and Western Unions, in fact, mostly Italians and Maghrebis with a beer in hand and hostile looks. Men but also a few women, and when the markets ended and a thin African girl in a short fuchsia dress stationed at the corner of a low building smiled at him, Yaya thought that this time too they would manage to get by. Everyone noticed the girl, except Ousman. Baboucar had promised that he would let them have the battery charger as soon as they got to the bar, and now Ousman thought he could feel the weight of the dead phone at the bottom of his backpack, picture it exactly in between the sandy towel and the dry swim trunks.

"Is it oil?" Baboucar asked when they were three or four hundred yards from the refinery, but no one answered him. In five minutes they were close to the smokestacks. The sun had finally begun lowering behind them, and the six young men gazed at the distinct line of the sea. They sat next to one another, with their legs bent in front of them and their arms stretched out to the sides, palms in the coarse, dark sand, their shiny black skin constricted in the colorful clothing. Baboucar's backpack and plastic bag were piled up a few yards away, near a boat, and all around them people had begun packing up to leave and go home for supper. An old fisherman, tanned to the bone, was sitting in a canvas camp chair opposite one of the microscopic little houses. From time to time a child of three or four would tiptoe towards him, blow a kind of raspberry and dart back under the sunshade stretched between two other buildings. The man had white hair and wore a very tiny pair of green swim briefs; his legs and arms were lean and sinewy, his big belly taut and hairless. Two long fishing rods lay

resting quietly at his feet, like improbable retrievers weary after a day's hunting. Baboucar took photographs of the sea and of the others, a few selfies with the factory and smokestacks in the background. Meanwhile he kept talking about the film, trying to call attention to the presence of the large refinery, saying that going to the sea had really been a good idea. Few were following him. Robert was, and at one point even went so far as to ask where all that oil could come from, but neither Baboucar nor Yaya nor anyone else knew the answer or cared to respond. Ousman was edgy. He could feel the sand in his socks, and the thought of the dead cell phone nagged him.

"If you ask me it's okay to stay here tonight," Baboucar finally said looking decisively at Yaya, who puffed out his cheeks and rubbed the back of his hand on his nose.

"Huh," was all he grunted.

"Why huh?"

"Because huh. Maybe someplace not so close to the railroad might be better."

"What place?"

"Um," Yaya said. "I don't know. I don't know this area."

Ousman leaned forward and looked from one to the other. They were not far from the spot where the carabinieri had stopped him a few hours earlier.

"Maybe here we are in danger," he said.

Yaya nodded, putting back on the shoe that he had taken off to get rid of a small sharp stone that had ended up under his heel.

"But there are many of us!" Baboucar said. "They'll leave us alone. And besides, look over there.

The station is far away. The Pakistanis and those kebabs too. Far away. They don't come here."

He, like the others, imagined little gangs of those junkies or North Africans in tank shirts who prowled the beach with a bottle in one hand and a knife in the other, ready to mug anyone they ran into, or to defend their turf come hell or high water. But he was genuinely convinced that they were in no danger. It was true, there were many of them, and each of them had been through all kinds of things. And it was also true that they were in the most out-of-the-way stretch of the beach. Beyond the railroad track the main road curved inland and disappeared among the fields and the outer fringes. He tried to explain his reasoning, and reinforced it by reminding them how short the night would be.

"We come at midnight. Even later. At one. Then at six we have to wake up. It's less than six hours.

We can also not sleep. That is, take turns. I could stay awake. Almost the whole time. Until four.

Then two hours, you, Yaya. Or you, Ousman."

Robert nodded vigorously, and in very broken Italian offered to take a turn at standing watch.

Baboucar thanked him, glad to have found an ally even though Robert was the small fry of the expedition.

"Trains will come by too," Yaya said. "We won't get any fucking sleep."

Baboucar forced a laugh. Trains were not a good reason to complicate their lives by looking for better places. This was the best place. They had pictured it before leaving, and nothing had happened that could really make him question that decision. The warnings of the two carabinieri were not enough. Why should they trust them?

"Um," Ousman said at that point, "I don't know. I don't know, Baboucar. We'll see."

Baboucar took a deep breath, but decided that he would not let the day be ruined by a glitch like that. There were still many hours left before bedtime, and after the game the others would surely change their minds. Sleeping there was the simplest thing. When they're tired and it's dark, men want to go to sleep. And as close by as possible. The closer the better.

A few yards away, the fisherman had listened to their discussion, and seemed struck by it. Some minutes ago he had actually stood up and moved closer, staring at the sea with one foot resting on the boat, but paying full attention to them. The two Ivorians had noticed it, but didn't much care about him. The only one of the others who had sensed something was Ousman, and he was now watching the man, curious and perplexed. The fisherman caught his eye, and at that point he decided to speak. "Listen," he said, addressing everyone and no one, "I'll tell you where to sleep tonight."

He stored the fishing poles and led them beyond the underpass, where Ousman once again admired the two time-worn posters of Lory. She was always there, who knows for how long, caught in the moment before starting to sing or going to fix her hair or taking off her dress and leaving her big pale breasts free to wink at whomever they wanted to. She was there to the indifference of everybody, now, because no one was interested in a concert that was years old, and no one knew anything about the things that Lory might instead have said to him, maybe singing, or asking him for a last dance. Ousman did not slow down, did not show any sign of interest, he saw what was enough for him and continued on behind the others, and when they came out to the road on the other side of the railroad tracks the fisherman, taking Baboucar under his arm, had gained a few yards on the trailing group of stragglers. He was wearing flip-flops, and had put on a short-sleeved shirt that flapped unbuttoned over his fat, muscular belly. Ousman couldn't hear what they were saying very well, it was mostly the fisherman talking, but Baboucar occasionally answered or asked a question. They were both gesticulating, and from behind they looked like a couple of old friends who had met again after a long time.

It didn't take long to get to where he had promised them. In one of the buildings on the left side of the road, braced between two wooden wicket doors, was a main door of metal and opaque glass; a plastic sign was affixed beside it, its inscription rendered illegible by time. The fisherman swung open the door, and they were immediately assailed by a strong musty odor. Dense dust particles drifted in the sunbeams that filtered through the door. One of the two Ivorians coughed. Yaya, smiling, pretended to grab hold of a sunbeam, and Ousman, who'd had the same temptation, offered him a fist bump as a sign of approval. The fisherman was already opening another door, and after a few seconds a neon light began flickering on the ceiling.

"This is the place," he said, indicating the room in which they found themselves with a half sweep of his arm. It was quite large and almost completely bare. Only one corner was occupied by a desk stacked with folders, next to which stood a black leather office chair with caster wheels. The man went quickly to the window behind it and hurriedly opened it. Beside the desk, on the wall, was a calendar from 2014, on the opposite wall hung a large reproduction of "The Fourth Estate" by Pellizza da Volpedo. That wall was also the only one to be completely covered with thin vertical laths of pale wood, separated by grooves slightly less than half their width. Beside the picture hung a dartboard in concentric black and yellow circles, with two darts stuck not far from the edge.

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