

So Distant from Life by Monique Ilboudo. Translated from the French by Yarri Kamara.

Original title: *Si loin de ma vie*

Chapter 4

My uncle, the chief, one day told me an incredible story. If you lay down a chicken and place a knife on its neck saying to it, for example: ‘Don’t move, I am going to the market and when I come back I am going to slit your throat,’ the chicken will not move until you come back from the market and kill it. Try it, you will see.

I was not a chicken. I refused to remain lying down where chance had birthed me. I refused to be a collateral victim of International Monetary Fund structural adjustment programs. I refused to silently suffer the carelessness of those in charge. I grabbed my destiny by its horns. I looked it straight in the eyes and I gave orders. Come what may! My plan was simple: One, get out of this rat-hole as soon as possible. Two, go and make a fortune in Europe, or even better in the land of Uncle Sam. Three, come back and live like a king, taunting all those who had treated me like dirt.

From here the grass looked very much greener on the pastures of the neighboring continent. Lambana claimed to have seen them. He also said that the European coastline was closer to Africa than people said. Lambana was a former classmate. But he had paid more attention to the teacher, as my mother says. He became a police officer. He had just returned from a six-month training course in Algiers. He came back cloaked in new-found prestige. The fact that he had succeeded in joining the

police corps had already set him apart from the rest of us, the futureless ones. But the fact that he had gotten so close to those ever-so-coveted coasts and had come back 'to serve' as he asserted with a certain emphasis, elicited the admiration of all the mothers in our neighborhood. 'Only God knows why!' sighed some mothers rather cryptically.

In the stories of his mythical trip, Lambana compared the Mediterranean to the dam that separated our neighborhood from the one on the opposite bank. He claimed that from Algiers you could see the town of Marseille and the green pastures that surrounded it. We all knew that Lambana was a serial exaggerator, but we wanted so badly to believe him! We so badly wanted those coasts to be closer, to be more accessible. Virtually, they had come much closer in recent times. Thanks to satellite we could now, in real-time, watch the same programs on television as the lucky inhabitants of the countries where good and beautiful things were available to all. Though not at our house where we only had an old TV - in color, but so capricious that every now and then you had to slap it to get it to work. We received only the sole national TV channel. But in some of the better-off homes, satellite dishes on rooftops signaled subscription to a package of a dozen channels. The less well-off among us could watch some of these channels at Modou's. Modou was the basket-case of the neighborhood. Mothers said his name only to express pity for his mother or to feel better about their own offspring. 'That poor woman,' you would hear, 'suffering nine months for that! If at least she had had another child.' Or: 'Mine at least got his primary certificate or his junior high certificate, or mine at least is a mechanic, a welder or an electrician...' Hajja Safiatou was a gentle and modest woman. She watched over her only son like a mother hen and cut short any discussion if she sensed the slightest criticism of him. At almost thirty years of age, Modou had never made the least attempt at emancipation. Some even claimed that he still slept in the corridor outside his mother's room, refusing to move into one of the rooms in the bachelor wing that had been built on one side of the large compound to house the young men of the family.

And then satellite TV came and Modou found his calling. He convinced his father to subscribe to the basic package and free up the vestibule at the front of their compound where the old man spent his days and received his visitors. Old El Hajj as he was known in the neighborhood, had been a successful trader. When he had returned from his pilgrimage to Mecca, he had given up his spot in the Ouabany Central Market to his son Issa, Modou's half-brother. From then on, he spent his days reading the Koran, reciting verses and fingering his prayer beads, only interrupting this ritual to receive visitors or go for prayers at the nearby mosque. Another entry door had to be created on the western side of the compound wall, in front of the enormous beechwood tree under which the old man now sat. In the rearranged vestibule, Modou set up benches and opened his cinema where he welcomed us in exchange for a fee. Twenty-five francs each time we stepped through the outer door. I was not a regular as I preferred the real cinema that was downtown. However, some evenings it was easier to manage to get a hundred-franc coin from Marité or my mother, than a five-hundred-franc bill. You needed one hundred francs to really spend a good evening at the vestibule: twenty-five for entrance and twenty-five for each of the three glasses of tea that Modou would prepare, while watching us out of the corner of his eye. During the hot season, he set up his small brazier outside and brought us the three tea servings on a tray. When the *harmattan* winds blew and the nights grew cool, he brought the stove indoors and it heated up the room.

We tried to negotiate a daily rate, but Modou refused to budge an inch on the price. And so we stayed as long as we could to get the most out of our francs. Nevertheless, at some point one always had to step out for an errand, to eat or to respond to a call from a friend or relative to come and help them. Despite the draconian measures imposed by the master of the place, several of us were regulars at this neighborhood cinema. The vestibule was full to the brim especially on days of football matches. We were as fascinated by the adverts as we were by the matches. Faced with the orgy of luxury, of shops, of windows and shelves overflowing with all types of products, we could do nothing but dream

of getting close to such paradise on earth. One particularly boring evening, I found myself at Modou's. There was no match, but I was ready to watch any film while waiting for everyone at home to go to bed. When I arrived, Modou took my twenty-five-franc coin, the second of the day, closed the door and then went out by the interior door towards the compound. A voice had called his name from inside. I sat down as a commercial break was ending. A documentary started. We hated documentaries. This one was called *Stop Food Waste*.

The three guys who were already there shouted in unison, 'Modou, change the channel!' In order to remain the master of programming and avoid fights between clients, Modou never let anyone else touch the remote control. He came back, asked us which channel we wanted, but our ravenous eyes were now riveted on the screen. Tons of meat, milk, eggs and other food products were being thrown in pits to be destroyed. The opening scenes of the documentary had left us speechless. In unison, we signaled 'It's ok!'. Modou went back inside the compound. For half-an-hour we witnessed in shock and silence monstrous waste. One of the other three spectators found the force to say out loud, 'Why? Can't they send that stuff to us?' The next day, when I told my sister about the documentary, she, in a mocking tone, retorted 'It's the law of the market!'. That very day, I took the decision to migrate.

My first attempt to reach the banks of the prosperous West was snuffed in the bud by the hungry pockets of my agent. I had been saving with him for several months, when one day he vanished into thin air without a word (we would have trounced him had we known), taking my savings with him. Yet Raso had been well known among aspiring migrants. Ten or so guys had successfully migrated thanks to him. This had gained him a solid reputation which had attracted another dozen candidates for economic exile.

Once one started depositing their savings, one could not turn back. Giving up on the journey then meant losing hard-earned or sometimes borrowed cash.

Investigations found that while Raso may not have completed his first year of economics at university, he'd had the time to learn some tricks.

'It's the classic scam,' Marité explained to me. 'He respected the contract with his first customers to gain people's trust and attract new customers.'

And it had worked. He had patiently amassed a neat pile of cash before disappearing. Where to? No one was able to find out.

I had to start from scratch again. Doing the rounds of paternal and maternal uncles, some trader aunts, and even some friends who already had jobs. During my first attempt, some of the relatives I asked for help had tried to dissuade me from going ahead with an endeavor they judged perilous. My uncle, the chief, had tried to appeal to my sense of patriotism.

'Your father and I, we could have stayed in France, but we came back because this is where our roots are. And, who is going to build our country, if you, the youth, leave?'

My mother, for her part, cried, 'Wooiii! My dear son, don't do this! It's too dangerous. Do you not watch TV? Do you not see what is happening? The great sea is insatiable! She swallows all those who try to cross her and spits them out lifeless!'

I had great difficulty persuading her. The example of a neighbor's son who managed to make it to the other side in the end convinced her. She had handed me her meagre savings, which that bastard Raso took off with along with the rest. I never found the courage to tell her. I started saving with another agent, pretending that I had not yet finished with the first. More than a year later, I finally set off. With their eyes reddened by tears, my mother and my sister said their wrenching good-byes to me in the middle of a moonless night. My father had not been informed about my plans. This second attempt got me a little bit further, but not to destination. Having left Ouabany in the middle of the

night, I got to Agadez five days later. The journey to Tamanrasset was the most trying. Packed in the back of a truck transporting sand, we had to take turns to sit. We drove mostly at night. During the day, most of my fellow travelers, barefoot, danced on the platform made scorching hot by the burning sun. Some ended up taking off their clothes to wrap them around their feet. I was one of the few privileged ones, I had second-hand sneakers which more or less protected the soles of my feet. Between flat tires and various breakdowns, we reached Tamanrasset after a three-day ordeal. According to my calculations, this step should have lasted just a few days, but I ended up staying weeks in the small Saharan town. I met Henri in Alouette where I had followed two fellow travelers more experienced than me. Alouette was the place one went to when you got off your truck. All migrants passing through Tamanrasset stopped by at one moment or another of the day. It was here that you could get the latest news, learn from the experiences of others. His black t-shirt with 'MC Solaar' scrawled on it grabbed my attention. I was a fan, and I had the same. Henri had taken off from Yaoundé in Cameroon. Robbed during the journey, he had been trying for two years now to rebuild his nest egg, taking on jobs as a porter, he who had quit a job as a nurse to 'seek adventure'. 'Seek adventure' in Henri's mouth took another sense: while danger was not excluded, he left no place for chance. Like myself, my new friend was sure of himself. Just a few towns, a desert and water to cross and then success and money awaited us, quietly, on the other side. This was not our only thing in common. Henri did not wear MC Solaar on his chest for nothing. Like me, he loved words and we spent hours reading the dictionary I had brought with me, discussing the meaning of words, learning new things. We stayed together until Oujda. Unfortunately, a few weeks after our arrival, Henri was caught up in a massive roundup of hundreds of migrants. They were expelled. We later learned that they were more than five hundred. They were deported and abandoned in the desert between Algeria and Mali. I tried to spot Henri among the few survivors that were later found. A French TV station

broadcast the images. Their faces, burnt, emaciated and unrecognizable, evoked those of Auschwitz.

To this day, I hang on to the idea that he survived and I did not recognize him in the images.

I lived for a year and a half in Oujda. Did I really live? I survived, I got by, exhausting my meagre resources, accepting the worst menial jobs to earn my daily bread.

I took part several times in attacks from the town of Nador, without any success. What we called ‘attack’ consisted in several dozens of us hurling ourselves against the barriers on the Ceuta and Melilla borders. Twice or thrice I reached the second row of barbed wire, the highest and the sharpest. My wounded hands and soles forced me to retreat to the camp to treat them. And then, there came the roundup which temporarily put an end to my hopes of conquering the damned iron wall to finally live my dream. After getting seriously injured during yet another attack, I had joined some compatriots in the Sidi Maafa forest to recover in peace. That’s when the Moroccan police decided that day to go migrant-hunting. Unable to run due to my injuries, I could not get away from them. Just before getting hurt, I had helped Monsieur Ben Yahia and his family to move house. They were leaving Oujda to move to Meknes. I had accompanied them to their new house and Monsieur Ben Yahia had issued a sort of pay slip for me so that I would not get hassled on my way back. He was a classy guy, who moreover had paid me well, unlike most others who took advantage of our precariousness to exploit us. Sometimes, some even refused to pay us once we finished our work, threatening, if we insisted, to call the police. Monsieur Ben Yahia’s kindness betrayed me. An inexperienced diplomat at our embassy in Rabat confirmed to the Moroccan authorities that, given my name, I was certainly one of their nationals. I was repatriated on a direct flight with Royal Air Maroc. My first trip on a plane.

I had communicated very little with my family since my departure two years ago. My father did not scold me. Rather, he was relieved to see me, as the number of migrant boats sinking had grown the past months. My mother and Marité danced with joy before they saw the gashes on the soles of my feet. The wounds had started getting infected and I was only able to stand through superhuman

effort. I spent one month in hospital. When I was back on my feet, I immediately got back to work trying to scrape together new travel funds. I wanted to get back on the road as quickly as possible. Far from putting me off, the experience I had lived had convinced me that I was an *adventurer*, a hard-core one. I was more confident. I now knew the route and all its traps. And above all, I knew for certain that the third attempt would be the successful one. Three, a man's number.