

GLOBAL AFRICAN VOICES  
DOMINIC THOMAS, EDITOR

# I WAS AN ELEPHANT SALESMAN

ADVENTURES BETWEEN  
DAKAR, PARIS, AND MILAN

## PAP KHOUMA

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## TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE



In Italian the terms *traduttore* ("translator") and *traditore* ("traitor") are remarkably similar. Perhaps of all the ways in which a translator inevitably "betrays" the original work, it is the act of translating the title that often proves the thorniest. In translating the title the translator faces the daunting task of trying to preserve the part of the work that is most closely linked to the work's core identity—at least in the eyes of the readers. The title serves as the first point of contact between readers and the work, thus establishing an inextricable link between the texture and form of the original language and the emotional memory of the reading experience. Often it is the appeal of a highly peculiar or poetic title that originally leads a reader to become enamored with the work—a linguistic love affair that is thereafter reinforced by the familiar interplay of syllables, syntax, and metaphor, which in turn become terms of endearment of sorts.

This is certainly the case with Pap Khouma's *I Was an Elephant Salesman: Adventures between Dakar, Paris, and Milan*, whose original Italian title, *Io, venditore di elefanti. Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*, has undoubtedly become a term of endearment in its own right, a title almost as beloved to readers of Italian as the book itself. The boldness of the Italian title's use of the first person ("*Io, venditore*")—while a fairly common structure for book titles in Italian—immediately captures our attention as it alerts us quite dramati-

cally to the earnest attempt of the narrator to forge some degree of individuality in a world that would at times unjustly bereave him of such aspirations. Yet it is this endearing quality of the Italian that gives the translator cause for concern. The title reminds us that the experience of being “renamed” in another language—of having one’s name misspelled or, worse, mistranslated—constitutes an inexorable part of the overarching difficulties of migration. This problem becomes apparent in the story when the Italian police misspell the narrator’s name on their arrest report, just as it does when the narrator must resort to adopting a “battle name” to protect himself on the Italian streets and beaches, and finally in the numerous times when the narrator is erroneously “renamed” *marocchino* or “Moroccan,” a highly anonymous and derogatory term that marks his inauspicious baptism in his new host country and language. Given this unfavorable link between renaming, or *misnaming*, and migration, I considered it important to avoid “renaming” the book itself beyond recognition. For this reason I chose to retain the use of first person in the English translation, albeit changing it to the more common English syntactical form “I was,” which has the added benefit of capturing the simple, forthright quality of the original Italian.

The second key element of the title that seemed important to retain in the English translation was the ingenious play on words evoked by the phrase *venditore di elefanti*. The book’s title most certainly owes part of its popularity to this beguiling term, whose simplicity belies a sophisticated critique of the colonial legacy in the context of immigration in contemporary Italy. In Italian the term *venditore di elefanti* might initially be misconstrued as a person who sells actual elephants. It is only upon closer perusal of the Italian cover and the first page of the story that we see that in actuality this phrase refers to what in Italian would be more commonly called a *venditore ambulante*, a term commonly used to refer to African street vendors who sell little elephant figurines, lighters, and T-shirts on the beaches and streets of Italy. The confusion of the title deliberately appeals to the Western fascination with an exotic Africa, one associated with wild

animals and safaris, big game hunting, and adventure. In contrast, the actual *venditore* of the story is much less exotic: we soon discover that the word points to an extremely tense social issue—and one even marked by racism—currently unfolding right in Italy’s own backyard, namely immigration from Africa. The double entendre of the title therefore quite compellingly asks the reader to reconcile the West’s simultaneous romanticization and demonization of Africa.

In fact, I deliberately chose the term “salesman” as a way of furthering this initial “misunderstanding” in the original title. While “salesman” evokes the image of a business representative, perhaps one dressed in a suit with briefcase in hand, it captures the narrator’s repeated attempts in the story to convince the reader, Italian society, and himself that the life of an immigrant is “a fine line of work” and “nothing to be ashamed of.” While the term “seller” or “vendor” might indeed be more appropriate to the actual reality of the narrator’s work in Italy, the use of the term “salesman” also reflects the second part of the title’s emphasis on inventing “a life” (*una vita*) and, more importantly, on creating a modicum of dignity—which is the larger goal of the work.

Although it was possible to preserve the first part of the original title (*Io, venditore di elefanti*), doing this with the second part—*Una vita per forza fra Dakar, Parigi e Milano*—was more challenging. While I initially toyed with the idea of translating the phrase “una vita per forza”—an idiom difficult to translate literally in English—as “a life at all costs” as a way to keep the theme of the psychological and even existential “costs” of migration of the story, instead I finally opted for “Adventures between Dakar, Paris, and Milan.” Beside the advantage of its comparative brevity, the term “adventure” manages to express a similarly biting and profound critique of the immigration experience in Europe that is evoked in the phrase “una vita per forza,” a somewhat colloquial Italian idiom that suggests both the possibility of agency and an inevitable lack of agency. That is, the idiom “per forza” is often used to express a situation in which one has no other choice (for instance: Did you study for the exam? *Per forza*. Yes, of course, what other choice did I have?). Furthermore, “per

*forza*" has a subtle allusion to *forza*, or "force," that recalls the recurrent presence of the Italian police in the narrator's life in Europe. Like the phrase "*una vita per forza*," the word "adventures" exemplifies the simple, albeit standard and even eloquent, language that has become the story's hallmark.

Moreover, the term "adventure" contains the same critical allusion to the colonial myth of an Africa of adventure as conveyed by the term "elephant salesman." Like "elephant salesman," it contrasts that Western myth of Africa with the contemporary *African* myth of Europe. In this story Italy in particular is the exemplary vacation land for foreign tourists, recalling Italy's past as foremost destination of nineteenth- and twentieth-century travelers, a myth that Khouma suggests has been reinvented in the last two decades as Italy has become instead a land of opportunity and adventure for young men and women from the global South and East. Of course, the nature of such "adventures" has changed dramatically from one of privilege to one of necessity, a change Khouma skillfully underscores.

Finally, the term "adventures" is true to the story's overall tone, which is often noted for its uniquely ironic account of immigration. The word is used in the original story ("*avventura italiana*") to convey the risk and danger encountered daily by an immigrant, but also more ironically to suggest the lack of fun and enjoyment that often characterizes his or her life. This same idea is expressed in chapters like "A Run on the Beach," whose seemingly lighthearted allusion to jogging, a classic vacation pastime, is actually a reference to the considerably less leisurely experience of being chased by the Italian police on the beaches of the Adriatic.

Ultimately, Khouma's work stages an original interplay of metaphors that serve to highlight the long and complex history of European and African relations. The translation of these metaphors demands a delicate mix of the original work's lightheartedness and its grimmer overtones as well as an appreciation of the way the work's more sophisticated critical edge is often couched in simple colloquialisms that are anything but simple.

## INTRODUCTION

GRAZIELLA PARATI



Italy is often perceived as the country of fashion, wine, stylish shoes, famous monuments, art, and great food. Beyond this attractive veneer that has attracted tourism and fed an orientalist image of the country, Italy is a place of contradictions, particularly in the arena of emigration and immigration. Historically a country of emigration, millions of people left Italy during the past century and a half. In peak migration periods, Italy witnessed the departure of 600,000 citizens a year. There are now as many people of Italian descent outside Italy as there are living within the borders of the country. Italians continue to migrate even today, leaving Italy for better job opportunities in every profession.

Over the past thirty years, Italy and other Southern European countries such as Spain and Greece have experienced immigration. Migrants from Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and South America have radically changed the human, urban, and cultural landscape of Italy. Immigration laws were established for the first time in 1986 and amended over the following decades, but have been unable to efficiently address Italy's role as a destination country.

While social discourse immediately identified immigration solely as "a problem," it was a response to Italy's own economic demands: migrants are still widely employed in the care of young children and the elderly, the very individ-

uals that the welfare system in Italy should provide for but cannot. Immigration was also motivated by the demand for unskilled labor in agriculture both in the tomato fields of the south and in the fruit orchards of the north. However, stereotypes of migrants as criminals, as intruders, as invading hordes, and as interlopers into a superior culture multiplied in the press and in public discourse. Racist attacks against immigrants started to increase in the late 1980s, culminating in the much-discussed murder of Jerry Masslo in 1989. He was a South African political activist who had applied for asylum in Italy and worked as an agricultural laborer. The public debate that followed his death focused on the fact that the perpetrators adamantly refused to admit that the murder was racially motivated. They affirmed that their motive was robbery. What was evident was that by killing an "other," they probably felt that they could get away with the crime more easily. Unfortunately, that was only the first of a long list of violent attacks on migrants in Italy. Even Pap Khouma, the author of *Io, venditore di elefanti* (I Was an Elephant Salesman), has been victimized by racial violence in recent years, after living in Italy as an intellectual for decades.

For many years, documented and undocumented migrants had no way to make their stories heard, respond to the skewed, negative rhetoric circulating in public discourse, and discuss the episodes of violence that victimized them. This was complicated by the fact that they had to acquire the local language in order to respond with efficacy. Nevertheless, migrants in Italy began to make their voices heard by publishing their stories in Italian in the 1990s.

In 1990 Pap Khouma's autobiographical novel *Io, venditore di elefanti* became a best seller and was a powerful model as one of the first immigrant's stories in print. Published by Garzanti, a major publishing company, Khouma's narration of his transmigration from Senegal to the Ivory Coast, to France, and then Italy, back to Senegal, and then to Europe again allowed people to read about the complex motivations that pushed a man to leave the culture that was familiar

to him. These reasons resonated with Italians, because they were the same ones that had motivated millions of Italian migrants to leave their country, namely politics and poverty.

Khouma, fluent in Wolof and French, used the language of the former French colonizers of Senegal to learn Italian. He rejected a migration to the colonial motherland and instead struggled to inscribe himself into a new cultural context that was rarely welcoming. He describes the life of an undocumented migrant among other undocumented migrants and their struggles to survive, and to make enough money to bring another member of the family to Italy in order to combat the crippling loneliness that hounds a migrant. His problems with the police ("the Uncles," as he calls them), with employers who exploit the migrants' undocumented status by paying them very low wages, and with the impossibility of finding housing, as well as the unexpected alliances among migrants, are at the center of his narratives, which also include a long list of acts of kindness on the part of native Italians. By highlighting the paradoxes of his experience, Khouma employs humor to tell a story that describes a hard life with a happy ending. As promised in the Senegalese proverb to which Khouma refers at the end of his novel, telling his story brought him luck, not only because it has testified that he survived while others did not, but also because this novel allowed him to begin a career as a journalist, and ultimately to become a public intellectual.

Important for Khouma was his encounter with Oreste Pivetta, a native Italian journalist and novelist, who facilitated and edited Khouma's story. Their collaboration was based on the complex translation of an oral narrative into a written text. Pivetta would transcribe Khouma's recorded stories. Khouma would subsequently read the transcription and modify the narrative. The collaboration between a linguistic expert and a non-native speaker is always imbalanced. Other immigrant writers such as Saidou Moussa Ba, Nassera Chohra, and Salah Methnani, to name a few, experienced the difficult—at times positive, at times nega-

tive, and even traumatic—challenge of collaborating with someone who occupies a position of power because of his or her standing in the local culture and the publishing market. At times these relationships could become conflictual, but they often allowed a migrant's text to be made public soon after the migrant writer's arrival in a destination culture. For many writers, co-authoring was quickly replaced by publishing texts without the mediation of the linguistic expert. Khouma published his second novel, *Nonno Dio e gli spiriti danzanti* (Grandfather God and the Dancing Spirits), in 2005 after contributing articles to newspapers for years.

Initially viewed as a passing phenomenon, narratives by migrants have become instead a powerful cultural force in Italy. Over the past twenty years dozens of novels and collections of short stories have circulated in Italy and have become more and more sophisticated. Narrative strategies have become more complex and subject matter has become less autobiographical than in earlier texts. In this landscape, Khouma's text represents a model that opened doors to the other texts that followed and courageously redefined the parameters used in describing and narrating Italian culture through non-Western eyes. The foregrounding of the gaze of the other has uncovered traditionally unspoken topics such as Italian racism and the country's long history of racist practices. These writings demanded an open discussion of Italian colonialism, which had been conveniently forgotten or labeled as "only" a phenomenon during fascism. They also demanded an examination of Italian migrations and their role in a number of disparate cultures. Only in the 1990s were foundational texts about the emigrations of Italians, such as Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939) and Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979), made available in Italian translations. These translations and the works authored by immigrant writers have invited native Italians to think of themselves as "others" as they highlight those similarities that connect Italian histories and stories to contemporary migratory experiences in Europe.

Migrating cultures hybridize destination cultures, modify communities, and create new allegiances. The protagonists of migrations challenge what being Italian means and inflect the debates surrounding migration and local cultures. Texts by migrants articulate the possibility of rethinking cultural boundaries: the historical and politically charged boundaries between a North and a "global" South, as well as divisions inherent in larger dichotomies such as Western/non-Western, and belonging/non-belonging.

Pap Khouma's *I Was an Elephant Salesman* is a foundational text. It sought to provoke a rethinking of who the incoming others are, and as such it has succeeded in becoming a mandatory point of reference for talking about contemporary Italy. Khouma has also made it possible for his readers to rediscover the power of literature in public discourse and to imagine future dialogues about culture that might not be dominated by a majority and contaminated by negative rhetorical discourses pertaining to "fortress Europe."

I WAS AN ELEPHANT SALESMAN



# SELLING



I COME FROM SENEGAL. I used to be a salesman. Let me tell you everything I've been through. It's a hard job, selling, only for the toughest souls in this world. You can't be the type to give up easily. You have to use your legs and be insistent—even if they slam every door in your face.

I have no idea what makes a person good at selling, but I do know that those of us from Senegal have a gift. In our misfortune as emigrants we were miraculously blessed. Just like other young men from the Maghreb or the Ivory Coast, or Mali or Ghana or any other country in the world that has bred men to go out in the world and sell, and sent them out among the whites, the *tubab* of Europe. Just like the many others before us who have sold elephant families and elephant tusks—the kind inlaid with fake ivory—ebony masks, silver bracelets, silver earrings, silver rings, dragon teeth, leather belts, stone paperweights, and especially whips, those long, long whips our farmers use. Who knows what has become of our farmers today . . . lost, forgotten. . . How many things dance around in my head, things that don't interest the whites.

It's a tough job, selling. It's tiring, sad, humiliating. You roam the city until dark and then you have to get up early the next day and start selling all over again. Each day you have to start the hunt for new *piazzas* from scratch. I re-

member how scared I used to be walking into a *caffè* for the first time. I was so ashamed that I would always try to hide. I'd crouch behind my friend and jump out at the last minute with my own merchandise. On the little table of the *caffè* my friend would have his elephants and necklaces all nicely arranged. Edging my way toward the table, I would stretch out my hand with my little elephants, hoping that some buyer would choose mine. It's all part of selling. We had to sell. There would be days when walking into a *caffè* would make me sicker than other days, having to bother someone enjoying a quiet drink and a cigarette—not at all curious about my elephants. But whatever nausea I felt at that moment I had to push it deep down inside.

When I couldn't take it anymore I would concoct my own sort of detox, and I would stop selling and go away for a few days. But the trick was to keep going and not let it get to you. I'm positive, all right. I've seen it with my own eyes. If you give up, you're finished. You let yourself go, you start sleeping on the park benches, you don't wash yourself anymore, you don't eat, and you only feel like crying. You end up stinking drunk because you've had one too many drinks in the *caffès*. And once you're drunk, you don't understand anything anymore. You don't know how to sell anymore. You only know how to die. That is, unless someone comes along and gives you a hand. But then you even start to second-guess your friends. But don't kid yourself either: selling is not just a question of sticking it out and hanging on when things get tough. You might be the most determined, hard-hearted type, but this still doesn't mean you'll be a good salesman. You'll understand what I mean if you listen closely to my story. You'll understand that selling elephants or glass-encased butterflies or eagles made of bone is an art.

Times soon changed with the arrival of the fake Lacostes, Armanis, and Cartiers. Now beside the usual problems with the police and the shopkeepers, and basically the everyday risks of illegal emigration, the market has changed with all the fake Guccis and Louis Vuittons. Now they come looking for you. I was a good seller because I was a good observer.

I'm convinced that it takes a certain knack to spot the right buyer and know how to win over a new customer. For instance, it was all right with me when they would call me "*marocchino*" . . . "Hey, Moroccan, come here." In the end it was a way to start talking. After we chatted for a bit, the person would usually buy something. If one person started, the others would be forced to join in for fear of looking cheap in front of their friends.

It took some time and a lot of ups and downs before I got to Milan. It is here that I became an inventor. Along with three friends I was the first to sell in the metro stations. As you know, the Senegalese are everywhere in the metro now and there's no way to get rid of them. You can try to argue with them, but they're pretty convincing. But back then it was just the four of us who started it all, besides the ten Italian guys who were also selling there. The first day the Italian police confiscated all our merchandise. I can't even begin to tell you what we went through. But we kept selling. If we sold, we could afford to sleep with a roof over our heads and eat. This wasn't always the case, but often it was. It was by selling that I learned Italian. Some guys try to change their line of work, hoping for a better life, a house, a family, and I admire them for that, but selling is a fine line of work. Nothing to be ashamed of.

# ILLEGAL



**HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE AN** illegal immigrant? Terrible. Mostly because you have to compete with people just as bad off as you. An immigrant has to put up with everyone and everything. He has to keep quiet and accept the worst of everything because he has no rights. He has to suppress every reaction, empty himself of his personality, and face the fact that there's nothing he can do. Take, for instance, when I find myself face-to-face with a police officer. The first rule is always say, "Yes, Boss. You're right, Boss. Sorry, Boss." Rule two: Look down. It shows that the illegal immigrant respects the uniform and that he gets who's in charge. These rules aren't written down anywhere, but you need to know them by heart. If the officer's chest starts to puff up right before your eyes, and he even sprouts a few inches taller, well, then, maybe you're off the hook. You've earned his charity and he just might let you go.

I sold for years and then I decided to stop. But there are guys who only know a life of selling. They started in Africa as kids, like their grandparents and parents. Selling was the family business. I, on the other hand, was the first to sell in my family. I learned in Abidjan in the Ivory Coast. I used to sell ivory there to Italian and French tourists.

From Senegal to the Ivory Coast, then to Italy. From Italy I went to France, with my eye set on Germany, but there

they turned me away at the border because I didn't have enough money on me. So I went back to France, but I didn't want to live there. I was always scared there. I don't even know of what, but I was always scared. Maybe it wasn't so bad after all; maybe I just imagined it. The whole time I was in France I never had trouble with the police, but I was always waiting for the worst to happen, even if they never even asked for my papers. All my problems were money related, and maybe also related to the fact that the Senegalese there were not the most hospitable. I crossed back into Italy and started selling again until I was able to find myself another job.

Selling brought me only fear and anguish because I had to run away from the police an infinite number of times, because they confiscated my merchandise, because I ended up in jail, because people looked at me assuming the worst—that is, when they weren't cursing me for setting up my elephants and necklaces in front of their store.

But to understand all this better, we have to return to Dakar.

# AFRICA



**NOVEMBER 1979.** One day I got on the train. I was twenty-two. In my pocket I had thirty thousand CFA francs on me—which came to about one hundred and twenty thousand lire—and the idea to get to France sooner or later, where I planned to work on my pottery. I had been trained as a potter in a school in Dakar. I knew how to mold clay, shape vases, bake, and design. I used to paint flowers. When I chose to become a potter I broke with family tradition. I should never have chosen this line of work. It wasn't for us. We were a poor family but at one time an important one and so tradition demanded that we not dirty our hands with certain professions. No law prohibited me from making my beautiful pottery. It was custom that advised against it. My father told me this, day in and day out. But I liked to mold clay and paint. Better to forget tradition than spend one's life doing nothing.

In Senegal there is no shortage of people hanging around doing nothing. Strolling along the white streets of Dakar is a national occupation. My country is divided up according to a caste system. It is poor and seems to be getting poorer all the time. After ten years of drought, the peanut-farming industry is now suffering. Other countries produce peanuts now too so the prices have plummeted. In Senegal there is a socialist government, but I can't for the life of me un-

derstand why they call themselves socialist. Senegal is poor and the people protest even if they know it won't change anything. The majority of people can neither read nor write. There are a lot of newspapers, but they always end up in the same hands: the hands of those who control everything. It's not true, however, that people aren't interested in politics. Maybe people there talk about politics even more than in Europe. In Senegal people always have something to say. They are yearning to yell at someone. Everyone talks and complains and raises their voices. Complaining is the second national occupation. But those in power couldn't care less. In thirty years those in charge have made some big fancy shoes for themselves, and can walk anywhere, do anything. Corruption has spread to all the villages. Whatever money arrives is pocketed by those in collusion with the government. To silence the people's complaints, they use the technique of postponement: "We'll see tomorrow, brother, we'll take care of it tomorrow." Everything—the people's protests, their hope—it's all lost in the wind. It's like the desert sand: it always looks like it's just about to lift, but it never moves an inch.

Africa is poorly governed. There are too many people making a profit at her expense. You can even study and work, but nothing changes because those in charge aren't willing to concede any of their power. And so the people must leave. Only if they flee, only if they make it to Europe, only then do they have any hope. In Africa only a select few have jobs and everyone depends on them. For this reason you can't go back. If you do, you'll just become one of the many depending on the few. The job I once had doesn't even exist anymore, and so I must stay in Europe.

I am Muslim, part of the Sufi order. There are other brotherhoods, the Tidjane for instance. Every Muslim has the right to choose a brotherhood, and each one claims to be more Muslim than the others: we are the most devout, we are the most Muslim. You can even see some of this rivalry among immigrants. Once upon a time the people of my country were all animists. They would find their gods in

nature, in the plants, in the sky, and the sea, and maybe it was better then. People were more sincere. Then the Arabs arrived from the desert and we became Muslim. Some years passed and the Europeans arrived, this time from the sea. The good Christians built colonies, and so we, too, became good Christians, especially along the coast where the new masters would stop to build their ports. Whoever refused to convert to the new religion and remained an animist was called *ceddo*. A few years ago in Dakar they were supposed to show a film about the *ceddos*. Nothing came of it for years because of a technicality: they couldn't agree on whether they should spell it *ceddo* or *cedo*, and no one wanted to be the one to decide. But that's not the only reason why. There was something else behind all that bickering, something besides the same old bureaucracy crippled by fear. Maybe it was the fear of rekindling age-old sentiments in a tribal society. One hundred years ago Dakar was a fishing village. The French made it into a major port and proclaimed it the capital of Senegal. The farmers from the countryside in the interior started to migrate to the new capital, which at that time seemed a place blessed by fortune. "To Dakar, to Dakar" was everybody's dream and aspiration. My parents followed this same path. Now Dakar is a big city with a million inhabitants in a country that has even lost the desire to dream. When I went back, it seemed so small to me, like a small town, almost an island. I can still see myself in its sunsets. There the sun sets right into the ocean and along the beaches. Sunsets that spread across an infinite sky of blue, red, and yellow: our colors, the colors of our clothes. And all around Dakar, green countryside and silence. We like bright colors.

## THE MARKET IN ABIDJAN



**MY COUSINS WHO RETURN**—some from the Ivory Coast, others from France, some even from America—all come back wearing nice clothes and talking about wondrous cities. They beg me again and again: "Come away with us." I envy them. I picture their homes, their streets, their stores, their parties, their jobs. I dream of sitting down at a table in a French café sipping a cool drink and watching beautiful women and cars pass by. I dream of the lights, the movie theaters, of talking and dancing with all my new friends. I dream of a sign: "*Paris. Bienvenu.*" And I dream of a monument: a monument in honor of a young man from Senegal who made it in the capital of the empire. Above all, I dream of nice clothes and shoes. It's just me. I do not have a wife. Instead of staying here hoping and waiting for them to send me nice things, I decide that I will go and get them myself. And I will begin in Abidjan. And just like that I decide to leave my country for the first time. The train is due to leave at six in the morning. A few hours before, I tell my father about my plans:

"I'm taking off. I leave in a little bit."

"And where are you going?"

"To the Ivory Coast."

"To the Ivory Coast? Why didn't you tell me before? I could have given you my blessing. You are always the same."

You never change. But go on, son. Behave. Do not smoke cigarettes and do not drink."

I want to enjoy my youth and my freedom. I have no regrets. These will come later, if they come at all. Without any sadness, I say goodbye to my brothers. At the station I run into some friends. What luck not to have to travel alone on the first trip of my life. The train speeds toward Bamako, the capital of Mali. It passes Tambacounda, Kayes, Bafoulabé, little cities that seem so poor, immersed in the heat, flies, and sleep. They are little dots on the still and monotonous landscape, under a hot, muggy sky. Bamako is the last stop on the train line. To continue onward to Abidjan you have to take a taxi. But you have to wait and be lucky enough for one to come along first, and then you have to haggle with the driver over the price. The bargaining is exasperating and takes forever. The departure is liberation. In five or six hours you arrive—that is, if the car doesn't break down, which does happen.

The car didn't break down. I am in Abidjan. I like Abidjan because life in this city never stops. In Senegal there is a big difference between Saturday night and Monday night, the first day of rest and first day of work. Just like in Italy. In Abidjan, they move at the same pace Saturday night and Monday night, and they make the same amount of noise. Life there seems to be one endless motion. In the market the merchants take turns selling even late into the night and early morning so they don't risk leaving any potential customer unsatisfied. An endless, tireless crowd moves through the neighborhoods of Abidjan, in Treichville where I live, on the big boulevards, where life happens all around the clock. Abidjan wins me over. I run into some cousins who are selling. I begin to sell, too: mostly ivory and old antique objects to the Italian and French tourists. I'm doing pretty well. My family is far away, but I am young, just twenty years old, and any homesickness is quickly forgotten before the happiness of independence. For the first time I don't have to report to anyone. I forget about ceramics. I would have had to start from scratch, mold, shape, paint, bake, and then sell.

Too complicated and expensive. With the ivory I earn fast. Abidjan seduces me. I don't think about Europe. I want to stay here. I mean, let's be honest: if you find a place close to home, surrounded by your friends, a place where you make a lot of money, why would you even think of leaving it? With the Italian tourists, selling is even enjoyable and life is lighthearted. I can practice this trade that I've learned well from my cousins and friends and even be fairly successful at it. It's hot and the sea chases me along the beach just like at home far, far away. But when I am—I won't say at the height of happiness, no, not cloud nine, but at least taking it easy on a very comfortable cloud—well, I start to feel strange. You in Italy call it *mal d'Africa*. I didn't know what to call that sweet seductive breeze that caresses me ever so gently. Maybe it's the voice of the country calling out to me. Who can say? It is a subtle indisposition that comes on slowly, as if I were tired of selling and walking, as if I didn't like the Italian tourists and their pretty money anymore. It's an illness that runs through my veins, rushes to my brain, and takes my breath away. I sit down, look at my hands and let time pass. The doctors can't diagnose my illness. They tell me again and again: "Young man, there is nothing wrong with you." But the illness is always there, like a low-grade fever that won't go away. The doctors repeat: "Young man, there is nothing wrong with you." So I decide to go see the witch doctors, the African medicine men. They diagnose me immediately: I'm cursed. I try everything to rid myself of the curse. I spend a ton of money. I try new *grigris* charm necklaces and amulets. I trust my medicine man much more than the doctors because the medicine man just has to look at you to tell you: "Young man, here is what is wrong with you, here is what you must do." He can even tell you what happened to you the day before you went to see him. He doesn't even need to see you. He just knows. So, even if you have to go to the hospital, you should make sure to go see your medicine man once you're out. Maybe I am overly enthusiastic about our medicine men, but it just so happens that my family is a family of medicine men and my father

is one. His powers dwindled after a trip to Europe, to Paris. Who knows what happened to him in Paris. He lost his powers, unlike his brothers who are still medicine men.

Of course you always have to be careful of the quacks. There are always some of those around. I might have even run into some in Abidjan. For example, one day one of them told me, "You have enemies." Continuing along these lines, he explains, "They have cast terrible things your way. You must perform sacrifices if you want to free yourself of them." I follow his instructions word for word, beginning with the sacrifices: first the chicken, then the ram, then a cow. Nothing changes. I give up and instead try offering them gifts. I go out and buy a cola nut for one of them. Still nothing. In the meantime I spend and spend as my friends witness all this and give advice. I keep spending. The medicine men are not cheap. Once in a while they will let you go without paying, but then you have to pay in other ways. The costs continue to rise. I'm feeling bad, worse in fact. My legs feel weak and when I breathe my lungs emit a deep, hollow groan. I would eventually find out from a doctor that I had typhoid fever, but for now no one can tell me what's wrong with me. In any case I want to go back to Senegal. If I am going to die, I'd rather die in Senegal close to my mother. I want to be buried in Senegal. So I pack my things, buy a plane ticket, and a few hours later I land in Dakar. And, first things first, I get myself to a hospital, but a different one this time. Immediately after my first visit, the doctor scolds me: "Young man, leave the beds for the patients who are really sick." The home air has cured me.

The same thing would happen again during another trip. I would get sick again, but then at the ticket counter at the airport my condition would suddenly improve. Conclusion: I like Abidjan a lot, but it is not for me. I must face the facts. In Africa we say it is the spirits' fault. Every place has its own spirits, and not always good ones. In Abidjan I came across bad ones. If I got sick in Abidjan, it was only because my spirits were not welcomed by the city spirits. We are Muslim, but these superstitions left over from our animist

past are very much alive in our culture. I say "superstitions" because at school they taught me not to believe in spirits. But everyone still talks about spirits. The truth is you can feel the spirits inside you, as if they were permanent guests hosted by your soul. You can't get rid of them. Actually you might not want to because even if they are scary from time to time, they are a kind of consolation. After my bad experience, I want to free myself of superstition, and try to reason my way through my illness. But the spirits always win and I might as well face it. I decide that I will never leave Senegal again. It only takes a day though, then another, until my mind starts to wander. After a week my mind and my will are elsewhere. I'm done here, I can't stay. But the memory of my illness, the doctors, and the medicine men keeps me from leaving. I hold out for eight months, but after that I can't resist any longer. I'm itching to leave.

It is July 1984. I make up my mind: I will go to Spain. The ticket costs less than other places in Europe. Just to be on the safe side though, I first go to consult my *set-kat*, my fortune-teller, who will reveal my path in life. In my family we have our own *set-kats*, but I wouldn't be able to confide in them. With a stranger my plans will remain a secret, just between us. For some time they have predicted that I would go to the land of the whites by way of another country in Africa, and leave from the Ivory Coast. My trusty *set-kat* reads some shells, *courî* fresh from the sea. He looks at my hands, and writes something in the sand. He advises me strongly: "No, not Spain. Germany is better for you." And so Germany it is. I'm being superstitious of course, but the *set-kat* might also very easily tell you: "You just stopped for gas on the way" or "Two days ago you gave twenty thousand lire to a woman." Sure, there are always the quacks, but if one of these medicine men tells you why you are there before you even open your mouth, well, this is usually enough to convince you he knows what he is doing. In any case, it is settled. But it is not all the doing of the *set-kat*. I could stay. I work now, and I even taught French for a while. But I have to help my family and by staying I can't do that in the same

way. I have many brothers and sisters: about thirty, more or less. We don't keep count because it is bad luck. I want to help them all. I want to leave and break free of this poverty that I just can't seem to shake. I want to leave to come back a rich man. I fantasize about freedom. I am young and somewhat rebellious. In Senegal the father is in charge. His word is law. He is the head of the family, the voice of authority, and he has the right to tell you "This is good" and "This is not good." You have to ask his permission before going on a trip. He can forbid you to leave if he thinks it is an "unfavorable day." In many other matters as well you have to obey him. Instead I want to do as I please, even if it is not the day he has chosen for me to leave. So I secretly get ready, and when I decide to finally leave, I do it without anyone knowing. I am stubborn, the most stubborn in the family. And now I have decided to run away, by plane this time, and to Europe, and once again at six in the morning. I don't tell anyone except my father, who as always I tell at the very last minute. Where I come from we don't advertise when we leave on a trip for fear that the news will end up on the wrong people's lips. It is better to wait, because if things go badly and they send you home immediately—as can happen if you don't have a job or papers—there will always be someone to spread the word that you never even set foot out of your house. "What a liar he is!" they would laugh behind your back. I don't want this, especially from those who should understand how painful it is to leave. So at six in the morning I leave. Destination: Germany. But to get to Germany, I have to first pass through Italy.

It is July 21, 1984.

## DAKAR-RICCIONE



**THE PLANE HAS TAKEN OFF.** By now Dakar is far behind me. The sky is blue and you can begin to make out the outline of the land of the *tubab*, which still seems like the land of happiness. I am calm. The words of the fortune-teller were clear: You, young man, will go to the land of the *tubab*. So, what could go wrong? *Mamma mia*, what will become of me? Hovering in the air between one coast and another, one sea and another, I can feel the anxiety spreading, and nothing can contain it. There are other Senegalese with me on the plane, but fortunately only a few. They are silent and sullen, their mouths shut tight. They look like men who have just been sentenced to a sad fate, and are praying that the good Lord remember them. The moment is about to come when our lives will change, when we will have to use our brains, our arms, and the money that we have saved or borrowed. I feel as if I am jumping from a sinking ship, and I blame our government for its sinking.

The other passengers, the whites, see our anxiety and they reassure us: Everything will be OK, it will all be OK. I believe them and pray to my God. "The pilot has informed me that we are now flying over Sardinia, and the weather is . . ." Who cares about the weather? As soon as I hear them say "Sardinia" my stomach knots up like when I was sick in Abidjan, and my courage flies out the window. *Mamma*

mia. Dear, dear Senegal. Beautiful Senegal. My brothers, sisters, friends, heck, even a future wife: I want them all here with me in this moment instead of the shoes and the clothes of the *tubab*, the beautiful shoes and clothes of the *tubab*. I would give it all up just to go back, but instead I am flying over Sardinia. I hear my fellow countrymen whisper and mumble, itching in their seats. One after the other, we dig deep into our bags and pockets and pull out little bottles containing a liquid for good luck. We begin pouring it on our palms and then splash some on our faces. Someone reads from the Koran, the passages that the marabouts highlighted for us before we said goodbye to friends and relatives. One, two, three times. If I read them five times they will let me in. It all depends. They also told me to be careful to step off the plane with the correct foot: left or right depending on the day because the left is not always the good one just like the right is not always the bad one. It depends.

It would be the same when we had to deal with the "Uncles." But the Uncles waiting for us in Italy are police. They want to know everything and are condescending: "What are you doing here? Where are you going? How will you support yourself?" And then they order you around. Here Uncle wants to rule your life.

In any case I step off the plane with my right foot just as foretold by the fortune-teller, and just like that they let me in without any problems. We move ahead to the customs sign, where they glance at our stuff, our documents, our bags. And that's it. We're in. I am really in Italy. I'm outside the airport, on the street, in the open air under the sun.

I look down at my clothes. The jacket was a gift from my brother, who got it from a cousin in Paris. It had seemed gorgeous before. Now I see how the others are dressed. My jacket is nothing like theirs and my pants are too short at the ankle. No, none of it is right. It is July and I am hot. The *tubab* look at me, and I can't be making a great impression. I take off the jacket and fold it under my arm.

In Dakar I had tried to find out everything I would need to know about where to go when I got to Italy. The Senega-

lese who had been to Italy told me about Riccione, and they assured me that it was easy to get there. I would have to take a taxi to Rimini and then from Rimini I would have to get a bus to Riccione. I am walking toward the taxi stand when I meet another Senegalese. He asks me if there was a Senegalese woman on the plane. He is waiting for his wife.

"No women. Only men."

"You sure?"

"Yes, I'm sure, only men."

I add: "I'm going to Riccione and I'm looking for a taxi." His eyes open wide and he says, "I've lived here for years and I've never heard of this Riccione. That means it's far. Let's go find out. We'll take the bus and go to the station. We can find out there." This is all making me waste time. "Let's go find out, let's go find out, never heard of Riccione," he insists. In the end he convinces me. At the station we get in line and he asks because I speak only French while he can get by with Italian. "To get to Riccione?" They explain to him how to go. And he translates for me: "Rome–Riccione is more than three hundred kilometers. I was right. It's better to take the train. Come with me. I'll help you change your money." Then a quick goodbye and a handshake. I never saw him again. He even paid for my bus ticket. I would have to switch trains at Orte, and then again at Ancona, and then still one more time. Finally I leave. The train runs across the maze of tracks between the houses. But I can't even look, my head is spinning. All this getting on and off is making me nervous. So every ten minutes I ask the Italians: Ancona? Rimini? And they always say, "*Cambiare*": change, change, change. Always "*cambiare*." This word and another word, "*binario*," which they say as they point to the platform number, become a nightmare. So at every station I am ready with this ticket of mine, and I show it to whoever passes. I am annoying people, but I don't give up. I just keep waving my ticket.

"Sit next to me," one Italian offers. I'm fine until Orte: at Orte I have to change. Here is the stop, the platform, the train . . . change. The last time I do this is at Falconara. The

sky is blue, the city lights sparkle, and it is all very pretty and close to the sea. I get on another train, the last one of this special day. My enormous suitcase follows me everywhere, the one that accompanied me from Dakar to Bamako, from Bamako to Abidjan, and back to Dakar. It's half-empty this time because I didn't stuff it with necklaces, elephants, and other merchandise, only a few shirts and pairs of pants that keep jumping from side to side with the hopes of finding peace sooner or later in a drawer somewhere. I'd like to even throw it all away. After all, I came to Italy to change my clothes and shoes. I ask again, showing my ticket, where my stop is. A boy takes my hand and counts on his fingers: *uno, due, tre, quattro . . .* OK, I understand. I see the sign "Riccione." I get off and let out a great big sigh.

## STREET-SMART . . . BEACH-SMART



**GLORIOUS RICCIONE.** **RICCIONE**, I adore you. I am tired, but my eyes are wide open in order to take everything in. The lights are blinding like the noonday sun, even if it is midnight by now. In my pocket I have an envelope with an address written on it. I give it to the taxi driver: Via Nullo. The driver leaves me in front of the closed door of an apartment building with an intercom to the right and one to the left. I don't understand, but he insists, "It's here, here," and drives away. It's not too late and so I begin pressing all the buttons. I've seen this done in the movies. I keep pressing one in particular. A dog starts barking. This also happened in the movie. A man comes to the window shouting: "It's not here, it's not here." Who in the world understands him? Finally the man decides to come down. He takes me by the hand and with his finger points to the intercom and the right button. I ring and some guys come right down. I say to them, "I'm looking for someone I know . . ."—when really I am looking for a cousin of a friend from Abidjan. I have never seen any of them before in my life. I tell them the name of the guy I know. "He no longer lives here," they inform me. My first big letdown. And now what do I do?

But the two young guys bring me to him. Right, left, right, left, and we find ourselves in front of another apartment building. We go up together. Two other Senegalese guys let me in. My friend lives there, but he's out at work somewhere far away: Porto San Giorgio, Porto Recanati, Civitanova Marche, Numana. He'll be back. In the meantime they put me up. So far, so good. My first night in Italy I sleep. The guys there don't ask anything. They leave me to my thoughts about the next day when I'll discover the city and walk by all the houses, the *caffès*, the shops, the people . . .

The morning is here. Finally no more train. I go around on foot now, with my legs, and under the sun. I look around and I'm happy to be in the middle of so many dressed-up people, all smiling. These people have fun and don't work. They spend their days on the beach or at the *caffè*. They chat and stroll along all day long. Who knows what they're talking about as they stroll along without a worry in the world and with plenty of food in their stomachs. It's an unending party, like in Abidjan, days and nights that last forever. "I will be like them," I tell myself. They were tourists, but I didn't know that at the time. I thought they lived there all year round . . . I still had a lot to learn. I want to soak up the sun and take in the nice shops. Instead my new friends are waiting for me at home, worried.

"Where were you, *grand-frère*?"

"I just went to take a look around."

"Be careful, you shouldn't be doing that. You better not walk around because here we live in hiding. We don't have papers. We pretend we are tourists. But everyone knows that we aren't tourists and that we sell on the beaches. It's not allowed, it's forbidden, got it? If you go wandering around like that, Uncle might see you and stop you. And if he stops you, he'll bring you to the station and give you deportation papers. And when they find you with those papers, dear *grand*, you have to leave the country. If not, if they catch you again, they'll send you to jail. Got it? You've got to be careful. When you leave the apartment, you have to look

around and make sure the Uncles aren't there waiting in their car for you. If there are too many people, go back. And don't let the *tubab* see you when you go back in. It's better if they don't know that we live here because if the Uncles know that we live here, they'll come and kick us out—that is, after they serve us with deportation papers and confiscate all the merchandise they can get their hands on."

"Really?"

"Really."

I was scared. But I was also confused. After seeing so many happy people in Riccione, how could I believe Osman, or Os, as we called him, the head of our little group, the oldest who gave advice and orders to us all? We would see. After a few days our friend comes back. I introduce myself: "A cousin of yours in Dakar gave me your address. I don't know where to go. I can find a place somewhere else, but I don't know anyone in Italy." I can stay but I have to look after myself. He has a car to go buy the merchandise. But there are already five guys and there's no room for me. Two other guys, Saliou and Charl, come to my rescue. They don't have a car either. They offer: "We'll show you the place where to buy the stuff, then you follow us on the beach and watch how it's done. Do you speak Italian? Do you know how to sell?" I sold for four or five years and I got by pretty well with Spanish and English. So one morning the two guys wake me up. We have to get ready to go buy the merchandise in Rimini. There are three of us. The guy who knows the way heads out first. I keep about fifty meters behind him. The third, who also knows what he's doing, takes a different route. We all meet up at the bus station, careful not to be seen together. We have to hide behind the bushes waiting until the bus comes and then we all jump out and hop on the bus. That way if an Uncle sees us he can't stop all three of us: if he snatches one of us, the other two can still get away. In Rimini, too, it's the same routine: one in front, one behind, and the other a street away, all with our eyes peeled looking for Uncle and a possible hiding spot: a *caffè*, a

hotel, or even a bush. This would be our strategy from here on out. We get to the shop and it's owned by an Eritrean guy who is married to an Italian. He usually sells wholesale, but he sells to us as well since there are a lot of us and it's worth his while that way—even if he really isn't supposed to for legal reasons and risks a big hassle with the police. He could get a fine, maybe even a big one, but no, our money is good and so everyone just turns a blind eye. Later the guys show me another store, also in Rimini, not too far from this one. The owner, who was a local traffic cop, is a good person and sometimes he even sells us stuff on credit. Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, elephant families, inlaid horns, eagles made of bone or fake bone: all go right into the friends' bags. I stay to watch a bit. In the end I buy the same stuff as the others—a little less, though, just to be on the safe side. It's time, they say. We start on a beach nearby named Misano. "Careful of the police. They're dressed like that and wear that kind of hat there, the kind with the hard visor, just like the military."

And just like that I start. After Abidjan, Riccione. Only here I am always on the run, always on the lookout. The police are waiting behind every beach umbrella. There isn't a stretch of beach where I can sell without worrying. I go a few meters and I find myself face-to-face with a police officer. Go another few meters, sell a necklace, and out from behind the umbrella pops another police officer. I'm careful, real careful, and so I manage all right. But I don't know how long this can last. Selling while dodging the police umbrella by umbrella is not an easy game.

I even got off the hook once when I ran straight into a police officer and had my merchandise right there in my hands, out in plain sight. I was shaking with fear. I didn't know what to do. I looked at him, tall, in shorts and a white shirt, wearing the usual hat with the hard visor. But he didn't do anything. It's not that he didn't see me. He saw me, but he stepped aside as if to let me pass. *Dio mio.* I stood still until I saw him leave and then slowly I began to move as well, real slow. When I was sure he couldn't see me anymore, I

booked it the rest of the way home. When I got there I told everyone the story. It turned out I had run into a lifeguard from one of the beaches around there, the Lido Splendor. I realized then that the lifeguards weren't Uncles and they let us do our thing because there were only a few of us then.

# ITALIAN MONEY



**SO THE GAME WORKS LIKE THIS:** Avoid the Uncles and sell necklaces on the beach. Every day I cover kilometers and kilometers on the beach. At the end of the day I am covered from head to toe in sand, sand that clings to the sweat on my body and is annoying as anything. You must have seen them a million times, those young black guys with the skinny legs and long feet that sink into the sand, guys loaded with necklaces and elephants. I was one of them, one of the first, back when we were still just a curiosity for you. We were out of place, because a black person in Rimini or Riccione is not in his element. This is true even for me who have been on plenty of beaches, mainly those at the seaside in Dakar. There the sea merges with the ocean, stretching to eternity. Just the opposite of your Adriatic, which is small, dirty, and confining. There even the sand is different and it doesn't bother me like it does here. But despite it all I keep going because if you keep going, eventually evening will come, the people will go home, I get to go home, and then who knows what will happen. I don't give up. The first day I make fifty thousand lire. Not bad at all. I keep going, and after my walk from umbrella to umbrella, I usually end up with forty or fifty thousand lire. Together with Saliou I go and spend it all on shoes and clothes because I like all the nice shoes and clothes. Sal thinks like me. He's here from the Republic of

the Gambia and a few years younger. He's rubbed off on me. Every night we go to a pizzeria or restaurant to eat and watch the people. "We are here for this, too," he teaches me. There are fifteen of us in our apartment, and we are the only ones to spend all our money and have a little fun.

I notice that the others save the money they earn, a nice big bundle every day. They count and recount their money. With great big smiles on their faces, they act like hens sitting on their eggs waiting for them to hatch. The only difference is that they stare at their eggs rather than sit on them. Then they hide the money and fret at the thought of it disappearing. We don't have that problem: every night we spend it. We say to each other, "Can you believe how stingy these guys are? They won't even buy nice clothes and shoes. What cheapos. We're living, enjoying life. We're not here to save." We like pretty girls and we'd like more than anything to go to a club. But we have to be careful. Our friends tell us to forget about it. Despite the brave face we put on, we are terrified that Uncle might jump out at us in the dark of night. It's easier to be spotted when there are fewer people around, after a certain hour, for example. We settle for the pizzeria da Paolo. The place has a view of the sea and you can enjoy the sound of the waves and the fresh air. A Senegalese guy comes in one night. He's there to sell. We tell him, "No, not here too. It's not right, have a little respect." A song I've never heard before follows me everywhere: at the pizzeria, while I talk and laugh with my friend, during the day while I walk and sell on the beach, and when I run and hide from the cops. I can't get it out of my head even if I don't know what it's about. I would have to wait a few weeks, even a few months, to learn more words of my new language. I liked one of the refrains, that same one they sing over and over: "Where do the sailors go? Where do the sailors go? . . ." Eventually, when I started to understand a little, I fooled myself into thinking that maybe they were singing about us.

Sal's rule was to never stop dreaming of all the things that might be possible: look at the girls and think that one day, as soon as we learn the language and the selling picks

up, we might meet one of them. Window-shop, fall in love with the lights, sleep very little. We acted like that to keep the anxiety and homesickness away. At least we were relaxed when we sat down in a pizzeria or went into a nice store.

One by one, under the heat of the sun, the days evaporated. Our perseverant friends were still saving their money. Pleased with their ability to scrimp and save, they already planned their return: some to Senegal, some to France. Sal and I, on the other hand, never had more than a little change in our pockets.

## PAOLO IL NERO



**NOT EVERYONE WAS A GOOD** person in the Senegalese community. Paolo il Nero, or Black Paolo, was a scam artist, or at least he tried to be one. He had come really early to Italy, at the beginning of the seventies. He had a lot of friends and was clever. He would rent apartments and then sublet them, earning quite a lot. He would get merchandise on credit at the store owned by the traffic cop and then resell it to the newcomers at a higher price. And the newcomers didn't say anything. They were scared of him and mainly of the police, and they figured that if some stupid argument broke out among the lot of us, the police would come and arrest everyone and slap us all with deportation papers. Paolo il Nero was pretty important at first. Then everyone learned to take care of themselves and Paolo il Nero didn't scare anyone anymore. The guys would all laugh at his threats. Eventually he disappeared. Word had it that he went back to Paris. He owed a few million lire to the cop who had the store. He was a precursor, Paolo il Nero, a small-time boss. But he worked alone, no organization for him. The papers wrote about a racket and Italian contacts that organized the selling for Moroccan or Senegalese men, distributed the merchandise, and then tried to pocket the better part of the earnings for themselves. But this wasn't

my experience. I always found that someone gave you the merchandise on credit, like the cop in Rimini. Then, you would return, you promised, to settle your bill. But sometimes you just never returned.

## GIRLS FROM SENEGAL



**THE WORST WERE THE GIRLS.** I used to see them arrive from Paris with other young people and in cars full of merchandise. The girls would sell everything, I mean absolutely everything. And they would justify it by saying, "We have to sell to live, just like you with your necklaces." They would make you pay alright. One hundred thousand lire. I didn't like it at all. I didn't want them to even come into our house. But I really fell for one. She was pretty. Beautiful. My eyes pop out just thinking about her. She was from Senegal and had been in Germany. She said she was a teacher. She hurt me bad. Because, after all, a girl shouldn't prostitute herself. It's degrading for everyone. Those words really stung: "We sell everything." That was our life in the end. We sold everything: elephants, necklaces, bracelets, our dignity, our work, our youth, our dreams. And she understood this well, this girl who prostituted herself:

"We are illegal, we can't do anything. We left whatever freedom we had at home. Might as well face it or you'll just end up back in Senegal."

"You have no willpower," I protested.

"If you fight it, they'll kick you out and you know it."

"But you can fight it in a way that the worst doesn't have to happen," I tried.

"You have to do it if you want to live. One job's the same as another. You're not going to make a great career for yourself as an illegal immigrant. If you have no rights, you have to always hang your head. And if you have to hang your head, you have no dignity."

"Are you lecturing me?" I asked.

"You and your dumb black morals."

But I thought she was wrong. "You're just cynical," I told her. "Just keep looking out for yourself. Do what you want with your life. But you should know that you're also making a bad name for me in the eyes of the *tubab*, and they already don't think well of me because I have the black face of a black immigrant—and a poor one at that. 'See,' the *tubab* will say, 'that's what they're like in those countries: all whores and beggars.'"

## POLICE . . . JUST JOKING!



**GERMANY IS ALWAYS ON my mind.** The days pass and I can't think about anything else. After all, that's the destination that my fortune-teller assigned me. But my friends convince me: "In the summer everyone is on vacation. They're all here at the Adriatic. You should wait for winter." They're right. I see the Germans every day, right next to their umbrellas. Better to stay in Riccione. But whatever feelings of enthusiasm I had at first now quickly melt under the sun. I see how these guys all live under enormous stress twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. They've all been arrested at least once and had their merchandise confiscated. They've all received deportation papers ordering them to go home. The expert, Osman, the boss, is always saying the same thing: "Careful, sooner or later it'll be your turn." To hear him, you'd think we were back in the days when they would go around hunting the black man. The black man can never escape. Sooner or later he ends up caught in their net. The police raided some other apartments, in Via Nullo, in Via Trieste, and even others. They caught some guys there and took their necklaces, bracelets, and elephants. Some even ended up in jail. Ours is the only apartment that hasn't been searched. The guys all say over and over, resigned to their fate, "They'll be here one day. If not tomorrow, then the next." One evening around nine, the intercom buzzes from downstairs. One of us answers and asks who it is. "It's us."

"Who?"

"Police."

My friend drops the receiver and comes bounding into the living room shouting, "The Uncles are here." We are all mute as we stare at the receiver hanging off the hook. There were three guys there with us who had just been released not too long ago. Clutching their deportation papers, they had told us about their run-in with the police. Seated around the table, we were relaxed and chatting, and just to show off, someone even started to laugh his head off. But now when we hear that the police are here, everyone's eyes jump from one corner of the room to the other looking for an exit or some way to sneak away before it's too late. I'm the last one to move. I don't know what to do and like an idiot I stand as still as a pole, praying that Sal or someone else will drag me with them to a good hiding spot. Instead, our three guests are quick on their feet. They run into the kitchen, fling open a window leading to the roof of a garage, and jump. They've split. Three others follow them: this must be the best way out. I jump, too. But I don't know where to go. If I start running I will get lost and won't know how to get home. I follow one of the guys to a *caffè*, staying right on his heels. He notices and says, "Stop. Look and see if you see the Uncles' car." I do what he tells me. I go back a few meters, lean against the corner of a building, and just like in the movies I peer out to get a glimpse of the front door of our building. There they are. "Yeah, the car's there. I see it." And in fact the car's there, parked at an angle with the doors open, menacing like all the Uncles' cars. We start running again until we duck into a *caffè*.

"We made it again this time."

"But we can't spend the night here. We have to go back."

The *caffè* closes. We look for another one. And still another. We're now approaching one thirty in the morning. Even my friend says we have to go back. But I don't know if that is such a good idea at this point. Somehow I manage to suggest: "Let's go back." But this "Let's go back" sounds

more like "But what are we going to find there?" He tells me that he has left some friends' money in the house while they're in the Marches traveling. He has to go get it. I follow him because I'm too ashamed to admit that I'm covered in goose bumps. It's now two in the morning. We go up the stairs. My heart is pounding and I'm careful to not make any noise. They let us in and then they all burst out laughing. We fell for it. It turns out that one of the guys planned the whole thing. The others caught on immediately while we were wandering around for five hours terrorized. "What chickens! Where were you?" they laugh. It doesn't seem so funny when you are the one out there running around on a windy, cold night: "Whose idea was all of this? Whose?" I insist. My blood is circulating again and now it's gone even to my head. They stop laughing at once. I must look pretty scared. I fell into their trap and now I feel hurt and ridiculed and say, "I want to know who it was. I'll show you not to mess around like that again." "No, come on," says another one of the guys, "he's a good guy. When he found out that you'd left, he felt bad." I am sure he did. I manage to calm down, but Osman decides that there will be no more of these jokes. It's not OK to pretend to be the *carabinieri* since like the other police, they are a real danger for us. Instead we need to invent a way to avoid them. So we start taking extra precautions. We wake up before six since the police always come early in the morning, and we always leave the apartment in complete silence and with utmost caution. Osman's right: Exercise caution as soon as you step out that door. No big groups, and always keep your eyes wide open. As soon as you leave the house there's a busy intersection and accidents happen all the time there, so the police are always around. To go out we have to wait for them to leave, praying to God that they don't stay all day to patrol the street. Then, after we look in every direction, we make a run for it and hope that in the meantime the police who have just left the intersection do not come to pay us a visit at home. Despite everything, I've been lucky. I have never been served deportation papers, and never had my merchandise confiscated.

I'm a quick runner and my eyes never rest. But for the others it is always the same old story. "They gave me deportation papers and confiscated my stuff," they all complain. But luck and presence of mind do not soothe the fear. When the doorbell rings, my heart always jumps into my throat. I can hardly sleep. I'm up all night waiting for the police. "Tomorrow it's my turn, tomorrow it's my turn," I repeat to myself. Still today, years later, the doorbell and the sound of feet scare me, and I am still a light sleeper.

"We should at the very least celebrate the holidays," suggests one member of the group.

We are undecided.

"We can't be too conspicuous."

"But it's Tabaski!"

For Tabaski we can risk it. Tabaski is a Muslim holiday that you celebrate by sacrificing a lamb.

"Yeah, right, we'll go to the main *piazza* to sacrifice the lamb, so that they can confiscate both our merchandise and our lamb!"

"No, look, we'll buy the meat and cook it. And that's it."

It's decided: We'll buy the meat and celebrate. The happy day arrives. It's a holy day and no one works. We invite some friends over and we're all gathered in our apartment while someone does the cooking. There are twelve of us. We chat and even laugh, for once forgetting about the police back at their station. Instead, we dream of our country far away, of our mothers, our girlfriends . . . that is, until all of a sudden the kitchen fills with smoke.

"It's on fire! It's on fire!"

A fire really did break out. And most likely because the gas tube was too close to the flame, which burned a hole in it. Nothing serious, but we didn't even think of calling the firemen. They would have come with the police just behind them. The guests leave first. Someone else decides to collect his stuff and slip out. Meanwhile the flames lick an old wooden dresser and the wall turns black. The smoke is rising and even spills out into the street. The air stinks and

the people at the intersection start to call for help. There are only three of us who stay behind, and we take turns looking out from the balcony to reassure the passersby while the other two try to extinguish the flames with soap and water. The super arrives. He wants to come in. We stop him: "It's just a party for a Muslim holiday. There's a mess because we had a lot of friends over." It was a great party. Finally we manage to put out the fire with sand from the yard. Now we have to clean up, but at least the apartment is saved and we got to celebrate Tabaski. The fugitives return. Too bad about the meat.

# GERMANY VIA PARIS



BY NOW I UNDERSTAND how things work here: Soon the summer will be over and everyone will go home. There won't be anyone to buy my knickknacks anymore. I start working harder than before and start saving. I, too, count my small wad of money every night. It seems pathetically small and certainly not enough to do anything I've planned. It is about the 20th of September. The guys pack their bags. Most of them will go back to Senegal. What reason is there to spend the winter in Riccione? A bunch of them advise me: "Your ticket is still good. Go home. The cold is a terrible companion." But I try to be strong and say to myself: I don't need your advice, who asked for your opinion? I've been traveling for years. I don't need your preaching. I decide to stay put for now and then go to Germany. Sal and Charl will come with me. Some other guys have also decided to join us in Germany. But they have a car. There's no room for us and it's impossible to buy one here. So we go to France. We'll buy the car in France. Then we'll all meet in Cologne. It's all set. So long, Riccione. The beaches are empty and the cold air of the first autumn wind smacks you dead in the face. The Senegalese leave. Their old apartment is now empty. There are only a few cars at the intersection outside. Silence prevails. I recall the anguish of leaving Dakar. Now I have friends with me. We have plans that must be honored and another train to board for Germany, the country where I am destined to go.

But first there's always another border to cross, this time at Ventimiglia. We've made up our minds: we'll pay a *passeur*, a guide that will take us to France by the back roads. But at the border no one asks us anything. In Italy they only check a little. In France only a glance here and there. We're headed to Toulon, where one of our cousins lives. If the police asked anything, we were to say: We're on vacation, we're just going to say hello to a relative. Just to be on the safe side, we split up, each in a different compartment of the train. Menton, Nice, Cannes, St. Raphael, the French Riviera. It's the France I've dreamed of, the country I've always wanted to see. France was once the owner of Senegal and a great deal of the rest of Africa. In the end my culture is also French. I learned French as a child and in high school I studied everything about France: its history, literature, and geography. I read the French poets and even taught French in Senegal. But I hate France because it colonized and exploited us. I feel the kind of pride that only those who stand up for themselves can know. I feel angry when I think of my brothers in Senegal and all that they suffered. I wouldn't stay in France. No, I would go to Germany, just as my fortune-teller predicted. We stop for two days in Toulon. We have a million lire among the three of us and we're looking for a car. We want to buy one, but we don't know under whose name to register it since none of us has legal residency in France. We can't get around this darn residency document. My cousin from Toulon (the son of the brother of my father: I should really call him brother like we do in Senegal) doesn't trust us. We look for a generous friend with French residency. But we're up against a sea we just can't seem to cross. We give up and leave for Paris by train. Nothing has changed and once again we don't know who to ask. Charl has a phone number in his pocket. As soon as we arrive at the Gare de Lyon he calls. We wait a little while and then a Senegalese guy who's not much older than us arrives to meet us there at the station. He's relaxed and dressed pretty nicely. Our new friend brings us to the metro. "Good luck," he says.

# A MONTH IN PARIS



**H**ERE I AM, OUT TO DISCOVER Paris, the capital of the empire. The Arc de Triomphe is magnificent, but a Senegalese immigrant lives on the outskirts of the city and it's not a great life. Dirt, rain, the cold; mean faces staring back at you—or just indifferent if you're lucky: this will be our everyday fare. There's also the exhaustion of hunting every day for something that you'll never find: a hotel room, the car you long for, and a friend who will register it in his name. The sky is gray and the dead leaves fall from the trees. I shove my hands deep in my pockets searching for a little warmth. The same old negative thoughts come back to haunt me. The money, on the other hand, vanishes. The first night is awful. We stay in a little *pension* where we pay one hundred and twenty francs. The owner is fat, greasy, and mutters a total of two words, as if his customers—which would be me, Sal, and Charl, three well-behaved guys—were keeping him from some more important prior engagement. The room is small and oozes misery. Well, we figure we won't stay long. We ask where we can find something to eat and our friend points to the foyer. It's a cafeteria for immigrants that is subsidized by the federal government. It's not the pizzeria in Riccione, but compared to the cold outside it almost seems cozy. And with six or seven francs you can fill up and even help yourself to seconds. It's not so bad for a poor immigrant. On

our second day in Paris, we learn about the flea market at the Porte de Clignancourt. We have an appointment to meet our friend there, the same one as before. He explains that it's better to try another market, one near the Mairie de Montrouil station. The market is jammed with people chatting excitedly with one another like there's no tomorrow. We have our eye on a little car that's pretty nice, a Peugeot 204. We agree on the price: one thousand five hundred francs. That works. It seems like a done deal, but we still have to find someone willing to register the car in his name. Since we don't have residency, it's impossible for us to do it. We look each other in the eye and I ask the Senegalese friend if he'll do it. He looks down at the ground; his hands, pressed together, are now moving up and down halfway between prayer and shock: "I've already registered three under my name." I have no choice but to ask my cousin from Paris. I call and then we go to see him. He lives in a big apartment building in the eighteenth arrondissement. There he is. He seems happy to see me, I think. His hello is pretty warm. He's lived in Paris for quite a while. I guess he's not doing too badly. He has a good job working for a tailor and he even has a place of his own. We explain our dilemma and tell him our plans to go to Germany. He wants to think it over before giving us an answer.

We check out of our *pension* and check into another one that's a lot cheaper. But in exchange it's just as disgusting. The owner is Moroccan. There's no shower, no bath, and the sink to wash your face is so small that you can only fit one hand in at a time. Oh well, we just need to stick it out a bit longer and soon we'll be on our way to Germany.

My cousin calls us back. He's agreed to do it. But, he says, we should forget about that other car we had our eye on. Outside Paris in the *banlieue*, he has a friend, some Turkish guy who has a used-car business. There we'll get a better deal. So we go to check it out. A Peugeot 504 like ours costs five thousand francs. All our savings from the summer in Italy disappear at the bat of an eye. My share comes to just about seven hundred francs. The car, however, is gorgeous,

shiny, and chrome-plated. It's seven to eight years old, but you can't tell. Thank heavens the sale is fast. The Turkish guy signs and erases his name. The car's ours. Saliou, who was a good taxi driver back in Gambia, will be the driver. In a few days we'll leave Paris, where we've been for a week. We just have to fill out all the paperwork for our Peugeot. I go to the motor vehicle agency in Bobigny with my cousin's residency papers. I pay three hundred francs and the transaction is done. Problem solved. I go back to my cousin's with the papers and there's a surprise waiting for me: "Listen, cousin, the deal is off. Sorry, I changed my mind. My friends advised me not to do it because you guys are going to Germany with the car and my name's on the car, and who knows what kind of trouble you'll get into there. No, I just can't. I've changed my mind. My friends told me that some other guys did it and then there were problems because of traffic tickets. . . ."

"But, no, cousin, don't worry, you'll see, we won't get any tickets, I promise. . . ."

"No, I can't."

"But we've already spent three hundred francs."

"Guys, I just can't."

My cousin's face turns dour. Conversation over. I don't try to convince him anymore: "OK, I'll find someone else." And so just like that we're back to hunting for help, without a cent among us and with a beautiful car that we can't use. At the Porte de Clignancourt we look for someone willing to sign for the car. But the Senegalese avoid us. When they see us coming they turn the other way, and one even picks a fight with us. I have no choice but to keep bugging my cousin. "We just need some advice," I say. But my cousin sees the real problem that's bothering us: "I can give you some money, but not the apartment. I have no room. Here's the address of a friend who lives outside Paris." "Outside" means Chanteloup-les-Vignes. It's not easy to get to and it costs us a bus and a metro ticket. His friend Kebè is hospitable, but he has a wife and two kids who are six and seven years old and the house is small. We're an imposition even if Kebè doesn't imply it. We can't stay any longer than neces-

sary. We battle the fog of early winter as we cover kilometers and kilometers each day by foot and metro, searching for someone to register the car for us. When we find someone who might be willing to act as the owner of our Peugeot, immediately someone else approaches him and says, "Are you dumb? You're going to do this transaction for them and you don't even know where they'll end up." And just like that, it's "no," and we have to start from scratch. Thanks to two hundred francs it looks like a French guy from Guadeloupe is willing to do it. A Senegalese guy acts as a go-between: "As long as no one knows about any of this." So I return to Bobigny and I go through it all a second time, handing over my three hundred francs. It seems like the deal is final. But when I run into the others, I realize that word has already spread. The good brothers of Senegal scold their friend from Guadeloupe, "Are you stupid giving your signature to them?" He balks and we beg, but he says no. We give him more money, but someone else butts in. . . . In the end I turn to my friends: "Guys, we can't stay in Paris. We'll leave the car here and go to Germany by train."

I can't stand Paris anymore. I can feel the apathy and hostility all around us. The Senegalese want nothing to do with us, as if we were there to steal from them. A guy we met around the station is our final hope. You can tell he does well for himself. He's well dressed and has this way of teaching you about life. He's nice, but there's something shady about him. "Look guys," he advises us, "you're wasting your time here. These are not good people. Trust me, I tried to live with them." He's insistent: "Come with me. I'll show you how to deal. Then you won't have any problems with the hotel and you won't have to give a damn about these people. Sell the car and in one week you'll double your money. Stay with me and I'll get you started." I turn to Sal and Charl: "Hey guys, if we don't leave now, this is not going to be pretty."

We leave the car with Kebè. We get on the train and leave, following the advice of the first friend we met in Paris: Avoid Belgium, it's better to take the train via Frankfurt. It's less crowded. We leave from the Gare de l'Est, heading first

for Metz, then for a small town called Forbach just over the border. We split up on the train. Charl goes first, then me two or three cars behind him, and last Saliou. At the border the customs officials and police get on: "Where are you going, young man?" they ask. I explain in French, "I'm going to Forbach. I'm staying there a few days to see an old friend. Then I'm coming back to Paris." "How much money do you have?" they ask. I had a few francs, a gift from my cousin. "All right, follow us," they order me. In the police compartment of the train I find Charl. He was already there explaining, telling his story, and justifying it all. I pretend that everything is normal and hope that at least Sal got off the hook and that at least one of us got lucky. As the train speeds onward, I peer out the window and spot the approaching station. I see Sal coming my way.

"Do you two know each other?"

"No, never seen him before."

"You don't know each other? You sure?"

"No, we don't know each other."

They burst out laughing. They had just found a photo of the three of us in my pocket: "Guys, life in Germany is expensive and you don't have any money. Go back to France." I don't say anything. Only Sal is stubborn: "We have the right to enter." But the police only repeat, "*Nein. Nein.*"

They leave us at the station to wait for the next train, which leaves at two in the morning. Now the French police arrive. We show our documents. Charl and I don't have any problems. We're from Senegal, a former colony, and so we don't need a visa to enter France. Sal is from Gambia. He needs a visa.

"How did you enter without a visa? Come with us." The police change shifts and the next two ask for our papers: "Come with us." Again we're at a police station. We find Sal. We pretend we don't know him. We manage to get some information from him: they're keeping him because of the whole visa story. For me and Charl everything goes smoothly. We leave Sal at the border. We get the train again, this time back to Paris.

# THE FOREIGN LEGION



**MY MEMORIES OF PARIS** are not happy ones. Even today I can still feel the cold in my bones and see the gray haze of those dreadful days. I get off the train and start shaking all of a sudden. It must be fatigue, I tell myself, but deep down I know it's my spirits that are in the dumps because the whole point of the trip has gone to hell. Our money's gone. I'm here, desperate, and in a foreign city without a clue as to what to do. Do I give Germany another try? Maybe. And in the meantime do I start selling here? It all went OK with the French, who I hated just like every man from the colonies hates his former master. Even the police ended up being nice. The problem was with my fellow countrymen, with the exception of my cousin and his friend who gave us a hand from the start. The others thought we had no right to be there. We were just in the way. Some couldn't care less about us. Others were outright cruel, as on the night of our return to Paris.

We look for a place to sleep. A Senegalese guy gives us a room. He says goodbye and leaves. After a few hours, around midnight, he comes back and tells us, "You've got to get out of here, you can't stay." "What?" we ask. "What do you mean? You told us we could stay. Now it's late and it's cold out there." "I don't give a damn," he responds. "Get out of here. And fast." He changed his mind. Or maybe someone

else, maybe his father, changed it for him. In the end he lets us sleep for fifty francs in a bed about one meter wide that the two of us have to share. "And you have to be out of here first thing tomorrow morning." Fine. Thanks a bunch.

We get up early and leave. We count our change: we have a few francs left. We own a car that we don't have the right to use. We are also missing Sal, who is back at the border because of the visa problem, and he is the only one who knows how to drive the car. After that first stellar night, we make do at our cousin's and Kebè's. We try to at least sell the car, but the buyers take advantage of our desperation and offer us next to nothing: the miserable sum of two thousand five hundred francs for a car that is easily worth twice that—in fact, the very amount we had paid for it. The deal's off. All of a sudden Sal appears holding deportation papers ordering him to go back to Gambia, even if he doesn't have a cent. Thankfully my cousin helps us out. We pool our money together for a hotel for one of us while the other two stay with Kebè. Another day goes by. And then another. We walk around the city, but no one has any idea what to do. Selling under the bridges of the Seine near the flea market doesn't pay. At Pigalle there are a lot of tourists but it's dangerous because the police are always around. Instead of walking, we are dragging ourselves, spending our days in utter listlessness. I curse Paris and the idea that brought me all the way here. The guy with the drugs pops up again. "Guys," he insists, "you have to hang with me. You're wasting your time if you think someone is going to give you a hand. You saw what the Senegalese are like in Paris. They're bastards. I want nothing to do with them. Come on. I'll show you how it's done." Always with this story about dealing drugs. It doesn't sit well with me, not because I'm scared of the police, but because it doesn't seem like the right thing to do. The others agree with me. I count and recount my money: I have only one hundred francs in my pocket: "What will I do when I've spent all these francs? I can't keep knocking at my cousin's door. What will I do? . . ." As our threesome moves along the beautiful sidewalks of Paris, I always take a peek

at the window displays. But I don't see clothes and shoes. I only see three black individuals wrapped in rags with tired and bitter faces. I don't smell their foul odor (by now they hardly wash themselves) only because the wind is so strong it whips you in the face as it passes. Always the same question: "What are you guys up to?" No one answers. Our Senegalese friends duck behind the corner more than ever now at the sight of us. Sal is stuck with his deportation papers and Charl seems worse off than me. My brothers Sal and Charl are pitiful and sad in this Parisian autumn.

In Dakar I had heard about the Foreign Legion. The cousin in Toulon warned us, "Guys, don't even think about the Foreign Legion. The Legion is no good. When you get out of the Legion you are no longer a human being." My cousin in Paris said the same thing: "Don't even consider the Legion, ever." I only have one hundred francs in my pocket. The song of a siren lures me: "There's always the Legion." You would think it was easy to find the Legion in France, like finding a peanut tree in Senegal or a pizzeria in Riccione. I ask a man and he suggests that I ask a police officer. The police officer doesn't know anything. I stop a soldier who points to a military base saying, "There they can tell you." I knock on the door and the employee there gives me an address and some directions. I take the metro to the end of the line at Château de Vincennes. I ask around and some police officers tell me to take a bus to a little town in the suburbs. I'm on my way. There's the base. It's closed. It's not exactly welcoming, but what can I do? I find the buzzer and ring. "What do you want?" someone asks on the other end.

"Where can I find the Foreign Legion?"

"All right, hold on."

After a few seconds they let me in. They take me down a long corridor to a big room where they invite me to sit down. There's a French guy there already. He tells me that he's run away from home because he didn't get along with his parents. It almost makes me feel better. At least I chose the Legion for a slightly less stupid reason: I am alone, desperate, and it seems I have no other choice. At least they would give

me a bed and some food and others would think for me and make decisions. The whole process goes pretty quickly: passport check, questions, formalities, and then the medical exam. There's an officer who speaks French with a heavy Italian accent. A truck in the courtyard is about to leave for a training camp on the French Riviera, in Aubagne. They tell the driver to wait; that way he can take us as well. The officer, the first one I saw there, gives me back my passport: "See? We're honest. You left one hundred francs in your passport. We could have stolen it, but we're not jerks . . ." Thanks. My last one hundred francs. It's my turn first. "Look, young man, you are ill," the doctors tell me. "You have stomach problems, in your abdomen. . ." They list a few illnesses. "But I have always been healthy," I insist. "Look, young man," they say, "we're not racist. The trouble is that you are not well and life in the Foreign Legion is hard. You have to be healthy, really healthy, to handle it. Get better and come back. We'll take you. No problem."

No Foreign Legion and one hundred francs in my pocket. A month has passed since the days of Riccione. It's almost November. I'm disappointed and exhausted. *Mamma mia*, what am I going to do? The Legion was my last resort. I can't go begging to my cousin again. I don't know many people here. In the foyer I meet a Senegalese guy, an old acquaintance from Abidjan. He also tries to find work for me. But in the end I discover that the work is the usual drug dealing. Is it possible there are only drugs here? With one hundred francs I can't even get out of Paris. The Legion slammed the door in my face. I get on the bus. But I stop at Château de Vincennes. I end up at the castle because I want to get away from the road and my same old thoughts. In the rooms of the castle the noises of everyday life are gone. The warmth of those rooms, the silence, the peace and quiet of those big spaces, the paintings, they all take me far away to other times and countries. The visit ends at the stairs which take you back to the street. I leave the fleeting calm of the castle behind me at the main gate. I find the metro for St. Ouen. I get the train again and I wish the trip would never end so

that I might avoid the sunlight waiting for me. When I get out in the open air, I find three guys I had met the night before I tried to enroll in the Foreign Legion: Falou, Mordiarra, and his little brother, As. They were all supposed to go ahead of me to Germany, but instead they're here in their red Peugeot with Parisian plates. They pull over and tell me how they had gotten all the way to Germany only to find that the Germans wouldn't let them sell anything. They didn't even make it one day: deportation papers just like that.

"Well, so long. We're headed back to Italy," they say.

"Italy?" I open the door. "I'm going to Italy, too."

"Good, with four people the trip will cost us each less."

# FROM PARIS TO RICCIONE



**I DON'T WASTE A MINUTE.** Just thinking of Riccione gets my blood pumping, even if there are hundreds of kilometers between me and Italy, and most importantly there's still the border to cross. Paris is too gray for me to stay any longer. It's harsh and bitter. My friends are in a rush. I run over to Kebè's and collect the few things I have. There are four of us from Senegal in the car. We talk loudly, eager to yell and laugh because we are finally free from the Parisian anguish and chill. It's pandemonium. We each say what we think is the best way to exit the city. In the meantime the Porte d'Italie closes. We are still in Paris, stuck in traffic, tricked by the signs for "Italie" and trapped by our own chatter. Four idiots.

We reset the departure for tomorrow. I make use of the time to call my cousin: "Cousin, I'm leaving for Italy." He responds on the other end, "I'm glad. It would have been hard for you here. You would have ended up under the Seine bridges." I thought so too after having seen all the dealers, drug addicts, and good Senegalese people enslaved to the bottle, sleeping on cardboard. We decide to meet up one last time to say goodbye. I see my cousin arrive. He hugs me and gives me five hundred francs. Thanks, cousin. I remember our Peugeot, abandoned next to Kebè's house. I talk to Sal and Charl about it: "Guys, do what you want with it."

We were always together in these last months. It's a way, I guess, to pay them back for my betrayal. We had shared money and hopes for the future, the trip to Germany. We had wandered together around the markets, the stations, the bridges of the Seine, and the Parisian suburbs. So long, guys. I'm sorry, but I can't stay here anymore. I look back out of the moving car. Paris slowly fades away. Shrouded in the exhaust fumes of an engine just barely running on a gas-oil mix, it looks small and barely visible. It's a Thursday at the end of October. I have to make a stop in Toulon to collect my other suitcases. We travel for an entire day, the whole time on the local roads because we figure they are less patrolled by the police and so safer for us. As soon as we get on the highways, the police stop us, asking, "Where are you going? What are you doing? And what about the car? Whose car is it?"

We're not frightened. It almost has no effect on us anymore. "We're leaving France. We're going to visit a friend and bring him his car." This beautiful red car with Parisian plates would be our companion for months to come, the protagonist of endless breakdowns, sales, and searches. It would introduce us to endless mechanics. But for us it's also a home, a family, and all those other things that a Senegalese immigrant is bound to love in a red car with Parisian plates. The police let us go. The first stop is Aix-en-Provence. Our drivers, Falou and Mordiarra, stretch their legs and arms and sleep a little. Even the car takes a breath. Now that we're awake we make plans for what's to come since once again we will have to face another border. Toulon is close. Then Cannes is next. We're forced to stop so that we can figure out which is the best way: Menton or Ventimiglia. The guys we meet hanging out in the gardens in Cannes tell us about their own experiences.

"Friends, go through Menton."

"But, there's also another road through the mountains. We can tell you how to go."

"There are too many police on it right now. You'd better try Menton."

One of us disagrees; it never fails. He prefers Ventimiglia. We have to wait for the right moment, closer to evening. There's a cassette player in the car and so we pop in a cassette with recordings of our prayers from home. When there's a problem, Senegalese people remember that God exists and become believers as long as it's necessary. At Menton, the French let us pass, looking us over with a half-interested expression on their faces. We're just four black guys who are leaving. The Italian police officers start with me: "OK." Then it's Mordiarra's turn: "OK." They check Falou's and As's papers: "Wait a minute, no, you guys, no. You guys already have deportation papers." We go back to Nice. That night we spend a few hours in the car. Then we try again, this time through Ventimiglia. The car is a mobile mosque, bursting at the seams with religious hymns. But God is not enough. Two sets of deportation papers are stronger than our faith.

They send us all back. I say, "Guys, I have an idea. We'll send our bags to the Genoa address that Falou knows. Mordiarra and I will try the border again. Little As and Falou will pay a *passeur*. Then we'll all meet up in Genoa." And so that's exactly what we do. With two hundred francs each, Falou and little As find themselves a guide and manage to cross the border using small mountain roads. The next evening we call the hotel Falou told us about. We ask for our friends. They say, "Yeah, we got here. We made it. God helped us get in." Right . . . God. Now it's our turn. We're still in Nice waiting to leave. We mail our bags as planned. We have nothing else on us, only the clothes we're wearing. We try the border for the third time, at Menton. With our papers we should be fine. "Fine," the Italian guards say, "let's see inside the car." They open it and rummage around, press buttons, and before you know it they are sniffing and lifting up the spare tire. The search everything with a fine-tooth comb, but there is nothing to find. The cassette continues to protect us with the religious songs.

"Where are you headed?"

"We are going to Genoa to visit a friend who's really sick. Then we're going back to Paris."

"We usually find African masks, elephants, and other stuff in your car. There's nothing here."

"But we don't sell anything. We just want to go give our sick friend a hug."

They're not convinced. They open everything again and take another look. Nothing. They go over our documents again.

"You can enter."

It's two in the morning and we are racing toward Genoa. The curves on the road lead us along the coast. If we slow down we can smell the sea and hear the tide. Memories come flooding back: in my mind I'm halfway between Dakar and my summer in Riccione. We are just at the entrance of Genoa. We enter the city, but we don't know where to find As and Falou. We stop in a *piazza* and sleep.

Our morning starts at dawn because the sounds of the market wake us up. Out from the stalls and crates of vegetables emerge two happy illegal Senegalese guys. The phone puts us in touch with our friends. We are going to meet them at the station. But our bags haven't arrived yet. I'll come back in a few days to get them. Meanwhile we're all together on the road to Riccione. We find it immediately and go faster. No need for the religious songs now. Another kind of music finds its way into our happy hearts: rock, reggae, and the songs of Senegal.

# THE CAR-HOUSE



**A HOME IS AN IMPOSSIBLE** dream for a Senegalese illegal immigrant—and any illegal immigrant all over the world without papers. But it's even worse for the immigrant whose skin is on the blackish side, whose hair is always too straight or too curly, and whose wallet is empty (or half-empty when things are good). In that case meeting the future landlord becomes a real challenge.

In these conditions it is pretty obvious that to find a home you need God's help. But God is not always listening to the tribulations of a poor Senegalese immigrant in Italy. We four—Falou, Mordiarra, his little brother, As, and I—hope to get lucky and meet someone who can help us. We position ourselves on the train platform of the Rimini station. The first Senegalese that gets off will be our first victim. Here he is. It would have been luckier for us to have met him during the summer.

"We have just arrived from Paris," we say as we approach him. "There are four of us. We are looking for a house. Can you put us up for one night?" I can imagine the thoughts flashing through our friend's head. But he can't say no. Brotherhood among the Senegalese is strong and when they're far from their dear home hospitality becomes sacred. So for one night we sleep soundly, but the next day we are already back to square one. There really are too many people for a one-bedroom, one-bath apartment. A new address

brings us to Cesenatico, to an old building, inhabited by five or six brothers, or so we're told since we find out there are even more living there. We mainly meet guys and girls who have just arrived from Paris with their loads of merchandise: elephants, ebony masks, ashtrays, and other objects of fine African craftsmanship.

"Hello! Friends, we're here," we announce.

"You, too!"

"We don't know where to go."

"Well, whaddya know?"

"We have nothing to sell."

"We'll give you some stuff to start you off."

"On credit though," we try our luck.

"Well, whaddya know?!"

"And a little money for gas," we add.

In the end they invite us to stay for a nice lunch. But they don't offer us a bed. There is no talk of that yearned-for, dear bed. There are already too many of them. So our only bed becomes the car, which we park in a dark safe place after every selling foray between Rimini, Cesena, Santarcangelo di Romagna, and a number of little towns, *caffès*, markets, and pizzerias. Summer on the beaches was easier. Now there is the added problem that every evening we have to drive hundreds of kilometers to find a new place that doesn't have a bad reputation. I don't like to go into the *caffès*. On the beach, when you are in the crowd of tourists, it's easier to pick out the right customer. In the *caffè* you are observed, studied, judged. In a little space like that you can't escape the nastiness and the accusations. You can't camouflage yourself or hide. And there's the added problem that I am really shy. I always send one of my more courageous friends ahead of me. He speaks, he shows our goods, and I listen and wiggle my way into the transaction, reaching forward with my hands full of elephants and masks from India, Kenya, the Ivory Coast, Senegal, and Mali.

My Africa is for sale.

There is always someone who wants to show you all he knows about Africa, tell you what he thinks about it, tell you all his stories of long trips, of people he's met, cities

he's visited. Might as well let him. It's a good way, after all, to begin the sale, to convince someone else to buy, and to close the deal quickly. This is the goal: be quick and get out of there as fast as you can because you never know when a kind Italian brother, while we are there listening to everyone go on about Africa, has had the brilliant idea to call the police. The police or the *carabinieri* are already waiting for us for their own reasons. Our red Peugeot with Parisian plates attracts the police and *carabinieri*, but the Parisian plates often save us as well. "Where are you going? What are you doing here?" they ask. It is always me who answers because I happen to have learned a tiny bit more Italian than everyone else. Every night when we get back from selling, I stay up for a few hours with my grammar book and memorize the rules, inflexions, verbs, pronouns, nouns, adjectives, adverbs of place, of manner, and agreement. I am the best at Italian. This month I've learned something very important: When you are face-to-face with the police, it doesn't pay to play the part of one who doesn't know anything, who doesn't understand, and can't manage a word of Italian for his life. It's much, much better to answer in an appropriate way and not make the police officers' and *carabinieri*'s lives any more difficult as they are already angry on their own account. Instead, lower your eyes and say: "Yes, Boss, you're right, Boss"—and in Italian.

The boss, then, without a doubt will ask, "Wait, how do you know Italian?"

My turn now: "We speak many languages. He speaks English. This other guy speaks German. Him, Spanish. We know many languages."

"But what are you doing here?"

"We're students."

"ID, please."

"We are from Paris, as you can see from the car. And we are on our way back to Paris. We came to Bologna just to say hello to some friends."

Bologna could then become Pesaro or Perugia or Padua, always a university town, though, because we are students,

and we are always headed to Paris. The trick usually works. In the end not even the Uncles really want to waste time with four black guys. But it does happen sometimes that an Uncle wants to waste his time or that he's very strict and has great respect for his uniform.

In that case he usually comes back with "Look here, you're illegal."

"Yes, Boss."

"You can't stay in Italy."

"You're right, Boss."

"You have to leave."

"OK, Boss. I swear that I will never come back."

"If I see you again, you can be sure that I will throw you in jail."

"I know, Boss. Sorry, Boss."

The Uncles threaten us more and more with the jail story. Every day we have to humiliate ourselves more and more. When that is not enough, the threat becomes real and we all end up in jail: sometimes for an hour, other times a day or a week. Uncle's mood varies, but the accusation is always the same: illegal aliens on board. Our reactions are all different: At first you cry, and then with a little practice in the end you can even make yourself laugh. We always think of our country far away and above all of our mothers: "What are we doing here?" we ask ourselves. "What have we done wrong? We've only tried to sell in order to live. In Senegal we were never arrested." Despite it all we never curse. It's not right and they might hear. We only complain and sigh deeply. That is, until one of us loses his patience and scolds another: "Cut it out, you crybaby." No one can stand to be called a crybaby and so he then responds: "You're the crybaby." Then we kid around as a way to muster courage. The bitterness doesn't go away, though. It's only alleviated somewhat, hidden. Sooner or later Uncle opens the jail cell when he feels that the guys from Senegal have understood who is in charge: "Now listen up: I don't want to see you around here anymore." OK, Boss. But the selling must go on, and at the pace we've planned: every single day. We

leave early in the afternoon, start selling in the evening, and return at nearly dawn. The destination is always uncertain. We take our friends' advice. Other times we just move on our own without a plan. Falou, the driver, gets impatient: "Come on already, are you going to tell me where I have to go or what?" On the highway each of us tries to convince the others that one place is better than the next, carefully laying out his reasons for the rest of us to consider. "OK, fine," we agree. "We'll go there."

We arrive in some town, maybe in the middle of the Marches. The Senegalese spaceship has landed. The aliens have arrived. People are visibly agitated. We are a novelty to them and a show.

The car is well hidden away from the eyes of the police. A bunch of us enter the first *caffè* we see. We are greeted by curious faces, and sometimes suspicious ones. From our bags a family of elephants slowly emerges as a voice asks sweetly, "Do you want to buy?" From the back of the *caffè* a guy comes forward. He's interested in the necklaces. He examines a few. Other necklaces, bracelets, earrings, and rings emerge from the bag.

"Where are you from?"

"From Africa, naturally."

"So what do they cost?"

The transaction has begun. We're almost there. Others are curious and approach the table. They come over more for us than the merchandise: "Where are you from?" How many times have I heard this question? I feel like a rare object and wish I could disappear. But this is business and we have to take advantage of every opportunity to make friends, win them over, exchange a few words, and in the end sell our goods. Fine. We sell. The bartender even offers us something to drink. We stop in another *caffè*. Sometimes they greet you with a loud "Out!" It's not wise to insist. So, in that case, outside it is. We try another street. The owner offers us something to drink. I always get a glass of milk. I follow my father's advice: "Do not drink and do not smoke."

"Hey, *marocchino*. You, Moroccan." Our friend wants to have some fun. All right. Let him have fun. A guy moves

suspiciously around our necklaces. One goes missing. A theft. We realize what's happening. So does our friend: "Put down the necklace." Now a fight breaks out. "I'm going to call the cops if you don't give the necklace back," he threatens. *Mamma mia*, that's all we need.

The bartender gets involved: "Come on, let's go, let's see that necklace you stole. You should be ashamed of yourself stealing a necklace from this guy!" At this point the Senegalese seller is flat up against the wall looking for refuge behind the coatrack and a place to disappear: "If the police come, it's me who will end up in jail." Someone always comes to our defense. While we experience humiliation, insults, and theft, there is always someone who takes our side. The problem is that we can never defend ourselves because we are illegal and the law is against us, and everyone knows it, including this lady who threatened us one evening by saying, "Give me the stuff at the price I say or I will call the *carabinieri*." Or the guy with the crew cut who makes fun of you, imitating your voice, the way you move: "*Vu comprà*, you buy? You buy?" "Idiots," I tell myself. No one can hear me and so the insult stays inside me. I carry it around with me all night. The youngest of us cry. But there is always someone who understands our situation and buys even if they don't need anything. Some will offer you dinner or give you money. I don't like that. I want to sell because selling is our job. I don't like charity. But still I understand it, and it is after all a form of solidarity. It is comforting compared to the alternative: apathy, curses that sting, and insults. Thank goodness I have friends waiting for me each night. And, of course, we always have our car, the red Peugeot with Parisian plates.

We sell until midnight—that is, if we don't get discouraged first or the *carabinieri* don't stop us. If we aren't near any kind of bed, we sleep in the car. Thanks to the car, the afternoon trip can be more complicated, but also more profitable. If we know the area we split up and work alone. The driver brings us to different towns. Each salesman ventures alone into the *caffè* or the pizzeria. Then at some point the driver comes back to pick us up one by one. Or, rather, you hope he comes back to get you. You pray that the car hasn't

broken down or the police haven't stopped him. If this happens and the meeting time and place don't work out, the driver will wait the whole night if need be. I don't like risking it so I always get out of the car last and always near the final parking spot. I always work in the area where the car is. A night out in the open, with only the cold and fear for company, is a terrible thing.

## DOUBLE MALAW



I DON'T KNOW HOW MANY people's houses I went to looking for a place to stay, in those weeks between October and November, but there was never any room for us. Our Senegalese friends saved us from the pain of the cold and the car for a few days, but at the end of a few days they always said the same thing: "Guys, you have to leave."

We left. We saw in what conditions they were forced to live.

Lucky for us, we never ran out of friends. One friend who is not much of a talker but is nevertheless very nice is named Mara. He has just arrived from Paris. We find ourselves two more friends who live in an apartment in Valverde di Cesenatico. We find out that they are going to France. We ask if we can sublet the place, which is in the name of an Italian girl. They say OK. We just have to change the name on the contract. For two hundred and twenty thousand lire a month, utilities included, we find ourselves a home: three rooms in Valverde di Cesenatico. Exciting, right? But the problems with the Peugeot get worse. Poor girl, she's having a hard time keeping up. Every day something breaks and there isn't a night that we don't have to push her to get the motor going. But still we don't give up. The selling continues. We look for new *piazzas* and on the weekends we go as far as Padua. The *piazza* in front of the Basilica of Saint An-

thony is our marketplace, and the devout pilgrims our customers. The Moroccans are right next to us with their hands in the pockets of their jackets, which are always too tight. Our faces disappear between our scarves and our wool hats pulled down over our ears. We would make an ugly monotonous army of salesmen if it weren't for Malaw, who breaks up the monotony—vertically speaking. We become friends with Malaw, a Senegalese guy with wide shoulders who is remarkably tall, two meters and thirteen centimeters tall, which explains his name *Double* Malaw. He lives in Padua in a hotel room that costs him fifteen thousand lire a day. He owns a little Peugeot. He tore out the back seat and sits with the front seat pushed all the way back so that his infinitely long legs can reach the pedals. He always has trouble finding the right bed since they're never long enough for him. He doesn't have trouble selling, though. We find this out immediately because we get along right off the bat and Malaw decides to move with us to the Riviera. We let him stay with us as our guest at Valverde and that's how we find out how much he snores at night, but also how sweet and nice he is. Traveling around the Marches, Romagna, and the area near Padua and Ferrara, Double Malaw becomes popular. His approach is always the same. Laughing and bright-eyed he tells people how "he is so big and must eat a lot to live." Caught off guard, people look at him and he takes advantage of this to sell. Malaw is a phenomenon. He can even sell in the supermarkets. Our little community gets bigger when we find a driver for Malaw. The girlfriends of our two Senegalese friends come to visit us every now and then, sometimes with Italian friends. This is enough to set the neighbors against us: they complain, "You're noisy." It's not true. They keep at it, though: "You're bothering everyone. Cut it out." They complain to the girl whose name is on the rent contract for our apartment: "They stole the radio from our car parked outside." The girl sticks up for us, but the neighbors don't give up. In the end one of the most aggressive ones goes to the *carabinieri* and reports: "They're all drug dealers." So the *carabinieri* show up at our apartment. Malaw, Falou, Mara,

and Mordiarra have gone to Ravenna to get some merchandise from someone named Mauro, a friend of Malaw. He's a good guy who sells us a whole bunch of stuff on credit, everything from eagles inlaid in bone to ashtrays. I am out doing the usual grocery shopping. At home are little As and Malaw's driver. I come home. It must be noon and two *carabinieri* cars are parked outside the house. "They've come to pay us a visit," I think to myself. I'm torn. I want to run, but the youngest of us are the only ones home and so I can't just abandon them. I go in and when I am just in front of the front door I hear some voices speaking Italian. "It's them," they whisper. I am still undecided. Do I go in? Do I run? But if I run away, where will I go? I don't even have a car. I ring the doorbell. A *carabiniere* opens the door with a gun clenched in his fist.

"Here's another one. Get in here," he orders as he pulls me, then pushes me, and orders me around some more: "Hands over your head."

"Uh, OK, calm down, I won't run."

"How many are there of you in this house?"

"You're looking at us."

"I don't believe that for a minute. There aren't just three of you."

They've already rummaged through everything, opened our suitcases, and emptied our dressers and drawers. They didn't find money for the simple reason that we didn't have a lot and the little we did have we gave to our friends to buy new merchandise.

"It's odd. They told us that you were drug dealers. We've looked this place over from top to bottom and we haven't found any money. How's that possible? You're drug dealers without a cent to your name?"

We try to defend ourselves: "We're not drug dealers. We're street vendors who move from town to town. We have nothing to do with drugs."

"Where are the others? We know you've got others with you."

"It's just us three. The others left for France."

"And the girls?"

"What girls? There are no girls. We don't know any girls."

One of the officers returns from the balcony: "So whose cigarettes are these, then? Are these yours? With the lipstick?" They all burst out laughing. Right, OK. We laugh, too. "Fine. We'll go with you to the station." At the *carabinieri* barracks in Cesenatico the interrogation continues.

"Do you have a *permesso di soggiorno*? Do you have papers?"

"No, we've only been here for three months. We don't need a *permesso di soggiorno*." I made this up on the spot, but it seems to have worked. Maybe it's even true.

"Three months! Come on! Who knows how long you've been here."

"No, really. Look at our passports."

I show them the visa that the French officers stamped on my passport at Forbach: "Are you convinced now?" I ask. "This stamp is from a month ago. I was in France. . . ." This time things go smoothly. Only just as I am thinking this I see the other four arrive: Mara, Double Malaw, Mordiarra, and Falou. The *carabinieri* were waiting for them outside the apartment.

"Well, well, aren't you a big guy, Malaw?" says one of the *carabinieri*.

"You see how big I am and you want to keep me in jail? You better let me go. I am big and I eat a lot, double what the others eat. You'll starve me to death. You will starve me to death, I tell you!"

Double Malaw makes a face screwing his lips together and flexes his muscles. Before we know it he'll be taking an officer by the neck. But he laughs and the *carabinieri* laugh. Things turn around. Today I am feeling really optimistic, but there's no way out of this one.

"Guys, you have to leave. Your neighbors have complained. You don't have *permessi di soggiorno*. You're illegal. We can't let you stay here if the neighbors complain. Go to Milan."

"But we would like to stay here."

"You can't. We won't stop you. We won't give you deportation papers. Nothing. But you can't stay here. We have to escort you out and see to it that you leave."

"We can't leave because we don't have any money." The *carabinieri* pull out their money and buy our products. "Now, you have no excuses." We have to leave; we have to leave Valverde. Some of us have to go by train because there's not enough room in the car with all our merchandise. We plan to meet in Riccione at the home of our Senegalese friend. Double Malaw decides to take leave of our company. He wants to go back to Padua, where he has lots of friends. He'll spend one night in Riccione in a hotel near the station. At first they don't want to take him there. They complain, "We don't have a bed big enough for you." Malaw insists. So they give him two beds which they rearrange to make one long bed.

# CHIEF LAMAN



**DOUBLE MALAW BROUGHT OUR** family good luck. He was good at his work. He was likeable and well-respected. He knew how to laugh and kid around and he had this way of speaking with his eyes. He was good at selling and even knew all the stores where to buy the best merchandise at the best prices. At the end of November he paid our rent, two hundred and twenty thousand lire, which we didn't know how we were going to pay. Since we parted ways with Double Malaw we find ourselves once again without a house and without money. Among the four of us we manage to scrape together forty thousand lire for gas. Gas is our gold, it's an investment. Without gas we couldn't drive around and we couldn't sell. After a few days I make a big sale and rake in fifty thousand lire. But soon after I am back to counting my coins. Selling is becoming harder. It's not like selling to tourists on the beach in the summer. On the beach there's no competition and all the customers are relaxed. Our gas tank is nearing empty. Our driver taps lightly on the accelerator. He performs miracles in order to save gas. We look for a bit of hospitality, but all our friends just tell us "no" again and again. They're scared of us because by now the police all know us. We try our luck with the Senegalese guys in Cesenatico. After consulting each other, they explain: "You're too dangerous. Everyone knows your car and it attracts

too much attention." Our selfless red Peugeot with Parisian plates! How dare they treat her like that! We won't stand for it. "But you can stay for a bite to eat." We came to ask for a roof over our heads and to borrow some money and they offer us a plate of rice. "No, no thanks, we're not hungry," we say even if our bodies quiver just thinking of the pleasure of putting something in our stomachs. It's a matter of dignity.

We take off with our Peugeot, our hunger, and a few drops of gas. We don't know how far we'll get. We keep going until we find a safe place to spend the night. Under the stars, naturally, but we don't mind: we like the fresh air. If it weren't for the temperature, it would even resemble an African sky, a sky painted specifically for dreaming the best dreams. Instead, you only feel like cursing. But, we also feel a sense of duty to not discourage the others. We feel responsible for the youngest of us. But more and more we just feel like giving up and going home. If only I had money. In the morning we make our way to Cesena again. We stop at each gas station and try to barter: a little gas for an eagle or an ashtray. In a *caffè* they give us some salami sandwiches. We enthusiastically accept them.

The bartender is shocked: "Wait, aren't you Muslim?"

"Yeah, of course we're Muslim."

"And you eat pork?"

"They're not for us. They're for a guy waiting outside in the car." Allah doesn't stop our stomachs from grumbling and so the Senegalese guys look the other way when it comes to the rules. Not everyone, though. The most pious of us even honor their hunger. Only As and I eat our pork sandwiches, and even find them tasty. We'll be forgiven. These are hours lost in terms of selling, but gained in terms of the kindness of others. An old lady gives Mordiarra five thousand lire in front of a supermarket. He goes in and buys spaghetti and canned tomatoes. He comes back and happily shows us his treasure. "Great, we tell him, and now where do you suggest we cook it?" Mordiarra gets offended. At a gas station just at the old city gates of Cesenatico, we meet a kid at the gas pump: "Will you give us some gas? We can pay you with

our merchandise here, an eagle or a necklace?" Thanks to the eagle the boy pours twenty thousand lire worth of gas and adds twenty thousand more with his own money. But twenty thousand lire disappear in a second. Now where do we go? We can't go back. Should we go to Bologna? Who knows. Milan scares us: too many police. We've heard horrible stories of police roundups and deportation papers. We've heard talk about one prison in particular, something like San Vittore. Mordiarra has an idea: "Babel." He heard of some Senegalese kid who lived near Ravenna, in Lido di Spina. He must have been pretty popular because a lot of Italians asked us about him. We also know that his friend is the owner of a real estate agency that rents houses. "Babel, right, Babel." We get in the car on the hunt for Babel. The address is pretty vague. We trust in Babel's popularity. But night is upon us and Babel is nowhere to be found. We have to wait for morning to find him. "Babel, pal, we're looking for a house." "Well, all right. I'll bring you to the countryside." The countryside? Who wants the countryside with all that freezing wind? But it's no time for jokes. Near Cesena there is a little farmhouse with a few beds for rent. It will cost us fifty thousand lire a month. To start we need to beg Babel to give us a break for a few days. We'll pay later. We take a look around. Fields everywhere, and a grayish-green color that screams cold, mice, tall thick grass, and the night that comes too fast. Soon the fog will also be here, that thick, solid fog that for us is like a miracle of nature, disorienting us every time on the road when it's time to go home. It creeps over the little country roads which are all alike as if they were paths in a labyrinth. But in the little farmhouse we manage to warm ourselves a little at the stove and even do a little cooking. The red Peugeot is really suffering at this point from the cold, the humidity, and all the years she carries on her back. But even the Peugeot, after some of our strong, brotherly pushes, gets back on her feet. In one of the rooms on the ground floor there are still some beds available. Babel is able to rent those as well and our community grows. We split the chores: some do the cleaning up, some

cook, others go into town to do the food shopping. I always used to laugh at the guys who did the women's jobs. But we're not in Dakar and I can't afford not to adapt. I become a good cook; my specialty is Senegalese food. The new guys don't have a car so we have to bring them every morning to the Cesena train station. In the evening we all hang out at home bundled up together in blankets to keep warm. We tally our profits from the sales made that day, but without being too precise on the specifics because we salesmen are envious of each other. The most popular topic when we all talk is the future, the return, our hopes. Dakar is more and more the stuff of our dreams, so much so that it begins to seem like paradise. We sound like war veterans starting every conversation with "Do you remember . . . ?" Each of us recreates a familiar scene, in which his mother is always the protagonist: "Ah, if only I could see my mother just once." After each one has listed all his family's virtues, we start on the girls. Each one brags that he's left one more girl at home than the guy sitting next to him, and naturally his girls are prettier than the other guy's. After sharing so many regrets, we always end up in tears. If only there were a television or if we could listen to some music.

At a trash dump not too far away we find an old black-and-white TV set. The minute we plug it in, our lemon of a TV lets out a "zipsiiii" of life while the screen turns bright and smiles. The television opens the doors to a new world for us. It keeps us busy in the evenings and keeps the nostalgia at bay. Thanks to the little screen our existence becomes something other than the usual problems and family memories. Our conversations about how much is happening in the rest of the world occupy us late into the night. Then we sleep, sometimes fairly late. Laman, the oldest of the group and by right of age also the "village chief," is the one who gets up at a decent hour to go into town for the groceries.

# A SENEGALESE LUNCH



EIGHTEEN DEGREES BELOW, Celsius. My thermometer sadly informs me just how terribly cold it is. The ground is as hard as cement and the Peugeot's engine is dying. The air doesn't move and the thick sky announces that snow is on the way. I'm not the one who predicts the weather since I don't know anything about snow. Rather, it's the news around town which reaches our doorstep thanks to Laman, who continues to go into town every day. Laman has a lot of friends because he's an easygoing and generous guy. He assures us that the weather is going to change because he sees that the snow worries us. The electric stove is a disaster. The unit is old and every five minutes the power goes when the line gets overloaded. At least the gas stove works, our only means of defense against the polar forces coming our way. But even when it's working at its best, the kitchen thermometer struggles to hit five degrees above zero. The snow that begins to fall makes for a beautiful scene, but a few minutes later when we realize that it is piling up quickly we understand what a disaster it is. We're snowed in and can't get into town. Our economy hangs delicately on the outcome of the mighty push we give the car to restart the engine. But due to the snow even the push is a poor attempt at nothing. The guys from Senegal skate along the sides of the red Peugeot, their hands glued to the back hatch of the

car while legs go flying in the direction of the sky. They are forced to give up. When the need to sell becomes greater, they give it a few more tries. This time the push is more confident, or maybe just more desperate. The wheels win the battle against the ground, the engine hiccups, and the Peugeot marches on.

The guys are now back in the *caffès*, the markets, and the towns around Cesena and even further, past Forlì, which we always avoid because we've heard rumors about how mean the police are there. Instead, sales are good in Meldola on market days. The owner of a *caffè* even gives me two little tables where I can set up a kind of sales booth. The most generous people I have ever met live in Meldola. But our neighbors in the countryside are also generous. They offer us wood, clothes, and other useful items. I am afraid, though, that all this attention will be our ruin. People will start to talk too much about the Senegalese guys. The police will also start to take an interest in us and the little farmhouse full of illegal Africans. Christmas is not a day of rest for us. But someone tells us that today we'd better take a break: "Guys, it's not a good time." We hear on the television that a bomb has gone off on a train in a tunnel near Bologna and many people are dead. "Guys, it's not a good time. We might offend people today. Let's go home," suggests one of the group. That's how 1984 ends: under the snow, the heaviest snowfall in the last thirty years, or so Laman will tell us after he gets back from his daily chats with the locals in town. The information is not encouraging. We tell ourselves that it won't be like this every winter we spend in Italy; the next one will surely be better. The guys ring in 1985. Some friends arrive and photos are taken that remind us of that night. After the party no one wants to go back to work. The bed is still the most welcoming place because the covers trap the warmth beneath them. It's late in the morning by now and Laman lets us know its time to get up: "Come on, get out of bed, no more sleeping. We have to go and sell. If not, what will the village chief do tomorrow for groceries?" Laman's right, as always. We get out of

bed and struggle to get going. We don't get very far because of the snow. But at least our conscience is at peace. In the evening we all gather around the table, like every evening in our farmhouse. This time, though, it's Laman who's late. It's happened before, but still you can't help but think of the worst-case scenario: an arrest, deportation papers. The sound of a car approaches. We have a strange feeling that it's the police. One of us hides while another starts to curse. We know that the police in Cesena are strict and just to be on the safe side we have always avoided passing through town. By this time the police are right in front of our house. What do they want?

"Does Laman live here?" they ask. They didn't come for us, then.

"Yes, he lives here."

"There's been an accident."

"What? An accident?"

"It's serious. Someone needs to come with me."

Falou and another guy move first and follow the officers. Laman is already dead. He was in the town nearby where he had just finished selling for the day and an Italian friend offered to bring him home. The car wouldn't start, though. Just as he had done many times before with our Peugeot, Laman started to push the car. But another car came along too fast around the bend. Laman was crushed between the two cars. He was thirty-seven years old. Falou tells us the story, shaking. The guys all look at each other and cry. Tomorrow we won't sell. We have to make sure Laman gets back to Senegal. At the very least we all want to see poor, generous Laman go home to his family—even if dead. After having lived, worked, and suffered so far away, it's only right that he get to go home. We have to collect a lot of money. We will sell more. We will ask for help from the other Senegalese guys. We will find our friends all over Italy. For the first time death has found me in this illegal emigration, a death that makes us feel even poorer and more alone. I don't know what to do or say. I can only think of how we need to show our respect for our friend Laman, even if

we do the minimum, and even if we ourselves live in communal poverty. I look at my friends and I can see they are mulling over the same thoughts when suddenly we are distracted by a youthful voice that calls to us in our language. We look out the window. There's a Senegalese guy standing there, smiling. He must be twenty years old.

"I am Laman's brother. I live in Trieste. I'm here to say hi to my brother. I haven't seen him for months. I'm here for Laman. But, to tell the truth I am also here to eat a nice Senegalese meal. I miss our cooking." I look at the others. No one knows what to say. We begin to cook in silence. We make the best dishes we know. The guy keeps asking about his brother. We assure him that he'll be here soon. We sit down at the table.

"Aren't we going to wait for my brother?" he asks.

"He'll be here, he'll be here. We should start in the meantime. He's always late."

"Where's his plate?" We add a plate.

"I can't wait to see my brother again. Let me know if I need to go look for him."

"Let's eat our Senegalese lunch first."

So we eat as a way to honor at least one of the two wishes of Laman's little brother, who's come all the way from Trieste. Soon it will be his turn to find out the sad news. We will manage to honor our promise. Many of our Senegalese friends and many *tubab* friends will help us and eventually Laman will get to go home to his family in Senegal. For us life goes on in the farmhouse, in the freezing cold, which is quickly becoming more oppressive, and in the snow which comes down hard.

# A DRESSER IN PIACENZA



**LITTLE AS IS A NICE GUY** who is full of energy. But he has one flaw: he possesses a unique talent for attracting the police. When the police or *carabinieri* stop him, we always have to run to his rescue. "We can't leave him alone," we reason. "He's too young." So we all go together to the station to get him out. And as a result the deportation papers begin to pile up like snow after a winter storm. In Comacchio we all stay in the car so that the police won't see us. Instead, As walks around as cool as a cucumber admiring all the nice stores. They spot him immediately and then follow him to the red Peugeot. "Come with us," they order. Just what we need. We end up back at the station. Inspections, document searches, questions. They use German shepherds to look for drugs. We pretend it's all a game and joke around with the *carabinieri*. They joke back:

"Do a little break-dance for us."

"No, we don't know how to break-dance."

"You're telling me you're black and don't know how to break-dance?!"

"We don't break-dance."

"So then you must do some kind of African dance or something."

I guess this is the way the *carabinieri* gentlemen entertain themselves. In the end one even pretends to escort me to

the middle of the dance floor. I've had enough. Now they're just provoking us. I raise my voice and tell them, "None of us is going to dance." One of the *carabinieri* in charge, thank heavens, breaks up the squabble and tells the others, "Let these guys go."

We had told them our destination was France. They take us to the tollbooths on the highway for Bologna and leave us there. As they are walking back to their car, they stop and open the rear hatch of our car: "We'll take this thing here." One of our beautiful eagles. "Of course you can have it for free," we stutter. "It's a gift." We get onto the highway. After two tollbooths we exit and are right back at home. The farmhouse isn't safe anymore. Also, it is in such bad shape that all our efforts to make it somewhat homey are pointless. After the death of Laman, the police come back. They inform us: "Guys, you have to leave." All of us in the red Peugeot agree on one thing: "We have to leave this place." "Let's go to Bari," someone suggests. We have an address of a hotel where you pay only eight thousand lire a night. At the first rest stop on the highway we pull over.

"Wait, guys, do you know where Bari is?"

"In the south, where it's hot."

"But we need to sell. Let's go to Bologna."

Falou, the driver, speaks: "Come on, make up your minds."

"We don't know anyone in Bologna."

"And in Bari who do we know? Just a hotel that we have to pay for."

"Why don't we try Massa?"

"Massa? But it's in the completely opposite direction."

"But there we have friends who can put us up."

So we go to Massa. In Massa we are greeted by the not-too-happy faces of Senegalese friends. There are about ten of them. The apartment consists of one big gray room. They listen to us as we ask them to put us up, but they are not too excited: "It's up to you, you decide." We decide. They give us some lunch, which is mainly rice and rice. I know that rice is a typical Senegalese dish but we usually add fish or

meat or vegetables. For our friends in Massa, it's only rice. Selling, they say, is not going well these days and so there's not much money to speak of. We can see that. The Peugeot clan calls a meeting:

"What are we doing here? Our friends have no room for us. There's no work."

"We at least have a car. We can move around."

"But we also need to find a place and get settled."

"Yeah, but where?"

"In Milan."

"In Milan?"

"Let's go to Milan. It's a big city and there'll be enough room there for us."

I couldn't care less about Milan. I'm tired and I can't stand this life anymore. If I had even a tiny bit of money I would go back to Senegal. I say this again and again and still that tiny bit of money never comes my way. OK, fine. I try to put it another way: "Why should we be scared of Milan? It's hard everywhere, as we know. So, let's try Milan. At least there we'll have more opportunities." After one night in Massa we leave. They all seem convinced. At least for a few kilometers. It's still snowing as the red Peugeot now heads in the opposite direction, to Bologna. But what are we going to do there? The Peugeot once again changes gears. "Milan, Milan!" We're not short on ideas in this group. This time it's the driver who proposes Piacenza: "I heard of a cheap hotel there." The hotel really exists, just as promised, and it's right across the street from the station. It costs seven thousand and five hundred lire a person a night. The five Senegalese passengers of the red Peugeot look at each other and say in unison, "What do we need Milan for? This will be great! We have all the *piazzas* of northern Italy right at our fingertips." On its second or third day of life in Piacenza, however, the Peugeot starts to let us know that it hasn't quite taken to the snow and ice. On the iron bridge between Cremona and Piacenza it bumps and bangs against the guardrail. The red Peugeot is on its last legs. As we say our farewells, we just manage to get her back to Piacenza, where we leave her to

hibernate. From now on we would have to travel by train to Lodi, Casalpusterlengo, Genoa, Cremona, Crema. The *carabinieri* come looking for us, though, at the hotel room at two in the morning. They knock, but then decide to let us sleep. Unfortunately they come back four hours later. We have no choice but to open the door this time, and they take As, who had been sleeping with Falou and me. I tell Mordiarra and Mara. As usual we can't abandon our little brother. So the emergency squad hits the road. Falou is a bit hesitant, though. "Are you scared, Falou?" someone asks. Of course he is. Falou's scared. He's got a slew of deportation papers. No problem, *Gran Falou*, we'll go without you. It's too risky for you." "Yeah, that's just it, guys," he replies sheepishly. In Senegal you're called "*grand*" if you're the oldest friend. We'll go alone, Mordiarra, Mara, and I. We already have a plan. We'll tell the police that we're just passing through and we want to get to Paris as soon as possible. But when we get there they don't believe our little tale. Too many others before us have tried it. They come to the conclusion that we have to leave. A very tall officer with good posture and this way of carefully articulating his words informs us: "You have forty-eight hours to leave." All right. We'll go. The group seems decided: Riccione this time. But on this one I don't agree:

"Guys, listen, let's not fight. You guys go to Riccione. I'll stay and then leave for Milan."

"No, come on. It's better to go all together to Riccione."

"But if we don't even have a place to stay . . ."

"So, we'll stay here too then."

"But there's still the problem of little brother. It would be best for him to go to Riccione so at least they won't arrest him here. Then that way he can at least scope out the situation there."

I get my way. We stay in Piacenza. As leaves. We four stay behind for a few days. Sal arrives from France. He was supposed to go back to Gambia with his deportation papers. He tried to ignore the order. So they stopped him and locked him up in a cell at the station. In the end it was his stinky

feet that saved him. Sal stank too much and the police let him go, but kept his papers: anything not to have to smell the nauseating stench of his filthy feet. Sal made the most of the situation. He made his way to Italy—without papers. He crossed the border at Ventimiglia after he paid a *passeur*. And so here he was. Now what does he do? Go back to selling. So I sell together with Mordiarra, and I slowly inch my way closer to Milan. One day we even decide to get the direct train to Milan . . . but we don't get very far. We go to the end of the staircase and take a look at the *piazza*. The city is there right in front of us as far as we can see. We head right for the first *caffès* in the area. Our Milanese baptism is over in a few hours and a few metro stops later. Pleased with ourselves, that evening back in our hotel in Piacenza we share our experience with the others: "We were in Milan." One of the guys is quicker than us: "You went to the *caffès* just near the station. Those have already been hit by hundreds of vendors. They're already packed." OK, so they're already packed, fine. We are here to learn. The next day we exit the station, get the number 75 bus, the first one we come across, and then get off in Piazza Castello. We try some *caffès* nearby. We keep going all the way to the Piazza del Duomo. The big church frightens us. The spires seem like trees from our countryside and forests except that they are white and lifeless. This is not our land. A few hours later we tell our friends back in Piacenza, "We went to a big *piazza* with a big church, all white and gray and covered in statues from top to bottom." That same friend points out: "Right in Piazza del Duomo where the police are always waiting to nab you." We made a mistake this time, too. But at the very least we are becoming more comfortable with the city. We got on a bus, we ran into the police and *carabinieri*, and no one stopped or interrogated us, or interrupted our work. We will also find out that we had visited Piazza della Scala. But we always go about the city haphazardly: we get on a bus and we count the number of stops agreed on beforehand. "You're crazy," insists our friend, "because Milan is really dangerous and you guys chose the most dangerous areas to sell in. You

shouldn't go anywhere near there again." We'll consider that the next time. I don't know when since the police are now back and they're no-nonsense. They're all charged up and as strong as ever. They come by one morning at the end of January and knock loudly: "Wake up, wake up, open the door. Don't make us waste our time." One fine mess we're in. The door to my room is locked. A police officer leans up close and orders through the door: "Get up and go down to the lobby." He heads next to the other rooms where my unlucky friends are sleeping. I take my time getting up and getting dressed. I get my papers in order, leave the light on and the door open, and climb into the dresser, a big dresser with a moldy odor, but very hospitable in a moment like this. The police pace outside my room, look in, and go away. They continue to knock at the other doors which are still closed, knocking over and over again and yelling at us to hurry up with a tone that is growing harsher by the minute. Outside my room, where the light is on and all is quiet, they don't show any signs of interest. They keep going, their shoes rumbling down the hallway. Only one officer, who is more curious than the others, enters the room, turns around and takes a good look. "I'm a goner," I say to myself. He approaches the dresser. "I better just give myself up." He opens the dresser door and peers inside. He closes the door and leaves. The shadow and dim lighting save me. I stay there holding my breath until I detect the sound of the cleaning women and my friends, who have just been freed and now are standing there with nice big deportation orders in their hands. Even Sal, who has no ID to begin with, finds himself with those good old deportation papers. He gave the police a fake name. You always do that when you don't have your ID so that you don't start to rack up too many deportation orders under your name. He makes up the fake name by choosing any old word from Wolof: "shoes," for example, is a great one, or "turtle." We have to get out of there. My friends are all set on going to Riccione. "The time has come to split up," they say. I let Sal in on this idea earlier. I told him what it was like on the Riviera and we were in agree-

ment about the situation. When they see us so determined, the others change their minds. We're back together again. My friends have three days to obey the police orders. Mordiarra and I go ahead of them to Milan, hoping to find a bed for everyone. Mordiarra finds a solution: the Berengario *pensione* near the convention center and the metro. This will be our new home.

The red Peugeot stays behind in Piacenza. Despite all our efforts we can't bring it back to life.

I leave for Milan with ten thousand lire in my pocket and a debt of fifteen thousand lire with the generous hotel owner. Many of us owe him money. The police even fined him because he gave rooms to ten or so illegal immigrants from Senegal, Gambia, Morocco, and many other countries.

## THE END OF MA



**OUR ROOM IN THE PENSIONE** in Milan has a window with a view of the chain-link fence around the convention center. On the other side, past the intersection, there is a long tree-lined avenue. The traffic is heavy. Thousands of people appear and disappear as they file in and out of the metro from eight in the morning to eight at night. The houses are nice and even remind me of some houses that I saw once in Dakar, but these seem cleaner and without cracks. On the other side of the street, where the fence ends, the houses are lower, one or two stories, and decorated with flowers and sculptures. On the left I can see another one, cream colored, plain and simple. I would really like that house if I hadn't found out that the police commissioner lived there. Just great. Things are really looking up for us. Here we are just in front of the commissioner's house, and next to a *caffè* where the police hang out all day and night. And just to make matters worse each day we have to face the snow which continues to fall onto the sidewalk and roofs, and on our poor heads, all the while piling up under our shoes that are too light for winter. We are paying ten thousand lire a night. It's not a lot, but the idea of sleeping with the police two feet away makes us anxious.

We spend the first day exploring the city. We can't afford not to sell. We need money. But we want to get to know the

city first, pick out the best spots, and maybe find another hotel far from the *carabinieri* and police. Mordiarra and I decide to make our way to Corso Venezia and Corso Buenos Aires. It won't take us long to learn all the street names. For the moment, though, we go where the wind takes us and where our instinct as trained salesmen helps us avoid danger and spot easy customers. We count on firsthand experience and on friends' advice, which isn't always the most reliable. Besides being friends, they are also our competitors and sometimes they will go so far as to steer you in the wrong direction just to hide a good *piazza* from you.

A Senegalese friend of ours from Corso Buenos Aires seems honest and willing to help. His name is Ma, and he has a second name, Silla, his family name. He speaks quickly and his tongue seems to get all tangled up in his mouth. He tells us that there are plenty of hotels, and he points out the most promising areas for us. He tells us stories about big sales and all the money to be made, as his eyes grow wide and his hands fly around. He talks and talks and a river of words comes gushing out of his mouth. His clothes hang too big on him and are lined with dirt. In fact, Silla is drunk and can barely keep his balance with his big bag strung across his chest. He makes an effort in front of the guys who have just arrived so he doesn't seem so pathetic. I would run into him many times, almost always at the main train station, where he would be spread out across a bench or sitting on the grass in the little parks, with his back against a tree, and gazing into space. Our friends who knew him back in Senegal say that he was always well-dressed in Dakar, and even used to wear fancy clothes. He was one of the first to reach Italy, in the early eighties. He started out like the others, selling in the *caffès* and the markets. But his evil spirits, it seems, decided to move in, conspiring to prevent him from living a life of dignity. One too many times he was stopped by the police, and one too many times his merchandise was confiscated, and so he started to drink. When you're in the *caffès* people offer you something to drink, sometimes alcohol. I only accept milk. But they make fun of you if you only ask

for milk. Silla never said no to wine. In every *caffè* he drank, and drank, and drank. He would walk bent over and it got worse, until he couldn't even stand up anymore. He would fall over right on the ground and stay there until someone helped him up out of pity. At that point he would open his eyes and start cursing because he was offended: "Leave me alone, I can take care of myself. If I want to, I can sell and earn myself some money." At a certain point, things started to go downhill and from then on he was always drunk. The same people who always offered him something to drink were now begging him to stop. Instead he would dig for a little change in his pockets and put it on the table and in an angry voice order more wine. He was in such a sorry state mainly because he became a magnet for both the police and bad luck. After having his stuff confiscated one too many times, he eventually went off the deep end and hit rock bottom. He was forced to sleep on the streets, skip meals, and always wear the same old dirty clothes. Everyone has trouble with the police, with their stuff being confiscated, with money, with the hotels, but many manage to pull through. Silla let himself go. He just started to drift along. He had no money to send to his family, and none to buy a ticket home. And worst of all, in addition to losing hope, he had lost his mind. He would wander around like a vagabond, cursing, bragging about his wealth and all the sales he made, and asking with a throaty voice for some money for wine. At the end of 1985, after five years dragging along like this, at the end of his rope, just getting by in the area around the train station, he became well acquainted with the police. They put up with him and were even worried enough one time, when they saw him looking worse than ever, that they checked him into the hospital. When he was released he seemed better, but his spirits were the same as before. He was prey to desperation and despair. He was so out of it that in 1987 he did not even realize that there was a law that could make him legal. He had some cousins in Milan. They tried to get him to return to Senegal. But he rebelled at that idea: "What do you want from me? I'll go back to

Senegal when I want. I sell and I can buy myself a ticket. I don't need your advice or your charity." They kept insisting and he kept yelling the same insults, even threatening them. Insulting our fellow countrymen became his favorite pastime: "Well, would you look at that Senegalese guy. He won't even say hello to me. He pretends he's Italian. But I know them all, those bastards." He'd made friends with a Senegalese guy who was even worse off than he was. They were always together, defending one another. Yet you could tell that Silla made more sense than the other one—even if by then everyone thought Silla was off his rocker and far beyond the call of sanity. When he wasn't drunk he was able to talk in a way that even sounded wise. "Come over here to say hello to a fellow Senegalese," he would often say. "We have to behave ourselves. We came to Italy to work hard and we have to work hard to make others respect us. . . ." I saw him many times after that, and finally I decided that we had to do something to help him. I remember well. I was in Rimini for the summer. One evening I started to think more seriously about Silla's predicament. Finally I promised myself: In Milan I will ask all the others to pitch in and I will help send Silla home to Senegal. I returned to Milan and spoke with his cousins, who told me that I should speak to their uncle who lived in Genoa. I went to Genoa, but the uncle told me to stay out of it and mind my own business. At the time I didn't want to insist, but I kept thinking of Silla. I collected some money and spoke to him about a trip to Senegal. He didn't want to hear anything of the sort. He looked me straight in the eye and told me to go to hell: "May your evil spirits do away with you!" One day he disappeared. I would find out that he had been arrested, maybe for insulting a police officer. Silla spoke Italian well and always had a joke or two ready. I didn't see him for six or seven months. Then one day out of the blue he showed up. He had changed and seemed like someone else. His hair was no longer knotted in little braids. It was short now. He had clean clothes on and a big smile. Word had it that they had provided him with medical treatment in jail. His cousins were soon talking

about Senegal again to him, trying to rekindle in him the idea of leaving. They knew he was sensitive about the idea so they did it carefully, dancing around the issue so as not to rub him the wrong way. He finally resigned himself to leaving Italy, convinced that the idea was his own. He went back one day to the little grassy areas where the benches are outside the main train station, but just to say hello to his police officer friends who were happy to see him healthy. And in the end he left. After nine unhappy years in Italy he crossed the borders again, this time toward home. Even though he didn't have a cent to his name, he left thanks to the help of his relatives and friends.

Many from Senegal have lived in the same conditions. Many have found themselves on that same downward slope, but Ma slid all the way to the very bottom. Others slide only a little, but then they hang on to something, they stop in their tracks, and slide some more, maybe even climb back up. They struggle, but they manage not to fall. I was not stronger than poor unlucky Ma Silla, but I had the good fortune to not be alone and to always have my friends nearby. They were a big source of courage for me, and Mordiarra more than anyone. In Senegal we have this rule: When you are with someone younger than you, it is up to you, the older one, to set a good example. If the younger one acts brave, the older one has to act even braver. I found courage writing home to my family. I fooled myself that things were different, maybe more like what I was writing in my letters as I tried to reassure them: a life without police, without my merchandise being confiscated, without hunger. The letters were always the same: "Dear Mom and Dad, everything's going well here." I would even think to add sometimes: "It's a little cold, but we are men and can handle it." I would always end the letter by asking my family to pray for me. They would reply, reminding us how lucky we were to have had the chance to leave Africa and come to Europe: "Life is getting harder here. We are counting on you to help us. We can't ask for the impossible, but try to do what you can for us. We pray for you always. We never forget you in our

prayers." My father would always add: "Don't follow the ways of the whites, don't drink wine and don't smoke. If you don't drink and don't smoke, you will have all that you wish for. If you disobey me, I cannot give you my blessing." He had warned me about this years before, when I left Dakar for the first time. We all felt a huge responsibility for our families. Our conditions were much harsher than we made out in our letters. But they needed us. So we couldn't turn back. We couldn't even stop too long to complain about our problems. We had no choice but to bounce back and start the selling again. If I was late in writing, my relatives would write first: "We are worried because we haven't heard from you. If you are in trouble, you have to let us know because we are your family. You shouldn't keep it to yourself. Remember that Mom, Dad, and your brothers are all thinking of you."

Once when I was really down, I received a call from my brother, who was a policeman. I still don't know how he was able to find the number of the hotel where I lived. I felt so many emotions hearing his voice like that, so far away. I could tell him everything. But first I made him promise not to tell my parents: "Brother, life is hard here, harder than you can imagine or that you can tell from my letters. There's no room in this life for happiness. We are illegal and this means we must live with our heads hung low. Before you leave the hotel you have to wait and make sure there is no one around. You have to slink along the walls and hide. You have to always say yes. We make some money selling. But selling is sad when you realize that people only buy out of pity and that your elephants and eagles matter little to them and that you survive only thanks to the generosity of others. We hope things will change. For now our life is one of humiliation."

## MILANESE CHRONICLES



**I'M STILL IN MILAN.** The snow is melting away while fear, my ever constant companion, remains by my side. I sell every day, with earnings that range from ten to sixty thousand lire. Every now and then I have a stroke of good luck. In a *caffè* in Sesto Marelli, I just about put my bag down when a guy approaches me and says, "Let me see what you're selling." I'm not sure what to do. But he keeps insisting. So from my bag I pull out a family of elephants and framed butterflies. "Go ahead," he says, "show me everything you've got." Not really trusting him I proceed with the exposition of my merchandise. "Now name me a price. If it's honest I'll buy everything." I'm confused, but I give it a try: "One hundred and seventy-five thousand lire." "That's not so bad. I'll take it all," he says, putting the money in my hand. I bite my tongue because I haven't shown him everything. Once in a while I see my dream customer around town, but I don't dare try to sell him anything else. He says hello to me though. He even buys me a drink now and then, and asks how I'm doing.

I make friends with two guys working behind the counter at a sandwich shop. They're young and they let me use a table to set up my stuff. They even advertise for me: "Buy something from this guy. You can't leave without buying something." Then they write the names of the customers

who hesitate or just don't want to buy. They do this every time someone comes into the place until they give in. Two guys with a Citroën Deux Cheveux offer to bring me home. But I get out in Piazzale Lotto because I would rather not tell anyone where I live: I see danger and police everywhere. At a little *osteria* in Viale Padova I find a police officer right out front while I am there peddling my goods to a man who only wants to buy a lighter. The officer orders something to drink. I try to hide my elephants and make myself invisible, but no such luck: the officer comes over to me. He places his hand on my customer's shoulder and says, "Go ahead. Don't be so stingy, buy something. Don't be wasting this young man's time." I almost smile at him but my legs won't stop shaking. I leave a lighter and thank him, saying my goodbyes on the run. After Sesto, I get off at Corsico. After Corsico, Trezzano. I have great memories of Trezzano. I always sell a lot there, no matter where I try.

It seems like my luck can't run out. In fact, a guest at the hotel, a Spanish guy, offers me work at the convention center. My job is to assemble a stand. In five days I earn 250,000 lire. I can pay off my debts and pay back Monica, the girl who runs the hotel with her parents, and an Egyptian friend. I buy some more merchandise in the usual store behind the Garibaldi station. It is just around this time that an idea starts to take shape. Sal and I talk and in the end we decide: "Instead of going around always looking for people to sell to, why don't we set up our stuff where we know people will pass by?" I go to the metro station in Piazzale Lotto. Falou and Mordiarra prefer the Pasteur and Turro stations. Someone else who is also named Falou has had the same idea and goes to sell at the Sesto Marelli station. We will stay here and see how things go.

The first day, once we are all settled at our station, I decide that the time is right to go do some shopping for dinner. "Sal," I say, "I'm leaving my stuff in your safekeeping." I go to the supermarket and come back. Both Sal and the merchandise are gone. I do one lap around the station. Nothing. I ask a Neapolitan man who is also there selling, but he

won't even answer me. Just as I decide to leave, I spot Sal out the corner of my eye in a car with three men. I don't know what to do: it's not a police or *carabinieri* car. I decide it might be best to just lie low. After a few hours Sal comes back: "They confiscated all my stuff. They were local cops, in plainclothes." "It doesn't matter, Sal," I reassure him. "All that matters is that they didn't serve you deportation papers." But I was floored. I had never had my merchandise confiscated before. And we had two hundred thousand lire worth of merchandise. But we have to move on: I still have a little money left. I buy a little bit of merchandise and split it with Sal. I have one hundred thousand lire left and I stuff it deep down in my pocket. It's a warm day in April. It seems like people have woken up after a long slumber. The crowd is really alive today. "Look how many people there are, Sal. They seem happy, not a care in the world. Try to imagine we are in Africa, Sal. . . ." We are on the metro headed to Gorgonzola. We get off there and look around, undecided where to go. I stick my hand in my pocket and let out a scream: "The money's gone!" I look Sal in the eye, trying to think of something comforting to say. Instead I ask, "What do we do now? I can't take this. I don't feel like selling anymore. I've had it." I turn around and start walking. I want to ask the ticket controller if he knows anything.

"How could it have happened?" I implore him.

"Did they only take your money?"

"Only money?"

"You're lucky. Just think that every day hundreds of people pass through here and report stolen money and IDs."

It's the 21st of April and I am back to square one. Fortune has turned its back on me. I really have to start selling again if I want to save a little money to go to the Riviera.

It happens to me again, but this time it's different.

One day I am in Cinisello to check out a *pensione* where for a single they want 150,000 lire a month. In the hotel where I am, I pay double that. But the *pensioni* that are the best deals are always in strategic positions. A few meters away from the one in Cinisello there's a *carabinieri* station. I

fly out of there as fast as I can with my legs in the air. I have to walk all the way to the first stop on the bus route. At my back I hear the sound of a car slowing down. It passes me by about a meter and then stops. A guy sticks his head out of the window and offers me a ride. I accept and explain that I'm headed to the metro station at Sesto.

"OK, I'll take you there."

He's a middle-aged man, well-dressed, well-groomed, with smooth skin, his hair neatly parted, just a little long at the ears. He wants me to tell him about myself. Listening to the same wise voice of caution, I always say exactly the opposite of what I am thinking. He drives slowly. Then he turns down a road that I don't know, nestled between the hedges and brush, and trash and junk.

"Why are we taking this road to go to Sesto?"

"I like this road. Don't worry. I'm bringing you to Sesto."

As long as it doesn't take too long. But there's also another problem: why is he so nice to me? I start to suspect that it's a plainclothes cop who is pulling the wool over my eyes and is bringing me right to the police commissioner. But that idea doesn't last too long. My friend starts to say something:

"You're a good-looking guy. You're really cute."

I respond, "Thanks," as I slide up against the door as much as possible.

He says, "Do you like women? Do you like making love?"

"Yeah, of course."

"Do you want to make love with a woman?"

"Why are you asking me this?"

"If you want I will bring you a woman and you can make love with her."

"No, thanks, I choose my own women."

He says, "You don't want to come with me? You know, I am a woman. I seem like a man, but I can do anything a woman can. Do you want to try?"

"No, thanks, I don't want to try."

"You are mean."

"I am very mean."

"Listen. I will give you fifty thousand lire if you come with me." I don't have a cent in my pocket but I tell him again, "No, thanks."

"I know you're broke. And you're going to turn down fifty thousand lire? Should I pull over?"

"No, let's go."

"Where do you live?"

I keep acting polite and patient: "Near the main train station."

"I'll bring you there."

"No, I'll take the metro."

"I have an idea. I will look for a woman for you. You make love with this woman and I will watch."

Finally, a red light. I jump out of the car yelling, "*Arrivederci.*"

In a *caffè* near the Inganni metro stop, people buy everything. They're friendly. They ask me my name. I answer back with the usual "Pascal," my battle name when I need to camouflage myself. They are ready to buy my products and pay for drinks. They are quick with the jokes and compliments. They are always kidding around. "Pascal," they say, "show us your goods. You know what they say about you Africans being so well-endowed?" I try to laugh: "I can't, no, I can't. I have to go. I'm in a hurry." I say goodbye and leave. The jokes start again the next day, and the day after that, and every other time I go into the Inganni *caffè*. Finally they say, "Pascal, it's cold outside. You don't have a lot of money. We'll find you an apartment, a car, some nice clothes. Then we'll find you a woman and you won't have to work anymore. Would you like that? Wouldn't that be better? If you keep on like this, you'll freeze to death. You won't make it. Trust us." I am speechless. I don't understand. The bartender pulls me aside: "Don't listen to them. They are the women." When I return to the *caffè* at Inganni, they don't buy anything anymore. In Sesto, when I arrive in the area around the station at the last metro stop, there is always someone in stockings who opens the car door and invites me to get in. At this point I burst out laughing.

In June we decide to go back to Rimini. We were last there in the winter to buy some glass-encased butterflies and we drove along the deserted roads covered with leaves. Mordiarra had gone there to scout out the housing situation. Now it's our turn. We meet up with him by car, the same old panting red Peugeot that we retrieved from Piacenza. He hasn't found a house, but we manage to dig up a place in Miramare right near the station. There are five of us and the contract is strict about one detail: only five people can rent the apartment. Price: three hundred thousand lire a month. We have no choice but to say no to two friends of Mordiarra's who are the last ones to show up. It's not just a question of space. We have been suffering in the cold all this time while they have just returned from Senegal. Now they can take care of themselves.

We can't say no to Omar, however. He is a friend and he did six months in jail. He sold during the entire summer of 1984 then decided to return to Senegal. But before that he decided to treat himself to a nice big gun. He didn't know about the law against carrying and exporting weapons. At the airport the alarm went off immediately and Omar ended up in jail.

In the house, despite all our good intentions, the coming and going is constant. One evening Charl shows up from Paris. Then Mara's at the door. Even if the contract says five, there are seven of us now, sometimes eight. Business is the same as usual, except for the fact that we try to stay far away from Rimini because competition is too intense there. So we go to Civitanova Marche, Porto Sant'Elpidio, Porto Recanati, Numana. We leave in the morning and return late in the evening, always by car because despite its disastrous state the car is still safer since we don't have to deal with the train stations. At the station the police are always patrolling, but it's rare that anyone stops you in the car. But after torturing the car for a week, it won't move. It won't even start. I decide to attempt the train by myself and I get off at Falconara, which I liked so much when I had a chance to see it at the beginning of my trip to Italy.

One day I decide to get off at the station before, at Marina di Montemarciano. There's a little beach cut off by the road. But it's a lucky beach. I sell everything for about three hundred thousand lire. Not bad at all. This is my secret place. I won't tell anyone about it. I'll be back here for sure.

# A RUN ON THE BEACH



THERE ARE HARDLY ANY umbrellas on the beach at Marina di Montemarciano. The first time it brought me good luck, even if in the end it doesn't seem to bring me much business. I keep at it and everything seems to be going well. But then out of the blue a *carabinieri* patrol unit pulls up. The two officers drive slowly along the sand. I don't know what comes over me, but unfortunately I take off running like a crazy person with necklaces swinging from my arms, socks dancing in the wind, and now my long feet as well since in no time I manage to lose the sandals I was wearing. The necklaces fly to the ground. It's hopeless: on one side there's the sea, on the other the *carabinieri* car and an officer tracking me on foot, and before me there's a canal blocking my path. And to make matters worse the canal is really an open sewer. The canal breaks my run and destroys whatever hope I had of getting away. I give up and stop running. The officer is right on top of me. Beet red and excited, huffing and puffing, cursing, he yells, "You goddamned blacks." I don't say anything. He grabs me by the neck and drags me toward the car. At that point I say, breathing hard, "Let me walk. I know how to walk." "You ugly piece of shit, you think you're gonna get away. We're the military. We're stronger. We run faster than you. Fuck you, fuck you guys from Senegal." I get a better look at him. He's tall for an Italian. He throws me

against the car and squeezes handcuffs around my wrists. Then he starts beating me. His partner gets out of the car and punches start flying, kicks, too, and then insults just to top things off. Someone on the beach gets up and moves toward us. He's watched the entire scene, from the chase to the capture to the beating, and now he takes a stand: "That's enough. You can't treat him like that. He didn't do anything wrong. He's just selling necklaces. Enough. This is a disgrace." "What the hell do you care? We're doing our jobs here with these bastards." I keep quiet and pray to God that my rescuers go away. When they complain, the *carabinieri* get meaner. At the *carabinieri* station I will be alone and I will have to face them without anyone's help. They open the car door and throw me inside. From the corner of the back seat the dark face of a fellow passenger appears. It's another Senegalese guy who's been caught on the beach just like me. "You shouldn't have run. They get pissed off if you try to run," he tells me. I'm starting to realize this for myself. The *carabiniere* who chased me down is now having trouble catching his breath: "This shithead made me sweat. We'll make him pay." I am covered in sand which is now burning my skin, and my sandals are back at the marina. My body is bursting at the seams with anger, but I am also scared to death after the *carabiniere*'s little fit. They bring us to the *carabinieri* barracks at Senigallia. The other officers watch me come in with handcuffs around my wrists and a question mark forms on their faces. The one who chased me says, now that he is finally breathing normally again, "He tried to get away, but I stopped him." And he brags, "This one here thought he was faster than me, but I managed to catch him." Now I stare him straight in the eye. He's a guy about twenty years old. Look at this dummy . . . just because he's wearing a uniform. It's always the same old story with the uniform. If I had wanted to, I could have pinned him to the floor with one arm. I rehearse the scene in the head. I see him when he aims his fist at me. I remember my champion karate skills and think of how I could have struck him by taking advantage of the way his arm moved and the por-

tion of his body left unprotected. I imagine my torso moving quickly over my agile legs. I take a quick step back, and then jump forward to strike him again, taking advantage of his shaky balance. I feel like laughing while he is still busy bragging. That's all right. At the station there are others like me: Senegalese, Moroccans, all locked up in a big room, not in a cell. They're all sitting on the floor.

"Did you steal?" one of them asks me.

"No."

"Why do you have handcuffs then?"

"Because I felt like running."

"Good job. Never run. What beach did they get you at?"

"Marina di Montemarciano."

"Good job. It's the most dangerous beach in the area. You had to go there of all places?"

"The first time I went it seemed like a great beach."

We exchange information, complaints, and protests about our bitter fate. We all are dying to leave Italy and go home. Words are flowing in Italian, French, and Senegalese. The police, though, don't let us use our languages because they want to know what we are saying. This is also what an immigrant goes through. You can't ask any questions. Or, rather, you can but no one will take the trouble to answer you. They dragged me here at three in the afternoon. At seven I am free to go. But they keep whatever documents I have on me, including my passport. That way I have to come back tomorrow. Thanks a bunch. The others, the Moroccan and the Senegalese, stay. They are all headed to court for trial because they all have at least one set of deportation papers. I leave the *carabinieri* station, without my merchandise, without sandals even—who knows where they ended up. I come to a little park area and sit on a bench. I end up bursting into tears, crying from anger and shame, for the marks left on my wrists by the handcuffs, and because I ran from a man. It's the first time I've ever done that.

I only ran to save my necklaces. But when I was in front of the *carabinieri* I pretended I was scared as an excuse: "Yes, I got scared when I saw the car and the uniforms. I got really

scared. That's why I ran." This makes them happy, even if it's not at all true.

Now I feel like punching the first thing that crosses my path. Back at the station I had seen a middle-aged man who was trying to pick up some African guys at the ticket counter. He's my target, the target of all my repressed anger. I'm pissed: "Just let him try that with me. I'll punch the crap out of him and then I'll have some justice." I've made up my mind. At the station I look around. There he is. He says nothing. Not even a look in my direction. I move closer. He turns the other way. I almost brush up against him. He doesn't even give me the satisfaction of a look and instead he starts talking with the guy working at the newspaper stand. I don't even get the satisfaction of having vengeance. I get on the train. I keep thinking about this afternoon's escapade. I cry and laugh imagining my fists whirling around the face of my chosen victim. Then I plan a strategy for the next day.

At home I only tell my friends about how my merchandise and passport were confiscated. They advise me not to go back there. Now I'm torn. Then I decide: the merchandise is gone, the deportation papers will arrive any day now, at least I can try to get the passport back. So I go back. The surprise: the *carabinieri* realize that I speak decent Italian and they ask me to act as an interpreter for a Senegalese guy who can't speak a word of Italian. It's a step forward. I become an interpreter at the Senigallia courthouse. Let's hope something comes of this. The accused is a forty-year-old Senegalese man, one of the most unlucky men you would ever meet. They stop him every other day. He has a mountain of deportation papers. I hear that the sentence proposed by the district attorney is five to six months in prison. I appoint myself his defense attorney: "I implore you, your Honor, to show some compassion, given that he had deportation papers, but no money to leave Italy. He was forced to stay to get together some money to pay for the trip back to Senegal." I convince them. They give him a conditional sentence so long as he doesn't commit any crimes for a set period of time and then release him. The judge expresses his admira-

tion for the professional services rendered by the translator. And then after he finds out why I was brought in, he recommends that they let me go without deportation papers—all thanks to my good behavior. That's what I understand at least. But I return to the *carabinieri* barracks with the others. The waiting has begun again. At noon, we protest: "We're hungry." A *carabiniere* takes it on himself to collect money and do a little shopping. He comes back with a nice big tray of bologna sandwiches. There's immediately trouble: "What did you buy with our money? This is pork. We're Muslim. We don't eat pork." To defend himself he replies: "Sorry, but this isn't pork, it's donkey meat."

"No, this is pork. We know it is. It's pork and we can't eat pork. Now what do we do?" We could eat pork like lots of other times, but the bologna sandwich is a good opportunity to rebel a little, to raise our voices, and to see the poor *carabiniere* get embarrassed in front of us. The *carabiniere* is nice and apologizes again. In response we put on a mean face.

At seven the same officer shows up and tells me, "You have to report here tomorrow morning." This is becoming tedious. Of course I go, but I am really furious: "Why don't you just give me the deportation papers and let me go. Don't make me keep coming and going like this. And remember that you have my stuff." He tells me, "Calm down, there's no problem. You'll see. They'll let you go." I wait until the afternoon, when they put me on a bus with other guys. I ask the driver, an officer of about forty-five, what the destination of our trip is.

"We're bringing you to the police station in Ancona for deportation papers."

"No, wait, let me out. We haven't done anything wrong." I don't like to beg, but you never know.

"Look, pal, I would like to help you, but these are orders and I have to obey them. You see, I wear this uniform and I have to obey. I'm sorry because I know you're not bad. But I don't have a choice. Do you understand?" He asks us about our countries and our families: "Why did you come here? It was better for you there." He seems moved by our stories.

I see this man who's sweet, and who has no desire to do us any harm, and I'm touched. When we get to Ancona the police officers greet us with "Moroccans again!" They call everyone Moroccans.

"Moroccans again. Why do you insist on making us work for nothing? Anyway, these guys are never going to leave! We issue the deportation papers, but they just stay. We hand them some more deportation papers and they still stay. Do you want to get it in your head once and for all? You're making us work for nothing."

A squabble breaks out between our driver and the police. But the interrogation process is not interrupted. They call us one by one. When it's my turn, they check my passport and other papers, fill out the deportation papers, and ask if the name is correct on the form. "Perfect," I confirm. It's missing a vowel. All the better: if they enter it into a computer, they'll never find it again. With my deportation papers in hand, I get back on the train and go to the *carabinieri* barracks in Senigallia. Surprise on the part of the *carabinieri*:

"Still here."

"Now I have deportation papers."

"And don't you know that you have twenty-four hours to disappear?"

"Yes, I know, but you have my merchandise. You have to give it back to me." With my big bag in tow I head back to Miramare. In Rimini I buy some more necklaces. The deportation papers disappear into a trash can.

# DAKAR VIA MOSCOW



HAVING BEEN SERVED MY first-ever deportation papers, I am soon right back on the seesaw, swinging between good sales and quick getaways. It's like playing hide-and-seek. If I want to get on a train at the Miramare di Rimini station, I don't enter at the main entrance of the station. Instead, I climb the wall as soon as I see the train pull up. I make sure to spend as little time as possible at the station. I jump on the first car I see and I keep a close eye on who gets on: it could be a police officer, disguised behind the socks and T-shirts of any of the beachgoers who are always getting on and off the train. Our house is always under surveillance. To avoid undesirable meetings it's best to leave at five in the morning and come back after midnight. But surprises can arrive at any moment, and so the illegal immigrant is always at the mercy of the *carabinieri* and police. And the minute you give up, a deep sadness always comes.

"I've had it with all this. I can't take it anymore," one of us would say.

"This is my last summer in Italy," another would chime in.

"This is no way to live. We're not criminals. We just want to work."

"I'm going back."

"Me, too."

The group makes the big decision: the Italian adventure must end. The idea of going back lifts our spirits. Our mantra is sell, sell, sell. That way we can buy the tickets and not go home empty-handed. Charl and I have a plan to continue the business in Senegal, where we'll sell some nice shirts and shoes we bring back from Italy. I make some calculations. When I left Senegal, I spent almost a million lire for the plane ticket and had another million in my pocket. After a year in Italy, I have the same amount of money and I'm at my wit's end from the exhaustion. I put a million and a half into the pot shared with Charl, my new business partner, to buy nice sweaters and shoes. The Aeroflot ticket costs me 540,000 lire. Our agreement is that I will leave with the merchandise and Charl will meet me in Dakar.

The evening of September 10th I get on a train to Rome with six suitcases. I arrive the morning after and get myself a hotel room with two guys, one Arab and the other Italian. I rest for a few hours. Then I take a walk toward the Vatican. I feel like taking a few pictures. The next day I go to the airport and here the problems begin. I don't have enough money to pay for the extra baggage fee for my six suitcases. I have to leave one in the storage area. The plane takes off on time. I arrive in Moscow. I should be in Dakar by nightfall. I'm just in transit in the Soviet capital, but they take their job seriously here. The customs official goes through my passport like a scientist examining microbes. He checks it page by page, from top to bottom, and bottom to top. He holds each page up against the light to make sure one isn't stuck to the other. I tell him that I have a connecting flight to Dakar to catch. But this guy is adamant. He checks with his colleague and then continues to scrutinize it. I complain, diplomatically. His face is indifferent. *Dio mio*, the plane's left. Now what? An African guy from Guinea who speaks Russian asks around and then tells me what he's found out:

"We have to go to a hotel."

"What do you mean? And my plane?"

"We have to do what they say."

I feel like I'm going crazy. Another official, a woman this time, intervenes in English. She tells me that I have to spend the night in a hotel and that I will leave the next morning.

"But I want to leave now because I have paid for a ticket for this plane and not for the one tomorrow morning."

"There's nothing I can do. The plane has already left."

"I don't want to stay here."

"There's nothing I can do."

I spot a bus just behind the glass. It's waiting to take us to the hotel. I insist, shouting now, "No, I'm not moving from here! I want to leave!" This time the young woman only answers me in Russian. Apparently she's forgotten her English. Everyone answers me in Russian when I speak to them. I yell in English, Wolof, French, even Italian, and shake my long hands. In the corner there's a group of police officers. I hear a burst of laughter coming from that direction. I look at the police right in the face and I burst out laughing, too. It ends here. I give up. I get on the bus and reach the hotel. To enter, we are escorted between two rows of police officers as if we were headed for jail and were dangerous assassins. One officer takes my passport and gives me a red ticket in exchange. I go to a squalid room and close the door behind me, shutting out everything and everyone, hoping for a chance to catch some sleep. But at four in the morning, as if we really were in prison, they tell us it's time to wake up. I try to lift my spirits by taking a shower, but the water feels like it's come straight from a freezing cold river. They offer us a crack-of-dawn tour of the streets of Moscow. I'm about to accept, together with two other Senegalese guys that I met during the trip, but then a man from Gambia, who already had the lovely experience, tells us how the bus flies through the town going really fast, and that you can't get off. In order to see something of the city you have to strain your neck to peer through the tiny window. So long, Moscow. Better to stay in the hotel restaurant with the police. It's finally time to leave. We get our passports back, go the airport, and get on our plane. Blessed be God. We're in the air. It's ten in the morning.

Thanks to the time change we gain four hours. As a result, Dakar first appears to me in the light of the afternoon: the city, the sea, the beach at Gorée, the other beaches where I once basked in the sun and all the girls, and my ceramics school, which we pass on the road home from the airport. I'm so excited that I almost faint when the door of the plane opens and a gust of air, our perfumed air that smells like almonds, greets me.

# LIFE IN SENEGAL



**MY BROTHER THE POLICEMAN** knows about my arrival and comes to meet me at the airport, but after the plane lands he sees only my bags arrive. He shows up on time for the next flight. "Iv!" I yell as soon as I see him from far away. I keep yelling his name as I run to him. I hug him and ask about Mom and Dad. I rush home to see them. They're doing well. My father interrogates me: "You didn't smoke or drink, did you?" "I didn't smoke and I didn't drink, Father. I followed your advice and as a result I'm doing well." Before I see the beaches again and say hello to all my friends, I have to think of how to retrieve my precious merchandise, the source of my profitable new business. A friend of mine who is a mechanic for the Senegalese airlines is allowed to fly for free and so he volunteers to fly to Rome to retrieve my suitcase from storage. The new business can start now. But unfortunately in Senegal money is always scarce, and while people are eager to buy, they ask for hefty discounts or insist on paying in installments. As a result, our stuff goes quickly, but we can't cover the overhead. My wonderful business ends up only creating a mountain of credit and leaving me with no job and not a cent in my pocket. I rely on Iv and his generous loans. But it can't go on like this, even if my forced leisure has its advantages since it allows me to see my friends and to tell them about my adventures and my

plans. They listen to me and slowly I start to hope again. Excited now, I play with the idea of selling to tourists. But in Dakar there's too much competition. Better to try Gambia. I buy the stuff in Dakar and sell it across the border as long as Sal hosts me, as he, too, has just gotten back from Italy. In a month I sell everything, but during my coming and goings, the value of the Gambian currency has dropped by fifty percent and all the money that I earned is now worth only half. It's not even enough to cover all my expenses. I'm really down on myself now. In five months' time in Senegal, I have tried everything. I don't even want to talk about taking up ceramics again. It feels like the potters here have multiplied by the thousands overnight. There might be some opportunities in the Ivory Coast, but I'm convinced that in Abidjan the evil eye would find me again and that I'd suffer from homesickness. I listen to my friends who have just arrived from Italy: Mordiarra, As, and Charl. Although we're not very convinced or enthusiastic, together we talk about our futures as we study the sea at Dakar. "What about if we try Spain?" we all ask. I don't remember whose idea Spain was. The idea is popular because we feel like Spain is closer, warmer, and more like us.

"But we need a visa."

"And the consulate in Senegal is giving out fewer and fewer visas these days."

"We'll try Guinea."

We put money and passports into the hands of Mordiarra, who leaves for Guinea. But it's just another dead end. We don't get the visas, and now we have no choice but to try the consulate in Mauritania. I'm starting to lose hope: "At this point, guys, I'm pulling out. I have no more money." They're going without me. Falou leaves for Guinea. Charl flies to France. I scrape together some money from the people who owe me for the sweaters and shoes. But now I miss my friends, my companions in travel and conversation, friends I've spent long afternoons with, sharing memories. I give in. Destiny and this destitute and stagnant country drive me back to Italy. I gather all my money, ask

my brother for a loan, and do some calculations. Yes, I can give it another try. Holding tight to the money in my pocket and easy prey to bad thoughts, I walk towards the center of Dakar to purchase the ticket. But the bank where I have to withdraw the little savings I have is closed. I postpone everything for another twenty-four hours and head home. I stuff my hands back in my pockets and exclaim, "There's a damn hole!" The money's gone. A dear brother here in Senegal has carefully cut the pocket and taken the contents. That's it. I've reached the point of desperation. I don't know who to turn to now. I wander around aimlessly like an idiot and every day I grow more and more anxious and moody. But, as it turns out, there are days when there is no shortage of saints to come to your rescue. My cousin's husband sends for me: "I hear you're in big trouble. I want to help you because you're a good kid." From a drawer he pulls out a checkbook and opens it right there before my eyes. "You write the amount," he says. My cousin's husband is a practical man and wants me to marry his daughter, who is even pretty cute. I take my time: as a matter of dignity I would prefer not to take the money. I don't want his daughter either, no offense to him, but because I have no plans to get married. But I do desperately need the money. I have to be careful, but first I need to be honest with my cousin's husband and confess to him that marriage is just not for me at the moment: "I'm still young. I don't have a stable job. I'd like to have an experience abroad. . . ."

I'm embarrassed. But my cousin's husband is very understanding. Or maybe he just hasn't lost hope:

"Take the money you need. We'll worry about the rest later."

"No, no, I can't." I'm not sure about all this.

"We're not going to talk about this anymore. It's a loan. When you can you'll pay me back."

Well, all right. I take one million and clenching it tightly in my hand I run to purchase the plane ticket—this time, though, without saying a word to anyone. I hold my tongue

before telling my friends. Just a few days before my friends had seemed saddened by the news of my departure, but this time I am leaving for real. I hug my parents. The plane awaits me.

# A TOURIST IN ROME



THE FIRST TIME I FLEW TO Rome there were only a few Senegalese with me on the plane. They were scared and mostly busy praying. Now there are many Senegalese and they pass the time on the plane imagining the challenges that await them. In fact, as soon as they step off the plane, they rush to get the best spot on the bus: the seat near the door that will open right at the airport entrance. As soon as the door opens with its soft hiss, the Senegalese rush out carrying packages, quickly moving their arms and legs. They are sure that the first to arrive has more of a chance of crossing that longed-for Italian border. I take my time, stand back and watch the whole scene as a spectator. I see that many Senegalese brothers are allowed into Italy. Yet I find myself among the last, the excluded. There are twenty-two of us. They take us all aside and tell us the news: "You cannot enter. You must go back to Senegal." I've prepared a plan "B" just in case. When the airplane lands in Dakar, I won't even leave the airport. I will get the first plane to the Ivory Coast. I can't go back to Senegal. In nine months I tried everything there under the sun. It was no use. You can't live there.

The police officers are looking for someone who knows Italian. I don't say anything. A guy steps forward, a guy who told me earlier how he had five thousand lire in his pocket to start his new life in Italy. Unfortunately he doesn't know

Italian. He can't understand anything. They question a few Senegalese guys. Then it's my turn. They make me go into an office. A police officer asks me a question. I answer back in Italian. "What's this?" he asks. "When we asked if one of you knew Italian you didn't move." And then he gives me what is supposed to be a friendly little jab at my stomach, adding, "You think you're clever, huh? You wanted to hide, but now I've caught you. Come sit here near me." The other Senegalese come in. The police officer does the questioning, I interpret, and he types away on the typewriter. As always I add something of my own. I put to good use my extensive experience and frequent run-ins with the Italian police as I correct the defendants' responses and provide my friends under interrogation with more appropriate explanations. I do this for about twenty of my fellow countrymen. Eventually the police officer turns to me and says:

"And you? What did you come to Italy for?"

"I'm here for a short vacation."

"And where did you learn Italian?"

"In Senegal."

"How did you learn Italian in Senegal?"

"At school."

"Have you been to Italy before?"

"Never seen Italy in my life. It's my first time here."

"And where do you plan on going?"

"To see a friend, a judge, who spends his vacations as a guest of my family in Senegal. Now he's returning the invitation. I'm going to spend my vacation at his place." And I show him a card with a name and an Italian address.

"Are you telling the truth? How can I know if I should I believe you?"

"Go ahead and call him."

The judge really exists. My father met him in Dakar. But I don't think he ever intended to host me.

"Should I call then?"

"Go ahead and try."

Between one question and another I slip and say, "Not a clue," when I mean to tell them I don't know the answer.

"Where did you learn to say 'not a clue'?"

"From these Italians when they come to Senegal."

"I am going to let you in. But you aren't here to sell too, are you?"

"Sell? Sell what? I didn't know my people came to Italy to sell."

"Do you at least have money?"

I show him everything I have: almost four hundred thousand lire.

"OK. Take your things and go."

In front of me there is still a barrier. The police officer checking the passports flips through a big book containing all the names of the illegal immigrants with deportation papers. My name's not there. Actually, it should be there, but they misspelled it. He could recognize me, though, from my date of birth or address. But he doesn't pursue it. He wants to get rid of me as quickly as possible. And so I get in. It is June 26, 1986. I am in Italy for the second time. I know what awaits me: hard work and fear. But at least my family won't have to worry about me. They will have one less thing to worry about.

I head for Riccione, where I have a lot of friends. I will go back to the beaches of the Riviera to offer the tourists my elephants, eagles, necklaces, bracelets, whips, and belts.

## TO CATCH A THIEF



**THE FIRST NIGHT** I solve the problem of where to stay by sleeping at the home of a friend I met in Milan in the hotel on via Berengario. A Senegalese is lucky to have friends everywhere. Friends come in handy at times like this, like when you need a plate of rice or a last-minute bed. There are a lot of people in the apartment so I can't stay. But a Senegalese immigrant, illegal or not, never stops trying. I remember Bobo, nice ol' Bobo, another old acquaintance from Milan. I know he's getting by in Riccione. It's easy to find his address. I go to his place. He has no problem finding a little corner for me in his apartment. Unfortunately Riccione is no longer the fairly hospitable city of a year or two ago. Then I was the only one on the beach for miles. In the space of a day I wouldn't come across more than a couple of my sales colleagues. People always smiled at you. The lifeguards turned a blind eye and let things run smoothly. Today Riccione is invaded by Moroccans, Senegalese, and other Africans from every corner of the continent. The competition is fierce. The tourists at the seaside feel like they're under siege. The shopkeepers see us as rivals and are scared of us. The police and *carabinieri* have increased their patrols. Our existence is a long and painful *via crucis* of deportation papers and, worse, of confiscated merchandise. I need a change of pace, but I stick it out because I promised my brother Samba that

I would send for him. He's eager to have his own experience here. I am happy to encourage him to come because it would be nice to have a relative close by.

Unfortunately after two months of selling I still haven't been able to put aside the money for a plane ticket.

I have to try to get a loan. We illegal immigrants don't have banks. In these cases we turn to homemade banks that we organize among ourselves. No Senegalese keeps the money he earns on him for fear of losing it or of being robbed. He gives it to the head of the apartment, the oldest and most respected guy in the apartment. He's the one who keeps all the money. When everyone leaves, the head guy, the teller, has the job of hiding it in the safest place. He at least makes sure that it's safe. All our lovely savings can easily disappear. It only takes one person to come home before the others, to start rummaging around and then have a little luck: the money pops up and the friend takes off with the stash. You can't report him, you can't do anything. But the thief will never be welcome at anyone's place again. Sometimes these friends are even cops or the *carabinieri*. It might even happen that at the beginning of a police search, there's a million lire well hidden and at the end it's half that. It's never happened to me. They've told me stories about it and I have good reason to believe it's true.

Our teller, Bobo, doesn't turn down my request for a loan. My little brother Samba can come. I go to get him in Rome. I hug him and bring him to Riccione. He repeats the same journey I made two years ago, except he has the luxury of being able to explore the city and ask questions because he has someone showing him the ropes, someone to take him around and give him advice. The season is almost over on the Adriatic. The tourists and the Senegalese are leaving. We will follow them. With the furniture convention in town in mid-September, Milan is overcrowded, and so are the hotels. There aren't any rooms, none at all. I make do sleeping in our friends' car. But how can I make my brother who's here fresh from Senegal do the same? I send him back to Rimini as a guest of another friend. In the meantime I will

figure out a solution. I meet my old friend Madicke. The two of us are looking for a house. One as desperate as the other. One evening near the metro station at Sesto Marelli we ask an Italian guy for some information. There are now three of us looking for a hotel, and with no results. In the end, the Italian, whose name is Walter, invites us home saying, "Come stay at my place." He calls his wife and then tells us the good news.

We find ourselves with these people who want to know everything about our lives. After spending too many nights in the car, Madicke and I can't keep our eyes open. And our sense of prudence takes over. Never tell anyone who you are, where you are going, what you are doing. I make up the story of a father from the Ivory Coast and a mother from Senegal, and a job between France and Abidjan: "We're just passing through Milan. We came to buy some merchandise and then we're going to sell it in our country back home." I'm sorry to trick Walter, who is nice and hospitable. But those are the rules. We are still illegal, still living in the shadows. We can never open up completely because the good old deportation papers are always just around the corner. Walter invites us the next night as well, but we don't show up. We're too scared and maybe too cautious.

A hotel, though, is nowhere to be found. We have no other option for the night but our friends' car. When even that's not available, our last resource is the Central Station. Those were some horrendous nights, those nights spent at the station. The marble benches are hard and the guests of the station have the habit of walking around drunk, dirty, stinky, and they yell and yell. And if you're really unlucky one of the more bedraggled guests might even roll over on you during the night. Waking up there is not a pleasurable experience. If all goes well the police come at five in the morning to shout at you: "Guys, it's time. You have to leave." Another solution is to buy a ticket for a train due to leave at five or six in the morning for any destination near Milan. That way you can use the waiting room, squeeze into an uncomfortable armchair and pretend to sleep, because

anything more than that is impossible in that position. That is, until the cleaning ladies kick you out.

But don't think for a minute that I gave up. Madicke finds a hotel and I find one, too, in the area around Sesto. A nice hotel with a semi-cold shower, doors and windows that don't close, and walls that are moldy in the corners. Samba will have to make do. It costs us thirty thousand six hundred total, exactly fifteen thousand three hundred a head. Shuffling up and down the corridor, the owner insists on repeating in her scruffy voice the same phrase over and over, like a refrain: "Have you paid? Have you paid? Have you paid?" You may have paid just a half hour earlier, but as soon as she sees you, she will inevitably mumble, turning up her nose at you, "Have you paid? Have you paid?" And at the end of the day those extra three hundred lire count, that's for sure. You might well have your fifteen thousand lire out and ready in your hand, but if you are three hundred lire short she might just turn you out on the street, all the while pestering you with the usual: "Have you paid? Have you paid?" We always have lunch and dinner in a restaurant underneath the hotel. The menu is always the same: spaghetti and potatoes. As you can imagine I am withering away and my overall health is not too good. My symptoms were already pretty bad in the days of the farmhouse in Cesena. In Rimini a doctor ordered a gastroscopy for me, without making me pay anything. He concluded that I had an ulcer. I can still remember his name, Montanari, because it sounds like a Senegalese name. During the first winter in Milan I felt the same awful pain. I went to the San Carlo Hospital. Everyone there was talking to me about health insurance, medical care, the national health system, and lots of other things. I didn't understand anything, absolutely nothing. They shuffled me around from doctor to doctor until I found one who avoided asking questions of any kind. He did a checkup and then simply put a prescription in my hand. The medicine cost twelve thousand lire: I paid for it with money borrowed from friends.

One day at Sesto, a guy named Mambei tells us that outside Milan, in Cassano d'Adda, there's room at a hotel where

you pay only one hundred and fifty thousand lire a head for a month. That's how the Senegalese community in Cassano d'Adda was born. I move there with my brother Samba. N'Diobo and Bass follow me and Mara Moussa arrives from France. Slowly others will come together there as well.

As for work, business continues as usual. My little brother manages just fine despite his disastrous debut. To initiate him in the business in Italy I had the idea to bring him to San Donato, along with N'Diobo. The idea of San Donato was a friend's. In these cases you have to always watch your own back, though, because no one ever tells you about a good *piazza*. If you're lucky, they'll tell you about a place they don't know. But San Donato wasn't so bad in the end. It was even great at first. The market was big, rich, crowded. But as we moved from *caffè* to *caffè* we ended up walking right by the police station.

"Where are you going?" they ask us. Great; now we're all set.

"Come with us," they say and bring us into a room in the station just past the main entrance. They leave us alone and my little brother immediately has a great idea: "Come on, let's run!" And indeed he proceeds to run. I say, "No, no, that will just make it worse." I know what I am talking about, but they don't listen to me. They run. I can't leave them on their own, so I run, too. We run without the slightest idea where we're headed until we eventually end up on the highway. There wasn't even a hole to hide in. In the meantime the police have sounded the alarm. I felt like I was in an American movie with the police cars zooming all over the place, crisscrossing each other's paths, the sirens wailing, all on the hunt for three young guys playing hide-and-seek. In our case, though, we can't even hide. The flower beds are too low, the bus doesn't come, the bartender kicks us out of the *caffè*, and the doors slam shut. The hunt is a big success. Three of them round us up and drag us back to the barracks as they proceed to list our crimes: residing as illegal aliens, resisting arrest, selling without a license, disturbing the public peace, et cetera, et cetera. "And now we're go-

ing to have to confiscate your merchandise and take you to the police headquarters for deportation papers," they add as a grand finale. The only thing that is weighing on me is the merchandise. I even get on my knees to beg the police commander, "Please be kind to us, Commander, we won't do it again. Please, we're begging you to be kind. You won't see us around here anymore. But leave us the merchandise. Otherwise we have absolutely nothing." My pleading finds a soft spot in the commander's heart and he gives us our merchandise back, but they don't spare us the police headquarters. The officers are concerned for us: "You know that at the headquarters they will give you deportation papers and send you back to your country? Do you have any bags to go and get? Where do you live?" "We have nothing and we live at the Central Station," we reply. We illegal aliens always live at the Central Station. We never give the address of the hotel or the people hosting us because if they have the address the police can go there at any moment, arrest the others, and then print out a pile of deportation papers.

When we get to the police station, they lock us up in a cell. They keep us until four in the afternoon. Then they call us one by one. We have to leave Italy for France via Ventimiglia. We find ourselves on the road. N'Diobo and Samba fold the deportation papers and place them in their pockets. Mine meets its usual fate in the first trash can I come across.

# LACOSTE



I FEEL REALLY OLD COMPARED to my little brother Samba and to N'Diobo. We belong to different generations. I was one of the first to know what it was like to be an immigrant and an illegal alien. I went through some tough times, but I also had a lot of adventures on the way. I went without food many a time and felt every kind of humiliation possible. I knew loneliness and homesickness. Instead, the last ones to arrive look like they are always playing a game. They have fun here. They're not scared. They are sure of themselves. They have little respect for us and even for the elderly who carry a lifetime of hard work and suffering on their backs. They don't like to get up early, don't want to take the car to hunt around for a better deal, and can't stand going around selling with heavy bags on their shoulders. Instead, they prefer to set up their merchandise at the metro station and wait for customers to come to them. Samba tells me in all honesty, "I can't keep up with you guys, out on the streets at the crack of dawn, covering kilometers and kilometers by car, then some more on foot. The earnings don't justify this kind of pain and suffering." I let him talk. I don't want to hold my little brother back. I was the first to go down into the metro to sell and I had no luck. It just might happen that he'll get lucky. I'm worried, but I don't want to transmit my fear to him. N'Diobo and I continue in the markets and the

*caffès* with a new product that everyone likes: brass vases and pitchers, made of the heaviest brass we could find, and carried as always in the bags hung across our shoulders. We get all the way to the Piazza del Duomo. On the way back, before we arrive in Cassano, we stop in the area around the Sesto Marelli metro stop. We're tempted, but still undecided, even if we know business is better there. Selling always has its traps. Police surveillance was getting tighter and the markets around the metro were the easiest target. I'm not convinced, but N'Diobo insists. It's worth trying anyhow so we go down into the metro with our vases and pitchers and stay there from morning to night. Later on we change location for a promotional tour in the Piazza del Duomo. By morning we are back on the mezzanine of Piazzale Loreto, and at the mercy of the police, who we are trying to avoid by organizing our own surveillance system. One word: "four." It's an order for everyone. As quickly as possible we collect our merchandise, grabbing together the "four" corners of the sheet that just a while earlier we worked so hard to align carefully on the ground. But with our pitchers and vases the getaway is cumbersome and slow.

For some time now we've been selling Lacoste shirts, those nice Lacoste polos that come in every color. They're light in our bags. I saw them for the first time in a booth run by a Neapolitan. The Moroccans got them first. We Senegalese arrived last. We bought them from the Moroccans until we realized that we just had to get our act together and go with the car to Naples, where we could find all the Lacostes we needed at a good price. It would always be the same way, even with pants and the Vuitton and Cartier bags: the Moroccans get their hands on them first, then the Senegalese come along, but before everyone come the Neapolitans. People love the Lacostes and the bags. They get a good product at a fair price. We make a lot of money with them, and they even reduce the risks of having our merchandise confiscated. We can just show a sample to the customer and then in two seconds run and get the specific model and size from the car where the rest are stashed. I still insist on the brass, though. Later I give in and move on to earrings.

Things proceed like this until the news breaks at the end of 1986. Word has it that a special law is going to allow all illegal immigrants to have a *permesso di soggiorno*. I talk to the guys in Cassano. They burst out laughing:

"The Italians are going to give us a *permesso di soggiorno*? No way. You're crazy. It's just a trap. Everyone will go to the police station, all trusting, and they'll all get slapped with some nice big deportation papers."

"I'm telling you that this is what people are saying. Look, I'm not dumb."

"Come on, wake up. They've finally finished building the ship that's going to take us all back to Africa. That's all this is."

"But this is our chance."

"Can't you get it in your head that it's all a scheme? No one is happy about having us here."

I give up. I don't feel like arguing with the guys. But every day I am more and more convinced that it's not a hoax. I was always waiting for something like this to come along, a law, some special legal provision. The Italians can't keep giving out deportation papers and then let us stay in their country. I had always hoped for a *permesso di soggiorno* and for this reason I gave up on the idea of going to Germany. The choice has paid off. One glorious day I spot a poster put up by the labor unions. It's all about our *permessi di soggiorno*. An immense joy comes over me. I go back to the guys:

"I'm going to find out at the labor union office. That way we'll know for sure."

And at the union they confirm it's true. I report back: "Guys, it's true, we can have a *permesso di soggiorno*." "De-luded as always. This is starting to look like some kind of conspiracy," they say and start laughing. They won't budge in their pessimism. But I insist: "If this law comes out, we have to have a plan, we have to do something."

My persistence converts them one by one. I even manage to organize a meeting. It's just the four of us. But we four convince others and so there are twelve of us at the first semi-official meeting, which we hold in a room that the union has given us just for the occasion. Our association is born.

"Now we need a president. You have to do it."

"I wouldn't even think of it."

"You have to be the president. You're the one with the most experience."

I am the president. I am happy. I feel like the hardest times are almost behind us. Soon we'll even have the *permesso di soggiorno*. For now we have our association. I thought many times about setting up an association when I was in France and didn't know where to turn. I couldn't find any help or even an ounce of information and the other Senegalese avoided me as if I were the devil. I say to the others, "We have to find a way to help ourselves." The association moves forward. The guys still believe in solidarity. They also believe me now about the story of the *permesso di soggiorno*.

## FIGHTS IN THE METRO



BEFORE THE *PERMESSO DI SOGGIORNO*, though, we have some run-ins with the Moroccans—and they with us. I think the final count is in our favor in the sense that they've taken more punches. I am a karate champion and Samba's not exactly a beginner. I'm not bragging; we're really something. And anyway, just let me smile a little. It makes me sad to think of the fistfights in the metro, and a little sorry, even if I am convinced that we were right. If I boast a little now about myself, it's only to make our little war seem less squalid and humiliating.

After a shy start, in which I was a protagonist, selling in the metro became common practice, especially with the new arrivals. It pulls in a lot of money and you don't have to move around constantly. There's no wear and tear on your legs and feet. Plus, you always have a roof over your head and a warm place to work. You just have to be on guard and take off like lightning at the first alarm. After the first trial months and good results, the imitators multiply like rapid fire, forming a little army of their own. I'm thinking of Piazzale Loreto, but really you can say the same of any major metro station where an increasingly aggressive and numerous group of vendors contend for the last square inch of black rubber floor. For now there is one rule that everyone

follows religiously: the first to arrive, Moroccan or Senegalese, gets the spot he wants. The others just have to make do with what's left. Whoever goes down too late gets a bad spot or doesn't get a spot at all. Everyone, though, has to respect two corners: the first belongs to a pretty elderly gentleman, and the second to a Neapolitan who has a family, a wife and two kids. He also has a big soft belly that sticks out over his belt, and a big crease that runs across his face, making him look sinister. He's a lot older than us and one time he threatened to shoot whoever else tried to sell earrings. He didn't kill anyone, but we still have to show him respect, at least for his age. Abdallah, a Moroccan, is always the quickest. It seems like he never leaves the *piazza*. He's always the first, always in the best spot. Good for him. But he's not satisfied with just having his spot. He takes another, then another, and another still, planting a row of bags here and there. Whoever arrives first has the best chance of setting up his stuff in the best way. The dawn is priceless. These are the rules and we have to follow them. But Abdallah goes too far. After a few weeks he says he doesn't even want to see us in the metro. We protest—without going too far. Abdallah starts to gather his friends together, all shady characters. They're not vendors. I wouldn't even know how to begin to tell you who they are. It's just a waste of time. . . . In any case, it so happens that our bags start to disappear. That's because the first thing we used to do when we arrived was to leave our bags alone without anyone watching them so that we could go shake hands with our friends, just as a form of common courtesy. But then the bags, one by one, are either confiscated or stolen: it is as if the local police and Abdallah's friends have formed an alliance against us Senegalese. Abdallah denies it: "I don't know them. I have nothing to do with them. And, anyway, Moroccans don't steal." But I am sure that they are the ones stealing. But we guys from Cassano always arrive too late, when everything has already happened. The other Senegalese guys, who are the first to arrive, are scared and don't know what to do when Abdallah's friends start causing trouble. Things go on like this for

some time. The guys all come to us to complain. We don't know what to do. The right moment will come. . . .

This time I am a witness. A Senegalese guy puts his bag down in a free spot. "No, don't you put that bag there," one of Abdallah's friends threatens us.

"And why not? I got here first."

"Because I'm telling you that you can't put it there."

Another Moroccan arrives and says, "I'm telling you, too. You take that bag somewhere else, you hear?"

I step forward: "And why is that?"

"What business is this of yours?"

"This guy you want to get rid of is my friend."

"What do you care? Mind your own business."

"Why are you acting so high and mighty? Let this guy work."

One of the two Moroccans, a big, dark guy with a mustache that sticks out, raises his voice and insults us. When he's sure everyone can hear him, he challenges me to a fight: "Come upstairs. If you're so brave, follow me, and I'll set you straight."

The Moroccan seems like a giant. I respond calmly, "Why should I follow you?"

"If you're a man, you'll follow me."

I think about it for a minute: "Why not here?" I ask as I lay a punch right in his face.

The Moroccan dives toward me. I point down and kick him in the legs to send him reeling on the floor. But he's tough, this Moroccan, and doesn't give an inch. Another punch. And still another one. The other guys have quickly picked up all their merchandise. For peace of mind they stow it in a safe place and then are free to join the fight. The punches fly. With my brother Samba on the team, as he's bigger than the others, the Senegalese win easily and the Moroccans clear out fast. I don't like the whole scene at all, but we didn't start the fight. That same night the Moroccans attack a Senegalese guy on the street. They beat him up and steal his bag. As soon as we arrive from Cassano the morning after, we find the guy who was robbed. He's in tears as

he tells us what happened to him. He's surrounded by his friends, who all hang their heads and nod in despair. It's my turn again. "Show me who it was," I tell him.

We identify the aggressor immediately. "Listen, you hit a guy and stole his bag. We don't want to start any trouble. Let's just forget about it. But tomorrow bring me the bag."

A day goes by and the bag is nowhere in sight: "Listen, friend, bring the bag back, or you better not set foot here ever again."

Another day goes by.

"So," I ask again, "the bag?"

"But I don't have any bag."

"Look, don't make me lose my patience. Give the bag back and that's that."

"And if I don't bring the bag back, what are you gonna do?"

I punch him. When you're dealing with this kind of person, there is only one way to make yourself clear.

The Moroccans call all their friends to help. We react as best as we can. This first time the police don't get involved. The Moroccans come down into the metro armed with chains and knives. But the Senegalese friends were also warned and they show up with hammers in their pockets. This is going to be ugly. The insults echo in the entry hall of the metro station. It's a hellish fight. We're all pissed off and worked up. Then someone takes a knife to N'Diobo, who's put himself between everyone to try to calm the storm brewing. Luckily just his jacket's been slashed. It's a sign. I'm able to back away thanks to my karate chops. Samba has my back. There's something for everyone, except the Moroccan who was so small that we nicknamed him Piccolo, and anyway we had decided that Piccolo was not one of our enemies. One guy falls on the ground and another jumps on him. A punch just grazes me. More pushing and kicking, then the groups separate. The Moroccans take off once again amid shouting and cursing. A week goes by and there's a fight a day. We all know that we can't go on like this. We live in fear, we're not selling anything, and our money is

dwindling. Even the police show their faces now: "That's enough, guys. You've caused enough of a ruckus. People are scared to walk through this area. You're going to make a bad name for yourselves. Cut it out now. Lay out your goods and get back to business." The Neapolitan, the earrings one, volunteers as a counselor and peacekeeper: "Work this thing out. Otherwise there will be vendettas and you risk a lot worse happening." The guys are confused. They would like to kick the Moroccans out of the metro because the Moroccans stole. I don't agree and I convince them: "Guys, they're vendors like us, they have to sell just like us, live like us. It's others who have robbed and threatened us. Whoever sells has the same rights as we do. We have to respect them. Instead, we have to focus on marginalizing the violent ones."

Peace is restored, but I am still scared when I go home at night so my friends walk me home.

In 1987 the new year brings us a special gift: the famous law. It wasn't a trick after all, one intended to send us all back home like my friends believed. In the end they really give us the *permessi di soggiorno*. Here they are, shiny and beautiful. Italian law has recognized our existence. We are no longer shadows, ghosts, or illegal aliens. We are men. Even our association is inspired with new courage. At the Islamic Center, where they give us a room, there are many of us. The union representatives provide information and explain the documents we need.

Have our troubles really ended?

# CHANGES



I HATE TO SAY IT, BUT AFTER we get the *permessi di soggiorno* the heavens are still not quite within our reach. Our days as illegal aliens are behind us, but to live we have to keep selling and no one is happy about this. We still work outside the law. Our business is illegal and brings us a slew of problems. In fact, thanks to the rights we have obtained, our problems grow. Both local and state police are now very suspicious.

"Pardon me, Mister Policeman, if you want to confiscate our merchandise, since this is your job and your duty, please go right ahead, but no insults. I am not an illegal immigrant. You must respect me, sir."

"How dare you, boy, speak to me with such authority? You don't know your place."

Imagine the proud eyes of a Senegalese street vendor as he can finally say, "This is my place and I ask you not to push me against the wall."

"Let me see your papers."

"I will give you my papers. Please do not shove your hands in my pockets."

While all this is going on, the officer is toying with the idea of reporting me for resisting a police officer. In the life of a Moroccan or a Senegalese elephant and bracelet vendor every action amounts to "resisting an officer." If you run,

you're resisting. If you beg them to let you keep something to sell, you're resisting. If you smile or make the wrong face, you're resisting. There is no limit to all the ways one can resist. The idea of resistance intrigues us: if we can't defend our rights and we can't defend our work and merchandise, at least we can resist and defend our dignity. We don't give those officers an inch. No one lowers his eyes anymore and as a result the tension rises. Many of the guys end up in jail for ten or fifteen days, and the number of those who are reported and sentenced grows.

When people see the officers acting too violently or unjustly, they take our side. Only a small number advise us to go home to our country. It's very important for us to have people on our side. We try to convince them that we are good people who want to work. We try to silence the rumors about us, about drugs or rackets, for example, that we are all drug dealers or pawns in a criminal racket exploiting us and using its power to control us. Some newspapers write this, but it's not true. We've learned to make ourselves heard, to explain why we are in Italy, to stand by our demands and protests. We make some friends this way, but our newly improved relations with the public do not slow down the efforts of the traffic cops, who continue to confiscate our merchandise and wait in ambush as if they were playing cowboys and Indians. These days they even arrive in plainclothes and together with police. They are out of breath because they have to run to catch us by surprise. They pull out a notepad and start scribbling tickets and citations. Every line written in that notebook bound in black leather represents one strike against our hopes for a better life here. The officers are tough and incorruptible.

Left penniless after their merchandise has been confiscated so many times, and now kicked out of the *pensioni* because they can't pay their bills, some of the guys realize that the most profitable business is dealing drugs. When I first came to Milan there weren't so many of these cases. How they get into the drug business I don't know, but over time I have seen many become dealers. Some are occasional deal-

ers who do it to get back on their feet after their merchandise is confiscated. It's a way to save some money and even go back to selling elephants and sweaters eventually. It's a cycle that repeats itself. The drugs sold become their bank. It allows them to buy other merchandise, like bags and glasses. But a strange thing was that the police were more intent on shutting down our business in the metro than all the drug dealing. For example, at Lambro Park, when the dealers would go around doing their business, the police seemed even distracted, as if they didn't see anything. Many guys let themselves be pulled into what is a risky but lucrative business:

"You guys stay here and sell, and you earn next to nothing, and the police are always on your case. Do what we do. In one week we put aside a ton of money."

"But it won't last. They're casting the net. Sooner or later they'll reel it in and you'll all be caught in it."

"It looks to us like it's you guys who are always caught in the net, always running from the police."

"They'll get you one of these days. Dealing is a crime. Because of you, people accuse us of stuff we didn't do. And we all end up paying for it."

"This way we earn money to live on. Otherwise we'd go hungry."

"But it can't last. It's better to go back to selling in the metro."

"They confiscated everything we had, they accused us of nothing, they threw us in jail, and now you want us to stop dealing? How in the world would we survive? Where would we get money? Are you going to give us the money to pay the *pensione*?"

Word spreads in our little world that dealing is good in Milan and that you can earn a lot fast. So in addition to the guys here who have become dealers due to poverty there are now the professionals coming from Paris and the guys from Germany and Spain. The police stood back and watched it all for a bit. Then the time came and they acted. They surrounded Lambro Park with vans and the dealers ended up in

jail. First they threw them against the walls with their hands in the air, searched them, and someone even got hit, just like the old days when we sold without a *permesso di soggiorno*. This was good for public opinion: the war against drugs had been won, the dealers all arrested. Good work, guys.

Most Africans still walk the same streets in Milan selling their usual goods. In addition to selling, I organize assemblies and meetings, give advice, write letters, and accompany the youngest ones to the courthouse.

I find an apartment in the city with another guy. We pay two hundred and fifty thousand lire a month for a hole in the wall in the Leoncavallo area. It's on the sixth floor and there's no elevator. It's not a great setup, but I'm a few feet away from Piazzale Loreto, which for us is like the center of it all, our little Africa. Between selling and helping the others, and walking all the time and listening to others' problems, I fall ill. I'm eating very little and I have severe bouts of dizziness. Two guys from the metro notice and ask me: "Are you sick?"

"No, no, I'm just hungry."

I gulp down something, but the pavement of the metro still looks like it's moving under my feet. They want to bring me to the hospital, but instead I end up in the emergency clinic at the Bastioni di Porta Venezia. The nurses immediately suspect that I'm on drugs. I have to tell them that I'm not. They make me lie down on a cot and tell me to rest. They keep me under observation. To observe me better, a nurse undoes my pants and starts to inspect me. I don't understand it all too well because I'm in a daze. But when the other two nurses return I complain, "That nurse touched me."

And they say, "He does it with everyone when he gets the chance. But don't tell the doctor." I don't tell him. But he shows up again and invites me to keep quiet by threatening me. I leave, and take the metro home. But when I get there I can't climb the stairs. I meet two Arab friends by chance, and they offer me something to eat. I am in front of my apartment building again, but my legs protest that they



can't do it. The stairs are an impassable obstacle. This time my friends decide to bring me to the main hospital, where they do a proper checkup, take some blood, hand me a bottle of vitamins, and discharge me, assuring me I'm just fine. When I'm back home, though, I see the stairs there in front of me, and the steps are still insurmountable.

## POLITICAL ACCUSATIONS



**THE OLD DOG DAYS THAT I left behind continue to haunt me.** While I sweat and pant, searching with my hands for the stairs that should lead home, I think of the hardship and all we did without, of the old hunger, of the days when the only food we had was a little meal made from a mixture of flour, sugar, and water. I think of the cold and of the fear and anguish that I've luggered around with me forever. I think of the doctors at the Foreign Legion who in Paris declared me "unfit" because of stomach problems. Poor me. They were right despite my insistence that I was in good health. No, I can't go on like this anymore. Guys, take me to the hospital.

My two friends opt for the emergency room this time. When we arrive I have to wait because there's always some sick person whose condition is more serious and urgent. We have an idea. Since the ambulances pass by regularly, we'll come back by ambulance. My two friends unload me next to an ambulance parked not too far away and invent some story of how they found me gasping for air in the middle of the street. One of the workers says it's possible that I am drunk and might have hit my head when I fell. Thanks a lot. The ambulance speeds toward the hospital, its sirens wailing. Now I, too, am a sick person whose case is serious

and urgent. But at the emergency room they send me home with a prescription for the usual vitamins. This time my friends don't leave me outside the door. They drag me up to the top floor. "Go slow, guys. I'm better now. Thanks." I close the door and move toward the bathroom and collapse on the floor. I can't even lift my hand, never mind get up. I stay there on the ground without moving, but I don't lose consciousness. I study the tiles in the bathroom, the cracks, the geographies of the world, the seas, the moon craters, our mountains. I dream, wake up, and doze off again.

I am not dead. I know this for sure the next morning. I even manage to get up and move an inch, then another, and finally a third. I walk to the metro station, and then manage to walk all the way down to the platform, at which point I hang on to Samba.

"Are you sick, brother?"

"No, just a little weak."

"I'll bring you to the hospital."

"No, not the hospital. I just need a little rest."

Samba doesn't listen to me and takes me to the hospital in Cassano d'Adda. The doctors in Cassano are quick to discover that I have an ulcer. I'm losing blood; I could have died. But now I'm saved. After a month they discharge me. I go back to living in Cassano with Samba and back to being president and searching for solutions for everything and everyone. That is, until I finally decide that the only way for me to survive is to get away for a little while. So with Samba and other friends I decide to buy a car for nine hundred thousand lire, another very lucky Peugeot 504. This way we will be able to move around, go to local festivals and markets, and above all avoid the metro and all the people demanding to speak to the president.

We don't miss a single town festival within a hundred kilometers of Como, Brescia, Bergamo, and Parma. We keep going like this until summer arrives, at which point we can't resist going to the beaches and the seaside at Cesenatico, Rimini, and Riccione. By now I am well-known here by my undercover name, Pascal. I still don't trust anything or any-

one: the soul of the illegal immigrant can't be changed overnight, even if new laws are passed in our favor. Our vacation on the Riviera in Romagna is the same old routine of beaches, confiscated merchandise, *caffès*, and more confiscated merchandise. On our return to Milan there is a gift waiting for us: a new law, or better, a decree that reinterprets the earlier law and that should guarantee us some good possibilities for work. But in exchange, the police are even more scrupulous in making us observe the rules. It's one confiscation after another now. The number of African people in Milan has grown considerably and finding a home seems impossible. The number of guys working in the drug business also continues to rise. I continue to give advice, but I feel powerless, as if I were stuck in a vise. Every step forward seems like one step back in some other area. I join forces with two guys, Sidi and Mamisko, and go back to working the festival circuit, far from the metro and the duties of the association. We push as far as Genoa, Florence, Siena, and Perugia. Mamisko proposes something that appeals to me: there's a festival about to start in Reggio Calabria. It lasts fifteen days and we can go for the second week. We load the car and leave. When we arrive there's no sign of the festival: it was cancelled this year, someone tells us. We are exhausted. I feel like stopping. I can't take selling anymore. But we leave with our pitchers and vases and brass plates—I chose not to take the elephants with us since people seem to like our heavy brass from Africa and India better. Next Genoa, Florence, Siena, Lucca, Perugia. On the way back from Perugia we stop for the night in a hotel where we have stopped once before. In the morning some plainclothes police officers bring us to the station to be searched. We are legal now that we have our *permessi di soggiorno*. Nothing would have happened if we hadn't had the brilliant idea to sit down while waiting. An officer with this very arrogant air about him walks in and shouts an order at us:

"You, on the floor!"

I don't understand. Our guy explains himself more clearly:

"What are these guys here doing sitting on the chairs? They have no right to sit down. They have to sit on the floor or, better yet, on the stairs."

He must have been forty-something. I respond, by now pretty pissed off, "We're here to be searched. We're all legal. You, sir, have to respect us."

"You don't deserve respect."

"You don't have any right to treat us this way. You cannot insult us. You have to show us respect. Do you understand?"

And our bickering goes on just like this until the guy decides to let the others go, but keep me. He says, "You have to go to the police station in Milan with your deportation papers."

I obey. But at the police station in Milan they check my papers and tear up the order issued by the little commander from Perugia. I still feel sick, and I go back to the hospital in Cassano. After a month of treatment they declare that I have recovered. I go back to working like before, with the meetings and the protests. Our civic association grows every day. The guys make a big effort. They believe in this work. It's mainly those of us from Cassano who take the initiative to get us noticed, and win over the public. But we also attract enemies and diffidence. And just like that, the police and *carabinieri* come to pay us a visit in Cassano. They march into the hotel and line all the Senegalese guests up against the wall with our hands in the air, right in the line of fire of their guns. It's like an act of war. They seize our papers and explain, "They told us there were drugs here." They start the inspection, opening dressers and emptying drawers and suitcases. They slice open the couch, ripping out its insides, and cut the mattresses. It looks like a silent hurricane is passing through the rooms. But the drugs are nowhere to be found. No drugs. Not even a little. "And they told us there were definitely drugs here." They can't leave empty-handed so they confiscate our merchandise: Lacoste shirts, bracelets, necklaces, and earrings. And they take us with them as well back to the barracks in Cassano d'Adda. There are

fifteen of us, all guests at the same hotel. In the barracks the search continues. Nothing. They keep four of us: my brother Samba, me, and two other friends, basically the four leaders of our association. They report us for selling counterfeit goods. Why don't they also report the others? I conclude that their goal is to damage our association. They arrest us. The three of us spend the night in Cassano, the fourth in a cell in Gorgonzola. On the way to jail there's a market. There are others there selling counterfeit shirts.

"Look, they're all selling fake Lacostes. Why don't you arrest them?"

"We're just following orders."

They bring us to the courts in handcuffs. They make us wait in a courtyard. One of our friends has long braided hair, Rasta style.

"Hey, Gullit," the *carabinieri* joke.

I become Van Basten. But I won't stand for it. I start yelling, "My name is not Van Basten and his name is not Gullit. Are we clear?"

"Whoa, hey there, we're just joking."

"Are you kidding me? You confiscate our merchandise, you put us in jail, and then you tell us that you're joking?"

"Come on, don't be so sensitive. We're your friends. We just want to have a laugh."

"You have our papers. Call us by our correct names."

"We only arrested you because we were ordered to."

"Follow your orders then and that's it. Do your jobs. This is no joke for us."

We are sentenced and then set free, but with orders to report back to the barracks in Cassano d'Adda to sign a sheet each week. The newspapers report our story. Meanwhile I keep repeating that everyone is selling the fake Lacostes, but that they arrested and sentenced only the four of us from the association. They wanted to intimidate us just when the association was getting on its feet. If a law states that we, too, have rights, then we have to fight hard to defend them. This is what the association is for. Every victory has its share of setbacks, though. When we got the *permessi di soggiorno*

the merchandise inspections became more stringent. We are under a constant state of siege by the police. They confiscate everything we have, even towing our cars when they know that there are shirts and bags inside. That way we have to pay fine after fine. They ask for your papers and keep your *permesso di soggiorno*, which then disappears. You go to the main police station and they tell you that it's under the jurisdiction of the traffic police. So you go to the traffic police and they send you back to the main police station. It almost feels like a game, but instead it's a way like any other to keep us in line, and intimidate and scare us. They want to show you that protesting won't do any good. In fact, if you keep at it there's always San Vittore Prison. If a job opportunity arises, even then you have to shut up and do what they say. It always works the same way; it's simple, really. You're hired and sign a contract. Then they force you to work overtime, and to work on Saturdays and Sundays, and of course the boss doesn't pay you. If you complain, he responds, "I'll pay you your overtime in two years. Just be good." That's why the new worker returns to the streets and goes back to selling. One day they confiscate his merchandise and then at that point maybe he even becomes a drug dealer.

## CHILDREN



**THOSE IN CHARGE ALWAYS** behave in the same way. As soon as you raise your head, they want to beat it back down. The guys from Senegal try to live like regular people now that the law offers them a chance. They come out from the dark. They don't hide anymore. They feel like dancing and hanging out with other guys and girls again. There's even a club that seems made just for us, where they play African music and where we all meet up in the evenings. It seems like a dream. It's nice to talk. It's nice when an Italian girl comes to see me while I'm selling in the metro. It's nice to be able to joke, laugh, and exchange opinions in broad daylight. Many don't like this. They have ideas and opinions that they would never admit but that can't be uprooted so easily, namely, that we poor people have to stay in our place in the shadows. They disapprove of Italian girls who stop to chat with us. When the police officers come down into the metro to round us up and confiscate our stuff, they say to the girls, "You're Italian, what are you doing with these guys here?" Sometimes people stop to hear what an Italian girl and Senegalese guy are talking about. The Senegalese guy has to holler, "What do you want? What are you doing here?" The nosy person has a response ready: "And you? What are you doing here? This is my country and I have the right to stand wherever I feel like." When the *carabinieri* came to Cassano

looking for drugs, they were amazed to find that we had a television and phone. When they saw our *permessi di soggiorno* they made a big stink: "What are you trying to do anyway? What, are you in charge now? They're nuts to give you all these rights." As soon as our life improved a little, many became annoyed, others scared.

In the meantime I decide to change my line of work. Although I was a good salesman, I was never really passionate about this job. So I became a tradesman after first working as an apprentice. One day I heard that an electrician was looking for help and so I became an electrician just like him, working in the area around Piazzale Loreto. One evening, around the month of June, I had an appointment to meet my friend Moussa, who was still selling in the metro. His Italian girlfriend was going to be there, too. We were supposed to go to her sister's for dinner. I was helping Moussa to collect his merchandise when we spotted a plainclothes officer holding a long multi-pack cigarette carton:

"Get your stuff and come with me."

Moussa's friend gets involved and protests, asking the officer for an explanation.

"I'm a police officer, financial squad. This guy has to come with me."

The girl insists, "This is unjust, it's a disgrace!"

"This has nothing to do with you, young lady. Just he has to come with me."

"No, it does have to do with me and I won't stand for it because . . ."

"An Italian girl with these characters! Please just go on and leave. . . ."

The guys who have gathered around us all let out a sordid "oohh," as if our financial officer had scored a goal. Now the officer's pissed.

"Come on, let's go!"

I follow them.

"What are you doing?"

"We're together. I'm coming, too."

A Moroccan guy sees his chance. The officer had confiscated his cigarettes without saying anything to him in the process. The Moroccan is thin and quick and while the officer bounces the cigarettes around in his hands, he grabs them and runs. People clap. The officer chases the Moroccan with his gun clenched tight in his fist. The audience bursts out laughing. It seems like it's all over. But instead after ten minutes or so, he reappears at the head of an army of financial officers armed with handguns and machine guns. The guys book it out of there. The girl, Moussa, and I stay. The officer, who's by now turned purple, points to us: "It was them. I was confiscating some cigarettes and they all ganged up on me. They let the Moroccan get away." His colleagues team up against us: "You bastards. You were going to hit one of our men, but you won't get off the hook so easily. We'll show you who's in charge here." Insults and pushing follow. And we reply, "Respect our rights. It's all a lie." The other guys come back after they hide their merchandise, and shout in chorus, "Liars, liars!" Deep down in the metro station all this ruckus starts to resemble an inferno. Other *carabinieri* arrive together with more police officers. Besides me, they also grab Moussa, his girlfriend, and the two friends that stepped forward as witnesses. Then they change their minds. They make do with just me and Moussa. They bring us to the police barracks, where they continue to insult us:

"You bastards! You wanted to hit our friend, huh? You good-for-nothings!"

I tell them it's not true, that they're all lies. Our friends follow us with their cars. Beeping their horns they put on a good concert. Everyone protests. I protest, Moussa protests, Moussa's girlfriend arrives and she protests, the sister of Moussa's girlfriend arrives and she protests. She also explains that she was expecting them all for dinner that evening. The officers of the financial police squad protest and they put it all down in writing. As far as they're concerned we wanted to stop them from confiscating the merchandise, to save the Moroccan, and to hit the officer. They don't

quote Moussa's girlfriend as a witness. In fact, they don't quote any witnesses. Instead, they throw us in San Vittore for three days.

My friends and I experienced these kinds of ordeals only because we refused to hang our heads. The times of "Yes, Uncle, OK, Uncle" were over. In exchange we got San Vittore. The association tries to help those who end up inside. But we know that the association doesn't carry much weight. It's just an association made up of some Senegalese guys. We formed it as a way to spread information and to help one another. It serves its purpose because many end up without merchandise, money, or a home and need a lawyer. But it's hard because the Senegalese don't have a lot of money and all the guys have a peculiar way of behaving: they're ashamed if someone tries to give them a hand. They are proud and you have to be very discreet. As for the Italian unions, they could do more for us, for our rights. Like with housing, for example. Why can't I have a place to live if I show that I have all my papers in order, that I have a stable job and money? Why don't I have a home when I see all those "For Rent" signs around town?

This is the life of a Senegalese, the life that I've known for a while now and that seems to go on forever. But I am also lucky because, as they say in my country, if you can tell the story of what you have been through, then it means it has brought you luck. Many of the guys rip up their *permessi di soggiorno* and return to Senegal because they want nothing more to do with Italy, the police, the *carabinieri*, the selling, the elephants, the ivory eagles, the necklaces, the Lacoste and Vuitton bags, the hotel rooms, the deportation papers, the confiscated merchandise, and the cold.

The cold here is something I will never get used to.

Many stay. They work, they sell, they become manual laborers and factory workers, even if they are exploited more than others.

Many stay and meet Italian girls. They fall in love. There are weddings and then separations and divorces, and still more marriages. Babies are born.

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