

## Free country

It was the first time that I was leaving the country of my parents, and of their parents before them. It was the middle of the night, I was crammed on a small rowboat with a dozen people. At every shocks, sinister cracks of the wood could be heard and the hull boat seemed about to split.

Sitting in front of me, wrapped up in a big man coat, there was a little girl. She could be about 10 years old, maybe less. As I was watching her, she looked in my direction and I suddenly felt uncomfortable; half of her face was marked by recent burns.

To avoid seeing her any longer, I plunged my gaze in the black water of which I could only perceived the reflects. A few month earlier, I was an angry young man, surrounded by rage and violence. But now, I had nothing left than horror, a vast horror for human beings. And I was afraid of course, terribly afraid. I wasn't in control of anything, and it was as if my life was slipping through my fingers.

The craft pitched and I received some cold water in the face. Unconsciously, I squeezed a bit more toward the center of the boat, the eyes still fixed into the dark. I began to shake. I didn't know how to swim.

I had just turned 23, but I knew I seemed a lot more. When I was looking at myself in broken glass, I could see little wrinkles around my eyes, and my hair was strangely white. I wasn't recognizing myself anymore.

We finally reached an old fishing boat - not the kind of boat which can handle a long crossing. We climbed aboard, and each of us tried to find a place inside the unique cabin. There were only two people in the crew : an old man who seemed to be the owner of the boat, and his son.

They weighted the anchor and the boat started to move away from shore. Very soon the wind became stronger, picking up the boat and rocking it to and fro. One by one, we got seasick, but it was impossible to get out of the cabin, because the waves were too high and could knock us off the boat.

After a little while, the engine stopped. We got a problem - said the old man, and he went out of the cabin. The boat could capsized at any time. At this moment, I thought we were going to die. I was so scared that my thoughts stopped.

The little girl was shaking, her mother lying sideways next to her. I sat down near them.

- It is all right, I said. You will see, they are going to restart the engine.

The mother didn't even raised the head. I kept trying to comfort the girl :

- Tomorrow morning, everything will be over.

- They took my father and my brother, she said. I don't know where they brought them. We gave everything we had left to take the boat. I don't like the sea. I don't know how to swim.

- It is all right, you'll see. I can swim for miles with two people on my back.

After a moment, she seemed to relax a bit.

- Mum said we had to leave. I didn't want to. It was my house. And my dog was inside. But everything burned. What do you think it looks like there?

- I think it's a bit like home, but we won't need to hide anymore. It is free to do whatever you want to do. You can walk in the streets even after nightfall, and you can enter in any shop you want.

The engine restarted and she finally fell asleep. I closed my eyes and thought about what I could do in my new life, when I could find a job and a place to live.

In the morning, there was a great agitation on the boat. The little girl, still half asleep against my chest, did not seem able to walk. Her mother was lying in the same position as the night before. I touched her hand. It was cold for long now. I took the girl in my arms and got out of the cabin.

The shore was a few dozen yards away. Tall trees overlooking the sea were extending their branches in our direction. The air was sweet and the sun was risen lazily behind the hill. I suddenly felt a huge joy spreading into my body, from my fingertips to all my members. Here it was, before my eyes. I had witnessed the worst barbarism, I had hidden in cellars when shells fell over the city, but it was behind me now. The free country loomed ahead. I just had to extend my hand to seize it. It was the first time for long that I was feeling strong and safe. The dawn was miraculously bright.

Some men had already jumped in the water and were making it to shore. I managed to get off the boat with the girl clutching me around the neck and we reached the land.

We weren't far from town and I followed the others in this direction. Smoke billowed from different parts of the city.

When we entered the first streets, we began to feel there was something wrong. Many burned cars were still smoking. That is when I realized that the shapes lying on the ground were bodies. One looked like a little old man, huddled in on himself. I got dizzy and felt like throwing up.

People were running.

- Don't stay here, one shouted. They shot at anything that moves.

- Have we returned home ? asked the girl.

- No... but our goal seems to be a bit further ahead.