

Moussa

Moussa woke up in the Airbus A300 still feeling agitated. The handcuffs had not been removed, and his guard occupied the adjoining seat. Moussa had not realised that the last drink he had been given after leaving the Vincennes immigration detention centre had contained a powerful sleeping drug. He also had the painful memory of a violent blow inflicted at the point of boarding that had put an end to any vague defiance impulse. Despite everything, he was relieved to have been able to make two telephone calls before leaving to Mr Pierre and to Emelya. The screen in front of him showed the flight path of the Paris flight that was taking him back to Abéché in the Ouaddaï Mountains to the regular rhythm of an illuminated display of light and sound.

The plane was flying over the desert to the north of the Tibesti.

Moussa's odyssey had been a long one, full of tragic moments. He had started life on the streets of Abéché, Chad's second largest town. Being an orphan, he had learnt how to survive. As was the case with all those around him - victims of armed conflicts in neighbouring Darfur, of AIDS, of extreme poverty

and poor health care - Moussa had survived by doing little jobs: weaving carpets and tanning leather, but also thanks to pick pocketing and petty theft. It felt as though time had stood still for Abéché. There was still a bustling market. The roads hadn't been tarred yet. The variety of little shops there were no longer run by Lebanese and Chinese shopkeepers. Mosques were as plentiful as everywhere else, but schools and community clinics were still thin on the ground and children wandered the streets. French soldiers were still in evidence thanks to a detachment posted in and around the airport situated near to mount Kilinguen. Chad soldiers were also visible, especially in town. An overnight curfew had even been imposed for NGO workers. Despite this back-up to the forces of law and order, a few child gangs had prospered. Moussa was in one of these. And his delinquency had inevitably landed him in prison. The two dark circles around his eyes, along with his somewhat athletic physique and his habit of pacing around his cell earned him the nickname of Moussa the Ouaddaï Cheetah.

Once out of jail, he reverted to his life of small jobs and thieving - until the day when he almost took a white man's wallet. It happened close to the Franco-Arab School. A teacher, Mr Pierre, had spotted him and allowed him to get close. No sooner had he begun his attempt at theft than Mr Pierre smiled his warmest smile and said to him: "Well well - do you need something, my friend?". Despite his surprise, Moussa, his eyes shining, smiled warmly back at him.

Mr Pierre continued: "Right then. Listen. Here's a piece of paper and a pencil. I'll give you 100 francs if you'll draw something for me...". Moussa hesitated but, seeing the 100 francs note being proffered, gave it a go. It was the start of a great friendship that, thanks to their habit of meeting daily, allowed him to gradually begin to learn how to read and write - and draw. With his lively, astute and pugnacious character, Moussa the Ouaddaï Cheetah revealed himself to be an intelligent boy with a talent for drawing. Mr Pierre's respect meant more to him than all the francs and dollars in Chad. Having spent two years at the Franco-Arab School, Mr Pierre left Chad with a great deal of bitterness. Before leaving, he gave Moussa his address written on the back of a splendid postcard showing a night-time picture of a floodlit Eiffel Tower on Bastille Day. That was the day that Moussa decided that he would find Mr Pierre and his beautiful country, whatever it took. He was 17 years old. He would therefore have to travel to France.

They were more than twenty clandestine migrants to leave Chad, including some women and children, split between two large vehicles loaded with hay and heading north towards Faya Largeau. Just before they reached the Libyan border, the people smugglers changed nationality. Chadians handed them over to Libyans who allowed them to pass in exchange for yet another payment. That particular zone was not under army control. Border security in southern Libya was mainly in the hands of militias who, far from preventing clandestine convoys, made

a profitable business out of them. They were stopped at a check-point 70 kilometres from Ajdabiya. Those who had no means of identification were taken to a special camp in Benghazi, only to be subsequently released because keeping them was always too costly for the State. At this point, some decided to stay. They worked illegally amidst the total insecurity of a Libya at the mercy of militia violence. Ever since the assassination of the Supreme Leader brother, there had been continuous fighting between Islamist groups and those backing a dissident general, and life in Benghazi had become synonymous with attacks on consulates or hospitals, coup attempts, and major prison break-outs.

Moussa and the other stowaways persisted with their migration plan to reach Italy by crossing the Mediterranean. People smugglers were not hard to find.

It was the middle of the night when they left, and the sea was rough. The overloaded boat was in poor condition, and its engine wheezed. As dawn broke, the mechanics stopped working altogether, leaving the pilot and his passengers defenceless against the stormy seas. One particularly large wave made even more noise than the screaming people. The craft capsized.

Moussa found himself on a bed in a camp in Lampedusa where he was told of his miraculous rescue and of the death of 14 fellow passengers. He still carried Mr Pierre's postcard, but the address had

become illegible. He knew it by heart: 12 boulevard Victor Hugo 4th floor 75 Paris.

Tourists were usually awed by Lampedusa and its sunsets and sunrises, but for migrants it felt like an open-air prison. They were arriving from all over: Sudan, Eritrea, Egypt, Syria, Niger, Chad, Mali, Libya, Tunisia...; Muslims, both Sunni and Shia, Animists, and Oriental or African Christians, white or black, all lived there in overcrowded conditions behind barbed wire fencing, monitored and guarded by police officers and soldiers. The forces of law and order patrolled 24 hours a day. This was where he recovered - in atrocious shelters and poor living conditions. In order to prevent outbreaks of lice and scabies, they were made to line up in the nude so they could be sprayed with disinfectant. The people in charge would shout at them to undress, and would often make fun of them. Their clothes were disposed of. It was cold. The washing and toilet facilities were totally inadequate. Stray dogs would wander into the camp and relieve themselves on the migrant's bags. The overpopulation of the camp meant that it was no longer possible to ensure proper nutrition. Not many were granted refugee status. They were fleeing from conflicts, war and extreme poverty. So some ended up committing suicide.

As the days passed, tension within the camp was such that even the NGO workers no longer crossed into what they had begun to call "the wildcat cage". In the last few days, the atmosphere in the immigration detention centre had become unbearably tense. And

so Moussa decided to act rather than to wait for a decision that would doubtless go against him. Yet again he became the leader of the gang as in days gone by, and now he found himself leading the migrant revolt. One morning, a dozen or so of them gathered in an attempt to break through the wire fencing. Ready for their escape, their plan was to make their way to the harbour, take a boat and head for the continent. So they rammed the wire fencing with a bench they had picked up. Once the fence had been weakened, they propped the bench against it so that it became a makeshift crossing ramp. Then each person ran, climbed and jumped towards the freedom that awaited them a few metres away.

Not very far away, perhaps fifty or so metres from where Moussa was, a police officer loaded his pistol - a SIG Sauer - and, without warning, aimed and fired it.

Moussa's past, present and future seemed to consist of alternating prison and hospital. Still a prisoner, he now found himself on the continent, in the Monaldi Hospital in Naples. His injured right shoulder was being treated in the hospital's secure area. He was eating well. He was being cared for. He got to know Emeliya, an Ethiopian nursing auxiliary. She spoke to him in Italian, and he answered her in French. But mainly they communicated through tender glances. She looked like a goddess: tall, with strong cheekbones, an elegant, straight and finely delineated nose, and pleasantly full lips. All her movements were supremely graceful. After she had left his room,

Moussa managed to draw her from memory on a scrap of paper. One day, as she was about to enter the room, Moussa closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He could visualise the gestures she was making as she worked, and her movements around the room, and then he smelt the closeness of her fragrance as she straightened the sheets on his bed. He waited. She was looking at him. Then, without moving, he opened one eye, looked at her, and they both giggled like children. The attraction was mutual. One day, he dared to show her his postcard. Then she understood what his dream was. One evening, before leaving his room, she placed a bag on the table and blew him a kiss. He got up, looked in the bag, and found some clothes in his size, 300 euros and a photo of Emeliya on which she had written her phone number and two words in Italian: "Buon viaggio¹".

Moussa waited for the guard change-over time, then left the room and quietly exited the hospital. As he was leaving, he caught sight of her sitting outside the café that adjoined the hospital. She was waiting for him. They lost no time in reaching her studio flat, where they loved each other with unbridled passion, and then again more slowly, savouring every caress... It was a long, beautiful and sensual night. The following day, she dropped him off on her way to work at the railway station in Naples. On her return home that evening, she found the biro sketch he had

¹ "Have a good trip"

drawn of her on which were three words in French:
"A bientôt... Moussa"².

And then it was Rome, Turin, Lyon, and finally Paris.

Mr Pierre was not surprised to see Moussa, but felt a little awkward about giving shelter to an illegal migrant. The penal code frowns upon what it considers to be an offence: assistance to persons whose papers are not in order... But Mr Pierre welcomed Moussa into his flat with joy and kindness as though he were his son. The apartment was not very big: one large room, a bedroom, and a study which doubled as an artist's studio. Everything was white, with watercolour paintings and gouaches: between the bookshelves crammed with books, Chadian landscapes and portraits of women in the style of Titouan Lamazou³ were interspersed with reprints of photographs signed Willy Ronis⁴ or Cartier Bresson⁵ and copies of Marcel Duchamp⁶. They toured Paris on foot under its bluish-grey or greyish-blue sky, stopping first at the Eiffel Tower before heading to the museums. Moussa liked the Louvre, and the Quai Branly museum. On another day, still on foot, they went to Montmartre and explored the banks of the Seine. And then, there were the shows: opera with Mozart's *The Enchanted Flute*,

² "See you soon...Moussa"

³ Titouan Lamazou: famous French yachtsman, artist, writer and photographer

⁴ Willy Ronis: 20th century French photographer, famous for his portraits of everyday life

⁵] Cartier Bresson: French film-maker and photographer, famous for turning photojournalism into an art form

⁶ Marcel Duchamp: French-born, naturalised American painter, sculptor and writer

ballet with Nureyev's choreography for Swan Lake, and several concerts which included Gustav Mahler's symphonic Cornelius Meister, and two folk and pop concerts: Isaya⁷ and then Zaz⁸. Mr Pierre liked to see the emotions etched on Moussa's face with each new discovery. It seemed to be doing him good. Once again they started drawing, reading and writing. Moussa learned some of Jacques Prévert's⁹[17] poems by heart. He was making fine progress. Mr Pierre's neighbour, a narrow-minded woman, became concerned by the presence of this young black man in the building. Mr Pierre informed her that he was one of his old pupils from Chad there for a visit. When three months had gone by, they broached the question of Moussa's future in Paris. But they had hardly begun to address the issue when the Border Police showed up on the 4th floor of No.12 boulevard Victor Hugo. It was Draconian for Moussa: he was held whilst his identity was established, then held again at the Vincennes immigration detention centre. Mr Pierre contacted a lawyer friend. Nothing could be done for Moussa, but it had recently been decided that it was no longer illegal to feed, house and help an illegal immigrant, as long as it was done for selfless reasons - in other words, no money was to change hands. Mr Pierre was safe. Moussa was going to be repatriated. The neighbour could breathe a sigh of relief...

⁷ Isaya: French female folk group

⁸ Zaz: French female singer and songwriter

⁹ Jacques Prévert: 20th century French poet and screenwriter, associated with the surrealist and symbolist movements

The plane was flying over the desert in the north of the Tibesti region... when its rhythmically flashing and beeping flight path display stopped - never to start again.

Press release

An Air Africa plane disappeared from the radar screen during the night of the 20th of July, with at least 122 people on board, including 7 cabin crew members. Flight AA 5010 was en route from Paris to Abéché. Contact was lost approximately 4 hours after leaving the capital. According to several sources, 31 French nationals were on board the plane.

Chad's transport minister stated that the pilot of the plane had asked to alter his flight path because of a violent storm. According to the Weather channel, flight AA 5010 did indeed cross an active storm zone with "strong gusty winds, impenetrable sand clouds and significant electrical activity". The reasons for the plane's disappearance haven't yet been confirmed. The French Secretary of State for transport has simply said that the plane was flying over the desert in the north of the Tibesti region when it was lost.

And,

The trade winds had now ceased and the desert's silence hung heavy in the landscape. Moussa was some distance away from the remains of the plane, sprawled on calcinated ground under a baking sun.

Ostensibly his body was lifeless, and yet it was possible to see that beyond the handcuffed wrists the fingers were imperceptibly tracing in the sand... Emeliya's face.

Moussa had become part of this vast expanse with no bars, and no doors - a prisoner of the desert, more tightly confined than by the narrowest of cells.

Extrait de *Crissements de Sable*