

My name is Turambo and they'll be coming to get me at dawn.

'You won't feel a thing,' Chief Borselli reassures me.

How would he know anyway? His brain's the size of a pea.

I feel like yelling at him to shut up, to forget about me for once, but I'm at the end of my tether. His nasal voice is as terrifying as the minutes eating away at what's left of my life.

Chief Borselli is embarrassed. He can't find the words to comfort me. His whole repertoire comes down to a few nasty set phrases that he punctuates with blows of his truncheon. *I'm going to smash your face like a mirror*, he likes to boast. *That way, whenever you look at your own reflection, you'll get seven years of bad luck ...* Pity there's no mirror in my cell, and when you're on death row a stay of execution isn't calculated in years.

Tonight, Chief Borselli is forced to hold back his venom and that throws him off balance. He's having to improvise some kind of friendly behaviour, instead of just being a brute, and it doesn't suit him; in fact it distorts who he is. He comes across as pathetic, disappointing, as annoying as a bad cold. He's not used to waiting hand and foot on a jailbird he'd rather be beating up so as not to lose his touch. Only two days ago, he stood me up against the wall and rammed my face into the stone – I still have the mark on my forehead. *I'm going to tear your eyes out and stick them up your arse*, he bellowed so that everyone could hear. *That way you'll have four balls and you'll be able to look at me without winding me up ...* An idiot with a truncheon and permission to

use it as he pleases. A cockerel made out of clay. Even if he rose to his full height, he wouldn't come up to my waist, but I suppose you don't need a stool when you've got a club in your hand to knock giants down to size.

Chief Borselli hasn't been feeling well since he moved his chair to sit outside my cell. He keeps mopping himself with a little handkerchief and spouting theories that are beyond his mental powers. It's obvious he'd rather be somewhere else: in the arms of a drunken whore, or maybe in a stadium, surrounded by a jubilant crowd screaming their heads off to keep the troubles of the world away, in fact anywhere that's a million miles from this foul-smelling corridor, sitting opposite a poor devil who doesn't know where to put his head until it's time to return it to its rightful owner.

I think he feels sorry for me. After all, what is a prison guard but the man on the other side of the bars, one step away from remorse? Chief Borselli probably regrets his overly harsh treatment of me now that the scaffold is being erected in the deathly silence of the courtyard.

I don't think I've hated him more than I should. The poor bastard's only doing the lousy job he's been given. Without his uniform, which makes him a bit more solid, he'd be eaten alive quicker than a monkey in a swamp filled with piranhas. But prison's like a circus: on one side, there are the animals in their cages and, on the other, the tamers with their whips. The boundaries are clear, and anyone who ignores them has only himself to blame.

When I'd finished eating, I lay down on my mat. I looked at the ceiling, the walls defaced with obscene drawings, the rays of the setting sun fading on the bars, and got no answers to any of my questions. What answers? And what questions? There's been nothing up for debate since the day the judge, in a booming

voice, read out what my fate was to be. The flies, I remember, had broken off their dance in the gloomy room and all eyes turned to me, like so many shovelfuls of earth thrown on a corpse.

All I can do now is wait for the will of men to be done.

I try to recall my past, but all I can feel is my heart beating to the relentless rhythm of the passing, echoless moments that are taking me, step by step, to my executioner.

I asked for a cigarette and Chief Borselli was eager to oblige. He'd have handed me the moon on a platter. Could it be that human beings simply adjust to circumstances, with the wolf and the lamb taking it in turns to ensure balance?

I smoked until I burnt my fingers, then watched the cigarette end cast out its final demons in tiny grey curls of smoke. Just like my life. Soon, night will fall in my head, but I'm not thinking of going to sleep. I'll hold on to every second as stubbornly as a castaway clinging to wreckage.

I keep telling myself that there'll be a sudden turnaround and I'll get out of here. As if that's going to happen! The die is well and truly cast, there's not much hope left. Hope? That's one big swindle! There are two kinds of hope. The hope that comes from ambition and the hope that makes us expect a miracle. The first can always keep going and the second can always wait: neither of them is an end in itself, only death is that.

And Chief Borselli is still talking nonsense! What's *he* hoping for? My forgiveness? I don't hold a grudge against anyone. So, for God's sake, shut up, Chief Borselli, and leave me to my silences. I'm just an empty shell, and my mind is a vacuum.

I pretend to take an interest in the bugs running around the cell, in the scratches on the rough floor, in anything that can get me away from my guard's babble. But it's no use.

When I woke up this morning, I found an albino cockroach under my shirt, the first I'd ever seen. It was as smooth and shiny

as a jewel, and I told myself it was probably a good omen. In the afternoon, I heard *the* truck sputter into the courtyard, and Chief Borselli, who *knew*, gave me a furtive glance. I climbed onto my bed and hauled myself up to the skylight, but all I could see was a disused wing of the prison and two guards twiddling their thumbs. I can't imagine a more deafening silence. Most of the time, there have been jailbirds yelling and knocking their plates against the bars, when they weren't being beaten up by the military police. This afternoon, not a single sound disturbed my anxious thoughts. The guards have disappeared. You don't hear their grunting or their footsteps in the corridors. It's as though the prison has lost its soul. I'm alone, face to face with my ghost, and I find it hard to figure out which of us is flesh and which smoke.

In the courtyard, they tested the blade. Three times. Thud! ... Thud! ... Thud! ... Each time, my heart leapt in my chest like a frightened jerboa.

My fingers linger over the purple bruise on my forehead. Chief Borselli shifts on his chair. *I'm not a bad man in civilian life*, he says, referring to my bump. *I'm only doing my job. I mean, I've got kids, d'you see?* He's not telling me anything new. *I don't like to see people die*, he goes on. *It puts me off life. I'm going to be ill all week and for weeks to come ...* I wish he'd keep quiet. His words are worse than the blows from his truncheon.

I try and think of something. My mind is a blank. I'm only twenty-seven, and this month, June 1937, with the midsummer heat giving me a taste of the hell that's waiting for me, I feel as old as a ruin. I'd like to be afraid, to shake like a leaf, to dread the minutes ticking away one by one into the abyss, in other words to prove to myself that I'm not yet ready for the gravedigger – but there's nothing, not a flicker of emotion. My body is like wood, my breathing a diversion. I scour my memory in the hope

of getting something out of it: a figure, a face, a voice to keep me company. It's pointless. My past has shrunk away, my career has cast me adrift, my history has disowned me.

Chief Borselli is now silent.

The silence is holding the prison in suspense. I know nobody's asleep in the cells, that the guards are close by, that *my hour* is stamping with impatience at the end of the corridor ...

Suddenly, a door squeaks in the hushed tranquillity of the stones and muffled footsteps move along the floor.

Chief Borselli almost knocks his chair over as he stands to attention. In the anaemic light of the corridor, shadows ooze onto the floor like trails of ink.

Far, far away, as if from a confused dream, the call of the muezzin echoes.

'*Rabbi m'âak,*' cries one of the inmates.

My guts are in a tangle, like snakes writhing inside a pot. Something takes hold of me that I can't explain. *The hour* has come. Nobody can escape his destiny. Destiny? Only exceptional people have one. Common mortals just have fate ... The muezzin's call sweeps over me like a gust of wind, shattering my senses in a swirl of panic. As my fear reaches its height, I dream about walking through the wall and running out into the open without turning back. To escape what? To go where? I'm trapped like a rat. Even if my legs won't carry me, the guards will make sure they hand me over in due form to the executioner.

The clenching of my bowels threatens my underpants. My mouth fills with the stench of soil; in it, I detect a foretaste of the grave that's getting ready to digest me until I turn to dust ... It's stupid to end up like this at the age of twenty-seven. Did I even have time to live? And what kind of life? ... *You're going to make a mess of things again, and I don't feel like cleaning up after you any more,* Gino used to warn me ... What's done is done; no remorse

can cushion the fall. Luck is like youth. Everybody has his share. Some grab it on the wing, others let it slip through their fingers, and others are still waiting for it when it's long past ... What did I do with mine?

I was born to flashes of lightning. On a stormy, windy night. With fists for hitting and a mouth for biting. I took my first steps surrounded by birdshit and grabbed hold of thorns to lift myself up.

Alone.

I grew up in a hellish shanty town outside Sidi Bel Abbès. In a yard where the mice were the size of puppies. Rags and hunger were my body and soul. Up before dawn at an age when I should have been carefree, I was already hard at work. Come rain or shine, I had to find a grain of corn to put in my mouth so that I could slave away again the following day without passing out. I worked without a break, often for peanuts, and by the time I got home in the evening I was dead beat. I didn't complain. That's just the way it was. Apart from the kids squabbling naked in the dust and the tramps you saw rotting under the bridges, their veins ravaged by cheap wine, everybody between the ages of seven and seventy-seven who could stand on their own two feet was expected to work themselves to death.

The place I worked at was a shop bang in the middle of a dangerous area, the haunt of thugs and lowlifes. It wasn't really a shop, more like a disused, worm-eaten dugout, where Zane, who was the worst kind of crook, squatted. My job wasn't hard: I tidied the shelves, swept the floor, delivered baskets twice my own weight, or kept a lookout whenever a widow up to her eyes in debt agreed to lift her dress at the back of the shop in return for a piece of sugar.

It was a strange time.

I saw prophets walking on water, living people who were more

lifeless than corpses, riffraff sunk so low that neither demons nor the Angel of Death dared look for them there.

Even though Zane was raking it in, he never stopped complaining in order to protect himself from the evil eye, with the excuse that business was bad, that people were too broke even to have money for a rope to hang themselves with, that his creditors were shamelessly bleeding him dry, and I'd take his complaints as holy writ and feel sorry for him. Of course, to save face, he'd sometimes, either by chance or by mistake, slip a coin into my hand, but the day I was so exhausted that I asked for my back pay, he kicked me up the backside and sent me back to my mother with nothing but a promise to give me a hiding if he ever caught me hanging round the area again.

Before I reached puberty, I felt as if I'd come full circle, convinced I'd seen everything, experienced everything, endured everything.

As they say, I was immune.

I was eleven years old, and for me that was equivalent to eleven life sentences. A complete nonentity, as anonymous as a shadow, turning round and round like an endless screw. The reason I couldn't see the light at the end of the tunnel was because there wasn't one: I was simply travelling through an endless darkness ...

Chief Borselli fiddles with the lock of my cell, removes the padlock, opens the door with an almighty creak and stands aside to let in the 'committee'. The prison warden, my lawyer, two officials in suits and ties, a pale-faced barber with a bag at his side and the imam all advance towards me, flanked by two guards who look as if they've been carved out of granite.

Their formality makes my blood run cold.

Chief Borselli pushes his chair towards me and motions me to sit down. I don't move. I can't move. Someone says something to

me. I don't hear. All I see is lips moving. The two guards help me up and put me on the chair. In the silence, my heartbeat echoes like a mournful drum roll.

The barber slips behind me. His ratlike fingers ease my shirt collar away from my neck. My eyes focus on the shiny, freshly polished shoes around me. By now, fear has taken hold of my whole being. The *end* has started! *It was written*, except that I'm illiterate.

If I'd suspected for a single second that the curtain would come down like this, I'd never have waited for the last act: I'd have shot straight ahead like a meteorite; I'd have become one with nothingness and thrown God Himself off my trail. Unfortunately, none of these 'if's lead anywhere; the proof is that they always arrive too late. Every mortal man has his moment of truth, a moment designed to catch him unawares, that's the rule. Mine took me by surprise. It seems to me like a distortion of my prayers, a non-negotiable aberration, a miscarriage of justice: whatever shape it takes, it always has the last word, and there's no appeal.

The barber starts cutting the collar off my shirt. Every snip of his scissors cuts a void in my flesh.

In extraordinarily precise flashes, memories come back to me. I see myself as a child, wearing a hessian sack instead of a gandoura, running barefoot along dusty paths. *After all*, as my mother used to say, *when nature, in its infinite goodness, gives us a thick layer of dirt on our feet, we can easily do without sandals*. My mother wasn't far wrong. Neither nettles nor brambles slowed down my frantic running. What exactly was I running after? ... My brain echos with the rants of Chawala, a kind of turbaned madman who, winter and summer, wore a flea-ridden cloak and a gutter-cleaner's boots. Tall, with a voluminous beard and yellow eyes painted with kohl, he liked to get up in the square, point his

finger at people and predict the horrible things in store for them. I'd spend hours following him from one platform to another, so impressed I thought he was a prophet ... I see Gino, my friend Gino, my dear friend Gino, his incredulous eyes wide open in the darkness of that damned stairwell as his mother's voice rings out over the thunder: *Promise me you'll take care of him, Turambo. Promise me. I'd like to go in peace* ... And Nora, damn it! Nora. I thought she was mine, but nothing belonged to me. Funny how a helping hand could have changed the course of my life. I wasn't asking for the moon, only for my share of luck, otherwise how can you believe there's any kind of justice in this world? ... The images become muddled in my head before giving in to the clicking of the scissors. In the cosmic deafness of the prison, the sound seems to suck out the air and time.

The barber puts his equipment back into his bag. He's in a hurry to leave, only too happy not to be forced to stay for the main attraction.

The imam places a noble hand on my shoulder. I couldn't feel more crushed if a wall had fallen on me. He asks me if there's a particular surah I'd like to hear. With a lump in my throat, I tell him I have no preference. He chooses the Surah ar-Rahman for me. His voice penetrates into the depths of my being and, by some strange alchemy, I find the strength to stand up.

The two guards order me to follow them.

We walk out into the corridor, followed by the committee. The clanking of my chains scraping the floor turns my shivers to razor cuts. The imam continues his chanting. His gentle voice is doing me good. I'm no longer afraid to walk in the dark, the Lord is with me. '*Mout waguef!*', an inmate says to me in a Kabyle accent. '*Ilik dh'arguez!*', 'Goodbye, Turambo,' cries Bad-Luck Gégé, who's only just out of solitary. 'Hang on, brother. We're coming ...' Other voices are raised, escorting me to my

martyrdom. I stumble, but don't fall. Fifty more metres, thirty ... I must hang on till the end. Not just for myself but for the others. However reluctantly, I must set an example. Only the way I die can redeem a failed life. I'd like those who live on after me to talk about me with respect, to say that I left with my head held high.

My head held high?

At the bottom of a basket!

*The only people who die with dignity are those who've fucked like rabbits, eaten like pigs, and blown all their money, Sid Roho used to say.*

*And what about those who are broke?*

*They don't die, they just disappear.*

The two guards are walking in front of me, quite impassive. The imam keeps on reciting his surah. My chains weigh a ton. The corridor hems me in on either side and I have to follow its confines.

The outside door is opened.

The cool air burns my lungs. The way the first gulp of air burns a baby's lungs ...

And there she is.

In a corner of the courtyard.

Tightly wrapped in cold and horror.

Like a praying mantis awaiting her feast.

I see her at last: Lady Guillotine. Stiff in her costume of iron and wood. With a lopsided grin. As repulsive as she's fascinating. There she is, the porthole at the end of the world, the river of no return, the trap for souls in torment. Sophisticated and basic at one and the same time. In turn, a mistress of ceremonies and a street-corner whore. Whichever she is, she's going to make sure you lose your head.

All at once, everything around me fades away. The prison

walls disappear, the men and their shadows, the air stands still, the sky blurs. All that's left is my heart pounding erratically and the Lady with the blade, the two of us alone, face to face, on a patch of courtyard suspended in the void.

I feel as if I'm about to faint, to fall apart and be scattered like a handful of sand in the wind. I'm grabbed by sturdy hands and put back together. I come to, fibre by fibre, shudder by shudder. There are constant flashes in my head. I see the village where I was born, ugly enough to repel both evil genies and manna from heaven, a huge enclosure haunted by beggars with glassy eyes and lips as disturbing as scars. Turambo! A godforsaken hole given over to goats and brats defecating in the open air and laughing at the strident salvos from their emaciated rumps ... I see Oran, like a splendid waterlily overhanging the sea, the lively trams, the souks and the fairs, the neon signs over the doors of nightclubs, girls as beautiful and unlikely as promises, warehouses overrun with sailors as drunk as their boats ... I see Irène on her horse, galloping across the ridges, Gino gushing blood on the staircase, two boxers beating the hell out of each other in the ring in front of a clamouring crowd, the Village Nègre and its inspired street performers, the shoeshine boys of Sidi Bel Abbès, my childhood friends Ramdane, Gomri, the Billy Goat ... I see a young boy running barefoot over brambles, my mother putting her hands on her thighs in despair ... Discordant voices crowd the black and white film, merging in a commotion that fills my head like scalding hail ...

I'm pushed towards the guillotine.

I try and resist, but none of my muscles obey me. I walk to the guillotine as if levitating. I can't feel the ground beneath my feet. I can't feel anything. I think I'm already dead. A blinding white light has just seized me and flung me far, far back in time.