

# The Ghosts

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## 1 Homewards!

Port-au-Bout, West Africa, October 2007. Try to imagine a sultry morning in the tropics. I'm standing at the edge of the concrete apron next to the shabby airport building, watching the plane being prepared for departure. Refuelling, loading and the final checks are being done with a disciplined routine that reminds me of Europe. It is still fairly early, but in the distance the runway is already starting to dissolve in the shimmer of an incipient mirage. A sweltering haze is hanging in the heavens that the African sun is breaking through like a fiery carbuncle – like an incurable swelling, I think, an inflammation that flares up again every morning.

I am accompanied by Ibrahim, who drove me last night from the camp at Bilonga, where we both work for Doctors Without Colours, all the way to Port-au-Bout on the Atlantic coast. It took us about ten hours, without even stopping once: ploughing through the potholes of the *Route Principale* in the moonless dark, through a blizzard of moths and flies that was only visible in the cones of light cast by our all-terrain vehicle. Travelling after sunset certainly entailed some level of risk; I was well aware of that. But I did not want to stay in this country for another day. I was also conscious of the fact that Ibrahim had a gun in his inside pocket, although I did not believe that the thing would be much use if anyone wanted to stop us. The two of us didn't have much else to say to each other. I did not want to think about anything and slowly allowed the monotony of the trip to hypnotise me.

The villages and huts that we passed every now and again seemed to be utterly deserted. There were no roadblocks. Other than the ghostly shape and reflecting eyes of a stray cow, we didn't come across a living being bigger than an insect. The spirits of the night were apparently sated.

When we arrived at the airport, a long way outside the city, Ibrahim put the weapon away in a lockable compartment of the all-terrain vehicle, walked me inside, guided me past the customs officials with the requisite secret codes and banknotes, made sure that the formalities went smoothly and that nobody disturbed me in my zombie-like state. And now we're standing there at the back of the airport building, waiting until I can get on board.

"I understand that you want to go home, Mark. But don't stay away too long. Come back. Come back before an evil spirit gets its claws into you and makes you start hating us."

As usual, Ibrahim had spoken in a soft tone. The words sink in, one by one. *Us*. He apparently includes himself among the people whom I might start to hate. Should I interpret that as an implicit confession of guilt? Nor does it escape me that he has said I might be susceptible to the influence of an evil spirit. Westerners are generally not reckoned to be affected by them. Our stubborn rationality is thought to

make us immune to ghosts. Maybe he believes that I have seen things in the meantime that will have made me less inaccessible.

I do not respond. Ibrahim has the same lugubrious look he always does. For as long as I have known him, I have seen the melancholy dignity of his desert nomad's face as the expression of personal sorrow and of the deep-seated desire to make his country a more humane and decent place. He has seen things too, over the course of his life. He is about the same age as me, in his early forties. Tall in stature, ascetically thin. Seldom laughs. Has a sparse way of talking and moving. The grey in his frizzy hair enhances the impression of seriousness and thoughtfulness that he has always made on me. But because of the events of the past few days and his dubious part in them, his attitude is now primarily making me suspicious. And the cheerful chattering of the passengers standing under the shelter a bit further up seems to me to be purely comedic, an irritating carnival of deceit and self-deception. Meanwhile, they have evidently received a message saying they can board, because the crowd starts moving towards the plane all of a sudden, like a disorderly caravan, slow and colourful and exuberant. They seem not to be in a hurry, but they are happy to be able to leave the continent.

Ibrahim holds out his hand and I can not refuse to take it. I do not know what I should think of that. At any rate, I do not have the energy to make things awkward for him. But my attitude towards him is not warm or even friendly.

“Bye, Ibrahim.”

As short as possible. No words of thanks, although I do have to admit that he was risking his own life to some extent by bringing me to the airport.

I am pretty much the last one to board the medium-sized plane. In the compact seclusion of the passenger compartment, the atmosphere seems to be even more exuberant than it was outside. Men, laughing heartily, enjoying themselves so much that they are whooping and chuckling, talking behind their hands. The bossiness of some of the women – whether pretended or ingrained – and the excited talkativeness of others. And as if they have not had enough of each other already, one or two are trying to make phone calls at a volume that allows them to be heard above the din. In the seat behind mine, someone is humming away dreamily. The vibration of his voice is tickling me unpleasantly all down one side, from my right ear down to my right hip. My god, I think, did they all have to come along? Will I have to put up with their vocal jungle for the entire flight? That colourful demonstration of vitality, those inexhaustible African theatrics? Whatever happens to these people, it never seems to make their need for truth and contemplation or reflection grow. They live and lie and natter away heartily; no mere murder can put an end to that.

I already knew that such thoughts existed. But I had never suspected that they would ever be my own.

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