

made in the USA, and plastic odds and ends made in Japan or Russia. Each was lost in his own thoughts. Humid putrefaction wafted around them, into them, and through them to the native quarters. The crows circled above them like black planes about to land. In the dump, the yellow, grey and brown flies also circled and dived into juicy offal.

'Here,' the old man interrupted their dreams, 'have a piece of cheese. Maybe it came from South Africa.'

Joey stretched out a hand. He had decided to lean against the wheelbarrow for more comfort. He chewed the stale cheese, silently watching the antics of the flies on a pool of vomit. The buzzing of the flies and the cries of the crows seemed to be the only sounds, but this was interrupted by the rising cadences of a plane starting up.

'It's the "Four Engine",' Joey remarked.

'Yes, it's the big plane taking off.'

'I wonder if it will stop in Salisbury.'

'Maybe.'

'I wonder who's in it?'

'Oh, the usual. Rich fat white men, brown men, and a few blacks.'

'Students going for more education.'

'Yes, I forgot about those.' Mazambezi stood up with a grunt, and wiped calloused hands on his overalls. 'I've got to be going too.'

'Goodbye,' said Joey slowly. He too straightened up from the wheelbarrow. 'We'll be meeting again tomorrow?'

'Yes.' The old man lifted the bars of the machine. In a few minutes, the squeak, rattle and thump faded in the distance. Joey wondered who would die first – the man or the machine. The rattle, squeak and thump of the machine and the stoic silence of the man behind it had the same quality as the mournful hoot of an owl. But Joey knew that the daily exchange of 'What has the big plane brought today?' – 'Oh, bits and pieces from the white man's land' would continue for some time yet. The left-overs, garbage and whatever would keep finding its way into the waiting rubbish dump; the flies and crows; Mazambezi and Joey.

E. B. DONGALA

The man

... No, this time he won't get away! After forty-eight hours, he had been tracked down, his itinerary was known and the village where he was hiding identified. But how many false leads there had been! He had been seen everywhere at once, as if he had the gift of ubiquity: dedicated militants had apparently run him down in the heart of the country without, however, managing to capture him: a patrol which had been parachuted into the northern swamps claimed they had badly wounded him, providing as their only proof traces of blood that disappeared into a ravine; frontier guards swore they had shot him in a canoe (which had unfortunately sunk) as he tried to escape by river: none of these claims survived closer investigation. The already tight police net was tightened still further, new brigades of gendarmes were created, and the army was given *carte blanche*. Soldiers invaded the working-class quarters of the city, breaking down the doors of houses, sticking bayonets into mattresses filled with grass and cotton, slashing open sacks of *foo-foo*, beating with their rifle butts anyone who didn't answer their questions quickly enough, or quite simply cutting down anyone who dared to protest at the violation of his home. But all these strong-arm tactics achieved nothing, and the country was on the verge of panic. Where could he be hiding?

It had been an almost impossible exploit, for the father-founder of the nation, the enlightened guide and saviour of the people, the great helmsman, the president-for-life, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces and the beloved father of the people lived in a vast palace out of bounds to the ordinary citizen. In any case, the circular security system contrived by an Israeli professor with degrees in war science and counter-terrorism was impregnable. Five hundred yards from the palace perimeter, armed soldiers stood guard at ten-yard intervals, day

and night, and this pattern was repeated at a distance of two hundred and then one hundred yards from the perimeter. The palace itself was also surrounded by a water-filled moat of immense depth swarming with African and Indian crocodiles and caymans imported from Central America which most certainly didn't feed solely on small fry, especially during the campaigns of repression that regularly fell upon the country after every genuine or mock *coup d'état*. Behind the moat was a ditch full of black mambas and green mambas whose powerful venom killed their victims on the spot. The perimeter wall itself – an enormous sixty-foot high structure of brick and stone as imposing as the wall of the Zimbabwe ruins – bristled with watch-towers, search-lights, nails, barbed wire and broken glass; access was by two enormous doors which also served as a drawbridge and were controlled from the inside alone. Finally the palace itself, the holy of holies, where the beloved father of the people lived: one hundred and fifty rooms in which scores of huge mirrors reflected everything and everyone, multiplying and reducing them *ad infinitum*, so that visitors always felt uneasy and oppressed, aware that their least gestures were being watched. Every movement, however small, was carried like an echo from room to room, from mirror to mirror, until it reached the ultimate mirror of all, the eye of the master himself, watching over that entire universe. No one knew in which room the founder-president slept, not even the well-versed prostitutes he employed for several nights at a stretch for his highly sophisticated pleasures; even less likely to know were the unspoilt, happy little girls he enjoyed deflowering between the promulgation of two decrees from his palace of wonders. But, if the beloved-father-of-the-nation-the-supreme-and-enlightened-guide-the-commander-in-chief-of-the-armed-forces-and-beneficent-genius-of-mankind was invisible in the flesh to the majority of his subjects, he was, on the other hand, everywhere present: it was a statutory requirement that his portrait should hang in all homes. The news bulletins on the radio always began and ended with one of his stirring thoughts. The television news began, continued and finished in front of his picture, and the solitary local newspaper published in every issue at least four pages of letters in which citizens proclaimed their undying affection. Everywhere present but inaccessible. That was why the exploit was impossible.

And yet he had carried it off: he had succeeded in getting into the palace, bypassing the crocodiles, the mambas and the Praetorian guards; he had succeeded in outwitting the trap of the mirrors and had executed the father of the nation as one kills a common agitator and fomentor of coups. And then he had made the return journey, avoiding the watchtowers, the drawbridge, the green mambas, the black mambas, the crocodiles, and the Praetorian guards. And escaped! Forty-eight hours later he was still free!

... And then came the rumour, no one knew where from: he had been tracked down, his itinerary was known, and the village where he was hiding had been identified; he was surrounded. This time he wouldn't get away!

Armoured cars, jeeps, and lorries full of soldiers set off at three in the morning. The tanks didn't trouble to go round the houses in the villages through which they passed, a straight line being the shortest distance between two points: villages were left burning behind them, crops were laid waste, corpses piled up in the furrows made by their caterpillar tracks. Conquerors indeed in a defeated country, they soon reached their destination. They woke up the villagers with their rifle butts. They searched everywhere, emptied the granaries, looked in the trees and inside lofts. They didn't find the man they were looking for. The officer in command of the soldiers was furious, and his neck seemed to explode under his chinstrap:

'I know he's here, the bastard who dared to murder our dear beloved founder-president who will live for ever in the pantheon of our immortal heroes. I know the miserable wretch has a beard and is blind in one eye. If you don't tell me within ten minutes where he's hiding, I'll burn all your houses, I'll take one of you at random and have him tortured and shot!'

The ten minutes passed amid a frightened silence as deep as the silence that preceded the creation of the world. Then the officer in command of the soldiers ordered the reprisals to begin. They manhandled the villagers: some were strung up by their feet and beaten; others had red pimento rubbed into their open wounds; yet others were forced to eat fresh cow dung ... The villagers didn't denounce the hunted man. So they burned all the houses in the village, and the harvest as well, the fruits of a year's labour in a country where people

rarely have enough to eat. The villagers still didn't give them the information they were seeking. In fact, the reason for their silence was quite simple: they genuinely did not know who had carried out the deed.

The man had acted alone. He had spent months making his preparations, reading, studying, planning; then he had put on a false beard and covered his left eye with a black band, like a pirate. He had found how to penetrate the impregnable palace and kill the great dictator; the way he had done it was so simple he had sworn to himself that he would never reveal it, even under torture, for it could be used again. He was nevertheless surprised to see the soldiers in his village. But had they really discovered his identity or were they just bluffing? Clearly, they didn't know who he was, standing there in front of them, among his fellow villagers who were themselves in total ignorance of what he had done. There he stood, clean-shaven and with both his eyes, waiting to see what would happen next.

The officer in charge of the soldiers, a commandant, got angrier still, confronted by his victims' silence:

'I repeat for the last time! If you do not tell me where he is hiding, this bastard one-eyed son-of-a-whore without balls who has murdered our beloved president-for-life, founder of our party and leader of the nation, I'll take one of you at random and shoot him! I'll give you five minutes!'

He looked feverishly at his quartz watch. Two minutes. One minute. Thirty seconds.

'I assure you, commandant,' the village chief pleaded, 'we don't know him and we assure you he isn't in our village.'

'Too bad for you. I'm going to take a man at random and shoot him in front of you all. That will perhaps help you to understand. You, there!'

The commandant was pointing at him. He wasn't even surprised, as if he had always expected it. Deep down, it was what he wanted, for he doubted that he would be able to go through the rest of his life with an easy conscience if he allowed someone else to die in his place. He was pleased, for he would have the satisfaction of dying with his secret.

'You will be the innocent hostage who has to be sacrificed because of

the obstinacy of your chief and your fellow villagers. Tie him to a tree and shoot him!'

They kicked him and beat him with rifle butts, they slashed him with bayonets. He was dragged along the ground and tied to a mango tree. His wife flung herself on him, to be brutally pulled away. Four soldiers took aim.

'One last time, tell us where the murderer is hiding.'

'I don't know, commandant!' pleaded the chief.

'Fire!'

His chest jerked forward slightly, then he collapsed without a sound. They would never find him now!

The smoke cleared. The villagers remained plunged in a deep, stunned, silence, looking at the body slumped in the coarse liana ropes. The commandant, having carried out his threat, stood before them. He hesitated, not quite sure what to threaten them with now. Overcome by an inner panic, he struggled, at least to preserve the honour of his stripes.

'Well?' he asked.

At last the villagers became aware of him again.

'Well what!' roared the chief angrily. 'I told you we didn't know the man you're looking for. You didn't believe us and now you have killed one of us. What more can I say!'

The commandant could find nothing by way of reply. He rocked on his feet, uncertain what to do next, and at last called out an order to his men:

'Attention! Form up! The hunt goes on. The bastard may be hiding in the next village. There's no time to waste. Forward march!'

Then, turning to the villagers, he screamed: 'We'll find him, the son of a bastard, we'll flush him out wherever he's hiding, we'll pull off his balls and his ears, we'll pull out his nails and his eyes, we'll hang him naked in public in front of his wife, his mother and his children, and then we'll feed him to the dogs. You have my word on that.'

The jeeps and the tanks moved off and went elsewhere in search of 'the man'.

They are still looking for him. They sense his presence; somewhere he is hiding, but where? Crushed by dictatorship, the people feel their hearts beat faster when there is talk of 'the man'. Although the country

is more police-ridden than ever, although it is crawling with spies, informers and hired killers, and although he has appointed as heads of security men from his own tribe entirely loyal to his cause, the new president, the second beloved father of the nation, entrusted with the task of continuing the sacred work of the father-founder, no longer dares go out. In order to frustrate the spell, he has issued a decree proclaiming himself unkillable and immortal, but still he hides away in the depths of his palace, with its labyrinth of passages and corridors, mirrors and reflections, walled up because he doesn't know when 'the man' will suddenly appear to strike him down in his turn, so that freedom, too long suppressed, may at last burst forth.

'The man', the hope of a nation and a people that says NO, and watches . . .

Translated from the French by Clive Wake.

ABDULRAZAK GURNAH

Cages

There were times when it felt to Hamid as if he had been in the shop always, and that his life would end there. He no longer felt discomfort, nor did he hear the secret mutterings at the dead hours of night which had once emptied his heart in dread. He knew now that they came from the seasonal swamp which divided the city from the townships, and which teemed with life. The shop was in a good position, at a major crossroads from the city's suburbs. He opened it at first light when the earliest workers were shuffling by, and did not shut it again until all but the last stragglers had trailed home. He liked to say that at his station he saw all of life pass him by. At peak hours he would be on his feet all the time, talking and bantering with the customers, courting them and taking pleasure in the skill with which he handled himself and his merchandise. Later he would sink exhausted on the boxed seat which served as his till.

The girl appeared at the shop late one evening, just as he was thinking it was time to close. He had caught himself nodding twice, a dangerous trick in such desperate times. The second time he had woken up with a start, thinking a large hand was clutching his throat and lifting him off the ground. She was standing in front of him, waiting with a look of disgust in her face.

'Ghee,' she said after waiting for a long, insolent minute. 'One shilling.' As she spoke she half-turned away, as if the sight of him was irritating. A piece of cloth was wrapped round her body and tucked in under the armpits. The soft cotton clung to her, marking the outline of her graceful shape. Her shoulders were bare and glistened in the gloom. He took the bowl from her and bent down to the tin of ghee. He was filled with longing and a sudden ache. When he gave the bowl back to her, she looked vaguely at him, her eyes distant and glazed with