

Eventually he pulled out a book, leaned it against the edge of the table, and began to read. I'd never seen anyone read at a bar.

I didn't *want* to steal. But I couldn't stay in Franceville forever. By the time my mother had died in the hospital, leaving me standing out front with a plastic basin full of her possessions and a baby sister on my back, she'd owed thousands of francs we didn't have. The hospital released me to Monsieur Tatagani, the bill collector, who let us live in a room crowded with other street boys working to pay off their debts. Of the six boys who'd been there when I'd moved in, three had gotten sick and died. Two had disappeared. The last had stolen a hundred francs from Monsieur Tatagani and fled. Monsieur Tatagani had gone all the way to Lastoursville to retrieve him, and after he'd brought him back he'd chopped off the boy's hands, right in the middle of Independence Square. The police had watched in case the boy tried to run. He'd died of infection not a month later.

If there was money or valuables in the metal case, I could pay my debt, get out of Franceville, and buy land somewhere. I could take the first steps to having a home, with breath still in my chest and hands still on my wrists.

Once Prof had finished his drink, he dropped some coins on the table and got to his feet, Omar scampering to his shoulder. I hadn't expected him to leave so soon, and hadn't yet come up with a scheme for getting the case. In an instant my heart went from quiet to thudding.

I decided I would put the glass I was wiping back in the slop bucket and get to the front of the bar as fast as I could manage. Skirting the wall, I eased around the corner. I didn't have to look far — the Professor was right there, facing me.

"*M'bolo*," I said, shocked.

"*Ma wok ki Fang*," he said slowly in my language, shaking his head.

"That's not a problem," I said in French. "I speak French, too."

“Oh, you must have gone to school,” he replied, also in French.

I didn’t know how to answer. I had gone to school until my mother had died. I had loved it. But you didn’t have to go to school to learn French. It was the language of the radio.

Prof gave up on getting further explanation from me. “I’m looking for the Hôtel Beverly Hills,” he said. “Do you know where it is?”

I pointed down the road. “It’s the large building at the other side of town,” I whispered. “Franceville’s only painted hotel. You can’t miss it. But someone important like you should be staying here at the Hôtel Léconi.”

Prof had hunched close to hear me, hand cupped at his ear, and now shook his head. “The only thing African about this hotel are the flies. Does the Beverly Hills have beds?”

I nodded.

“Then it will do fine. I am going to live with apes in the jungle, after all. No need for luxury now! Would the bar’s *papa* mind if you disappeared for a few minutes to help me with my bags? There could be a franc in it for you.”

I filled with warmth. The Professor was singling me out, as I’d done him. I sized up the large leather valise and figured I could manage hauling it. I picked it up and fought back the wave of dizziness that tilted me. My worry was less about passing out and more that Prof would notice my strain and fire me before I’d begun. I lost sensation in my arms for a moment, but managed to fit them through the straps. Blood pounded in my head, pricking the hairs on my neck.

“Have you had anything to eat today?” Prof asked.

*Please*, I silently begged, *don’t be nice to me*. I told him I had. I didn’t tell him it was because someone had spilled pastis into a bowl of dried peas and I’d gone around back and downed the whole thing.

Omar, full of bar nuts, watched me passively from his shoulder perch.

“Do you need to tell your parents you’ll be helping me?” Prof asked.

I shook my head.

He nodded sadly, as if I’d revealed myself, and I hated him for it. “Okay, let’s get along, then,” he said. “I know the bag is heavy. It might be worth five francs to carry. Or even ten. I am an important man, after all, on a very important mission, and important things are not cheap. Important things are either free or expensive.” Pleased with himself, he scratched the silver-and-black scraggle on his chin.

I took a step forward and immediately stumbled. After a moment’s pause, I made another step. Grinning to let the Arab know how enormously fine I was feeling, I freed a hand and reached for the metal briefcase.

“No, no,” Prof said hurriedly, picking it up and clutching it to his chest. “I’ll hold on to that.”

Omar chattered at me and exposed his teeth. The stupid monkey had figured me out better than his master had. Muttering under my breath, I took one step and another toward the far side of the town.

Prof puffed with exertion, walking with a slight limp.

We weren’t a hundred paces from the bar when we came across Monsieur Tatagani. He spent his days sitting in the center of Franceville so he could keep an eye on his boys. Squatting in the dirt, he wore a blazer that was so unclean, it was more the tan of dust than the black of fabric. Sometime in his life he’d been struck on the head hard enough to expose skull; he had a ring of white at the top, like an upside-down teacup saucer. When I had nightmares, I always knew Monsieur Tatagani had been the cause if the monsters had the same saucer of bone on their heads — and if, when I reached up my arms to defend myself, there were no hands at the ends of my wrists.

When he saw us coming up the walk, Monsieur Tatagani grinned hugely, exposing teeth unusually white and strong for a man of his age. He said nothing, though, I think because he sensed the chance for a payday. We were suddenly conspirators, he and I. The Franceville moneylender, the man generous enough to give me a place to sleep at night but cruel enough to cut off the hands of orphans who couldn't pay, saw into my wicked heart. Worse, he found himself there.

I avoided Monsieur Tatagani's eyes as I struggled under the valise. Soon he was out of view and Prof and I were stepping along Franceville's main paved avenue, kicking away garbage and excrement and the occasional stray dog.

"How old are you, boy?" Prof asked, gasping as we walked.

"I'm not sure," I said. It was the truth. The last person who'd acknowledged my birthday had been my mother. That had been my tenth. I thought that had been three years ago, but it might have been two.

"That," Prof said, pausing for a moment to catch his breath, "is my official answer, too."

We'd arrived at the Hôtel Beverly Hills, a dank cinder-block tower. It had painted walls, not because it was the fanciest building in Franceville, but because it had the most to hide. I let Prof lead us in.

Once I'd heaved the valise to the ground, Prof thanked me, placed a twenty-five-franc coin in my palm, and turned his attention to the desk clerk. Omar climbed down and sat on the floor, one hand protectively circling his master's ankle, his little monkey fingers working their way under the pant leg until they were against Prof's skin. I kneeled beside Omar, as if to pat his head. Prof noticed my attention to his monkey, smiled, and returned to haggling with the clerk.

Omar watched as I stroked his forearm. He watched as I stroked his shoulder. He watched as I inched my hand over to the handle of the metal briefcase.

Suddenly suspicious, the monkey bared his teeth and began squawking. Now that I was so close to him, I noticed that the skin on his arms was strange — it was almost like corduroy, and his palms were the slightest bit oily.

Though I was worried the monkey would bite me, I wasn't about to stop.

I tightened my grip on the handle.

I took a deep breath.

I ran.

There was shouting behind me, and motion. But I couldn't afford to look. I couldn't afford to do anything but sprint and dodge.

I knew these streets so well, and it felt like only moments before I had turned a half dozen times and thrown myself down countless alleys. I stopped against a tree on an empty street.

The briefcase was so solid in my arms. If it had money inside, I could escape with it come morning, hitch a ride on the next logging truck, and get away from Monsieur Tatagani and the police, into Angola or over to Libreville. If it was something other than cash, I could sell it at the market right as it opened and then either use the money to pay off Monsieur Tatagani or flee.

All I had to do was survive the night without getting caught. Because boys like me didn't go to jail for theft. Boys like me disappeared.

The night came, and grew long. I clutched the case to my chest. Avoiding the main road, I stuck instead to the edges of the city, creeping along farmland buffalo paths and the hunting trails I'd once prowled for bushmeat. The jungle loomed black off to one side.

It might have all been in my head, but for the first time in years I thought I could hear the mock men off in the trees, shrieking about how they had once been just like me.