

BAZU

The words weighed heavily upon Bazu Tagana, like a disease corrupting his soul. He was desperate for justice; the murder charge being pressed upon him was a blatant lie. He felt as if there was nothing left worth living for. Memories of the glow that had been taken away from him drifted through his mind, the only warmth that had existed in his dark, miserable life. His beloved Hinan had been his joy; he could still picture her serene, beautiful visage as she lay asleep the night before the attack that had destroyed their life. He had been away from their shared home in a Libyan village, meeting up with a contractor that had promised him a safe home and prosperous future for Bazu, Hinan, and their never-to-be-born child.

When he had returned, their house – merely a dilapidated shack – was scarred with the ravages of war to a point beyond repair. He had been left destitute, with nothing to his name but pointless rage and seemingly infinite sorrow. He had rushed in, searching among the remains for his wife, hoping against hope that she was still somehow alive.

The image of her marred and violated body was still seared against Bazu's eyes. He had kept a perverted vigil next to her body, even though there had not been any true logic behind it. The power of love and the excruciating pain caused by the removal of its source was nowhere more clearly demonstrated, Bazu now thought, than in these timeless rituals that were still performed the world over.

He had been in a state of shock for days afterwards; he became an empty shell, devoid of life. But he had to move on; the contract had fallen through when he had failed to appear at the next evening's meeting. He had been staying at a relative's, but he knew that they couldn't support him indefinitely; everybody had felt the ravages of war.

One day he had decided on a plan of action. Using some of his would-be contractor's contacts (which he had been forced to beg for), he had decided to seek asylum in France; he knew rudimentary French as a result of his Nigerien and Tuareg heritage, and he had relatives near Marseille. He had known it would be an uphill struggle, but he hadn't expected it to be like this.

Bazu raised himself from the bare, rickety armchair he had been sitting in; the corroded iron rods had etched themselves in his back, damaging what was a valuable asset in his line of work. He had been frustrated by the lack of semi-skilled jobs in France; in Libya, he had been a foreman, but people here didn't even consider the possibility that he could lead a group.

He shivered as the water splashed on his skin and wrinkled his nose as the strong metallic tang washed over him. He wouldn't have showered again under normal circumstances – water was precious, and he had taken a bath only last night – but he wanted to convince the policemen that he was more than an uneducated barbarian. As he opened his trunk, held together by flimsy leather straps, he saw the outfit that he had worn that fateful night.

His relatives had treated him well when he arrived and had finally gotten through the complicated process of seeking asylum. To celebrate, they had taken him to the local tavern. He could still feel the exhilaration of relief and celebration; it had been a glorious night of revels. He had drunk himself silly, riding on the foamy crests of the waves of despair that still occasionally flooded him. But he also recalled being proud of the fact that he had held his drink and through thick and thin, had never once lost consciousness or awareness.

The next morning, though, the painful and quite comical aftermath showed itself. He woke up on his relatives' couch with an excruciatingly painful neck and a severe hangover, surprised and rather ashamed. He then stumbled off in the direction of his house, refusing his relatives' cajolments to stay.

As he walked through the cobbled streets, he could hear an anxious buzz of activity pierced by a woman's wails. He made a split-second decision to follow the sounds, something he would ruminate on extensively later.

He turned the corner, taking in the brilliant hues of the fields of red poppies on either side of him. A coffin was being lowered into the baked earth by four burly men in somber suits. A group of people were standing around the fresh grave, many of them comforting a homely woman who was probably now a widow.

Bazu stood there transfixed. His blank visage was a veil, concealing the dark memories that were playing out like a film, projecting on the otherwise empty screen of his mind. The

scene reminded him all too much of those he had seen in his hometown after the horrible violence that had destroyed many of the people and even more of their livelihoods.

It was several minutes before he awakened, blinking. He decided to ask who the corpse had been; many of the people gathered around seemed vaguely familiar. He had always found the quaint mesdames that lined the streets of the village captivating; they were always present at any interesting event, chatting away, sipping tea, and eating delicate macaroons. It was to one of these, faceless now, that he addressed his question.

"Oh, that policeman? He died last night in a tavern brawl. Very sad, but I'm sure they'll find the killer," she responded to his query.

He had been certain it had nothing to do with him, but nevertheless he hurried to his house; there was too much here to remind him of the terrors of war he had witnessed.

And here he was now, ready to present himself at the police office as requested. He would be out of work for sure once word got around; nobody would want to employ a person connected with a murder case. Especially an African like him, a refugee too. But he would survive and persevere. What else had humans been doing for all these centuries anyway?

He supposed that all the mighty works of art and literature and philosophy accumulated through the centuries amounted to something, but in the end, it was all dust. He remembered a poem that he had heard long ago which eloquently and succinctly expressed his feelings and thoughts at the moment – perhaps only to be expected, written as it was by Percy Shelley:

And on the pedestal these words appear:

"My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:

Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!"

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

If this was civilization, accusing innocent people of that most heinous of crimes, murder in cold blood, he wanted out.

He trudged along the path, kicking up dust. His mind was akin to the tenebrous aftermath of a battle; vultures were picking at the last tendrils of optimistic thought remaining, plucking them out of their nooks and crannies and extinguishing them. War, even one fought in the trenches of peoples' minds, leaves no true victor.

The Napoleonic façade of the police station loomed out of the twilight. It would have been elegant and even beautiful in any other lighting, but the sharp relief created by the shadows eradicated the last vestiges of grandeur.

Bazu pushed open the double doors, leaving them flapping like an albatross's wings. He strode down the corridor, determined to show himself as a cultured individual. Two rather pallid and sickly policemen were waiting for him in a spartan room. They politely asked him to sit down in a bare chair, of the sort that would usually be found in a torture chamber. They introduced themselves, and quickly got to the matter at hand:

"We have reason to believe you killed our colleague, may God rest his soul," one of the officers started in an accusatory tone. "What do you have to say for yourself?"

"I swear, I'm innocent! My relatives were with me all the time and they can tell you so," he frantically responded.

"But we have evidence – your fingerprints were found nearby, and most of the witnesses tell us they saw you take him outside," said the other.

"And yet, I didn't touch so much as a single hair on his head," Bazu stated. "Please, at least hear us out," he concluded.

"Very well. Could we have your relatives' names and addresses?"

Bazu gave them the information, silently cursing his illiteracy. He had to learn how to write one of these days.

The following days passed in a cloud of tension and anxiousness. It was a double-edged sword, both a curse and a blessing. He survived on a bare minimum of social and physical activity, waiting for the letter that would arrive, confirming his fate one way or the other. The news, however, arrived in a different manner than he expected.

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Bazu was resting one day when he heard a knock on the door. He rushed out, feeling the cold tiles through his threadbare slippers. He let his cousin in, curious to see what tidings he bore.

"We went down to the police station and gave our side of the story," he said after they sat down and exchanged pleasantries. "They have evidence on another person, one of those old mesdames, in fact, and they say they're dropping all charges. I don't know why, but the villagers still think you're guilty. I think you'd better get out of here, or there might be trouble from them," he continued. "The government set up a refugee camp in Corsica for all the immigrants from Libya. I suggest you go there," he finished.

Bazu thanked his relative and showed him out.

He mulled over the proposition for the next few days, and finally decided that the best thing to do was to move to the camp.

Bazu Tagana surveyed his work. The fresh coat of paint dried quickly on the cheap concrete of the prefabricated house, set alongside hundreds of its ilk. A head popped out of the door and wheedled:

"Come in, Papa. The food's stone cold!"

Bazu smiled and sighed. He needed to get back to his foster-daughter.

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